

SWIMMING PEDAGOGY AND A CURRICULUM FOR STROKE DEVELOPMENT

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION	TITLE	PAGE
	Preface	1
PART A	SWIMMING PEDAGOGY	5
I	Swimming Pedagogy	7
	Drills	7
	Equipment	10
	Conclusions	14
II	Controlling and Changing Swimmer Behaviors	17
	Shaping: The Strategy for Developing and Modifying Swimming Skills	17
	Considerations for Shaping Progressions	18
	The definition of the terminal behavior	18
	Conclusion	20
III	Reinforcers for Swimming	21
	Types of Reinforcers	22
	Performance information	23
	Internal reinforcers	25
	Social reinforcers	25
	Material reinforcers	25
	Sources of Reinforcement in Swimming	27
	The swimmer	27
	The peer group	28
	The coach	29
	Outside sources	30
	Producing Behavior Permanence	31
	Suppressing Undesirable Behaviors	32
	Conclusions	33
IV	Priming Behaviors (Guidance)	35
	Physical Restriction	35
	Forced-responding (Manipulation)	35
	Visual Guidance	36
	Verbal Guidance	36
	The Coach's Task	37
V	Backward Shaping as the Teaching Progression for Swimming Skills	39
	The Original Use of a Shaping Progression in Swimming	39
	Better Teaching Progressions for Swimming Techniques	41
	An example of the Use of Backward Shaping for Altering an Established Crawl Stroke Technique	45
	Procedures	46
	Reverse teaching progression sessions	46
	Results	47
	Discussion	48
	Structuring Backward Progressions	50
	Correcting Errors	51
VI	Progressions	53
	Progressions for Difficulty	53
	An example of overcoming the perceived difficulty of swimming butterfly stroke	54
	Progressions for Quality	55
	Conclusions	56

TABLE OF CONTENTS (continued)

SECTION	TITLE	PAGE
VII	Integrating Instruction into Swimming Coaching	57
	Assumptions about the Coaching Staff	58
	Preferred behaviors for Coaching Swimming	58
VIII	Repetitions, Repetitions, Repetitions	63
	Technique changes are difficult	63
	Changing skills is not a simple task	63
	Reinforcers must be present	64
	Errors are never lost	64
	Implementing a curriculum	65
	Areas of improvement	65
PART B	A CURRICULUM FOR SWIMMING STROKE DEVELOPMENT	67
IX	A Curriculum for Developing Swimming Skill Competencies	69
	Introduction	69
	Why a Curriculum?	69
	Performance Outcomes	70
X	Assumptions about Levels of Age-group Swimming	73
	Underlying Assumptions about the Curriculum Structure	73
	Assumptions about the Curriculum	74
	Structuring Training Session	76
XI	Stroke Development Content for Level 1	79
	Purpose	79
	Coaching Pedagogy	79
	Level 1 Curriculum Content	79
	Basic pool conduct block 1.1	80
	Basic pool conduct block 1.2	80
	Skills block 1.1	80
	Skills block 1.2	81
	Backstroke block 1.1	82
	Backstroke block 1.2	83
	Butterfly block 1.1	84
	Butterfly block 1.2	84
	Breaststroke block 1.1	85
	Breaststroke block 1.2	86
	Crawl Stroke block 1.1	87
	Crawl Stroke block 1.2	88
XII	Stroke Development Content for Level 2	89
	Purpose	89
	Coaching Pedagogy	89
	Level 2 Curriculum Content	89
	Pool conduct block 2.1	89
	Pool conduct block 2.2	90
	Skills block 2.1	90
	Skills block 2.2	90
	Backstroke block 2.1	90
	Backstroke block 2.2	92
	Butterfly block 2.1	93
	Butterfly block 2.2	94

TABLE OF CONTENTS (continued)

SECTION	TITLE	PAGE
	Breaststroke block 2.1	95
	Breaststroke block 2.2	97
	Crawl Stroke block 2.1	98
	Crawl Stroke block 2.2	100
XIII	Stroke Development Content for Level 3	103
	Purpose	103
	Coaching Pedagogy	103
	Skills block 3.1	103
	Skills block 3.2	104
	Backstroke block 3.1	104
	Backstroke block 3.2	105
	Butterfly block 3.1	106
	Butterfly block 3.2	108
	Breaststroke block 3.1	109
	Breaststroke block 3.2	111
	Crawl Stroke block 3.1	113
	Crawl Stroke block 3.2	115
PART C	SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF CURRICULUM CONTENT	117
XIV	Basic Rules of Lane and Practice Session Behaviors	119
XV	Starts, Turns, and Finishes	121
	The Start for All Races from the Starting Block	121
	Specific actions	121
	Behind the block	121
	Mounting the block	121
	On the block	121
	On the start signal	122
	The entry and after (crawl, backstroke, butterfly)	122
	Primes	124
	Crawl Stroke Turn	124
	Specific actions	124
	The approach	124
	Specific actions	124
	Primes	125
	Crawl Stroke Finish	125
	Specific actions	125
	Primes	126
	Backstroke Start	126
	Specific actions	126
	In the water	126
	Holding the starting grips	126
	On the start signal	126
	The entry and after	127
	Primes	127
	Backstroke Turn	129
	Specific actions	129
	The approach	129
	Turn sequence	129
	Primes	130

TABLE OF CONTENTS (continued)

SECTION	TITLE	PAGE
	Backstroke Finish	130
	Specific actions	130
	Primes	130
	Butterfly Stroke Turn	130
	Specific actions	130
	The approach	130
	Turn sequence	131
	Primes	131
	Butterfly Stroke Finish	132
	Specific actions	132
	Primes	132
	Breaststroke Underwater Stroke after the Dive	132
	Specific actions	132
	Breaststroke Turn	133
	Specific actions	133
	The approach	133
	Turn sequence	133
	Primes	134
	Breaststroke Finish	135
	Specific actions	135
	Primes	135
XVI	References	137
XVII	Appendix A	141
	<i>The Swimming Practice Coaching Assessment Form</i>	141
XVIII	Appendix B	149
	Aids for Level 1 instruction	149
	Index	161
	About the Author	165
	Front Cover	

PREFACE

This book is inspired by the observation that few swimming coaches know much about teaching motor skills, perhaps the single most-important characteristic of an effective swimming coach. It covers two extents of teaching: altering an established movement skill and implementing a total curriculum for developing competitive swimming strokes.

Why is there a need for such a book? There are many answers to that question. Some of the reasons that could be proffered are listed below.

1. Many swimming coaches are not trained teachers despite a strong case being made for teaching being the major element in effective swimming coaching.
2. Swimming coaches talk a very good "*game*". When discussing techniques, often correct elements are described and advocated. However, their swimmers do not exhibit those features. Knowledge alone does not make a good coach. Communicating that knowledge and effecting permanent behavior changes in swimmers does.
3. The myopic approach of using physical conditioning as the only avenue for stimulating "*improvements*" in swimmers is doomed to failure. While occasional champions emerge despite such coaching, the conditioning approach fails in many ways and in turn, deprives many swimmers of the opportunity to improve. Some of the general verified principles associated with conditioning in swimming that illustrate its limiting effects follow.
 - Physiological capacities do not change after maturity. With judicious training, those capacities may be maximized but cannot be improved.
 - During growth, many improvements result from physical development alone, not from any "*secret*" swimming program element. Unfortunately, because age-group swimmers improve due to maturation and more often than not despite the swimming coaching to which they are subjected, many coaches assume credit for that biological phenomenon. That incorrect association leads to many false and/or ridiculous claims about activities and content that "*work*". Such is the formation of superstitious behaviors (in the true psychological sense) and is the explanation for "*false positive coaching effects*".
 - When a swimmer is low in fitness, aerobic conditioning that is specific to certain swimming races can be achieved within about 12 weeks (Bonifazi et al., 1998) of at least one hour of appropriate work per day (Troup, 1990).
 - For higher intensity performances, training can be "*peaked*" in as little as one month (Steinacker et al., 1998; Villani, Fernhall, & Miller, 1999), while not all adaptations are physiological (Myburgh et al., 1995).
 - For 12-month trained swimmers, a physical conditioning approach is very likely to lead to a form of training staleness that has been postulated as a significant cause of overtraining (Wilson, Aydt, & Raglin, 2001).
 - 12-month training has the potential to cause techniques to deteriorate (Wilmore & Costill, 1998). That is one more reason to require swimming coaches to stress technique instruction over physical conditioning.
 - Attempts to condition for longer than the above general amounts increases the threat of a swimmer becoming overtrained – a state that reduces adaptation and performance capability.
 - Continued training beyond those general amounts causes swimmers to cope with excessive stress and strain. Those extended experiences reduce the level of work application, develop

loys and excuses to miss parts or all of training sessions, lose interest in improving focusing instead on surviving, etc., in swimmers.

Some coaches are so focused on physical conditioning as being the avenue for swimming performance improvements, that the structuring of programs is treated meticulously and according to "exact" formulations, so that it outwardly appears to be a very exact science. However, such an approach is based on several false premises and/or the denial of some important performance principles.

- Individual variations between swimmers is so pervasive that programs "designed" to produce certain types of adaptation (e.g., anaerobic adaptation) are only successful with approximately one of every three swimmers (Howat & Robson, 1992). Inter-individual variations in physical structures require correct techniques to be instructed in such a way that performance principles are adhered to but outward appearances make swimmers seem to swim differently.
- Gender differences and changes in physiology from pre-puberty through adolescence to maturity produce different physiological, biomechanical, and psychological responses to the same training stimuli.
- Classifications of training stimuli, for example, (a) any non-specific speed swimming; (b) minimum aerobic pace; (c) anaerobic threshold; (d) maximal oxygen uptake; (e) lactate tolerance; (f) peak lactate production; and (g) alactate speed/power, have not been validated in science (Personal communication, 1999, from Joel M Stager, Director of the Counsilman Center for Swimming Research, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana). The design of these categories seems to be based on supposition and not on well-founded physiological research. When such classifications are used to make training decisions for swimmers, the truth of the belief-bases upon which they are founded is no more valid than religious ideals. Their effects on performance are unimpressive.

Consequently, programming of swimming activities to be practiced and attributions of their "value" is largely invalid and results in inappropriate training activities. While a coach can talk convincingly about the content of "his/her" program, it is the swimmers who suffer. At best, only a few program participants would gain much benefit from this focused, but less than appropriate, orientation. As far as swimming fitness is concerned, it appears that as long as swimmers swim "enough" and do a sufficient amount of "fast" swimming they will be as fit as they need to be to race well as opposed to being overtrained or bored from relatively vast volumes of inappropriate swimming disguised as training.

This writer was acquainted recently with a phenomenon that has been talked about for many years about swimmer behaviors that develop in programs that emphasize physical conditioning. More often than not, ensuing behaviors are detrimental to other aspects of swimming training. When talking to some adolescent swimmers who participate in a conditioning-oriented program where the coach acts as the classic "pool cop" (telling the swimmers when to start and stop, calling out their times, recording their times on a board, etc.), one confided that he sang songs in his mind all practice. His aim was to sing all the songs included on the entire compact disk of the artist he was echoing. Another two described how they went over their school work for the day. One recalled as much as possible of what happened in his classes as a way of conducting additional learning. Another thought about and planned the homework he had been set. Several other swimmers opined they did similar things to these. In the mid-1970's, a graduate student and this writer inquired of the thought content at practices of swimmers who also participated in a conditioning-oriented training program. Similar results were obtained. Elsewhere, this writer has discussed the use of distraction

techniques as a way of reducing the awareness of pain and boredom (Rushall, 1977, 2000). It is a common strategy that is supported by many anecdotal stories in situations of repetitively boring activities. However, songs and school work are irrelevant to swimming. Only when thinking is task-relevant does performance improve (Chorkawy, 1982; Ford, 1982). If irrelevant mental activities represent the type of thinking that is occurring in many swimmers, how could they improve when they are not even thinking about their swimming? Research would suggest that improvement would be minimal to non-existent. At most, skills would become less variable and fitness would be sustained at a moderate but not maximal level. Training swimmers with a conditioning approach and no mental direction has minimal effect on performance improvement in growing swimmers and to all intents and purposes, no effect on mature swimmers.

Because swimming is a 12-month sport, maintaining a relevant conditioned state is all that is required. Prior to important meets, concentrated periods of just a few weeks of specific training are all that is needed to "*peak*". When a swimmer is in "*tolerable*" fitness, technique changes and developments are possible. That skill emphasis indicates how a swimmer can improve in performance without changing any underlying physical state. Consequently, the success of swim coaching is dependent upon the capabilities of a coach to improve the movement economy and effectiveness of swimmers. To do that, coaches have to be very effective teachers. Skill improvements are possible in all age groups. Consistent improvements do not result from poor instruction and a strong emphasis on conditioning.

Improvements in swimmers' speeds are caused by several general factors.

1. *Growth*. The majority of swimmers are maturing through childhood or adolescence. Changes in physical capacities and mechanical attributes provide for improvements in force production and performance extension. Coaching has little to do with these factors and much to do with reducing their influence. Given the skilled nature of swimming, the skill-development phases of growth that occur in both genders roughly in the 7-9 years age range and for boys again in post-pubertal years, render it essential that correct coaching (instruction) occur at those times to stimulate maximum performance changes. Neglecting that facet of development is unconscionable.
2. *Being taught how to swim faster*. Appropriate instruction can be used to teach swimmers how to improve in swimming speeds (e.g., developing more beneficial force, reducing unnecessary movements, and reducing resistances). The emphasis here is on *teaching*. Unless swimmers' performance-behaviors are changed for the better, effective teaching does not occur. The capability of a coach to change swimmers effectively and permanently is the mark of successful coaching. Without that demonstration, coaches are merely, at best, "*supervisors*".
3. *Serendipity*. In the absence of coach-instruction, some swimmers do change for the better to varying degrees. Having the good luck to make unexpected and fortunate discoveries about swimming techniques (e.g., through watching others, discussing actions with swimmers/persons other than the coach, trying "*different*" actions largely through trial-and-error, etc.), swimmers happen upon something that improves their performance. That influence is limited. The improvement factors usually are few, and if they reach a "*comfort level of satisfaction*" will be maintained and changed no more. A very few swimmers "*discover*" more factors than others and go on to be extremely successful. This yields the observations of some swimmers achieving despite their coaching. However, the majority of swimmers will languish in the realm of mediocrity and eventually realize that reinforcements from achievement improvements no longer are frequent or satisfying in the sport.

An obvious index of coaching ineffectiveness is when a mature swimmer no longer improves in performance to any notable degree. In this age of professional swimming, many mature swimmers continue to compete without any notable performance improvements (a few hundredths of a second here and there is not notable despite such margins often being achieved to break a world record). Swimmers' growth masks much coaching incompetence, which is perhaps one reason why the majority of swimmers are in their growth years. Mature swimmers leave the sport for many reasons but perhaps the most pervading is the realization of the futility of appropriating so much time, effort, and resources to the activity without any accompanying performance achievements. This book contends that should not occur if coaches *coach*.

One question has to be asked of conditioning-oriented or non-instructional coaches: "*What do swimmers do to improve in their swimming speeds?*" When a "*program*" of sets of repetitions with target performance levels is presented at the start of a practice session, apart from trying harder with its very restricted benefits, what is the avenue for improvement in swimming speeds over various distances? In-depth physiological explanations are appropriate only in very limited circumstances. Customarily, there appears to be a coach's belief that if swimmers swim by following "*their program*", performance improvements will ensue. But what is the mechanism that causes that improvement? The harsh-reality answer to that question is "*There is none*". Without changes in movement economy (endurance) or effectiveness (power), swimming performances will not change. The coaching belief that programs change swimmers is an institutionalized falsehood. Swimmers suffer because of that universally perpetuated delusion.

This book attempts to focus on the important factors involved in teaching when coaching swimming. It describes swimming pedagogy.

No apologies are made for haranguing about "*bad*" coaching, although it might be produced with the best of intentions. It is necessary to make some sense out of what is known about performance and coaching for the benefit of swimmers, not coaches. Swimming is a sport of skill. Therefore, swimming coaching requires an emphasis on the instruction of good skill content for high levels of success to be achieved.

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