

Breaststroke – the best stroke: some insights from some of the best.

By Wayne Goldsmith and Helen Morris

TERRY GATHERCOLE

Many years ago, I was very very fortunate to spend a little time with former world record holder, Olympic gold medal winning coach and outstanding breaststroke technician Terry Gathercole.

One morning we were on deck at the Australian Institute of Sport watching some elite level breaststrokers when all of a sudden he said “Shhh – listen to that”. I said “what?”

Again he said, “Listen to that”. Again I said “what – I can’t hear anything”. Terry smiled and replied, “That’s why breaststroke is the best stroke. It takes finesse. It’s a peaceful and gentle stroke. It takes real skill. It takes the best swimmers to swim it well. It is an art form”.

This article is inspired by and dedicated to him.

WAYNE GOLDSMITH

FIVE BREASTSTROKE ESSENTIALS FOR ALL SWIMMERS AND COACHES

1. If you want to swim breaststroke – you have to swim breaststroke

We have all been there – sitting behind a breaststroker, trying to overtake them, trying to get around their wide kicks and slow speed. Frustrating!!!

However, to get good at breaststroke – you have to swim breaststroke! That is to say, if you want to swim fast breaststroke in competition you have to train to swim fast breaststroke.

Many swimmers wonder why their breaststroke does not improve. Often the reason is simple...they don’t swim it enough in training.

How often do you do a full session of breaststroke? That’s breaststroke warm up, breaststroke kick, breaststroke pull, breaststroke drills, breaststroke main set, breaststroke starts / turns / finishes.

Many breaststrokers find themselves doing a few breaststroke drills in warm up, a few 50’s of breaststroke kick and then freestyle or medley main sets. Now often this is because of crowded lanes and the need to get the work done – particularly during main sets – but there is an old saying, “train the way you want to race”.

Allocate two to three sessions per week of nothing but breaststroke. Breaststroke specific sessions, and especially timed breaststroke **main sets**. Then, watch how much you improve!

2. Think **SHAPE** not **STROKE**

There are as many views and opinions on what constitutes perfect breaststroke technique as there are swimmers who swim it and coaches who coach it!

Don't think too much about the stroke. The basics you learn in stroke school or in your junior squad program will take you a long way.

Instead think **SHAPE**.

There are three key shapes in breaststroke:

TORPEDO SHAPE – At the end of recovery with hands and arms stretched forward, legs squeezed together, toes pointed and everything is tight. Although this shape is only held for a fraction of a second, it is important to extend yourself to be in this shape after every single stroke.

COBRA SHAPE – After the torpedo shape, you move into the cobra shape. This is when your legs are still long behind you, your arms are pulling in towards your chest at maximum strength position and your head is up looking directly ahead at the end of the pool (and you are taking an in breath).

FROG SHAPE – Directly following the cobra shape comes the frog shape. This is a shape that you would be familiar with when learning the breaststroke kick. Your feet are close to your backside and turned outwards with your toes pointing towards the sides of the pool. Your hands are under your chin/chest, about to push forward to regain that torpedo shape while your chest, hips and knees are making a long slightly outwards curved shape (hips are extended, not flexed).

3. **DON'T OVER THINK OR OVER COACH BREASTSTROKE**

In keeping with the **SHAPE NOT STROKE** concept – don't over think (or over coach) breaststroke. Learn the basics well, learn to do them consistently in training and learn to maintain them at high speed and under pressure in competition.

Too many swimmers (and coaches) catch the PBA disease: **PARALYSIS BY ANALYSIS**. That means that they spend too much time and energy getting breaststroke “just right” and are constantly tweaking, fiddling and adjusting timing, rating, pull width, kick depth, head position etc etc.

Once you get a good basic breaststroke – **LEAVE IT ALONE!**

Keep it simple. Think SHAPE.

4. **LONG AND STRONG / LONG AND STRONG / LONG AND STRONG / LONG AND STRONG / LONG AND STRONG**

Once you have a good concept of SHAPE, focus on long powerful kicks and strong powerful arms: or **long and strong** for short.

The critical shapes in breaststroke – the Torpedo shape and the Frog shape allow maximum distance per stroke from a position of maximum kick propulsion: maximum propulsive force at the point of least resistance.

Reach long – (torpedo SHAPE) and kick strong – (frog SHAPE)

The long and strong becomes a mantra and helps to develop rhythm in the overall stroke: reach long / kick strong, reach long / kick strong, reach long / kick strong etc etc.

5. SMALL, HEAD MOVEMENTS AND ALL OF THEM FORWARD.

In all swimming strokes (and just about everything else you do), your body follows your head. If your head is moving fast and excessively up and down, chances are in breaststroke, your body will also be moving up and down excessively creating too much drag.

In breaststroke, small head movements can help when there is too much height at the breath point and therefore not enough forward propulsion.

Try thinking FORWARD rather than UP and DOWN, i.e. push your chin forward to breathe then gently push your forehead forward back into the water. The total distance your head needs to move throughout the stroke is about 3-5 inches – the distance between your chin and forehead.

Whether breaststroke is the best stroke – you can decide. It is certainly ONE of the best four strokes and a stroke that can be fun, enjoyable and rewarding to swim.

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