

Give Your Swimming the Flick (KM)

A commonly neglected part of freestyle, butterfly and backstroke is the final part of the stroke cycle, when your hands exit the water. There might be a few reasons for this, such as:

- That final movement in the stroke cycle is out of sight and out of mind and therefore given little attention.
- You think this part of the stroke cycle is not important and does not contribute to forward movement.
- At that moment in the stroke cycle you are focusing on the catch and pull that the other hand/arm is executing (freestyle and backstroke).
- You are suffering from fatigue (especially in butterfly) and struggling to push your hands back past your hips so you shorten your stroke.
- You are hurrying the stroke into the recovery phase so you can commence the next stroke cycle.
- You are habitually decelerating into the back end of the stroke cycle.

So, what are the potential problems with this?

- Deceleration at the end of the cycle might creep back into more of the underwater stroke, making the whole stroke slower and less powerful.
- Your stroke length might shorten, meaning that you will travel less distance for each stroke and therefore become increasingly inefficient.
- By not cleanly clearing the water at the back end of the stroke you drag water at the start of the recovery, which consumes more of your energy (this is especially problematic with butterfly).
- You do start your recovery stroke from the correct position, which then adversely affects the way you execute the recovery stroke, your body rotation, and where your hands land for the catch.

How do you fix this and make sure it does not become an unconscious habit?

- Flick your hand out of the water at the back end of the stroke. Make the water in front of your palm spray up and out, away from your hips.
- Accelerate through the entire underwater stroke rather than maintaining a constant hand speed.
- With butterfly, allow your body to undulate and use your kick to transfer power to the back end of the stroke so you can cleanly clear the water. In butterfly, getting your hands clear of the water at the back end of the stroke is vital to maintaining forward momentum, keeping your stroke long and not expending extra energy dragging your hands out of the water before they pass your hips.

By cleanly clearing the water at the back end of the stroke you are setting yourself up to bring your hands forward with least water resistance, with a high elbow, and land in the best position to catch the water and commence the underwater phase of the stroke.

By adopting the practice of accelerating your hands at the back end of the stroke, you are more likely to commence this acceleration at the front of the stroke, which is exactly what you want to do to gain speed through power and stroke efficiency, rather than through simply forcing a higher stroke rate.

Drills

- With a training snorkel or holding a pull buoy, extend one hand out front and allow your other hand to trail just forward of your hip. Kick just enough to keep your body position horizontal. Take a breath and with you face in the water, push your hand past your hip as fast as possible and flick water into the air. Reposition your hand just in front of your hip and flick again. Do not take a complete stroke when doing this drill. The aim of this drill is to isolate just the final part of the underwater stroke. Repeat this several times on one side then switch to the other side. You will probably notice that you can flick more strongly with one hand. If this is the case, you need to practice the drill on your weaker side until it feels as strong as the more dominant side.
- Once you have mastered the first drill, set up the same way but this time extend the trailing hand out to the catch position, take a breath and with your face in the water accelerate your pull stroke as fast as you can, completing the movement with a flick of your hand. Move your hand back to the catch position as if you were doing dogpaddle, pause to get yourself set up again, then repeat the movement. Do this several times on one side, then on the other side. Make sure you start with your hand in a static position out front, and then make deliberate decision to execute the drill. Do not take continuous strokes with this drill. The aim of this drill is to isolate the underwater stroke and focus on acceleration.
- The final drill is to practise the accelerating stroke and flick within a normal stroke cycle. Initially it might help to practise freestyle with a catch-up stroke, so you can focus on each stroke individually. Each time you commence the pull phase, say to yourself "go" and see how fast you can get your hand through the underwater stroke and out the back with a flick. Make sure you control the speed of the recovery phase of your stroke cycle and do not simply rush the entire stroke cycle. Initially you might find you are expending more energy swimming this way, but it will become second nature in time as you develop more power in your stroke. If you are expending much more energy, that is probably a sign that the old stroke was relatively weak and inefficient.

Once you have mastered stroke acceleration and a flick to finish, you can ease off the flick so that your hands just clear the water cleanly past your hips and can sweep forward unobstructed. Control the acceleration to suit the speed at which you want to swim. Remember that long distance swims require less hand acceleration than sprints.