



Coach-Athlete Q&A

A look at some coach-replies to common questions by topic.

Q: Sonni, I've thrown in some long distance interval swims into my workouts and in the last few weeks I've noticed that I feel slower and not nearly as strong. I sometimes swim with a friend of mine and during the season I could leave him in my wake. Now he's leaving me behind. Should I back off on these longer swims? I'm afraid if I back off too much I'll lose what I've worked for. Help!! Thanks R.S.

A: Hey R,

More likely than not, the reason that your swim is lagging (with the increase in training intensity and volume) has less to do with being tired or over-training, than it has to do with how one's stroke characteristics change in the face of volume/intensity increases.

Basically, when someone gets tired or attempts to 'swim-above' what their stroke mechanics can handle, their form goes out of 'whack'. **More fatigue means less efficiency.** Sure, you may be getting more "fit" muscularly and cardiovascularly, but in the resistant medium of water (that's over 1000 more times dense than air)....**that doesn't necessarily equal speed.**

I read a quote from a study that said that a Dolphin exerts just 17 watts of power to swim at close to 40mph.....while the best male swimmers in the world must exert over 300 watts(!!) to swim just 3.5mph. It's ALL about efficiency.

Swim in a lane next to a group of 13 to 15 year old girls, sometime. The, merely, average one's can swim right by you, despite not being even remotely as strong and probably less fit. It's kind-of like a powerlifter trying to hit a golf ball farther than Tiger Woods. Won't happen. Stroke mechanics are the key.

Why? Well, obviously, better stroke efficiency. But if you know the ideal stroke mechanics (ie:re-read your updated 'swim-drill' info attached), what is the link between **knowing** them and **swimming** with them?

Two words: **FLEXIBILITY and PRACTICE.** Stretching is a better use of your time in each workout than another 1000yards. THIS is the advantage that the 14-yr.old girl has over you....flexibility. And it's THIS flexibility that allows her to make full use of good stroke form.

We're talking about flexibility in the lats, arms, neck, trunk, ankles, and **ESPECIALLY**, the shoulders. Try this: raise both hands w/ the backs of each hand touching one-another.....knuckles to knuckles....with arms bent at roughly 90 degrees.....to a position just above the top of your head. Now see how close you can get your elbows to one another like this. Not very, huh? {In 'soon-to-come' info I'm going to address the specifics of stretching for optimizing swim-technique. But right now, I'm still reseaching the flood of methods to determine which would work best for the athlete's I coach.}

Fishlike swimmers (and among them, young kids) can almost touch their elbows together in this position!! In the water, this means more balance, more rotation, swimming 'taller', and better streamlining.

Your stroke technique will determine how fast that your fitness allows you to swim. Remember this always.

I'm not saying not to push yourself in your swim sets. But do it in a way that incorporates perfect stroke mechanics. My favorite workouts are one's where I'll alternate a hard interval with a stroke-drill sets multiple times. To me, it seems that this sequencing 'burns' the movement (a nueromuscular response) into the nervous system.....just like shooting free-throws, playing the guitar, using a clutch in a car, or typing on a keyboard.

Hope this helps.