

Breathing in Swimming, when to take it.

Breathing in swimming freestyle is the most difficult thing to co-ordinate for beginners. As a specialist coach of adult swimmers, I am constantly approached by athletes that excel in other sports but are beginners in swimming asking me “Why is it so Difficult, How do you Breathe?”

Firstly, let’s talk about the size of the breath. Breathing too much can stop you in your tracks just as quickly as not breathing enough. If I was to sit down and take the largest size breath I could and repeat it 3 or 4 times in concession, I find myself getting light headed and dizzy and I haven’t even started swimming, why is this? It’s because I’m hyperventilating.

You only need to take in as much air to do the job at hand. When I am swimming at a warm up pace, I only take 20-30% of maximum intake, therefore I am not changing over lots of air quickly. Small amounts of air taken will be easily changed over in the next cycle of breathing without getting light headed. The speed of the arms is co-ordinated with how quickly I need the next breath. In sprinting I hold my breath longer and therefore will need to intake maximum, because I would not want to breathe for as long as possible.

Next is what breathing cycle do you choose? Do you breathe every 2 strokes, every 3 strokes, 4 strokes, what? The answer is, whatever you train yourself to do will become the norm. Two trains of thought on even or odd breathing cycles. One, breathe every 3 and you get to see both sides of the pool, lake, or ocean for any competition, and/or any buoys or markers. It will also even out your stroke for balance in strength, style, height of elbows and general Ying & Yang. The second train of thought is that most people are stronger on one side, right handed or left handed. If this is relevant in your stroke the test is to time yourself over 100m just breathing on one side. After resting repeat the test breathing only on the other side and compare times. Sometimes when I do this exercise on my swimmers there is up to 10 seconds difference breathing on one side per 100 metres. Therefore over a 1500m swimming race you are giving away 1min 15seconds if you breathe every 3 over breathing only on your strongest side. My coaching tactics would be do not show your weakness and only show your strengths which means breathe on your fast side only.

If you are swimming for speed you have to face facts, the more you breathe the slower you will go because breathing will slow you down. With this knowledge it means if you're racing 50 metres trying not to breathe it will get you towards your best result.

Next point to know is that there are two ways to hold your breath during the breathing cycles. One the slow release technique – this is where you take the breath and slowly release it during the course of arm strokes in-between breathes. The second way is the hold and dump method – this is where you hold your breath as long as possible until the change over of air and then you dump as much air as possible before taking in the new. I favour this method because whilst the air is in the lungs it is acting as an air bag that will keep you afloat better, and in my book the higher afloat you are the faster you will swim.

Finally, how should we connect the turning of the head in relation to the rotation of the arms? Here the problem is use the neck too much and that will effect how much body rotation there is, and it is healthy to have good body rotation. Therefore the turning of the head is smaller than what most people think. I find it best to have finished the intake of the breath at the midpoint of the arm stroke, which is when the arm is at the highest point above the head in the rotation of the arm cycle. Therefore the head should be returning back to the centre position on the downhill of the arm stroke before the reaching forward. This sets up the reach happening when the head is still and centred before the rotation is switched to the other shoulder.

Well good luck with all that and I hope you all get up to top speed and stay there.

Regards

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