

Fun with Fins and Playtime with Paddles: Using Swimming Training Equipment to Make Workouts Wonderful (and Wacky).

By Wayne Goldsmith

There are more brands and more varieties of swimming equipment on the market than ever – each one promising to deliver outstanding results and make significant improvements to your swimming performance.

Think of swimming and using swimming equipment like being a cook and using kitchen appliances, utensils etc.

The first step in cooking is to learn *the fundamentals of cooking* – usually from mum or dad or through a school program, a cooking class or a TV “chef-show”.

You learn how to chop, to dice, how to turn on the stove-cook-top, use the oven and how to make some simple dishes under the guidance and direction of someone who understands the basics of the art and science of cooking.

When you start cooking for yourself, you begin with a few simple recipes and some kitchen “basics” – a knife, a few bowls, a frying-pan, a chopping board and some common herbs and spices.

Then, as your cooking skills improve and you want to try a few more advanced recipes, you purchase a blender, an electric mixer, pots and pans of different sizes, several more specialist knives and a wider range of herbs and spices.

But the key to it all is how well you actually cook, i.e. how good are your basic, fundamental cooking skills.

If your basic cooking skills are poor, even the best appliances, the sharpest knives and the world’s largest collection of exotic herbs and spices will not make your food palatable.

In swimming, your success is determined by “the basics” – body position, head position, breathing, how relaxed you are, your catch, your kick – how well you swim is the product of how well you apply the fundamentals of swimming in your training and racing.

If you’ve got “the basics” in place, then the addition of fins, pull-buoys, kickboards, paddles, snorkels and other more exotic swimming equipment can make an incredible improvement in your swimming performance.

If your body position is wrong, your breathing inefficient, your catch ineffective and your kicking non-existent, not only will swimming equipment ***not*** help you but in some cases it will even *harm* and degrade your swimming technique.



A good example of this is using swim paddles.

Many Masters swimmers believe that using swim paddles is a “short-cut” to swimming success.

There’s no doubt that if you have good “feel” of the water and an effective “catch”, then swim paddles can help you learn to increase your pulling power and improve your ability to apply “pressure” to the water throughout your stroke.

However.....if your “feel”, “catch” and “control” are poor, then paddles – particularly large paddles, i.e. paddles which are much larger than your own hand, can:

1. **Increase injury risk**, i.e. large paddles can overload your arms and shoulders at the wrong stage of your stroke;
2. **Decrease your distance per stroke**, i.e. they force you to recover your stroke too early and not finish your stroke correctly;
3. **Cause you to lose stroke control**, i.e. if you can’t “hold” the paddles in the correct position your hands and arms will not follow your usual swimming stroke pattern;
4. **Cause your hand to enter the water incorrectly**, i.e. instead of entering the water with your fingers first, large paddles can force you “skate” on the water and enter wrist first.

Whilst swim paddles can help in many ways, they can also be potentially very damaging to your swim stroke unless you learn to use them correctly.

So.....if you have learnt the fundamentals of an effective, basic freestyle swimming stroke then swimming equipment can be a wonderful way to improve your swimming and have a lot more fun in training.

Here are some fun and exciting ways of using swimming equipment.

1. **Strippers!** Here’s a fun game to play with swim equipment. Start a swim set – for example 24 x 50 on 2:00 – wearing fins, with your paddles on your hands and holding your kickboard. Every six 50s remove or “strip” one piece of equipment. For example, for the first six 50s kick with the kickboard while wearing all your swim equipment. Then leave your kickboard at the end of the pool and swim the next six 50s with paddles and fins. After that, take off your paddles and swim the next six 50s with fins on then finally take off your fins and swim the last six without any swimming equipment.
2. **The Table.** This is a really tough but fun kick and swim set. Kick one lap on your back holding one piece of swimming equipment straight up in the air, i.e. with your arms at 90 degrees to the water. This could be a water bottle or a paddle or one single fin – anything **EXCEPT** your kickboard: leave that until last. Kick on your back holding a single piece of swimming equipment up and out of the water until you get to the end of your lane. Leave that piece of equipment at the end of the pool and **swim** back to the end where you started. Pick up another single piece of swimming equipment and again kick on your back, holding the item straight up in the air at 90 degrees to the water surface. Place it at the end of your lane and swim back to your starting position. Repeat this until all your equipment is at the opposite end of the pool from where you started the workout. Use your kickboard last – and as you did with all the previous pieces of swimming equipment, hold your kickboard straight up in the air at 90 degrees to the water. **Now...“the table”.** Place all your swimming equipment flat on the kickboard and kick on your back, balancing all your swimming equipment on the kickboard, back to where you started your swim session. Lots of fun – but very difficult to do well.

3. **Shifting Pool Buoys - KPS.** This set helps to add flow and continuity to your kick, pull and swim sets. For example, start with a basic set like 6 x 150 on 4 minutes – **KPS**, i.e. **kick, pull swim**. Push off for the first 50 using your pullbuoy like a kickboard, i.e. out in front of you. Then as you approach the wall, tumble turn and as you turn, place the pullbuoy between your knees and make the next 50 a “pull” 50. As you come back to the 100 metre mark, tumble turn again and as you turn, slightly open your knees, allow the pull buoy to pop out and the final 50 becomes a swim 50. Repeat throughout the KPS set.



4. **Kick – Swim “Base” Training.** This is fun and adds the element of competitiveness to kick sets. Start the session with a **timed 50 metre swimming sprint**. Then use this time as your “base” for some goal orientated kicking work. For example:
- Aim to kick 30 metres with your kickboard in your 50 metre “base” time;
 - Aim to kick 50 metres with your kickboard and WITH FINS in your 50 metre “base” time;
 - Aim to kick 50 metres with your kickboard but WITHOUT FINS in your 50 metre “base” time plus 15 seconds.
 - Aim to “double” – i.e. if your 50 metre swim “base” time was 40 seconds, double it (80 seconds) and see if you can kick 100 metres with your kickboard and WITH FINS in 80 seconds.
5. **With and without Paddles.** Swim paddles can be used to enhance your “feel” of the water because they allow you to feel “pressure” against the paddle more easily than you can feel the pressure on your palm. Start swimming SLOWLY with **paddles and fins**. Close your eyes for 4-6 strokes and “feel the pressure” of the water against your paddle. Rest at the end of the lap for a few seconds then repeat this “paddle and pressure” exercise, again closing your eyes for a few strokes during the lap so you can focus on this “feeling”. After a few laps, remove your swim paddles and repeat the “slow swimming and eyes closed” routine. Put your paddles back on and continue to swim slowly with paddles and fins, closing your eyes for a few strokes each lap. This is a great routine for developing swim stroke and enhancing your ability to feel the water.
6. **Kickboard Madness.** Most people think that using kickboards is a boring way to do laps at the pool but have you tried...
- Kicking with the kickboard on its “edge”, i.e. on its side;
 - Kicking with it over your head – see “the Table” exercise;
 - Kicking using a kickboard but with someone else holding on to the other side, i.e. kicking on the same kickboard **side by side** with a team mate;
 - Kicking on a kickboard with a team mate on **the opposite side** of the kickboard, i.e. you hold the kickboard on one end, your team mate holds the kickboard on the other end and you both kick at the same time in opposite directions to see if the power of your kick can push each other backwards. A fun and very competitive way to use ‘boards.



Summary:

1. **Swimming training equipment can be a great addition to your swimming training experience.** Not only can the right equipment – used the right way – enhance your swimming skills and improve your swimming performance but swimming equipment can be fun to use and provide endless variety to your training sessions.
2. **However, it is important to see all swimming equipment as just tools to enhance and further develop your existing swimming stroke.** They are designed to **build on the basics** – to improve an already sound swimming stroke and not to be used as a short cut to convert swimming mediocrity into swimming mastery!
3. **And remember... you don't start Masters Meets wearing fins a pull-buoy and swim paddles.** Whilst swimming equipment is fun to use, your key focus has to be stroke efficiency and effectiveness “au-naturele”.

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