

MATURE MASTERS

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Many people come to Masters Swimming at a mature age. Not all find it an easy journey. They join a squad to take part in a form of exercise that can be gentle on an ageing body. This article may apply to younger masters but they usually have greater flexibility and are more suited to learning new motor skills

Some people are born with a greater mechanical skill aptitude than others but not all their developed skills transfer to swimming. A baby will crawl, learn to stand, walk, run, jump, catch and hit a ball. These skills become platform skills for many sports. Skills polished in those disciplines will often transfer to another sport. But such skills only marginally help swimming. Swimming takes part in water, the body is not in contact with a solid medium. In most sports, contact with the earth provides a point of reference for movement. For our new **mature master**, perceiving body alignment in swimming can be likened to a pilot flying in cloud without instruments. Swimming well requires an almost unique skill set.

A coach will desire a swimmer to swim in a very streamlined manner and apply power in the most efficient way. The swimmer will usually want to keep up with swimmers in front of the lane and throw all their strength at keeping up. Usually skills not applicable to swimming are used in a very inefficient manner. The result is that **practice makes permanent** and reinforces the inefficiencies. Consider slowing down so the swimming stroke does not occur as a ballistic reflex. A significant portion of Alexander Popov's training was done slowly in the belief that his perfected stroke would be maintained under racing pressure. He won 4 individual Olympic Gold medals. Slower swimming will assist skill acquisition.

It is obvious that the **mature master** requires a great desire to learn.

The **mature master** requires two prerequisite skills. One is some core strength and the second is an ability to control breathing. I refer readers to my article on the Masters Swimming Australia website, [Coaching Tips and Resources, "Breathing, Posture and Core-strength"](#). A professional coach with whom I am associated, requests mature learners to stand up from a low sitting position without using the hands and arms to assist. She considers this to be a workable core-strength from which to learn and train. Core-strength control is essential for efficient stroke and diaphragm breathing. How many Masters are proponents of Yoga but do not apply that knowledge and control to swimming?

When a new **mature master** does not tune core-strength, breathing becomes more difficult resulting in the swimmer either lifting the head or turning the body off the centre line to take a shallow breath. Compromising both these skills leaves the swimmer without a platform from which they can control the arm action or kick. The kick can become merely a counter-balance to upper body movement and be non-propulsive or regressive. Lack of body and breathing control removes the ability to achieve maximum propulsion no matter how much strength is applied. Good swimmers hold a body centre line throughout the stroke and don't look to the front.

It is not difficult to learn to push off the wall underwater in a very streamlined position but so often when the arm movement and/or the kick is introduced, the stroke loses its streamlining. What has happened? Squads do sculling drills, encourage high elbows during the pull through but are these

applied to the full stroke? Sculling is a very useful skill to apply throughout the full length of the power section of the arm action. Dropped elbows make both sculling impossible and/or developing significant arm action power. Often the **mature master** will ballistically engage the arm stroke and kick flat out. There is a need to apply the power in a manner that is effectively propulsive. In an ideal stroke, I believe that muscle groups have micro-rests in the recovery phase. A fault in any part of the stroke will usually alter movement through the rest of the cycle. This makes the cause of a fault difficult to identify.

Most of the arm movement power is transferred to the water by the hand and the forearm. The changing body position enhances streamlining. So many slower swimmers have not developed the body position to allow the hands and forearms to “**hold the water**” as they progress through the stroke. I am amazed that many **mature masters** who have superb hand skills in other areas, such as music or needle work, are unable to transfer their skill to swimming. Core strength needs to be harnessed and used as a bracing point for both the arm action and kick.

Many **mature masters** do not have the foot flexibility necessary to achieve a useful kick but waste energy by kicking flat out. Alex Popov could kick 50 metres in under 30 seconds. How many **mature masters** are able to kick 50 metres in under 70 seconds? If your kick is not supporting your stroke, consider a very small kick rather than a huge kick effort.

Shoulder and ankle flexibility are particularly helpful to swimmers. Many ex-footballers and triathletes have limited movement ranges in both. A swimmer with these limitations may learn to swim well but would be better with extended flexibility.

The **mature master** has a difficult task in acquiring the skills of swimming. They have their own established motor skill base but **need to acquire new skills**. Young children acquire these skills often by copying the current Olympic champion and sometimes listening to instructions, learning the basic skill then with training polishing off the raw edges. They work with a receptive muscle memory and a brain not carrying motor skill baggage of the past. They establish motor skills easily. **Mature masters** with a competitive school swimming history have an advantage over their colleagues who have not had that much swimming experience. I discussed the difficulties of teaching new physical skills to mature adults with another coach. She is also a physiotherapist. Her reply was “when we are rehabilitating patients who have had a stroke, we teach them new physical skills”. We all realise that is not easy but very possible. Adults develop their abilities in different ways. Academic ability is not an indication of motor skill ability. One mature master may need to develop a hierarchy of skill sets while another has many established physical abilities transferable to swimming.

There are so many things to keep in the mind and apply to the stroke. You may perceive that the body is performing a certain movement while it is doing something completely different. There is a need to develop a perception of where the body is in water. Looking to the front will cause the body to lose streamlining. How lost do you get in the middle of a tumble turn? Perception of where the body is in the water is best learnt in a near empty pool without choppy waves or others getting in the way. So much to think about! Of course thinking too much brings its own problems. Trying too hard can bring about “Paralysis by Analysis”. Swimmers need to have a relaxed stroke. I remember seeing Dawn Fraser in her prime and she swam so relaxed. Susie O’Neill swam “as loose as a goose”. Can one keep all this in their mind and relax at the same time?

Perfect practice will result in the perfect stroke. A coach will be aware when a skill has been achieved by a swimmer but so often the stroke will regress to the previous faults. With much perfect practice over a considerable distance, the skill will become automatic and be retained in the muscle memory. This allows the swimmer to redirect their efforts to other skills. Pool swimmers can achieve speed at starts and turns. With streamlining, it is possible to maintain that speed using a perfect stroke for the remainder of the lap. Unfortunately the concept of using brute strength to overcome body resistance happens far too often. The two extremes require completely different mental and physical approaches.

Many **mature masters** have obviously read every article on the Web. They pick up tips about all the champions. It is a bit like studying how to perform a three and a half somersaults with full twist diving off the 10 metre platform but having difficulty performing it. The basic skills must be learned first. Academic and motor skills are not the same. I remember watching one swimmer at National Championships pushing off the wall then doing 4 underwater butterfly kicks. The kicks were sending her backwards!

The **mature master**, working in a squad, will receive many tips on how to improve the stroke. They may receive so many that the perception is that the coach is always picking on them. If a coach has 20 swimmers in a 90 minute program, they can only give very limited time to each swimmer while also writing up further details on the board, explaining sets and taking times. Maybe the occasional private lesson is needed. Select a recognised expert for such an exercise.

Coaches will be trying to undo a stroke based on unsuitable skills and rebuild the skills and stroke in a different way. They may try different ways to achieve this result. The **mature master** may perceive that they are being taught different things. When one explanation or demonstration is unsuccessful, the coach may then explain it in a different way or try to work from a different part of the stroke as a fault in one part can affect the total stroke cycle. It can be a long road for both parties. Patience and persistence are required from both parties.

Many concepts have been discussed in this article but the final suggestion is to construct your stroke around streamlining, breathing, centre-line and posture.

My articles are based on my experiences in 55 years of swimming and coaching. Standard text books are usually directed to younger swimmers. Masters swimmers have a sporting life, not just a career. May your efforts to improve your techniques now provide benefits for decades to come.