

# Six Quick Tips

## for Summer League Swimmers & Coaches

by Terry Laughlin

Summer league involves neighborhood teams with kids who are mostly 12 years and under and have little formal swimming experience. The race distances are short – primarily 25 and 50 yards – as is the season, usually 8 weeks or less.

With a short season and time so limited to "get the kids in shape," many summer league coaches try to squeeze in as much training as they can, but **youthful physiology can't make any significant training adaptation in six to eight weeks, so a focus on "working out" is futile.** However, **coaches can foster an impressive amount of progress by teaching kids to be more efficient.**

**By devoting as much time as possible to teaching fluency and stroke length, coaches should expect to achieve at least 25% improvement in stroke efficiency over the course of just a few weeks.** In concrete terms, that could mean teaching an 8-year old who swim 25 yards of freestyle (or, say, a 12-year old who swims 50 yards of breaststroke) in 24 strokes to do it in 18. Why is that important? Because **every study of swimming success has identified Stroke Length** – not aerobic fitness – **as the key factor**...and the shorter the race, the more important it becomes.

The additional benefit from being a teaching-coach in summer league is attitude. Kids will respond with more enthusiasm to a learning experience than to unfocused and repetitive laps. Making measurable progress and developing a sense of real competence could move them to decide that swimming is a fun and worthwhile activity for the rest of the year.

The question, then, is what and how to teach, particularly because many summer-league coaches are fairly inexperienced themselves. But teaching can be both simple and manageable – and a wonderful opportunity for the coach to have a great learning experience, too. You'll learn far more as a coach by spending your allotted daily hour or so actively teaching, than by giving generic laps.

As a starting point, **be guided by a principle of having the swimmers practice fluency and smoothness at all times – and to avoid practicing struggle.** Because water is a fluid, it hugely rewards fluid movement, and hugely penalizes rough or choppy movement. Swimmers who practice fluency will progress far more than those who do not. In addition, try the following:

**Teach starts every day.** Because summer-league races are short, **begin teaching starts and breakouts to every swimmer on Day One and keep teaching them, for at least a few minutes, each day of the season.** (Make sure you teach starts in deep water.) Focus on clean, knifelike entries and low-angle (not diving too deep, not having to climb steeply back toward the surface) breakouts. Teach turns and push-offs to those who will race 50 yards or farther. Small improvements in starts and turns – achieved team-wide -- will win you many places, races, and meets.

**Teach a few drills...thoroughly.** **Drills will produce more dramatic improvements in fluency and efficiency than anything else,** but given the brief season and the relative inexperience of swimmers and coaches, you'll achieve maximum benefit if you keep it simple. **Focus on just a few drills and take the time to do them really well.**

The most important drills are seven basic balance drills (four for the long-axis strokes of free and back, three for short-axis fly and breast), which will transform how they interact with the water. Learn how to teach them on the TI videos <http://www.totalimmersion.net/products-dvds.html>

Freestyle and Backstroke: The Total Immersion Way and Butterfly and Breaststroke: The Total Immersion Way.

**Swim smarter.** You won't do drills all the time. When your team is doing full-stroke swimming, try the following and, by summer's end, you'll have a pool full of kids who look like Olympians – and set personal records across the board.

**1. Have them count strokes on EVERY lap they swim the entire summer.** Every now and then, ask them to swim at a lower count than they've achieved before. They'll pay more attention to it, if, on a regular basis, you ask them to report their latest stroke count to you.

**2. Ask your team to swim more quietly. Challenge them to swim with as little noise and splash as possible** and, every now and then, organize contests to see which lane or heat can swim with the least noise and splash. If you're looking for a real challenge, have a contest for quiet butterfly – emphasizing a low-splash, soft landing.

**3. Never practice struggle.** If you have 7-year old freestylers or 9-year old butterflyers who can swim a few reasonably good cycles of the stroke, but lose form and begin "practicing struggle" at some point before they finish a 25, don't have them practice full 25s. Practicing 3 strokes of relatively efficient and fluent butterfly – then stopping for a breather – is better than doing 3 cycles of butterfly, followed by 10 cycles of "butterstruggle."

I PROMISE – they'll swim better for the full 25 on race day every time if you allow them to practice only the distance they can swim with good form, and patiently help them extend that distance, week by week through the season.

## Technique Made Simple

At the summer league level – or in any short-season situation – it's best to keep technique work fairly basic and put your energy into getting the WHOLE TEAM to do just one or two things consistently. If you make these three ideas a team-wide mission I promise they'll win you many races and result in best times:

**Keep your head on straight.** Here's one stroke tip that will work wonders for all four strokes. Virtually no one seems to do it instinctively, but I promise that any swimmer who learns it will improve instantly in their balance, stroke length and speed: **Hold the head in a neutral position in all strokes.**

As the coach watching from on deck, you should see this: Freestylers should look at the bottom and no more than the back half of the head should show above the surface at any time. Backstrokers should have the head resting comfortably on the surface of the water, with the face looking "slightly" backwards (less than 90 degrees).

**For breaststroke and butterfly, teach** the "sneaky breath." While breathing, look down slightly and keep the chin in the water. You can also think of it as **breathing as if wearing a neck brace.** Have contests to see which swimmer can take the "sneakiest breath." That means they breathe so seamlessly that it's actually a bit difficult, from the deck, to see when they took the breath.

**Don't sprint.** I know, this seems to go against logic: "All the races are short and you are telling me not to practice sprints?" Trust me. When the gun goes off, they know the idea is to go fast. They'll be far more prepared to do that on meet day if they spend the other days practicing slow, smooth, relaxed, quiet movement. And no matter how slowly they may be going, **anytime you see a swimmer looking a bit rough, do one of three things: (1) make them take a rest, (2) have them drill instead of swim, or (3) tell them to slow down.**

**If you want to give them some speed work, hold contests in swimming fast quietly** – any distance from 3 cycles to 25 yards. You can also hold contests in "who can go the fastest 25 yards in 15 strokes of freestyle (or 10 strokes of breaststroke)." Simply set the stroke count target as an appropriate challenge to the age group, swimmer and stroke.

Putting it all together. **On meet day**, as you send them off to the blocks, **ask them to think about just one thing** (e.g., keep a neutral head position or take longer, smoother strokes) and to otherwise just do what comes naturally. Most important of all...remind them to have fun.

In addition to the videos mentioned above, two other resources for short-season coaches are the books: *Swimming Made Easy* by Terry Laughlin and *Long Strokes in a Short Season* by Art Aungst. Learn more about them at [www.totalimmersion.net/products.html](http://www.totalimmersion.net/products.html)

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