Backstroke Guide

**Introduction**

Backstroke is usually the second stroke most people learn after freestyle and this is due to the similarities between the two, making it a tad bit simpler to learn as one builds their confidence in the water. Concept wise, backstroke and freestyle are fairly identical, with the only main caveat being that backstroke is done on our back and freestyle on our front. To help with this transition, I encourage you to look at using pancake flips to help with the concept of going from front to back and perhaps vice versa; pancake flips may help with the feeling of what it’s like swimming on our back after learning to swim on our front. Nevertheless, as with any stroke, our progression begins with kicks, upper body movement, body position, and combining them all into one at the end with additional drills to practice.

The key to being good at backstroke is a solid body position and this is reflected in the drills I will be including in the kick and upper body movement section. Without a strong body position, the rest of the stroke falls apart and makes it extremely difficult to move properly in the water, a lot more given that we are looking up at the sky when swimming and not down at the bottom of the pool, hence our sense of direction may be skewed. Try to emphasize the importance of having a good body position as it will help dramatically with their strokes.

**Part I – Kicks**

Kicking in backstroke is identical to freestyle minus the orientation. Whilst not all too different, kicking on our back has challenges of its own; this may include the desire to bend the knees even more due to pressure being exerted by the water, or the difference in strength in the downward kick as opposed to the upward kick. When beginning to learn to kick on our back, I like to start on the wall with both hands behind the head holding the wall. Being in this position allows us to see the leg movement and correct it accordingly. When kicking, try to keep the whole leg in the water with only the toes and feet breaking the surface; the moment the knees or the upper legs break the water, it causes the upper body to sink and throws off the body position.

Kicking Drills

These drills are meant to help with the leg’s movement and the body position, giving us the foundation to build upon in Part III – Body Position.

* Sidekicks

Sidekicks are self-explanatory, kicking on the side. For this drill, try to have the body completely facing the side with the lower hand extended and the other hand on the side out of the water. Head looks up and the legs move side to side. Keep the head still and the upper shoulder at your chin to help the body stay on its side.

* Rotation kick

For the rotation kick, instead of having one hand extended, both hands are on our side for the drill. Start out on one side with the shoulder to the chin, and kick 6 kicks. Then slowly kick another 6 kicks whilst rotating onto the other side. Then kick another 6 kicks on that side before switching again. The purpose of this drill is to mimic and normalize the side-to-side movement we have when swimming backstroke, helping to make it a habit.

**Part II – Arms/Upper body**

Arms for backstroke are slightly more difficult as we are only able to see the recovery portion of the stroke, making it difficult to understand if we are catching and pulling properly. We could do some sculling to build that feeling of grabbing the water and there’s a drill that I like to do in particular anytime I feel like my catch is lacking or if I find grabbing the water difficult for any reason. Good body and shoulder rotation will help with the arms and will provide most of the necessary power. For our catch, I try to teach a shallow catch where the fingers are pointed up as it leads to a more efficient stroke. Most people will try a deep catch at first; however, with a deep catch, it often leads to a finish where the body is being pushed underwater and this could throw off the positioning and lead to inefficiency. Hand positioning plays a fairly big role as the hand placement will dictate your direction due to being unable to see where one is swimming in backstroke.

With arms, I like to start off teaching the catch and push while standing up in shallow water. Show participants what the catch and push portion look like whilst explaining to them why we catch a certain way. During the catch, your shoulders are going to be rotated with one above the water and the other below it. The shoulder that is below the water is the arm that will be demonstrating the catch. At this position, you are on your side with one shoulder in and one shoulder out. The shoulder that is in is going to bring the arm slightly up, elbow pointed down, hands and fingers pointed up. Similar to freestyle, grab the water with the forearms and slowly rotate the body so that the shoulder is now out of the water. During this motion, push the arm back towards your legs. Recall that most of the power and momentum are going to come from the body rotating but none of that matters if the catch isn’t good. Practice the catch with participants standing up, then progress onto the wall where they are holding the wall with one hand and practicing their catch with the other hand. Swap accordingly.

To help practice/focus on the catch, I tend to gravitate towards a drill called “Old back”. It’s an older form of backstroke swam with both hands at the same time and a breaststroke kick. The drill allows for us to take our time and find the feeling of catching, as well as understanding the pull push motion. The only downfall of this drill is the lack of shoulder rotation as it goes against every point we have made so far. Try to use this drill as an emphasis for the catch, pull push, and how the arms should look without rotation.

**Part III – Body Position**

Arguably the most important part of backstroke, the body position is the key efficient, well controlled backstroke. Regardless of whether you have a good catch or a strong kick, if the body position is out of alignment or weak, everything else falls apart. To achieve a good body position, we try to emphasize a shoulder to chin rotation where both shoulders are coming up towards the chin, almost touching, whilst keeping the head still. As always, the body position starts with the core and the general body shape. For this, we generally try to keep the back of the head, neck, and spine all in one line, similar to the body position when learning back floats. A cue to help this is to have their eyes constantly looking straight up so that there is a ninety-degree angle between where the eye is looking and their body.

The kicking drills from earlier have given us the baseline to work with when it comes to building a strong position in the water. Like freestyle, having a side-to-side rotation is almost necessary as it allows for minimal resistance and a larger range of motion. Try to have the body move as a single unit, starting the movement from the center of the body, the core. It is easier to rotate the whole body from the core than it is from the shoulders or legs. With side-to-side motion, the shoulders coming up near the chin is a cue I like to use when determining if my body is rotating enough. When practicing drills, you want to over exaggerate the motion as it helps to build a subconscious habit.