Freestyle guide

**Brief Introduction**

The assumption is that participants can swim at least 25 yards of freestyle. The goal of the clinic is to help them refine their technique further and provide valuable feedback/explanations as to why certain things are done a particular way. I try to have participants swim an initial 25 yards of freestyle for two reasons; the first is to ensure that they meet the prerequisites, and the second is that it helps me to gain a better initial understanding of how I may help a participant during the clinic. For example, during the initial 25 yards, I may notice that a participant does not rotate enough and that causes more strain on the shoulder. I would then prioritize body position and rotation for that participant during the duration of the clinic, and thus provide them with drills to improve that body position. This allows for a more personal approach that caters to a participant’s specific needs. Understand that it can be exhausting to try and remember what each participant needs to work on, and therefore should not be the ultimate focus for the clinic. Rather, define a general goal and adjust accordingly to accommodate the respective participants. An additional note that I have is to understand that the way you swim is different from the way someone else swims; just because something works for you does not mean it will work for me or another individual. Therefore, I have included multiple ways to demonstrate different techniques that may be applicable to a general group. For more specific instruction, recommend a private lesson so that we as a department may better accommodate their individual respective needs.

**Part I**

The first part involves kicks. Kicking is the core fundamental behind any stroke, having a good kick will allow your body to direct energy away from trying to stay afloat and redirect that energy towards a stronger pull, perse. Try to help participants understand the importance of having a strong efficient kick while implementing the correct technique behind this idea. A common mistake that may occur is when a participant uses their knees to kick, failing to engage their hips and core. Try to demonstrate a proper kick whilst explaining to the participants the benefits of kicking from your hips. This could include fully utilizing the entire lower body, preventing injuries in the knees, and creating good habits for a good stroke later on.

Ways to help build good kicking habits are as follows:

1. On the wall. This will give them additional support to focus on engaging the hips and core muscles. Start out slow, keep the legs small, have the heels come out of the water, and then back down again. Try not to focus on speed and power, but more on the feeling of pushing water up and down.
2. On the board. This is taking the kicks from the wall and applying them in motion. Head positioning might be an issue at first, so have them try two different methods to see what may work best. The first involves holding the front of the board and keeping their head out of the water. Some may find this a little more difficult as they will need to engage a lot of their core if they’re not used to the positioning of their body. The second has them holding the back of the board with their face in the water. This gives a better-streamlined position and may make it easier to focus on the kicks. Granted, they will need to lift their heads out of the water to be able to breathe, therefore, make a note to mention that if they were to do so, they can lightly press on the board to give them some additional leverage to lift their heads out of the water. Immediately after doing so, bring their heads back down into the original position.
3. Sidekicks on the wall. This is slightly more complicated. Freestyle is not a flat stroke; this can be defined as swimming on our fronts only. Rather, freestyle is more of a side stroke where we go from side to side with each pull. Therefore, it is best to attempt to mimic the body position that the side kick provides. When pulling, due to the hip rotation and how much you want to rotate for easier recovery and maximization of the pull, the body is going to be at an angle of about 65 degrees, give or take. Thus, performing the side kick allows us to gain a better understanding of the position of the body. This is a lot more difficult as there will be less surface area and will then be harder to float. Utilize a noodle to help participants float and redirect their attention away from trying to stay afloat and towards feeling the engagement in their hips.
4. On the wall, on their back. I understand that this is a freestyle clinic, and it is expected that all the kicks would be done on our fronts. However, kicking on the back allows us to see the motion of the leg, and correct it accordingly. Remember that participants should be trying to engage their hips and not their knees. Their knees will be bending a lot more than what they may experience whilst on their front, however, this is normal due to the water resistance when pushing up being greater than pushing down.

**Part II**

The second part is somewhat of a leap if this were to be a normal swim lesson. As the assumption is that all participants understand how to swim basic freestyle, this is more so of a refresher and a correction as to what the best technique may be. The order of progression is listed below, note that this is not a strict order and can be adjusted based on the specific needs and/or capabilities of the participants. For example, if you feel as if a participant needs more emphasis on breathing than body position, feel free to spend more time on breath control first and then progress onto the body position. I have ordered it in this way to first build a background (body position) and then provide small corrections to the little details (breathing, catching, and arm recovery). Try to have little cues or pointers for participants to remember which will help them self-correct as they progress through the stroke.

1. Start with body position correction. This is done by bending over in shallow water, with the upper body almost horizontal and flat on the surface of the water. Their shoulders should be just right below the water’s surface. From there, walk them through the motions to mimic what a freestyle stroke may look like. Engage and rotate the upper body from the hips, driving the shoulders and extending the arms forward as much as possible. For now, you can discard the head position and breathing techniques as we will touch upon that later on. The emphasis here is to get participants to understand the importance of rotating from the hips as well as give them a visualization as to what a proper stroke may look like for the upper body at the very least.
2. Catch and pull. Continuing on from the body position correction above, staying in the same position as before, bending over in the shallow end with the upper body parallel to the surface of the water, with the shoulders slightly below the surface; we now demonstrate the catch and pull. There are two common ways that individuals may have been taught how to catch. The first and one of the more common ones for swimmers who may just be starting out is the ‘S catch’. This catch was designed for swimmers to ‘find water’ during the start of the stroke. While useful to help instill the initial idea of “grabbing the water”, it can be somewhat inefficient and time-consuming. The second kind of catch is more common among competitive swimmers, a straight down type of catch where we simply engage the forearm and the hand in a brief motion of pulling the water slightly towards you before pulling the entire arm back in the pulling motion. This catch, I consider, to be more efficient in the sense that you are not wasting away energy and time ‘searching’ for the water. It is up to you which one you demonstrate and teach, however, do try and provide the opportunity for participants to try out both as trial and error will implore exploration and a discovery of what may work best for them specifically. A key pointer/cue that has worked for my participants in the past is to keep the elbow pointed out and not behind you.
3. Swimming on the board. Once participants have a general grasp of the theoretical body position, have them move onto the board to try and practice their rotation and catch. If you feel like the two need to be separated and practiced at different intervals, feel free to adjust and have them swim on the board for rotation and body position before swimming for the catch.
4. Drills to do. Can be done on the board initially for stability and body position. The following drills are to be done on the board once participants have swum a few times with the board. This is to build emphasis on body position and give them tools to use later on in their own time. Stagger the drills throughout the duration of the clinic so that they are not too overwhelmed.:

* Touch and pull.
* Long strokes, more extension.
* Finger drags.
* Zipper drill.
* 3 pulls 6 kicks. Swim 3 strokes then do 6 sidekicks on one side. Then another 3 strokes and 6 kicks on the other side. Emphasis should be on the body position and rotation trying to go from side to side.

1. Arm recovery. The recovery should be the most relaxed part of the stroke, and this is achieved by keeping the hands as close to the body as possible. The body position part should give us the proper baseline to build this part of the stroke. When demonstrating a recovery, you may use the body position drill in (1) to emphasize the arm movement coming out of the water and reentering right in front of the head. During the recovery, the forearm and hand should be as relaxed as possible, and participants should engage in a high elbow recovery to maximize relaxation as much as possible. To do this, more rotation is recommended as it is easier to raise the arms out of the water, and close to the body when rotating on a greater axis compared to on a shorter one.
2. Breath control. Arguably the most and least important part of the stroke, it does not work without the foundation of the other parts of the stroke. A common misconception is to turn the head separate from the rest of the body to breathe. On the contrary, the head should turn with the rest of the body, as a single unit. This allows for the body to turn as one, rather than turning into different units and unnecessarily allocating energy to the separate components. The breathing should go hand in hand with the catch, arm recovery, and body position. Recall in the catch how we had the initial grab of water where our hands should be just right in front of our face, at that point is where you would begin turning the body, head following, and once the hands have gone past the head, the face should be half in half out of the water.

**Specific Reasons and How to Tackle them**

Everyone has their own goals when it comes to learning to swim, some may want to finally get into the sport, some may want correction on self-taught strokes or to be taught the ‘proper’ technique, and others may want an experienced eye to help scope out some little details that they might not recognize. In this section, I’ll try to detail some of the more common reasons why people approach us for swim lessons and the best way to go about helping them out.

“I want to learn how to swim longer”

Normally when someone indicates that they want to learn how to swim for longer, they are unknowingly saying that they want to learn how to become more energy efficient. This is usually the case in adults who are proficient in basic techniques but find it difficult to swim for prolonged periods of time. For myself, when approached by someone who states that they want to learn how to swim for longer periods of time, I would look at the following details:

* 1. Breath control. When are they exhaling. Everyone takes in air, but few ever breathe it out to keep the cycle rolling. Try to look at whether they are breathing out as well as in and see when they’re doing it too.
  2. Catch and pull. A lot of people aren’t too efficient with the catch and pull, and sometimes they end up wasting energy without going anywhere. Look at how they’re catching and adjust accordingly.
  3. Kick. Are they kicking from their hips or from their knees? Kicking from the knees uses less energy, but it doesn’t move you as far. Kicking from the hips on the other hand may use more energy but in the long run it is a lot more energy efficient as a strong kick will help the other parts of the body.
  4. Rotation. Rotating from the hips will help in the long run as they are moving the body as a whole unit rather than different pieces at different paces. If you try and move multiple small objects at the same time, you’ll end up using more energy compared to moving one big object. The hips and core are also the center of the body and rotating from the center mass uses less energy as opposed to rotating from the shoulders where it’s much further away from the center of buoyancy.

**Additional Thoughts and Comments**

The most important thing to remember when teaching something new or even fixing a slight part of the stroke is to be patient and to understand that no one swims the same. What works for me may not work for you, and what works for you may not work for your participants. Try to provide participants with as many options as you can, you can do this by starting off with a generalized concept and then adjusting it individually. For example, when teaching a catch, a generalized concept would either be the ‘S’ catch or the straight down. Show them both and then help them figure out what may work best for them. One may like the ‘S’ catch and another may like the straight down but with their own twist. Help them find that little twist and everyone will be a happy baby turtle.

If you have any questions, comments, or ideas feel free to contact me or write them in the doc.