

Stretch, Catch, and Roll
Swim Technique Basics
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Even though the Swim is relatively short for all distance triathlons, you need to aim to be as economical as you can be for whatever distance you are swimming. If you are expending too much energy on the swim, your performance on the bike and run will suffer. The swim serves to “set up” your race as well, physically and mentally.

More than the other sports in Triathlon, Swimming efficiently exploits good technique and penalizes poor technique. “The water provides an environment which is nearly 1000 times as dense as air¹”, therefore increasing the drag and causing nearly a 4x expenditure of energy per distance moved than running.¹

Therefore, improving technique may have a significantly greater impact on performance for a conditioning level than improving conditioning alone. One of the authorities on Swim Technique, generally, and balance, body positioning, and streamlining is Terry Laughlin, of Total Immersion. (For more information www.TotalImmersion.swim.com)

In developing a more effective stroke, my recommendations are simply to practice “Stretch, Catch, and Roll”, as a way to execute on instructions that will help you be more balanced in the water.

I. BODY BALANCE AND STREAMLINING

a. Head Position—Neither chin to the chest, nor water to the forehead. Think of your head as a natural extension of your body with your spine a continuous plane at the top of the water level.

b. Chest—Force your chest out and “push down” slightly raising your hips so that your tailbone achieves the objective of riding at the waterline. With your hips up and your chest down you can feel as if you are swimming “downhill” in some cases.

NOTE: Your Body Will Follow your Chest and Head—Looking slightly downward, and “leaning” on your chest will force your legs and hips up, and work with the wetsuit to reduce your drag.

c. Breathing—Take advantage of the wetsuit and roll your head to the least degree possible. If you are in heavy water (waves and such) you will need to roll your head more aggressively. Breathe to both sides ---practice it!!

d. Sighting—Integrate the sighting with your natural breath. Sight to shore (a marker, a kayak) as much as possible without “looking up”. The “looking up” risks dropping your legs and bottom, so make it every 6-8 cycles, and pick the head at the beginning of the breath (as part of the continuous action) or at the “replacement” of the head after the breath.---DON'T TAKE A PICTURE—JUST GET A GLIMPSE—PICK SOMETHING BIG TO SITE FOR!

Setting up for the Pull is as important, if not more important than the Pull itself.

Recovery—see immediately below

II.STROKE—Stretch, Catch, and Roll-- aka, "THE SET UP FOR THE PULL"

Efficient swimmers incorporate these three actions in a single, beautiful, **moment** in their stroke. There is ZERO power extended in this moment. In fact you don't expend energy with propulsion until your stroke is 1/3 underway.

a.Stretch—Entry can be on your forefinger or with a flat hand---don't pull---
STRETCH, and lean on your armpit. Expose that entire length of arm to the water. Begin the action of the hand rotation just as if you were to scoop wet peanut butter out of a vat with your fingers (one of my favorite food fantasies!).

b.Catch---Hand slightly cupped, arm fully extended, "weight" on the armpit, and SCOOP ever so slightly.

c.Roll--- at that same moment, when you are fully extended, whether you are breathing in this stroke cycle or not your hips can roll slightly accentuating the stretch, enabling the catch, and "reducing" your water resistance. (Think about your Shoulders and Hips ---if they remain square to the water, they create maximal drag. With this roll technique and stretch, your body will present itself slightly knifelike in the water.

OK NOW YOU ARE READY TO PULL

Rotate the elbow up, the palm down and then back, the hand at your midline with a bend in your elbow and follow your hand back as if you were pressing a wall to the bottom of your swimsuit.

RECOVERY-- Elbow up, palm facing outward (back of the hand passing by the ear) and entry forefinger or fingertips first.

DRILLS to try:

- Kicking without a board pushing your chest down with your eyes on the bottom of the pool straight down, but no more than 3 feet in front.
- Floating in the water face down in wetsuit attempting to "moon" airplanes
- Scooping Peanut Butter out of a vat with your hands—ok, don't try that one, too tempting!
- Kicking with fins, one arm extended, hips rolled as you lean on that side, STRETCH OUT and lean on your armpit
- "Doggie Paddle" – only complete a half stroke, concentrate on the "catch, and elbow rotation"

¹the Triathlete's Training Bible, Joe Friel, Velo Press, Boulder Colorado p179.