

THE BENEFITS OF TRAINING ALL FOUR STROKES

by Terry Laughlin

Why should less freestyle training equate with better freestyle in races . . . or better freestyle, period? There are several reasons. First, too much of anything can often lead to staleness in whatever you're getting too much of. I find that the freestyle I do swim is stronger, smoother and faster when I do "just enough and not too much." I often use the other strokes in training to "give my freestyle muscles a rest." It's something like active recovery. Training freestyle more selectively allows me to maintain a higher level of consistent effort on every freestyle lap I choose to do.

Second, using more strokes in my training allows me to create more training adaptations. Once the body becomes accustomed to any workload, the opportunity for further adaptation or growth decreases. The more one-dimensional a training program, the more quickly the body adapts. And, once that happens, your potential for further growth or improvement is limited. The larger number of tools or modes you have available to employ in training, the more opportunities you have to "fool" the body into thinking "this is a new task; I'd better attack it with all the vigor I have available." One of our Total Immersion alums - - a triathlete and convert to four-stroke training - - described it this way in a recent e-mail: "I finally realized that when I swim exclusively freestyle, my body gets accustomed to a certain narrow sense of effort and fatigue. It's kind of like running or biking the same loop every day - - you know every dip and hill, and have cracked their codes so well that your body automatically paces itself to handle the course. Swimming an individual medley [butterfly-backstroke-breaststroke-freestyle] set or workout is like setting out on a brand new course. Your body has to 'wing it,' and has to deal with unexpected demands - - just as it will have to do under race conditions over an unfamiliar course and under unpredictable conditions. The physical and mental benefits of four-stroke training have been powerful."

Third, one of the most-accepted definitions of a better-quality workout is one that uses as much of the body's muscle tissue as possible. Freestyle workouts use the same limited group of muscles all the time. The best way to attack the largest number of muscle groups in a swimming workout is to train with a medley of strokes. And medley workouts are also the least likely to cause the typical swimming overuse injuries. By spreading the workload over more joints and more patterns of movement, you reduce the potential for repetitive overwork in any one pattern of joint usage.

Fourth, four-stroke workouts tend to be tougher and more beneficial, aerobically, than just about any all-freestyle workout you could dream up. Nothing elevates your heart rate like a butterfly or individual medley ("IM") set. Chances are you'll be breathing like a locomotive after your first set of 8 x 25 butterfly or 4 x 100 IM's, but, if you're in reasonable shape, you'll be pleasantly surprised that you can maintain that high heart rate through the entire set or entire workout. This kind of anaerobic-threshold workout comes with a powerful training effect that will improve not just your freestyle swimming but also your overall fitness for biking and running.

Fifth, my motivation and enjoyment of swimming remain much higher when I keep my training varied. With a variety of strokes to swim, I can set an endless range of personal achievement goals, and devise an endless number of interesting, challenging workouts to achieve them. Since my potential in the other strokes remains relatively less-tapped than in freestyle, personal training achievements happen with greater frequency. I stay fresher both mentally and physically.

And, finally, when I do swim the other strokes in practice, I never "go through the motions" just because they're not freestyle. I aim to swim them with the greatest possible degree of excellence. The better my interaction with the water in any form, the more I learn about aquatic fluency and economy in a universal sense. The fact that I'm working on it in so many varied ways keeps my learning curve steep and my interest high. In some cases, the benefits and crossover learning value is extremely direct. Swimming better backstroke increases my sensitivity to body balance, alignment and rotation in ways that do not happen when I'm swimming freestyle. And that increased sensitivity translates directly to my freestyle. The other strokes make my freestyle better in less direct, but not necessarily less important, ways. Simply by increasing the number and variety of my interactions with the water, my body becomes a better instrument for moving through water. And when that happens, my freestyle improves.