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Teaching Breaststroke

Breaststroke is the oldest swimming technique there is. When competitive swimming started to develop, it was the only stroke used during races. Hence, breaststroke is the only stroke where we find initial attempts throughout the history of education of swimming strokes. We can hardly imagine the long road it took for the technique of breaststroke to get from the now ridiculous and funny looking, outdated swimming aids, like poles and harnesses, to where it is now.

One might wonder how much creativity, thinking and dissecting it required from the coaches and professionals, not to mention the success and experience of their swimmers, to develop today's modern breaststroke technique. The individual styles' of many outstanding athletes also played a vital role in forming this periodically changing and dominant stroke. For example the orthodox breaststroke by Sietas and Rademacher, the underwater method by Furukawa, the "butterfly" breaststroke by Eva Szekely, the delayed technique ("Chet the Jet") by Jastermski and the now well known wave method used by many of swimming royalty, such as David Wilkie, Victor Davies, Mike Barrowman, Jozsef Szabo, Karoly Guttler, Norbert Rozsa, Agnes Kovacs and Daniel Gyurta.

We introduce the successful educational method we are working with at present and with which even a 7-8 year old child can acquire the current up- to- date technique of breaststroke.

Pull on the pool deck:

Start working on the arm movement on the pool deck. You need to point out two common mistakes: The one where the pull starts with arms bent, and the other one, where it is one continuous movement without a rest between each stroke. Children learn more easily if they see the correct movement before trying, so it is practical for the instructor to demonstrate each exercise first. Breaststroke is cyclic, which means that different phases repeat each other in the same order within one cycle. Therefore, the arm pull can be taught in three easily distinguishable movements. This includes the correct placing of the hands, elbows and lower arms.

Only after this should we make the children practice the breaststroke pull starting with straight arms and adding the short pause after each stroke.

The previous exercise can also be practiced leaning slightly forward from the hips.

To practice the arm pull with breathing, the students should raise their arms straight up by their ears with their palms facing down and slightly outwards. When they start the inner arm rotation they should raise their torsos and heads a bit and inhale in that



position. At the end of the pull, their heads should be between their shoulders while exhaling.

With a good command such as “inhale-exhale-inhale-exhale” we can guide the children to acquire the rhythm of the arm movement with the breathing much more easily.

Poorly taught glide, bad habits and substandard instruction can lead to the following common mistakes.

Pull in shallow water:

All dry land exercises can be done in the water. It is practical to start in chest deep water first.

Once the students understand and know the movements, such as the correct bend of the elbows, the small circular route of the hands and the forearms and then the latter's rotation and its forward reaching movement, the primary purpose of practicing in the water is to feel its resistance.

After finishing each arm pull, the students should touch the wall with their fingertips.

With the active help of the instructor, the students can practice the reach and pause portion (**recovery phase**) of the arm pull to the “1-2-3-now” command.

Do this exercise first in a squatting position, then later while walking. The student should only start the arm work when the instructor lets go of his or her hands.

If the instructor can detect some fundamental mistakes during the arm movement, forearm rotation (**insweep**) or the **recovery phase**, it is helpful to lean over the student's shoulder and guide their arms through the exercise.

Next is the arm pull starting from a glide. This exercise is more realistic. The body and the head positioning, as well as the speed of the glide, are all similar to that of the actual breaststroke.

An excellent exercise if the student is gliding motionless and only starts the arm work when he or she reaches the instructors arms.

This exercise can be a lot of fun for the children: place a colorful object to the bottom of the pool. The students should glide motionless in a streamline position, until they get directly above the object.

To practice without breathing first try with one, then two and finally with three arm pulls.

This time instead of counting, use the “glide-arms” or “glide-now” commands. The instructor should call here out when the speed of the glide starts to slow down.

To avoid the following mistakes it is practical to go over all the fundamental breathing exercises prior to teaching the proper breathing technique. When the students look comfortable and at ease exhaling while diving, floating and gliding, it is easier to build in the breathing into the new series of movements they are about to learn.

The instructor's help is crucial during this exercise:

To the “exhale-exhale” command the student should breathe out forcefully with his or her head down. After that the instructor gives the “breathe” command and releases the student's hands so he or she can start the arm pull and the inhalation.



As shown during a previous exercise, the instructor can help the student acquire the breathing rhythm during the breaststroke pull, by giving the “breath-out” command. Practicing it while walking can help fully refine the motion.

When getting closer to the desired body positioning use a noodle as a swimming aid in a standing position as well as during a glide.

Similar to a previous exercise, first the students should only do one arm movement with breathing at a time, taking short breaks, while the instructor should correct any mistakes. Once they are able to do one correctly they can move on to doing 2, 3 or more at a time.

Here you see an exercise to practice the last phase of the arm pull and breathing.

Kick on the pool deck:

The propulsive surface plays a critical part in the efficiency of the breaststroke kick. The following exercise helps to develop a feel for the inner feet area.

The students should straddle with their feet facing forward and slight outwards. They should bend their knees a little and shift their weight forwards until it is supported by their inner sole. They start lifting their body from this position by straightening their knees and finishing the exercise by closing their legs together.

This exercise can help you teach the various angles of the feet during breaststroke kick.

Students sometimes have a hard time understanding what it means to “point their toes” or the opposite to “pull their toes back up”. They don’t usually see any exercises on land or in water that would involve them turning their feet in this way, so first it might seem strange, funny and almost unnatural to them. The students can observe their feet perfectly if they practice the kick sitting down, starting with their legs straight.

This exercise is designed to help students get a feel for the propulsive area during the kick.

The breaststroke kick can be taught in 3 steps: To the “lift up” command the students pull their closed legs up to a vertical position. To the “rotate” command they should turn their feet outwards so that their toes are facing out and to the side. To the “close” command they finish the rest of the kick. These three steps should be repeated a couple of times accompanied by the “lift up-rotate-close” commands.

Finally we tie the kick together with the breathing, in preparation for the actual pull-kick-breath movement. However, these exercises become more realistic if the students practice them in the water.

Kick in shallow water:

Looking at the mechanics of breaststroke, the kick plays a more important part than the pull concerning the efficiency of the stroke. It is vital for the students to understand the dynamic difference between the active and the passive part of the kick as well as to get a good feel for the propulsive area. In spite of all the practice and preparation on dry land, you will find that while teaching the kick in the water, problems with these elements will still occur. It might be a slight disappointment for



the instructor to notice that the students need to relearn the correct movements in the water, even though they mastered them on dry land before.

Demonstration helps the students understand the span of the kick, the various poses of the feet and the overall timing.

The students should start practicing the kick with a large kickboard, while keeping their heads out of the water so their breathing will not disturb their concentration. After this they should do the exercises with the instructor and a swimming aid.

Performing the first exercises on their own still with no breathing, the students should use a kickboard, then later they can practice without it.

In preparation to link the leg work to the breathing we go back to a previous exercise. The students should forcefully breathe out into the water, first standing still then while walking. They should only lift their head out of the water while breathing.

By guiding the rhythm of the kick the instructor helps to insert the breathing into the right place: “breathe in” during the pull up and “breathe out” during the thrust. Throughout every exercise the students need to concentrate on the following:

- a thorough exhalation underwater
- pulling up their feet and pointing their toes outwards in a slow motion
- the thrust should steadily accelerate
- at the final position the legs stay closed and stationary for a moment.

Finally, the students should be able to do the kicking and breathing independently with the help of a kickboard.

Pull in deep water:

A good or a bad start off from the wall can often determine the success of the attempt when practicing in deep water as well. A good solution could be, to use the ladder at the side of the pool, from which the push off can be more easily performed.

When starting from the water, do not start with a kick off from the wall.

In despite of all the preparative exercises in shallow water and on dry land you can still run into two big mistakes. Never ask your students to “keep up with the arm work until you run out of air, then take a break.” The more the child is “running out of air” the more the quality of their performance will drop, which will lead to rushed and inefficient arm work.

To avoid these mistakes we let the students practice the arms without breathing, first with a swimming aid then independently. After that they do these exercises to the “breathe out – breathe in” commands. During deep water practice we can’t allow them to make fundamental mistakes.

Kick in deep water:

Practicing the kick on the side of the pool helps the students avoid pulling their knees under their stomachs and also allows them to work on the correct way to position their legs and feet. Doing the leg work without having to breathe serves the same goal as well.

Practicing with the arms in a streamline position or directly next to the body can force the students to execute the exercises more precisely.



The students rehearse the well known breathing exercise they previously learnt in shallow water. Based on our experience, even novice swimmers can safely practice the legwork with the help of two swimming aids, this way they only concentrate on the proper kicking technique.

During the kicking practice in shallow and deep water the students had a chance to get a good feel for the whole motion. After each kick, when the legs are closed together, there is a glide. Similar to the arm pull, the students will find that there are some stationery movements during the breaststroke kick as well. The students must exhale during the glide after each kick, and inhale while pulling their feet up for the next one. Here you will see the most common mistakes. This demonstration shows that the kick, the pull and the breathing are not in unison with each other at all.

Delayed and gliding breaststroke:

Throughout the first kick-pull-breathe practice exercises the instructor should separate the different phases so a mistake in one will not affect the other. This is 1kick 1 pull delayed breaststroke /kick and pull are separated/, which we first practice without, then with breathing. After that comes the long glide breaststroke when, during the long glide after each kick we allow the students some time to correct their body positioning.

By reducing the time of the glide between the kick and the pull we slowly transition from delayed and long glide breaststroke to actual breaststroke. Breathe out for each kick and breathe in for each pull.

If we go over all the exercises they should logically build on from each other and hopefully they are easy to understand. What we have introduced here is of course just an educational foundation; one's success will depend on how it is applied. Keep in mind the importance of repetitive practice, proper introductory exercises, identification of common and personal mistakes and of course the experience of the instructor.

If after years of hard work a talented child can master the current technique of breaststroke, than with further care from highly qualified coaches, personal devotion, and parental support he or she can become a world class swimmer.