

FEAR OF FLIP TURNS

Ignore this overrated maneuver and your swimming will probably never know the difference.

By Terry Laughlin

It looks so competent, so coordinated, so necessary. Athletes just starting a pool-training program especially covet it. Powerful, sleek swimmer glides up to the wall, tucks and somersaults as neatly and compactly as any gymnast, and with neither ripple nor pause is gone again, slicing back down the pool in the opposite direction. It seems the very signature of the advanced swimmer, an athletic flourish like mogul skiing that forever separates the confident and the accomplished from the merely adequate. No hope of moving up from the novice lane, is there, until you can do a snappy 180, no matter how much the gyration feels like being stuck in the spinning barrel at the fun house?

Well, tell that to the swimmer I watched win a 1650-yard freestyle National Masters championship in the hotly contested 50-54 age group. That's 65 turns in a 66-length race and every single one of them was the simple open turn, as it's known.

Then there's Richard Arluck, a member of Trigger Masters Aquatics in Great Neck, NY. When Arluck was a star swimmer for Colgate University 30 years ago, flip turns were considered too difficult for wide use. Plenty of Masters swimmers, in fact, have never mastered the flip turn and see no reason to bother. Maybe it's not that critical after all.

Though many competitive swimmers revere the flip as an essential turn for winning freestyle races, it obviously is not. Well, not always. It makes sense to master it only if you end up with a significant advantage over your "old-fashioned" open turn, which means, in part, that you need to be able to pull it off with no extra effort. That's by no means guaranteed. You have to hold your breath from the time you take your last stroke until you surface and take your first stroke following the pushoff. The breathless period lasts only seconds if you're fast, but speaking from experience, you can get somewhere close to desperate for a little air on turns during the last few hundred yards of a hard distance race.

On the other hand, the open turn is luxuriously airy, at least through most of the maneuver. That usually translates into a faster underwater pushoff, covering more yards before you surface and begin swimming again. Since those underwater yards, if done with a good streamline and powerful kick, are the fastest you'll travel on any lap, a good, strong, open turn can shoot you yards ahead of a rival, oxygen-starved, flip-turning swimmer within the first 10 yards of the next length. So if your flip turn doesn't seem fated to become easy and fast with a reasonable amount of practice, consider work on a killer open turn instead. Here's how:

1. Approaching the wall, take your last stroke as you reach the "T" on the pool bottom, about one body length away. As you finish the push through on that stroke, roll onto your side with the bottom arm reaching for the wall since you'll cut the water more cleanly, lengthen your reach, and get to the wall faster on your side. Keep kicking hard throughout this split-second glide.
2. As soon as you touch the wall, tuck your legs tightly and pivot your whole body across your hips (your face and torso face the pool's side wall). Your trailing arm (the one you just stroked with) stays underwater waiting for your shoulder to drop in. The hand that's on the wall pushes your upper body away from the wall, as your feet swing in and plant just below where your hand was. Keep your head and shoulders tight to the waterline during your pivot.
3. As you plant your feet on the wall. Stay on your toes (not a flat-footed plant) and drop your pushoff hand behind your head to join the other hand. Allow your whole torso to drop 12 to 18 inches underwater as you streamline the arms overhead before pushing off the wall. Stay in the side-lying position for the first few yards of the pushoff and drive your legs hard but in a compact pattern. Take your first pull with the bottom arm and don't breathe until your second armstroke.

The body contours of the streamlined pushoff are important enough to practice in a mirror. You're trying to shape your body like a torpedo: both arms squeezed overhead with the palm of one hand completely covering the back of the other and the thumb of the top hand locked over the bottom hand. Both arms should be ramrod straight, with elbows locked and squeezed together. Biceps should be pressed against the head just behind the ears. (Now you know why flexibility is so important to swimmers.)

Once you've got it straight in front of a mirror, you have to learn to do it while dropping under water for a pushoff, every time you leave a wall while swimming.

But as you start gaining on some of the sleek ones, remember: I told you so.

Happy laps!