

Coaching Resources

HOW TO STRUCTURE A PRACTICE

March 2020



**Canadian Independent
Masters Swimming
Maîtres-nageurs indépendants du Canada**



MASTERS SWIMMING ONTARIO



Masters Swimming
Manitoba

Introduction

This document is intended as a resource for Coaches of Masters Swimmers. It is assumed that you already have a background in swimming and/or coaching.

A well-thought out practice is one of the key elements in a successful masters swimming program. Many swimmers join a club after finding it difficult to stay engaged or motivated when swimming on their own.

Use this document with other coaching documents and resource links posted on the MSO Website, such as *Useful Drills*.

Acknowledgment

This document is based primarily on the work of Don Kennedy and Coco Comtois, long-time coaches of the Orleans ORCAS in the Ottawa area.

1. PRACTICES STRATEGIES AND THEMES

Themed practices help to keep swimmers engaged and support the season's swimming objectives. While not all of your swimmers have completion objectives, the progression through the season and the skills are useful for everyone and can be adapted to the swimmer's personal goals. Encourage all swimmers to enter competition throughout the season. For example, early season meets are an opportunity for less competitive swimmers to get the feel of a meet in a fun and supportive environment. More experienced swimmers can start finding their "mojo" while supporting less experienced swimmers. Don't underestimate the value of team spirit.

Early season

- Swimmers are getting back into the water and building base fitness and endurance. Use sets with shorter distances that focus on technique.
- Consider focusing on one stroke each week. Remember to build in variety to give sufficient rest to prevent injury, especially when focusing on fly.
- Insist on proper turns early and throughout the season.
- Do some instruction between the warm-up and main set, even for the most experienced swimmers. Use the drill section to reinforce technique.

Mid season

- Build the endurance with longer distances, even for the sprinters.
- Continue to reinforce technique through drills and consider periodic teaching sessions.
- As competition opportunities arrive, add a few more speed sets and offer a *Starts and Turns* workshop.
- Arrange a practice meet and simulate real-meet starting procedures, e.g., whistles. Less experienced swimmers may be intimidated by meets because they are not familiar with the processes.

Championship Season

- Swimmers should have a good fitness base. Offer more quality sets that focus on building speed while giving more rest between repeats.
- Increase your focus on starts, turns and common DQ technique errors.
- Approach the competition season as a club – *one for all / all for one*. This may further encourage the less competitive swimmers to give it a try.

2. PRACTICE STRUCTURE

A complete practice should include a gentle warm-up, drills to improve strokes, a more strenuous “main set”, and finally a warm-down.

ABOUT TOYS

Toys may be used in a practice to help improve some technical or training component of swimming, e.g., to increase strength or flexibility, or just to provide variety. Some coaches use toys very strategically while others don't use toys at all. The most common toys, with possible uses, are:

Flutter Board – used optionally during a kick set. Proper use involves pressing down on the kick board (engage the lats) so that the hips don't drop down and out of alignment. Some kick sets have the swimmer in a streamlined position without a board.

Fins – generally shorter fins replicate your natural kicking tempo while providing cardio conditioning. The longer the fin the slower your tempo which may defeat the benefit of using fins.

Snorkels – can be used for head position in freestyle or in a kick set to maintain alignment

Pull Bouy – helps to isolate the arms, focus on rotation and bring the body into proper alignment.

Ankle Bands – in pull sets to work on body position, rotation and the core strength needed to keep the hips aligned.

Hand Paddles - help to correct the pull and catch, and increase distance per stroke

2.1 WARM-UP

Muscles need to be warmed up before exertion. Mature swimmers need a longer and more gradual warm up. The first ~15 minutes of your practice should use a variety of strokes while not being too strenuous. Use different sets to start swimmers thinking about their technique.

The objective of the warm-up is to loosen the muscles for all strokes, engage all parts of the body and gradually increase the heart rate.

Here are some warm-up ideas:

- *Anything Other Than Front Crawl (AOTFC)* or perhaps every fourth length AOTFC.
- *KRLS*: 100m made up of 25m Kick, 25m Right arm, 25m Left arm, 25m Swim. Can be done for any stroke.
- *50 m Individual Medley (IM)*: The intensity of the IM is reduced by doing each of the strokes for half of a (25 m) length.
- *SKIPS*: The 5x50m set is made up of 50m Swim, 50m Kick, 50m IM, 50m Pull and 50m Swim. Can also be done for any stroke.
- *Distance per stroke*: Have swimmers count the number of strokes required for 25/50 m and then ask them to focus on reducing the number of strokes on the next repeat(s).
- *50 Pull/50 Kick/50 Swim*: This can be done as a set of 150 m repeats using any stroke. To warm up all strokes consider a 4x150 m set in IM order or reverse IM order.
- *Rolling IM*: This set warms up both strokes and turns. Structure this as a 3x50m or 4x50m set. Repeat 1 is 25 fly/25 back; repeat 2 is 25 back/25 breast; repeat 3 is 25 breast/25 free; and repeat 4 (if used) is 25 free/25 fly.

2.2 DRILL SECTION

You can use this section as part of a theme for the practice, e.g., breathing, head position, freestyle, etc.) Later on, during the Main set, ask swimmers if they are continuing to apply the lesson of the drill.

See the separate document *Drills for Masters Swimming* for a more detailed examination of drills.

Here are some ideas for drills:

- one arm stroke for any style
- double-armed back (DAB)
- sculling with arms in front
- sculling at side (helicopter blade or windshield wiper scull)
- catch-up freestyle
- elbow high recovery (Zipper or Tickle drill)
- Dawg paddle (finish at the thigh)
- high hand recovery to let shoulder stretch forward
- “shaky hands” to keep wrists loose
- 3 Pull/1 Kick or 3 Kick/1 Pull (BS)
- skater drill for “distance per stroke (DPS)” for FS (hold the glide/think forward quadrant swimming)
- mid-pool tumble
- add 5 pull up/push out exercises at the deep end to replicate the wrist movement during the front crawl stroke.

YouTube is an inexhaustible source for new drills.

2.3 MAIN SET(S)

You can concentrate on one style or go for variety by mixing up style, distance, repetitions, rest periods, pace periods etc. More variety makes the session go more quickly for the swimmers. The nature of the main sets should consider where you are in the season and the swimmer / club objectives for the season.

“Building” = speed should increase within each element

“Descending” = speed should increase with each element within the set

About pace times and rest – Generally, a shorter rest period is used to build endurance while a longer rest period is used to focus on intensity and speed. The sets below provide the target rest period which can be built into pace times.

SETS BASED ON ONE STROKE

- i. 8 - 16 x 50s; rest 15s or set a pace time to provide about 15s rest. Maintain the pace time throughout the set.
- ii. 8 x 50 descending from 1 to 4; maintain the pace of #4 for 5 to 8.
- iii. 8 x 100 with breathing control. i.e., first length breath every 2 strokes, second length every 3; third length every 4 and last length breath every 5 strokes.
Variation: To encourage bilateral breathing consider a 3-5-7 or a 3-5-3-7 breathing pattern.
- iv. 16 x 25 build; rest 30s
- v. 400 with every 4th length being a choice of stroke.
- vi. 4 x 200 change speed 50 EZ/50 Med/50 Sprint/25 EZ/25 Med; rest 30s.
Variation: You can be very creative with this type of swim. Make it a 250m divided into 50s; change the location of the sprint e.g., 50 Med/50 Sprint/50 EZ/50 Sprint/50 EZ.
- vii. 400 rest 1 min; 4 x 100 rest 15s; then 8 x 50 rest 10s.
- viii. As above for 300 / 3 x 100 / 6 x 50.
- ix. As above for 200 / 2 x 100 / 4 x 50.

- x. 3 x 100 DESCENDING on a suitable rest or pace time; swim the first 100 slowly as a rehearsal (concentrate on TECHNIQUE)/note your time/REST and RECOVER/swim the second one more quickly (say, by 5 sec) and focus on TECHNIQUE and RHYTHM/REST and RECOVER/swim the last one as quickly as you can and certainly faster than #2/note your time/ REST. The final time is your baseline. During the year, try to improve this baseline.
- xi. BROKEN 100s or 200s aim to establish a base time that can be improved upon during the season:
Broken 100 - 50 SPRINT, R 10s / 25 SPRINT, R 5s /25 SPRINT. Take total time and subtract 15s. Note this time in your diary.
Broken 200 - 100 SPRINT, R 15s / 50 SPRINT, R 10s / 50 SPRINT. Note the total time and subtract 25s.

KICK SETS

Do not avoid KICK SETS. Guys, you need these the most!

FLUTTER KICK (FREE and BACK)

The objective is to achieve a flexible leg motion, starting with the hip and transferring the power through the knees and ankles to the tip of the toes. These can be done with the smaller, “short-blade” fins, not the larger “scuba” fins that slow down your kicking tempo so much that they no longer replicate your natural kicking motion. Snorkels are useful, especially to newer swimmers so they can focus on stroke mechanics rather than survival (breathing)!

FLUTTER KICK on the BACK is very important. For backstroke I advise:
STREAMLINE OFF WALL, SET YOUR KICK and then ADD BACK ARMS.

- i. Sprint KICK at wall during WARM UP sets.
- ii. Upright FLUTTER in the deep end. 30s FAST/30s EZ.
Fins are an option. Look at feet/ankles once in a while. Try moving from vertical to horizontal without losing the “ribbon” feel.

- iii. 8 x 25 or 50 “CLASSIC” KICK: one arm at full extension forward, one arm at your side. Swimmer head is close to the extended arm and looking forward, switch arms each breath.
- iv. 8 x 50 KICK “BUILD” from EZ to a SPRINT over 50m
- v. 8 x 25 or 50 SPRINT between flags.
- vi. 8 x 25 KICK under water as far as possible, surface and swim the rest. Snorkels optional.
- vii. 25 or 50 or 100 Barrel Roll...flutter kick while continuously rotating through 360 degrees.
- viii. 100 or 200 or 400 continuous kick with toys, i.e., SNORKELS and/or FINS.
Variations: Mix up the exercise so you do not get bored, i.e., kick flat for 25 m, then on the right side for 25 m, back, left side.
- ix. 100 or 200 Continuous kick, 25 EZ/25 HARD
- x. 8 x 50...25 FS KICK/25 CH

The drills above can be used for Freestyle or Backstroke. For Backstroke flutter kick, check for the “bump” of water at the end of each foot/ankle release.

FLY KICK (BACK and FLY)

The power of this kick comes from the core abdominal muscles. Fins can be used (sparingly) for feel and fun. Longer fins can enhance the undulation of the dolphin kick.

- i. UPRIGHT KICKING in Deep End...as per FLUTTER KICK above.
- ii. 100 or 200 or 400 Continuous, with snorkel; 25 arms in FRONT/25 arms at SIDE
- iii. Barrel KICK as per FLUTTER KICK above.
- iv. Any FLY KICK sets based on FLUTTER KICK SETS above that make sense.
- v. The FLY KICK is an important element of the every turn. So practice fly, back and free turns by adding one, then two, then three, etc. fly

kicks to each turn to increase strength and find the optimum number of kicks for the individual swimmer.

BREAST STROKE KICK

Note: Consider acquiring breast stroke fins which help both strength and correct leg action.

- i. In the deep end take an upright position along wall. Place arms folded on the deck and press the hips against the wall. Now do a BS KICK. This drill with with proper knees action.
- ii. Upright KICK in Deep End.
- iii. Upright Egg Beater in Deep End.
- iv. 8 x 50 as 25 Max Glide/25 HARD.
- v. 8 x 50 as 25 BS KICK on Back/25 on FRONT.
- vi. Any KICK sets noted in FLUTTER KICK above that make sense.

I.M. KICK

Note: A set of 4x100 I.M. KICK is different from 4 x 100 KICK in I.M. Order. The former is a 100 kick (25 each FLY-BK-BS-FR) repeated 4 times. The latter is a 100 KICK for each of FLY/BK/BS/FS.

You cannot use fins if BS KICK is in the set.

- i. 100 or 200 or 400 continuous IM KICK swum as (25 each style KICK) or (50 each style KICK) or 100 (each style KICK).
- ii. 8 x 50 as 25 BEST KICK/25 WORST KICK.
- iii. 4 x [4 x 50 KICK]; 1ST time 4x50 FLY, 2nd time 4x50 BK, 3rd time 4x50 BS, 4th time 4x50 FR
- iv. 400 Choice KICK, build each 25.

VERTICAL KICKING

Do this in the deep end, with and without fins. Alternate 15 seconds fast - 15 seconds easy or 15 seconds FLUTTER KICK - 15 seconds FLY KICK.

PULL SETS

These allow you to focus on correct arm technique. The pull buoy also allows for a better streamlined position, especially for swimmers who drop their legs due to a weak kick. Caution: a pull buoy is a useful tool, but if over-used can become a crutch.

Use any combination of

- Pull buoy (PB)
- PB plus paddles
- PB plus paddles plus snorkel
- Bands around the ankles

A pull set using ANKLE BANDS is a strengthening exercise for both the arms and the core abdominals. The swimmer has to push the shoulders/chest down and use the core to keep the feet and hips from dropping.

PYRAMID SETS

Start small and EZ at the bottom of the pyramid, grow the distance for each component until you reach your set max distance and then descend the other side of the pyramid. Mix and match strokes, drills, distances and toys. Be creative. Examples -

- i. 50 FS PULL/100 FS CLASSIC KICK/150 FS PADDLES/200 FS BREATHING DRILL/150 FS SNORKEL SWIM/100 FS FIN KICK/50 FS ZIPPER DRILL
Rest 30s between each component
- ii. 50 I.M./100 I.M. KICK/150 I.M. PULL/200 FS every 4th FLY/150 PULL, KICK, SWIM worst stroke/100 BEST KICK/50 I.M
Rest 30s between each component

CHASE SETS/ROLLING IM

Combine a longer style followed by a shorter distance of another style; then start the next component with the longer distance of the last stroke. Example:

- i. 4x75 Chase IM swum as
50 FLY/25 BK/ /50 BK/25 BS/ /50 BS/25 FS/ /50 FS/25 FLY...
Rest 20s between each 75.
- ii. 4x100 Chase IM swum as above for a 75/25 combination.

THE PIG IN THE PYTHON.

One element moves to a different spot for each component. Example:

- i. **50** FLY/25 BK/25 BS/25 FS... R: 30s
25 FLY/**50** BK/25 BS/25 FS... R: 30s
25 FLY/25 BK/**50** BS/25 FS... R: 30s, etc.
Note that the 50m moves along the python as the set progresses.
- ii. 50 BS EZ/50 BK MODERATE/50 FLY EZ/50 FS **HARD**... R: 30s
50 BS EZ/50 BK MODERATE/50 FLY **HARD**/50 FS EZ... R: 30s
Note the SPRINT (HARD) moves along the python.

SPRINT SETS

Remember to recover quickly and fully during the REST period. No time for chat.

- i. Walk Backs. 25 CH sprint from a BLOCK START/climb out and walk back to the start blocks.
- ii. Pyramid Rest. 8 x 25 FS ...
R:8s//R:7s//R:6s//R:5s//R:6s//R:7s//R:8s//R:1 min before the next set.
- iii. Pyrimid Rest for 8 x 50 FS
R:20s//R:18s//R:16s//R:14s//R:16//R18s//R: 20s// Rest 1 minute before the next set.

2.4 WARM-DOWN

Always design the practice to allow a sufficient warm-down period of at least 200m.

Some ideas to sooth tired muscles:

- Double-armed backstroke (allows for gentle stretching)
- “Distance per stroke”
- 100 FR pull, breathing every 3,5,3,7 per length.

As swimmers leave the Pool, ask them to identify a “positive takeaway” – what did they learn, what was improved, what do they need to work on ...