

Talking through Technique

Drill, drill, drill . . . As a swimmer, you know how critical effective, efficient technique is to performance — to fast swimming. Doing stroke drills where

one practices a specific element of technique is the primary way swimmers work on improving technique. For example, stroke drills can focus on the “catch” in freestyle, body rotation in backstroke and freestyle, or controlling undulation in butterfly.

If you’re like most swimmers, you get through a few 100 meters of stroke work in a training session then get on with the “real” workout—the test set or intervals. When all is said and done, the time that is spent on developing stroke technique probably makes up only a small portion of your total practice time. Rather than only focusing on technique during stroke drill sets, let’s look at how you can use mental skills to enhance swimming technique (or technique in any other sport, for that matter) throughout a training session. Specifically, purposeful self-talk is a skill that can be used to enhance your technique — which will, in turn, enhance your performance. [Refer to volume 1 issue 4 for detailed information on self-talk.]

To convince you of the value of integrating purposeful self-talk into stroke drills and swim training, let me describe a project we conducted at USA Swimming. We invited a group of local age group swimmers to swim in the flume. (The flume is like a water treadmill in that a person swims against an adjustable current; the athlete stays in the same place and can therefore be filmed from front and side angles. See figure 1.) We filmed athletes as

they swam their stroke of choice at a given pace. Their coach was asked to observe athletes swimming and identify one aspect of his/ her stroke that the athlete needs to work on to try to improve. The coach provided specific “technical cue words” to each athlete that would serve as the cue telling them what they need to do. For example, a breast-stroker was told to use the cue “snap the legs”; another athlete was told to “roll the body” more in freestyle.

The athletes were then asked to swim the same stroke again, but, this time, to use the technical cue words in an effort to enhance their swimming technique. This, too, was filmed. We finished the project with two video clips of each athlete — one with the athlete “just swimming” and the other with the athlete swimming while using his/her individualized technical self-talk cue. A group of coaches were later

shown the clips and asked to identify in which clip, if either, each athlete swam more efficiently—with better technique. There wasn’t a doubt! It was obvious to the naked eye that when the athlete used purposeful, technique-related self-talk it had a positive impact on technique in the water.



Now to you . . . what does this mean to you and your swimming? Whether you swim 1000m or 5000m a day, you can benefit from incorporating self-talk (i.e., technical cue words) into your training to enhance your swimming technique — and ultimately your swimming performance. Take the following steps to get started:

1. Identify elements of your stroke that you need to work on/ modify to enhance your swimming efficiency.
2. Identify the technical cue words that “speak to you”; that will tell you what you need to do to improve your technique. Maybe it is a description you picked up from a coach or words that describe how it should feel or look.
3. Purposefully integrate this self-talk into your swim training — allocate time during warm up, during stroke drills, and/ or during hard training efforts. A word of caution — KISS: Keep in Simple, Swimmer. Work on one or two elements of your technique at a time; avoid overwhelming yourself with cues for each and every aspect of technique.

Figure 1: The flume at USA Swimming headquarters



About the Author

Suzie Tuffey Riewald received her Master's and PhD in Sport Psychology/Exercise Science from the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. She has worked for USA Swimming as the Sport Psychology and Sport Science Director, and now is Associate Director of Coaching with the USOC where she works with various sport national governing bodies (NGBs) to develop and enhance coaching education and training. Additionally, Suzie is an NSCA-Certified Personal Trainer.