

Swim your way to a better paddling stroke! How to crawl before you paddle

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While swimming is well known as a very effective cross-training tool for dragon boating, it is hard to grasp the similarities without actually experiencing them. Within the last 5 months I started swimming in addition to our biweekly practices during the off season to improve myself for racing. Originally, I was doing so as a means to gain strength and endurance but it has become much more encompassed in my paddling skills. One particular time at the pool really set this to motion and has changed my dragon boating since.

I arrived at the gym a Friday evening late and there was no one else in the pool. I swam my breast stroke leg and then switched over to the crawl. While I was mid way through that leg one of the other swimmers I see there often turned up, also swimming the crawl. As I swam I could see with each breath that he would pass and pull away from me. I knew I was swimming more quickly and with more strokes, though!! It was frustrating. This is a gentleman, 53 years of age by the way, who, I later learned swam open ocean in Hawaii daily as a younger man.

When I finished, he paused for a moment to say hello, and I finally asked him how he was able to swim the length of the pool in less time and with what looked like less effort. He told me it was because he was using an easier stroke and was doing fewer strokes per lap. He had me swim the length of the 20 yard pool in as few strokes as possible while he watched – he said he thought I would do it in 18-24 strokes. It took me 18 the first time. He told me I was doing a lot of things right from what he saw (drawing my hand straight out of the water, snapping it forward and putting it all the way in before pulling – yes, I know, just wait) but then also proceeded to give me an amazing swimming lesson I won't forget.

He explained the strokes broken down in steps in a way I could understand. He told me I needed to reach more and rotate my body more with each stroke. As well, with every stroke, as the arm first enters the water, a long reach straight forward while rotating the torso, and continuing to kick, introduces the key to efficient swimming; the glide. The glide should be considered with every stroke while you continue to kick with relaxed but straight legs. He also told me that occasionally I was bringing my hand across my center and that I needed to keep it outside of my frame (My, is this starting to sound seriously familiar). He told me that as I got tired I should make sure I was leaning on my chest with each stroke, pulling myself along. I needed to make sure I glided through the water in between the strokes and really push off with my feet while I kicked and rotated (ok this is ridiculously familiar! – I could hear coach in my head saying the same things from previous practices). He had me do some exercises where I tried to match his stroke and follow him down the length of the pool. I could definitely feel my stroke lengthen and become more efficient, but he still was far out swimming me. He swims the length of this 20-yard pool in an average of 8 strokes.

It really opened my eyes to the fact that these two motions, dragon boat paddling and swimming, are basically the same! That while I was reaching, I could reach more. That, in both sports, twisting and pushing with my feet and legs was not the same as kicking off. Reaching with the outside arm, back rotated, inside shoulder back and cocked. It's amazing how similar the two sports are.

Put an imaginary paddle in a swimmers hands and it is essentially the same motion. Rotate your back to shore or wall, inside shoulder back, outside arm long and reaching, outside arm drives straight and hard once completely buried in the water until it is removed from the water and snaps forward again on the same line.

I swam two days after this impromptu lesson and my best pool lengths were at 12-13 strokes (tough to count sometimes) but often were one or two more. It's given me a lot to think about each time I am at the

pool or on the boat. More strokes *aren't* the key to winning a race. It's the quality of the stroke over the quantity.

If we both maintained the stroke rates listed above for a race piece of 500 meters (546 yards) I would likely complete the race in well over 400 strokes while he would do so in somewhere over 200. Those fewer strokes translate to more power and efficiency per stroke. I can remember one of our races our first season where we won but I know we did fewer strokes than our nearest competitor did during the race piece. Certainly, I know that while not all swimmers and dragon boaters realize so, they in reality do almost an identical motion. Swimming has changed my paddling stroke in a short while. The similarity of the stroke has sharpened my time on the boat physically and in my focus.

**Just my two cents at any rate! Keep your stroke long and strong.
See you in the pool or on the water!**

[Post Script to this article \(6/1/06\)](#)

I have seen this swimmer only twice since writing this. He commented how much better my stroke looked in the pool and was very happy I was still involved in paddling. He asked how that sport is going for me and was glad I was still cross training for it. I have also since found out he competes in Masters swim competitions occasionally.

He still easily out swims me (now in the 25 yard pool we use) and makes powerful strokes look effortless and incredibly smooth and clean. He is adamant that more is not better and that efficiency of stroke and when to apply power is the key. Upon our last meeting, he focused his topic to the entry of hands and the "catch" of the stroke; saying that it is critical to have a clean and effortless entry while slicing through the water with less drag. Sound familiar to paddling? I think so. I certainly don't plan to stop swimming any time soon.