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BY DAN BULLOCK

This month Dan Bullock takes us on a personal journey as he slips through the water fast and efficiently. In doing so, he explains all of the variables that have become second nature after years spent in the water. These are the things the rest of us need to think about constantly as we head to the pool during the off-season in the hope of making our stroke more efficient.

Apparently I swim like a fish, and have done for quite some time, at least those in the triathlon community believe. I have never known what it is like to struggle in the water, to not have a choice as to which side I breathe, to not go forwards when I kick. I am not that fussed whether the race is wetsuit or non. I still swim under 18 minutes for 1500 metres off two swims per week. Not bad for someone getting on for 42 now.

Each time I turn to breathe the air is there whether it's in the pool or open water. If the water is there then I don't breathe. I wait until the air comes back. How can you not tell the difference? I don't have to relax in the water, unless working hard I am always relaxed. The water feels solid to me. I just pull myself over and past my hands, it feels like the way a rock climber might go up a rock face. I put my hand in the water and it stays there as I move forwards and travel over it. There is no drag or at least very little. As my hand enters there are no bubbles. I wonder why so many add bubbles on their hand entry. The more solid you leave the water the harder you can pull on it.

I hide my feet behind my legs, and my legs are in the shadow of my trunk. My trailing shoulder hides behind my head while the shoulder of my extending lead arm closes down all trace of exposed surface area by sitting tightly to my chin. My head remains still unless turning to breathe. As my arm leads it hides behind my flat hand, my palm behind the outstretched fingers, remaining flat as I present to the oncoming water as small a profile as possible. When I kick I go forwards, when I demonstrate bad kick I stay still, or with greater effort, I can move backwards but it is tiring. Why would anyone choose this path?

As I finish extending forwards my fingertips lead and instantly point to the bottom of the pool, a simultaneous movement snaps the elbow position and quickly my forearm is vertical engaging



the deeper muscles of the back. I can feel the power of them pulling. They like this workout; they were meant to do this. The legs don't want to do the work, not since they are so greedy and want all the air.

To push down from the shoulder, leaving the arm straight, keeping the palm facing the bottom of the pool just never happens. The prospect of the physio bills is too daunting. My hand then sweeps under the body; sweep is probably too big a movement. The two tile widths that comprise the black line on the bottom of the pool is wide enough to see the hand send water backwards down to the feet with a subtle scull. Small enough that most goes back; wide enough that the pitch change prevents the water slipping around the hand. To me the water feels like a handle, I just hold it and over I go. I often exaggerate this and sweep wide across the black line towards the opposite hip or outside the shoulder line. I immediately feel the hips react and the legs kick out to counter balance thus creating drag. Water is not solid but pressing against it in such a way has me travel in the wrong direction.

Sometimes I forget to breathe because I am so comfortable in the water. It's just the laziness of it all, why lift the head?

My breathing pattern usually involves remembering to breathe when I run out half way down the pool. The head is heavy — surely it would be easier not to breathe? I only need air if I am creating drag. Surely it's the fuel of inefficiency? Instantly I maintain my streamline to use as little air as possible. Two leg kicks, four or six I can count them all and fit any combination of them all into my arm cycle as I need. If the big toes are tapping then the feet are turned in. I can feel more surface area this way driving me forwards. I could be simultaneously counting tiles if I wished but usually I just sing — it's the only time I am allowed.

My arms are relaxed as soon as they exit the water. Pressure is applied only during the pull phase — the movement is slow to fast. If you pull too hard or too early the water will again just slip around the hand. The hand leaving the water at the hip is not far enough, I know I can go further, and aim for the knees as my exit point to ensure I travel forwards enough. I lead the exit with the elbow, I can relax more and the pressure is taken off. I tried to lead with the hand and recover a straight arm but it was hard work. From the elbow down to the fingertips I can relax the arm. I liken it to those



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energy efficient engines that switch off at traffic lights or recoup energy from braking. If the hand stays high but also wide then I know I will need to throw a leg out to stop me from rolling over into backstroke. The momentum leads to a sweep across the centre line on entry. If my left hand extends forwards but crosses over the space in front of my right shoulder more surface area is exposed. Another braking surface, can't you feel that?

The legs lift back up to the surface in a straight line. There is no propulsion but more importantly there is no drag. The more economical muscles of the hip flexor and glutes do this, not the hamstrings. That would just bend the knee and send the legs sinking. It's automatic now but the knee bends on the down sweep meaning the forefoot and the shin both push the water backwards aiding my progress. This is not really that propulsive but with them providing this traction I can initiate my rotation. If the legs and core generate this movement then I do not need the arms to push down, lifting the head and forcefully and inaccurately creating rotation. If I am not breathing then I am still rotating. The shoulders are being

lifted above the surface of the water from the inside continually; there is no blockage, and the lack of rotation keeps the trailing shoulder low, if I suddenly choose to breathe to my weaker side.

Fast or slow, the stroke count is the same. Sometimes 13, maybe 14, depending on the number of fly kicks off the wall. A good streamline off the wall does the trick of getting me a third of the way. Push off like a starfish, move like a starfish. There is a good reason kayaks are shaped the way they are without bits sticking out. The stroke count rarely goes up; maybe at the end of 60x50s off 45secs one or two strokes might be added. I adjust the space between my fingers attempting to gain a subtle advantage; I wonder the optimum as I swim warm-ups and subsets? A few millimetres wider and I am under 30 strokes over 50 metres for the first time. Interesting. I can feel the disturbed water when drafting, I wait a fraction of a second and then engage my catch knowing the water will be solid again as it returns to its usual density. ❶

Dan Bullock is a senior coach at swimfortri.com and a Speedo Openwater Advisory Coach.

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