

Changing Your Swim Stroke in the Off-Season

By Joanna K. Chodorowska, BA, NC

The off-season is probably the best time to make changes to your swim stroke. You can focus on form and not worry about how many yards you are (or not) swimming. The off-season is when the mileage is low, so the focus can be completely on form instead of building endurance and speed.

When I work with my swimming clients, I change one to three components of the stroke per session. Usually these three things work together, making it easier to remember. I suggest to my clients that they get into the pool as frequently as possible during the week in between lessons. Do not look at your swim now as your workout – do the cardio vascular activities outside the pool. Your focus now is on the mechanics you are changing. You are working on new ways to swim so that means you need to train your brain as well as your body to move differently. Both of those can be very tiring. When you get tired, you revert back to your old habits; then instead of starting where you left off in the last session, you are starting over from the beginning. This can be frustrating to say the least. You want to think baby steps here – repeat new movements often and focus on those alone. It is better to get into the pool for 15-20 minutes daily rather than trying to cram in an hour twice a week. Your endurance will return pretty quickly but the form has to be mastered before you can attempt distance swimming.

At first, my swimmers swim only 25 yards at a time. Initially, it is hard to keep your new focus for longer than 25 yards, sometimes even for half the length, before the stroke 'falls apart'! Until you master the new form, don't go beyond 25 yards. The progressions go something like this: first you cannot concentrate the whole length and you feel the stroke fall apart. That is good - you are noticing the difference. Stop at the wall or change strokes to get to the wall, regroup and try again. Now when you feel it fall apart, you try to bring it back together. Once you can bring it back together, you will be able to hold it for the full length. Repeat that a few times, and then you can try 50 yards in the same manner. It is a building process. Don't try to speed it up.

When I changed my stroke several years ago after a USA Swimming conference, I not only had to change my stroke, but I also had to be competitive within four weeks. So I did as suggested above and was in the pool six days of every week, just focusing on form and how I felt in the water with the new stroke. I did not have the benefit of the coach on deck, so I tried to remember everything from the conference. I went from being able to swim a master's swim practice for ninety minutes to being exhausted after 30-45 minutes. I got out of the pool once I was too tired and therefore unable to keep the form. Each time I returned to the water, I was able to master the new stuff and add a few more drills. Within two weeks, I swam sets of 200 yards with another swimmer on Wednesday,



and then went to master's practice on Friday. When I returned to master's swim for the first time, we had to do 1000 yards for time. Unfortunately my stroke did fall apart in the middle of it and I tried everything I could to get it back. I did learn something though which I was able to correct from that point onward. Finally I got back to yardage swimming, not just technique. When I did swim my triathlon a few weeks later, I dropped my time from twenty-seven minutes for a 1-mile swim to twenty-three. I had no lower back pain, my shoulders did not ache and I felt refreshed instead of out of breath. The changes really worked.

This proves that practice and patience are key when changing your stroke. It also means you have to take the time to actually do it. The off-season is perfect for just that - less yards to swim and more time to think about technique. Hire a good swimming coach to help you make the necessary changes to your stroke but also try to focus on the changes and new techniques rather than the distance covered during your swimming session. You will master the new techniques quicker and have a much more successful swimming experience. So whether you are a triathlete looking to get a faster freestyle or an IM'er looking for a better butterfly or breaststroke, the off-season is the best time to change your strokes. Now go get wet!



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