

Starts and Turns to Start the Season

by Don Benson
Weston High School

When I was an age group and high school swimmer I always looked forward to taper time. I enjoyed the extra rest during sets that the taper provided, but I especially loved that practice almost always included starts and turns. After I became a coach of a high school team, I continued the practice of including a liberal amount of starts and turns during taper practices. However, as I progressed in my coaching career I noticed that during the championship season my swimmers committed the same technical errors at the championship meets that they committed in practice and at dual meets throughout the season. In response I began incorporating starts and turns to start the season, and hence saw a significant improvement in starts and turns at the end of the season. Basically, by practicing starts and turns prior to the first dual meet, swimmers should develop proper techniques that will be reinforced during the dual meet season, thereby increasing the likelihood for successful performances at the end of the season.

As for the turn work, I start by emphasizing the streamline and breakout. Underwater widths is a common early season set I employ to emphasize the streamline. "Long walls" is another set I frequently use to emphasize the streamline and breakout. The long walls set is swum over a distance of 300-500 yards: after each turn swimmers must surface past the flags and not breathe off of the wall (A six-six-six approach with six kicks on the back, six on the side, and six on the stomach helps swimmers achieve the "long wall"). I also find that training shorter distances at longer rest helps improve turn work because additional space can be allotted between each swimmer. For example, in a set of 10 X 50 at 1:00, with six swimmers in each lane, a ten-second send off provides ample distance between each send-off so that each swimmer can concentrate on a performing a good turn with a streamline push off without interference into or out of the wall.

In terms of start training, I frequently wait until a few practices before the first dual meet competition. This ensures that the swimmers have had enough training to begin to swim fast. I will initially allot a period of time to practice starting technique with the entire team (perhaps 20 minutes). Over subsequent practices leading into the first dual meet I will incorporate start work with sprint work during or at the end of practice. Finally, I will also practice relay starts in the early portion of the season. Even though relay combinations may change by the end of the season, swimmers should be concentrating on proper technique throughout the season so that relay exchanges become seamless by season's end.

The starts and turns to start the season approach correlates quite closely to the "Race to Train" philosophy I wrote about in the Jan./Feb. 2002 NISCA *Journal*. By practicing starts and turns at the start of the season, with special attention dedicated to technique, swimmers will then have 10-15 dual meets to practice race quality starts and turns. Bad habits are often too hard to break at the end of the season. Dedicating even a small amount of time to proper start and turn technique at the start of the season allows the dual meet season to become a race performance training ground. The results will be noticeable at championship time.