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FREESTYLE ARM RECOVERY: ANYTHING GOES!

BY KARLYN PIPES-NEILSEN

Whatever recovery you choose, the No. 1 priority is to maintain healthy shoulders.

If your recovery is creating shoulder pain, modify your stroke ASAP before you suffer permanent damage.

Straight, rounded or bent—which one are you? When it comes to freestyle arm recovery, anything goes.

My, how things have changed! For years, the only correct way to swim freestyle was with a high elbow recovery. Coaches spent hours making sure our strokes looked just right. So, why are we now seeing so many swinging arms? Did Janet Evans with her windmill stroke know a secret? It appears she did.

It is no surprise to learn that swimmers and coaches are always looking for ways to go faster, improve efficiency and minimize injury. Some of the benefits to a “big arm” recovery are:

- More relaxed
- Greater reach
- Quicker recovery
- Less stress on the shoulder
- Potentially faster

Following are five suggestions to help you find your optimal recovery. Keep in mind that the goal is to figure out what *feels* right, rather than focusing on what the stroke should *look* like.

RELAX!

The arm/hand should be as relaxed as possible, giving the shoulders a mini-break before going back to work. After all, it's called

RECOVERY. If you force it, the muscles in the arm, back and shoulders expend energy on a part of the stroke that is meant to be easy.

LET IT FLOW

Flexibility and range of motion will vary with each person, so the best recovery is the one that requires the least amount of effort and flows naturally. A high elbow recovery may look pretty, but it can wear on the shoulders and cause pain.

REACH BIG

A “big arm” recovery allows for a greater reach, gets you on your side and creates naturally occurring hip rotation. If you swim with a short reach with the hand/arm entering just over the head or by the ear, you may: stifle your natural rotation, miss the “extend and pause” phase that helps you set up the catch, pop a “wheelie” (hand dips down, then pops back to the surface) and drop your elbow, or cross your centerline.

DON'T GET STUCK

If you apply *umph* at the finish and push too far back, you can get “stuck” and lose momentum. For a quicker recovery, simply relax and release the force behind your hand

immediately after the power phase, then allow the arm/hand to sweep into the recovery in a curvilinear motion. Think: reach big, pull short.

MIX IT UP

A straight arm recovery is great for sprints, but for longer events, a more rounded stroke may be easier to maintain. It's perfectly OK to have more than one style of recovery—just let your body do what feels best.

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Experiment with the following drills:

Water polo stroke: Heads-up freestyle forces you to find the most economical and efficient way to swim. Swing your arms, keep them relaxed and stay away from pulling down the middle. Maintain the same stroke with your head down.

Three-quarters catch-up with straight arm: Begin with totally straight arms, then gradually round them down to find the recovery that works for you.

Contrast: Swim half a length with big arms, then half a length with your old recovery. Reverse and repeat (many times). Which is easier? Faster?

See yourself swim: You may think you are swimming with totally straight arms, but the camera may tell a different story. ♦

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