

Using Fins to Improve Technique

By: Chris Harrigan

The sensation "feel for the water" is one factor that has a strong effect on how good a swimmer can become. Some swimmers have more sensitive skin and can easily feel how water flows over the body. The lines and angles that a swimmers' body creates through the water will have a very strong effect on the amount of drag one creates in the water and the speed achieved at any given energy output level. Swimmers with a better "feel for the water" can feel how changes on body position/lines effect how water flows over the swimmers' body and this can lead to developing a superior technique over time.

There is a way that swimmers can increase their "feel for the water" and to develop a better technique. When you're in a car, stick your hand out of the window when going slow through a neighborhood and the difference in the force you feel against your hand when pointed straight ahead vs. held upright is minimal. Now try the same test when on the interstate; the difference in the force you feel against your hand in the two positions is substantial. On the interstate, even holding your hand one or two degrees off from pointing straight ahead now creates a very strong effect. Using larger fins when swimming can create a similar effect. Larger fins will cause you to move through the water faster so you can easily feel how even slight changes in body position / lines has on how the water flows over your body.

When new swimmers are developing technique and body position, they should use large fins in the same way a child would use training wheels when learning to ride a bike. Just as in golf, developing bad habits early on when learning technique and position can prove very difficult to overcome down the road. The increased speed that fins provide will help swimmers easily feel how changes in their body position effects their drag and speed in the water. By doing this, the stroke that is developed is superior to a technique learned at lower speeds without fins. When new swimmers first start out, they should use large fins 100% of the time, and gradually wean off fins as their technique and fitness progress.

Zoomers (short fins) are a very specific tool used only by advanced distance swimmers. Even if you are exclusively a distance swimmer, until you can easily swim 25 yards in roughly 15 strokes without much effort, the benefits gained from larger fins far outweigh the benefits from zoomers.

Another benefit that larger fins can have on swimmers of all abilities is making drill work more effective. If you have ever watched a boat build up speed in a lake or ocean, you noticed that as the boat gains speed, it sits higher and higher in the water. The same thing happens to the body as one swims faster vs. slower. Drill work should ideally be done at the same speed as race training. This will replicate the desired height in the water so you are learning a technique that is most effective for the speed you plan to go in competition. Obviously, it is very hard, if not impossible to replicate race speed while doing drills, but using fins will provide a solution to this problem.

Use fins large enough so that your pace is similar in any given drill to your desired race pace. Gary Hall Jr., who won back to back gold medals in the 50 freestyle used to do drill work with 2 foot long scuba fins to get closer to his race speed. Most people reading this are not training for the 50 free, but the point is the same.