

In Search of the Dreaded Dropped Elbow

printed material about swimming technique, you probably have been inundated with stroke portion of the arm cycle. Most books about freestyle during the propulsive chapters breaking the underwater motion into several parts, talking technique spend and vectors and S-shaped motions and on and on. Then they spend a paragraph or while. And, in general, it is hard or impossible to put what they tell you into the practice

The fact of the matter is that how you take a stroke is not nearly as important as the positions you are in and what you do while you are not stroking. Read that last sentence again because it summarizes my whole take on technique.

However, some people just won't be happy if I don't address the topic of what the hand and arm does during the underwater part of the stroke. Here it is: Get the stroking forearm vertical as far out in front of you as possible and keep it vertical for as long as possible as the arm moves down the length of the body. This is referred to as swimming with a "high elbow."

Stalking the critter

One of the most common problems swimmers have is The Dreaded Dropped Elbow. This insidious beast rears its ugly head during virtually every workout in every pool in every country in the world. The coaching fraternity, in an attempt to exorcise this demon, can be heard chanting the following litany in unison (sometimes with four-part harmony): "Frmum pskuhium hstrmvkus HIGH ELBOW mskbulum jqzlfgrn." Every now and again, if the coach gets every word pronounced properly, at the correct cadence and while holding his tongue just so.... the exorcism "takes" and the bane retreats.

Lets see if we can shed some sunlight upon this vampire that sucks the lifeblood from the strokes of so many innocent swimmers.



Let me describe the beast. Stand up and bend over at the waist. Extend your right hand out in front of your face as if reaching to full extension on a freestyle stroke (Fig. A).

Now bend the elbow slightly while lifting and rotating the upper arm at the shoulder. Imagine a straight line drawn through space from the shoulder to the wrist. For lack of a better term let's call this the "horizon" line (dotted line in Fig. B).

Note that the elbow is above the horizon line. Gaze upon the arm and note the relationship of elbow to horizon and also note what muscles you are using to get into and stay in this position (i.e. what does it look like & feel like). Now, still keeping the hand in the same position, lower the elbow below the horizon. Doesn't this feel wimpy and pathetic compared to the previous position? Again, gaze upon the arm and note the relationship of elbow to horizon line.

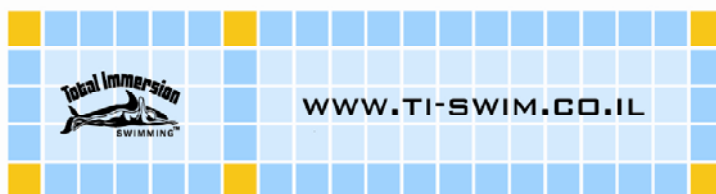
EEEEEEK! - That's the Dreaded Dropped Elbow! Quick! Kill it before it multiplies! Pick that elbow back up nice and high and see how the loathsome critter disappears into the nearest hole. Good work! That was a close call.

Killing the critter

OK. Now that we have seen the pesky varmint and have him cornered, lets think this through.

With your elbow held higher than the horizon, slowly move the arm through a simulated freestyle stroke. Concentrate on achieving the position shown below as you begin the stroke, keeping the elbow higher than the horizon (in the water this may feel somewhat like rolling your hand and arm over a barrel). As you move the arm through the stroke concentrate on keeping the elbow above the horizon as long as possible (Fig. D-1-3), then on keeping the forearm and hand as vertical as possible throughout the rest of the stroke (Fig. D-4-6).





Canines and incantations

Once you have mastered this with a “high” elbow try it again with a “low” or “dropped” elbow - just keep it below the horizon and make the same stroking motion. Hmm - do the words “wimpy” and “pathetic” sound familiar? Can you say “dog paddle”? Seriously. Watch a dog swim. You will note that the greatest advantage we have over our furry friend is the fact that our shoulders allow our arms to move in more than one direction (but dogs get more benefit out of a full taper and shave - win a few, lose a few). With a “dropped” elbow, the stroke creates lots of turbulence and very little propulsion. Keeping the elbow “high” allows for accelerating hand speed without “slipping water”, thus allowing continuous acceleration of the body as well.

Perhaps the Dreaded Dropped Elbow is not to be feared after all. Perhaps it should be called The Pathetic Wimpy Dropped Elbow and should be pitied and scorned instead. Hmm - just to be on the safe side, repeat after me, in unison - “Begone Ye Demon - I cast ye OUT! - Return from whence you came! - There’s no place like home... There’s no place like.....”.

In conclusion, it should be noted that neither the concept of avoiding the Dreaded Dropped Elbow, nor the propulsion potential of having the forearm and hand in the right orientation to the core body, is limited to freestyle. In fact, this concept is applied in nearly the same fashion to each of the other three competitive strokes...this, perhaps, is fodder for some future article. v

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