

Are you swimming uphill or “downhill”?



Before Christmas I talked about the concept of trying to make your swimming easier rather than harder, to swim at the same speed with less effort. So this begs the question, how can you swim easier? The vast majority of swimmers I work with find the most dramatic reduction in effort comes from learning to swim “downhill”. By “downhill” I mean feeling as though you are swimming downhill rather than uphill. When swimming “downhill” you are in fact balanced in the water. When you are evenly balanced you sit higher in the water and therefore have the potential to swim faster.

Consider for a moment that you are the water in front of a swimmer who is stroking towards you. Can you see their whole body i.e. chest / hips / legs and feet or just their head and shoulders? Imagine how much drag a swimmer whose feet are visible from this angle is creating. The water has to open up a whole 4 or 5 times (maybe more) larger than is necessary if just head and shoulders are coming through. This is crazy when you consider my favourite fact, i.e. that water is 880 times thicker than air!!!

So the uphill swimmer is incredibly inefficient and worse still the extra work caused by swimming with so much drag means that they get more breathless which drives them to reach to the surface and lift their heads high to get the air they need – which makes them even more uphill.

When swimming we must aim to be in our best posture (remember the stick races you had with other children at the local river – you didn’t need any physics knowledge to quickly learn the best stick was the smoothest and straightest!!). This posture is the same as on land, in other words you point the crown of your head up the pool in the direction you are going whilst you face the bottom i.e. good standing posture laid down into a horizontal position.

Now with that in mind imagine as you swim that you are a seesaw and that like a seesaw you have a natural fulcrum or pivot point. This fulcrum varies a little from person to person but is more or less at their sternum. So here is the trick – as you swim repeatedly ask yourself the question “am I swimming directly over my fulcrum or behind it. When over the top you will feel as though you are swimming “downhill”. When behind it you will feel uphill.



When swimming uphill you will feel water pressure on your hips / legs and feet. When 'downhill' you will feel it more on the top of your head and shoulders, your legs and feet will feel light and buoyant and you may get a little fresh air on your bum 😊.

Many sea swimmers mistakenly believe that a wetsuit fixes this balance issue. My experience has been that it will improve it but never fixes it.

Top tip 1 - Swimming with balance is an ongoing focus i.e. like balance in anything it isn't something you simply lock into and forget – it is an ongoing focal point, something to check in with regularly. Keep asking yourself the same question as you swim “am I over my fulcrum or behind it?”

Top tip 2 - Keep your fingers very slightly apart and relaxed – this will help you shift weight forwards from your shoulders to your hands thus tipping you downhill.

Top tip 3 - Release the full weight of your head to the water – it WILL float and again will help tip you forwards more.

Top tip 4 - As you swim smoothly shift your balance from an uphill and then to a downhill position. Exaggerate the two different sensations and play at finding that magical spot in the middle that feels easier, which allows your legs and feet to be free of resistance.

Top tip 5 - Break your session into lots of short one or two length repeats with a few seconds rest between. Swim at a steady pace and work on holding a balanced position.

Swim with balance, feel the flow!

Lionel

- [January 31st Freestyle workshop details](#)
- Please seek me out at the sea swims if you have any questions re this article or swimming in general.

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