

Catching Up on the Catch-Up Stroke



Courtesy of Robert Christians

In this 1937 photo, **BOB CHRISTIANS'** work with the catch-up stroke yields a longer extension of the forward arm.

>Robert Christians was a high school junior when the 1932 Olympics were held in Los Angeles. A competitive backstroker and freestyler, Christians closely followed Olympic swimming and was amazed when the Japanese men's team swept four of five events. "They were so powerful, especially in freestyle. It came as quite a surprise to the American swimming community," recalls Christians, now 89 and a member of Coast Masters in Laguna Woods, Calif.

Intrigued, Christians read an article analyzing the Japanese swimmers' success. "The author suggested that they were extending their arms forward more and coasting a bit longer than others. Thus their recovering arm entered the water closer to the moment the forward arm started its power stroke," he recalls. "My reaction was that I would go them one better and see what would happen."

At first, Christians says he just tried coasting a little longer, but that didn't seem to change anything. "Then I tried flutter kicking with arms extended and hands touching, took one power stroke and extended both arms again,

while continuing to kick. Suddenly, something seemed different. I became infinitely more aware of what each shoulder, elbow, arm and hand were doing during the pull. My stroke became smoother and more effortless." But he soon realized that his unnamed innovation could not be a competitive stroke because of the long time between pulls. Instead, he often used the stroke as a warm-up to help him "learn new secrets about gliding, stroking and timing."

When Christians joined the University of Iowa swim team in 1934 as a walk-on, renowned coach Dave Armbruster initially wasn't that impressed with the young swimmer's freestyle. It wasn't until Christians talked his way into a 220 race and blew away the competition that he catapulted into a middle-distance freestyler of some note. In 1936, his prowess helped Iowa claim its first Big

Ten Championship. "That year was the peak of Iowa swimming," says Christians, recalling his days of swimming with greats like Jack Sieg. "It all clicked."

Still, Christians—remembered by teammates for his beautiful, smooth crawl—never got credit for his freestyle invention. Nor did he keep up with the progression of the "catch-up" stroke during his years spent in the Navy, building a career and raising a family. Not that long ago, Christians got on the Internet and was amazed to find the catch-up drill being used by coaches to train swimmers to improve their freestyle stroke. "Swimming is a very complicated thing," Christians says. "It's important to go beyond—to exaggerate the stroke, and then come back to normal mode to really get it." <<<

CATCH-UP FREESTYLE

Swimming requires coordination of so many parts of the body that it's "a lot for the brain to keep up with," notes Robert Christians. He believes his experimentation with freestyle technique in the 1930s has developed into what is now known as the catch-up drill.

Today, coaches like Dan Peck, founder of Swim Smarter, use the catch-up drill to analyze a swimmer's freestyle stroke one arm at a time. "This is beneficial in fixing any problem from improper recovery, to pull width, to balance," says Peck. "The great thing about the catch-up drill is that you can take all the time in the world between strokes as you process what you are going to do next. As you figure it out, you can take less and less time between strokes until you are eventually taking strokes one after another."

The Drill

- >>> Start out face down in the water with arms extended out front in the streamline position.
- >>> Keep one hand overlapping the other and add a strong kick to start moving.
- >>> Pull one arm in a normal stroke; recover and place it on top of the other arm, which should still be extended in front.
- >>> Kick for two full seconds, and repeat with opposite arm.
- >>> As you go, you can choose to reduce the amount of time spent kicking between strokes to one second and then half a second. But make sure your stroking hand "catches up" and touches the other hand before it begins to pull.
- >>> Important: Don't speed up too quickly. Take your time and wait until your stroke is flawless at each speed before increasing it.

Source: Dan Peck, www.swimsmarter.com

The University of Iowa's 1936 Big Ten Championship swim team (l to r): **ARNE CHRISTEN, JACK SIEG, RAY WALTERS, "WEH" WEHMEYER, "JAKE" JACOBMEYER, DICK WESTERFIELD, BOB ALLEN and BOB CHRISTIANS.** For more information on these swimmers, visit www.usmsswimmer.com.



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