Manufacturers and distributors provided samples for this review of products available in the market.

Most often used to isolate the upper body by taking the kick out of the freestyle equation, pull buoys are also used by some Masters swimmers to give the lower body extra buoyancy, thus improving body position, which makes swimming more efficient by reducing drag. Using a pull buoy in conjunction with an ankle strap allows the swimmer to completely immobilize the lower body and focus attention on arm mechanics, core activation, body rotation and breathing technique. We categorized the buoys we tested into three basic groups: the one-piece “dog bone” buoy, the old-school barrel buoy, and lastly, an assortment of other options. Although buoys are also used to train other strokes, our testing focused on freestyle.

One-Piece ‘Dog Bone’ Buoys

These buoys are currently the most popular—seen in swim bags everywhere. They are lightweight, have one-piece construction and no moving parts. They resist bacterial growth, can take some abuse and are simple to use. At first glance, they appear to be all the same, but we found some differences—which is a good thing, since there are differences in the swimmers who use them.

In general, testers with slimmer lower bodies and not a lot of natural flotation preferred more foam—a larger and thicker buoy. This was not only to add buoyancy, but also to put thinner legs in a comfortable position without having to squeeze the legs together to keep from losing the buoy. Swimmers whose thighs don’t meet when they stand with their feet together on the ground may have a problem keeping a thinner buoy in place.

For those testers with larger legs or more natural buoyancy in the lower body, a standard or smaller buoy worked well—even some of the junior-size buoys used by age-group swimmers were preferred by some testers.

1. **ARENA FREEFLOW PULL BUOY**
   
   **Price**: $15 arenausa.com
   
   The beveled edges of this small buoy added a bit of extra comfort. The Freeflow was very thin in the middle, making it ideal for testers with thick legs. Thin-legged testers had trouble keeping it in place.

2. **FINIS PULL BUOY**
   
   **Price**: $10–$12 finisinc.com
   
   Two sizes: Jr. and Adult
   
   The profile of this dog bone is different from the others. It flares out sooner and larger at the ends, which are more circular than elliptical, making it much easier to keep between the legs—even the junior-size Finis was easy to keep in place. Testers with slimmer legs loved this buoy. A few testers with more ample thighs or more natural buoyancy felt that it was too much buoy for them.

3. **KIEFER CONTOUR PULL BUOY**
   
   **Price**: $8.50 kiefer.com
   
   The unusual shape of the Kiefer Contour was popular with testers. Although not as thick in the middle as the Finis, it was comfortable, secure and easy to wear because of the rounding created by the flared ends. One tester loved the fit, but being of smaller stature, did not want as much buoyancy, so she cut off one of the layers to customize it.

4. **KIEFER UNIVERSAL PULL BUOY**
   
   **Price**: $7–$8 kiefer.com
   
   Two sizes: 5- and 7-inch
   
   The regular size is your basic dog bone with an added layer of foam, which makes this buoy taller and more buoyant than the other dog bones. Taller swimmers with heavy legs liked this buoy in the 7-inch size. The 5-inch size is noticeably thicker in the middle than other junior pull buoys, similar to the Finis Junior, making it better for small swimmers with thin legs.

5. **NIKE ONE-PIECE PULL BUOY**
   
   **Price**: $10 allamericanswim.com
   
   Simple, standard dog bone; functioned perfectly for a wide range of testers.
SPEEDO PULL BUOY
$12 speedousa.com
Speedo’s dog bone is slightly larger at one end, like the Kiefer Contour, only without as much flare on either end. Many testers already had this buoy in their gear bags, and reported that it functions well. Testers with thinner legs had trouble keeping this buoy on, especially during flip turns, during which the small end tended to slip out.

SPORTI PULL BUOY
$5–$6 swimoutlet.com
Two sizes: Junior and Regular
Sporti’s dog bones had rougher sides than other buoys. Some testers liked this and felt that the texturing acted as a non-slip feature that secured the buoy better. Sporti also offers a USMS logo buoy for those spirited members wanting to fly their colors at practice.

TYR PULL FLOAT
$11.50 tyr.com
The TYR Pull Float has slightly softer foam than the other dog bones, making it more comfortable. For some testers, this caused a bit of slippage. Otherwise, a good basic buoy.

Old School Barrel Buoys

Some testers found these old school buoys preferable to the dog bones because of the ability to adjust to get a perfect fit and ability to purchase the amount of desired buoyancy. Some testers experienced chafing from the edges of the barrels during longer pull sets. Both Bettertimes and Kiefer offer three sizes—allowing the swimmers’ natural buoyancy to come into play. Testers with heavy legs who struggle with body position appreciated a larger buoy, which gave them a lot of buoyancy and put them into that downhill position.

Smaller testers with thinner legs preferred the small barrel buoy. These testers did not want the buoyancy of a full-size dog bone buoy—too much downhill—but could not keep most of the junior dog bones in place (except the Finis Jr. and the Kiefer 5-inch). With the smallest of the barrel buoys, they could achieve the correct fit by adjusting the barrels as close together as they needed.

Older versions of this type of buoy were prone to mildew because of their porous foam. Newer versions seem to have been smoothed on the outside, which may prevent mold, but also makes them a bit slipperier.

BETTERTIMES PULL BUOY
$6.50 swimoutlet.com
Three sizes: 6-, 7-, 8-inch
The strap assembly includes a plastic buckle that makes it secure, but takes awhile to adjust.

KIEFER BASIC PULL BUOY
$6–$7 kiefer.com
Three sizes: 6-, 7-, 8-inch
Kiefer went very basic with this buoy that has no plastic buckle, making it easy to adjust, but slightly prone to strap slippage.
“Variety is the spice of life,” according to English poet William Cowper, and these buoys gave testers an opportunity to try something new. Not surprisingly, some testers ended up liking what they were used to, and others found some of these options a welcome departure from the standard fare.

1 AQUA SPHERE ERGOBUOY
$25
This buoy is new for Aqua Sphere and is not yet available on their website. It received good reviews, although its odd elastic strap annoyed most testers by slipping off when pushing from the wall. In order to prevent this, it had to be cinched so tightly that the wear and tear on the elastic was evident. However, the strap is removable, and without that strap, the buoy functioned beautifully. The ribbing on the inside helped keep it in place and it had a nice curve and smooth feel that was comfortable for almost any shape tester. The piece of foam that is removable along the strap can be glued into place after the strap is discarded if more buoyancy is desired, or discarded with the strap.

2 ARENA PULL-KICK
$30 arenausa.com
When combining a pull buoy and kickboard, one usually functions better than the other, and in this case the kickboard wins. Only the tallest testers could use this as a pull buoy. Average-size testers found that it poked them in the backside and made it difficult to do flip turns. It was very thin and tended to slip out as well.

3 BETTERTIMES ONE PIECE PULL BUOY
$6 swimoutlet.com
Like the Arena Pull-Kick, this buoy was better for taller, longer-legged testers. It was soft and comfortable, and stayed in place nicely. Those with average or shorter legs found that it hit their calves or buttocks when they were executing flip turns.

4 FINIS RANGS BUOY SYSTEM
$20–$25 finisinc.com
Two sizes: Jr. and Sr.
This system offers some lower body buoyancy without changing the swimmer’s ability to kick and maintain balance. This may be helpful for new swimmers or triathletes who need to improve their body position while working on coordinating their arms and legs. One coach used it to keep some of his swimmers from bicycling when they kick, by placing the thick padding at the back of the knees—which reminded the swimmers not to bend their knees too much. Breaststrokers commented that the Rangs gave them some positive reinforcement for proper body position.

5 SPEEDO FILLABLE PULL BUOY
$20 speedousa.com
This buoy was comfortable and functional only for taller, longer-legged testers with strong or large legs. Because of its narrowness and streamlined design, it caused the least resistance of all the buoys tested, but a strong grip was needed. For everyday application, however, most testers preferred a simpler option. Dubbed “The Flask” by one tester, the Fillable Pull Buoy has a removable stopper that lets water in, which allows for buoyancy adjustment.
Ankle Straps

Some coaches like to bind their swimmers’ feet together to completely isolate the upper body and force them to feel rotation more keenly. Swimmers who still use their legs for balance when pulling with a buoy will find that when their ankles are bound up, engaging the core muscles becomes more important.

6 FINIS LATEX ANKLE STRAP
$6 finisinc.com
Sometimes simple is better, and this plain latex rubber band did just the trick—without the annoying seams and sharp edges from cut-up old inner tubes. The more twists, the tighter the ankles are held in place.

SPEEDO PULLING ANKLE LOCK
$11 speedousa.com
At first, testers remarked that it almost took two people to use this device. However, once on, it held the ankles together firmly, completely immobilizing the lower body. Testers felt that this was the most secure of all the ankle straps and well worth the extra effort to put it on properly.

8 STRETCH CORDZ ANKLE ELASTIC
$8 nzmfg.com
The elastic material used here was a little rougher than a plain latex rubber strap, making it a little less comfortable, but was a little easier to don and adjust—a few extra twists in the middle tightened it up according to preference. Testers worried that the elastic material may have a shorter lifespan when used in chlorinated water regularly.

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