Swim Bag: Kickboards

Kickboards are controversial in Masters swimming. Many coaches don’t recommend the traditional tombstone boards for swimmers with neck, back or shoulder problems, as the boards’ tendency to elevate the upper body can put additional strain on those areas, as well as contribute to an undesirable “swimming uphill” body position. Others, however, like that a nice floaty piece of foam allows the swimmer to focus on a strong kick without having to deal with breathing or awkward arm movements. And let’s face it, many swimmers view the kick set as a social occasion, since they can buddy up and talk to their lane mates while they’re kicking (hey, it is Masters swimming!).
Tombstones

Testers were divided into two camps over the traditional tombstone boards. Some preferred a sturdy, buoyant expanse upon which to rest their elbows and upper bodies. These boards, such as the Speedo and Sporti, were more popular with the social kickers. Other testers preferred the smaller, more flexible, or less buoyant boards, which allowed them to press down on the front of the kickboard and achieve a flat or more downhill position.

Finis, Speedo and Sporti have junior-size tombstones, which take up a lot less space in a mesh bag, and many testers agree the juniors are plenty big enough for all but the largest adults.

1. HEAD | HEAD.COM/SWIMMING

Basic Kickboard $12

Head’s kickboard is small, thin and not very buoyant. Its handgrip openings make facedown kicking a little easier. Several testers who have had shoulder issues liked this board as it is easily pressed under the surface of the water without causing any shoulder strain. Some testers rated this board as too flimsy for serious kicking.

2. FINIS | FINISINC.COM

Foam Kickboard $14

The feature that sets Finis’s basic board apart from the other tombstones is the slightly beveled edge, which makes the grip comfortable.

3. KIEFER | KIEFER.COM

a. Competitor $11

The Competitor is the widest and longest board we tested, but it is thin and quite flexible; some testers preferred this, but many felt it was too flimsy.

b. Hydro Kickboard $14

The Hydro was the tester favorite of all the traditional, full-size tombstones. It is thicker, sturdier and narrower than all the others, and slightly smaller overall. Testers say the best feature is the groove running along the underside periphery of the board, which makes gripping it comfortable. The Hydro is buoyant enough for the social kickers, but not so buoyant that it strains the shoulders when pressing down. Testers who kick with their boards in front of them, either with a snorkel or without, loved this board as well, citing the easy-grip groove and the narrow width.

4. SPEEDO | SPEEDOUSA.COM

Adult Kickboard $15

Speedo’s tombstone comes in a nice array of colors. It is thick, buoyant and gets the job done. The Junior is the thickest of all the tombstones, which makes it as buoyant as the full-size boards.

5. SPORTI | SWIMOUTLET.COM

Kickboard $9

Similar to the Speedo tombstones, Sporti boards are thick, sturdy and buoyant.
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Arrowheads

These kickboards allow for some versatility. The shape encourages a more streamlined position for the arms, and they are less buoyant (with the exception of Speedo) than the tombstones, allowing for a flatter body position.

Most have handgrip openings at the base of the board, ostensibly for facedown kicking. However, when testers used the handgrips, the boards popped up in the front, which testers found annoying. Speedo put their handgrip openings on the sides of their arrowhead, which eliminated that problem.

6. ARENA | ARENAUSA.COM
Kickboard Pro $20

7. SPORTI | SWIMOOUTLET.COM
Premium Kickboard $15

8. WATER GEAR | WATERGEAR.COM
Ergo Training Kickboard $18

These three boards are nearly identical. The only slight difference is the thickness, which was not enough to affect buoyancy to a noticeable degree. Sporti is the thinnest, followed by Arena, then Water Gear. (Water Gear offers a crazy color pattern, which was popular with many testers.) All three of these boards were popular with kickers who prefer to submerge their boards a little while kicking. Testers loved the ergonomic grooves and depressions at the tips of these boards and say they were comfortable to grasp.

9. KIEFER | KIEFER.COM
Sharkfin Kickboard $12

The Sharkfin is quite similar to the other arrowheads, but is smaller and thinner overall, less buoyant and does not have handgrips. This was another popular board for underwater kickers.

10. SPEEDO | SPEEDOUSA.COM
Competition II Kickboard $22

Speedo’s Competition II is thicker and sturdier and much more buoyant than the other arrowheads. The addition of side handles makes facedown kicking easier, but the board still floated too high for testers who prefer a flatter bodyline. However, the social kickers liked this board, as it is wide and buoyant enough to stretch out on (plenty of elbow room) and chatter away. The junior version does not have side handles, but still had elbow room for smaller testers.
Testers’ Choice
TYR | TYR.COM
Hydrofoil Kickboard $20
Testers loved this board. TYR sent us only one, and it went missing several times during testing, only to turn up in someone’s mesh bag a day or so later. Its curvy space-age look was not the reason; testers say that it was the most comfortable of all the boards to use. It felt smooth and fast in the water and was easily submerged, which made flip turns (for those who like to flip with their boards) much easier; however, no one complained of any lack of buoyancy.

Editor’s Pick
FINIS | FINISINC.COM
Alignment Kickboard $20
This board, paired with Finis’s Swimmer’s Snorkel, is a sublime kicking experience. It allows for a perfectly aligned spine and head, easy flip turns and focus on the kick—especially important for breaststrokers. For swimmers with a bum wing, the hand strap allows for one arm to be kept at the side. The board offers just enough buoyancy to support the hands, but is easily submerged while swimming and turning. The one downside? It cuts down on the chatter. Best kickboard ever.
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Pull/Kick

When we tested pull buoys (May-June 2011), we were sent a few of these pull-kick combo items. They’re fine if you travel with your gear because they take up a lot less room in a mesh bag than a kickboard and a pull buoy, but none of them work really well for either kicking or pulling.

11. Arena | Arenausa.com
Pull Kick $30

Sporti | SwimOutlet.com
Pull Kickboard $12

Most testers agreed that both Arena’s and Sporti’s pull-kick combos make passable kickboards, but are far too long and thin to be used effectively as pull buoys.

12. Head | Head.com/swimming
High Level Pull/Kickboard $19

13. Speedo | Speedousa.com
Pull Kick

Of all the pull-kick combos, testers preferred Speedo’s and Head’s. More compact, they’re a little easier to use than the Arena or Sporti models. For testers who prefer kicking in a facedown position, with or without a snorkel, they make passable kickboards.

—Laura Hamel

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