Swim Bag: Snorkels, Nose Clips, and Earplugs

BY LAURA HAMEL

Snorkels

A snorkel is one of those things you may put off trying, but once you use one, you’ll get hooked on it. As pointed out in the technique feature in this issue (Page 20), breathing can cause multiple problems for beginners who are still learning freestyle. The ability to remove the breathing motion from the stroke helps swimmers focus on body position, technique, and coordination of the pull and kick. But snorkels are not just for beginners; many experienced swimmers consider them essential for working their technique.

Snorkels are also great for helping swimmers with neck or back injuries stay in the water—they allow for gentle rotation with no neck strain. Kicking with a snorkel instead of a kickboard relieves back or neck strain caused by kickboards (use a small kickboard, such as the Finis Alignment, or a large hand paddle, held slightly under the surface).

Some snorkels have purge valves, which help clear water out from both ends of the snorkel after surfacing from a turn (although there is an easier way—see the sidebar). The snorkels without purge valves are shaped in order to minimize intrusion of water and are better suited to experienced snorkel users.

As you’re learning to use a snorkel, you may get water up your nose. If it’s uncomfortable, a nose clip (also reviewed here) may help until you get used to breathing in only through your mouth when your face is submerged.

1. Finis Swimmer’s Snorkel | finisinc.com | $36

Finis’s Swimmer’s Snorkel was the first center-mount snorkel to become mainstream. This snorkel is comfortable and reliable. It has a large bore, which lets lots of air in upon inhaling—this is great for first-time snorkel users. With the optional Cardio Cap ($5) you can decrease the bore size and get less air, a simulation of a high-altitude workout. The Swimmer’s Snorkel was among the most comfortable, and the simple design allows for a good fit. The straps are easily adjusted with buckles. Finis sells replacement purge valves, which is nice since they can fail, especially if not kept clean and dry between uses.

2. Finis Freestyle Snorkel | finisinc.com | $35

The Freestyle Snorkel is more compact than the Swimmer’s Snorkel, and curves back over the head and neck instead of sticking up like a periscope. This makes it more streamlined—there is less drag and interference when flipping and pushing off the wall. It does not have a purge valve.

The Freestyle Snorkel is not for beginners. It requires near-perfect head position and an empty lane to work best. Because the bore opens up near the surface of the water, wave action in a crowded lane can cause water to be sucked up into the air tube. Despite this, experienced testers who have mastered flip turns and have excellent head position preferred this snorkel to the standard. Its shape helps keep water out during turns.

3. Speedo Hydralign Center Snorkel | speedousa.com | $45

The Speedo Hydralign is another comfortable snorkel that is easy to adjust and fits a wide range of head sizes. The sheath that holds the tube upright is rigid, which makes this snorkel particularly stable when pushing off the wall.

The Hydralign is the largest and, thus, bulkiest of the snorkels. This didn’t bother most beginning testers, but experienced testers preferred the smaller-profile brands. The large bore makes it easy to get plenty of air.

One advantage to the Hydralign is that the snorkel can be removed from the bracket easily; if you want to swim a few reps without the snorkel and then put it back on, you can do so without removing the entire assembly.

4. TYR Ultralight Snorkel

TYR’s Ultralight would win a design award if one were given for snorkels, with its sleek, black post-industrial/space-age appearance—the purge valve cleverly hidden. This was also one of the most comfortable snorkels according to testers. The head bracket is curved and it cradles the forehead—much more so than the flatter head brackets of the other brands. The Ultralight does not have a flexible mouthpiece like the Speedo and Finis, but testers didn’t seem to mind. Several testers preferred the rigid tube, as it kept the snorkel from moving around as much, although some found that this snorkel wobbled too much when they pushed off the wall.

5. ylon-a aXis Snorkel | axisswimming.com | $30

At first, testers were doubtful that this tiny snorkel would be able to get the job done, but it soon became a tester favorite for experienced snorkel users. The mouthpiece is quite narrow, but the bitewings are long enough to accommodate a full-sized adult mouth. The ylon-a has a smaller bore size, which means less air, but it also means less water inside during a turn. This snorkel also fits quite easily into a mesh bag. Compact and streamlined, the ylon-a is also simple and low-tech. The straps do not adjust on the fly—you have to set them for your size and then leave them, and there isn’t a purge valve. Experienced snorkel users considered the lack of these features as a plus.
Yes, you can flip turn with a snorkel!

Executing flip turns with a snorkel can be challenging at first, but once you get it, you won't go back to those weird looking tugboat-in-a-bathtub turns you've been doing (you know who you are).

Some will tell you that you should surface after your turn and blow all the air out like a whale does. That’s great if you have whale-sized lungs and can save enough air on your flip turn to expel all the water after you’ve completed the turn. But let’s face it; we’re still ignoring our coaches when they tell us not to breathe inside of the flags, so where’s all that air going to come from? And why save a lot of air for a blast at the surface, right when you really need to be taking air in, not expelling it?

There’s a better way: the displacement method, or displacement clear. This is taught in basic scuba and skindiving classes and works very well for flip turns. The trick is to expel a small amount of air while you’re upside down on the wall—still underwater. As you push off and continue expelling a small amount of air, by the time you surface and the snorkel is right-side up, the air has cleared (displaced) the water from the tube and you can inhale with comfort as soon as the snorkel top clears the surface.

Keep in mind that a perfect tight streamline off the wall, with chin tucked, is not going to happen when flipping with one of the larger snorkels—in order to keep the snorkel on, you may need to push off with a higher head than you normally would. The lower-profileylon-a and Finis Freestyler allow for better streamlining than the larger, upright models.
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Earplugs

Earplugs are often recommended for swimmers who have suffered from repeat ear infections. Customized earplugs can cost $100 or more—if you don’t want to spend that much, these may do the trick. We’ve divided them into three categories: Christmas Tree, Molded, and Moldable. All the models we tested come with plastic storage boxes to keep them clean and from getting lost.

Christmas Tree

These plugs have the traditional Christmas tree shape, produced by flanges that decrease in size to the point that is inserted into the ear canal. There is no way to determine if they will fit unless you try them, as all ears are shaped differently. Some testers don’t like this design, as the intrusion into the ear canal can create soreness over a long practice.

6. Aqua Sphere Ear Plugs | aquasphereswim.com | $10

These come with a great case and storage lanyard and are marked left and right. They take some fiddling to achieve a watertight seal, but are comfortable once in place.

7. Head Swimming Ergonomic Ear Plugs Silicone | head.com | $4

The Head plugs are quite small and a little harder than others of this design. Some testers found them uncomfortable and were worried that they would get too close to their eardrums with the tips.

8. Mack’s AquaBlock Earplugs | macksearplugs.com | $3

These plugs got high marks for softness, flexibility, and comfort. Most testers were able to get a good fit.

9. Mack’s Ear Seals | macksearplugs.com | $3

The Ear Seals didn’t do as well underwater as the AquaBlocks. They’re not quite as soft, and although comfortable, they didn’t form a waterproof seal. These include a nice removable neck lanyard. These plugs are probably better suited for use outside the water.

10. Sporti Ear Plugs with String | sporti.com | $2

These plugs were too large for some of the testers, and they could not get a seal. The lanyard for these is not removable, which did not appeal to most testers.

11. Sporti Silicone Ear Plugs | sporti.com | $1.5

Testers liked these better than the Sporti Ear Plugs with String. They’re rigid but comfortable, and fit smaller ears better.
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**Nose Clips**

Nose clips are often used by backstrokers, beginners who are still learning how to breathe, and by swimmers with chlorine or other pool chemical allergies. Our nose clip testers agreed with the earplug testers: you really need to try them on since noses, like ears, come in all shapes and sizes. Longtime nose clip users mostly preferred the wire ones (Speedo and Sporti), as it’s easier to get a proper fit with them—you can squeeze them smaller or bend them open to make them larger. The plastic nose clips either fit or they don’t—there are no adjustments. The backstrokers tested all plugs for backstroke starts, streamlines, and breakouts to make sure they were secure—all the clips passed these tests. Like the earplugs, all the nose clips come with plastic storage boxes.

17. Aqua Sphere Nose Clip | aquasphereswim.com | $8

Like Aqua Sphere’s earplugs, the nose clip comes in an awesome carry case that can be conveniently attached to a gear bag or swim bag via a silicone lanyard. The nose clip is sturdy and secure, but did not fit testers with larger noses.

18. Barracuda Silicone Pad Nose Clip

Testers didn’t like the look of the large plastic bridge on this clip, but they reported that the clip worked well. The large silicone pads helped to stabilize it and were comfortable to wear.

19. Finis Nylon/TPR Nose Clip | finisinc.com | $4.5

Testers liked the soft pads on the Finis nose clip, and noted that although it was tight, it was tall enough to accommodate a larger nose.

20. Head Swimming Noseclip | head.com | $4

Like Head’s earplugs, this nose clip was very small and seemed better suited for children’s noses.

**Molded**

The molded plugs enter the ear canal part way, but also have a molded flange that sits in the outer ear to stabilize the plug and form a seal to keep water out. These tended to be more secure and more comfortable than the Christmas tree–shaped plugs, but they did not fit all testers.

**12. Barracuda Ear Plugs**

These plugs were comfortable, secure, and kept water out, provided they were seated properly. They are left and right specific, but not marked as such.

**13. Speedo Ergo Ear Plugs | speedousa.com | $5**

Like the Barracuda plugs, the Speedo Ergo plugs are comfortable, secure, and kept water out. They also require some wiggling to get a proper seat.

**Moldable**

The moldable category contained only one type of plug: a lump of silicone putty that is gently pressed into the outer ear to conform to the shape of the outer ear. These plugs should not be rolled up and inserted into the ear canal. They are very comfortable, have a custom fit, but must be discarded after about five uses.

**14. Head Swimming Ear Plugs Silicone | head.com | $4**

These plugs did not contain enough material to form an adequate seal. Testers tried inserting them into the ear canal, but they fell out during flip turns. The only way these worked properly was to take one pair and squish them together to form a single plug. This was easily accomplished as each box contained two pairs.

**15. Mack’s Pillow Soft Silicone Earplugs | mack-searplugs.com | $3**

Mack’s includes plenty of silicone and the plugs are the softest and most comfortable of all the moldable plugs. They stayed in place and created a waterproof seal. Mack’s come two or more pairs to a box and in children’s sizes.

**16. Speedo Silicone Ear Plugs | speedousa.com | $5**

These were similar to the Mack’s, although some testers reported that the silicone was not quite as soft. There also appeared to be slightly less material, although still enough to form a seal in all testers’ ears. They come two pairs to a box.
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21. Speedo Competition Nose Clip | speedousa.com | $6

This clip is popular with regular nose clip users who like the fit, comfort, and durability. One tester noted that the latex padding appeared to have been upgraded since the last time she had purchased one.

22. Speedo Liquid Comfort Nose Clip | speedousa.com | $6.5

Although most nose clip users preferred the wire ones, the Speedo Liquid Comfort got good reviews. They found the silicone pads were comfortable and the double band helped with getting a proper fit.

23. Sporti Swim Clip | sporti.com | $1.5

Sporti’s basic metal clip is similar to Speedo’s Competition clip, but the metal loop is much larger. It still fit a variety of noses, although testers with smaller noses preferred to have the band sit closer to their noses. Great price from Sporti.

24. Sporti Nose Clip | sporti.com | $2

Testers with smaller noses reported that the silicone pads on this clip were soft and that the clip fit well, but testers with larger noses could not get it on without discomfort.

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