Swim Bag: Paddles

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BY LAURA HAMEL

We last reviewed paddles in the May-June 2010 issue. Some of those models are reviewed here again, along with a few newcomers. As with the last review, we focused on paddles designed for general use, either flat or slightly curved, with a few specialty paddles thrown in. Fingertip, fist, and other specialty paddles and technique aids will be reviewed in the January-February 2015 issue.

General-use paddles serve two primary functions: improving technique and building strength. They shouldn’t be used just to swim faster—in other words, don’t don the dinner plates to race your faster teammates during that 8 x 200 pull set your coach just threw up on the board.

When purchasing paddles for the first time, choose ones that are just slightly larger than your hands. Your fingers shouldn’t curl over the edges. Also consider your existing strength—you may have large hands, but if you have weak upper body and arm muscles or are new to swimming, stay as close to your hand size as possible and build your strength gradually, purchasing larger ones when you get stronger.

Bad technique causes injury, and the potential for injury with paddles gets exponentially worse as paddle size increases. Have a qualified coach take a look at your stroke while you’re using paddles until you’re both satisfied that you won’t be doing more harm than good.

Used properly, hand paddles are essential in helping to develop and refine technique and build strength for all swimmers, newbie to pro.

1. Aqua Sphere ErgoFlex | aquasphere.com | $20

Testers were intrigued by these paddles, but noted that only someone strong who has excellent technique and control should use them. The slightly curved design allows for a relaxed hand and the straps adjust to fit different sized hands. The paddles dip upon hand entry, but after that, they are beastly, grabbing huge swaths of water and pulling you past your anchor point quickly. The lack of holes makes for quite a bit of wavering. Testers didn’t find these paddles suitable for strokes other than freestyle. The soft materials make the ErgoFlex more lane-friendly than hard plastic paddles. One size.

2. Finis Agility | finisinc.com | $20

Testers dubbed these unique paddles Fritos or Pringles, after the chips they slightly resemble. Nicknames aside, the paddles performed excellently. One big advantage with the Agility is the immediate feedback on poor technique. Because the paddles have no straps—just a plastic divider between your thumb and fingers—you need to maintain constant, even pressure on the paddles and focus on keeping your hands, wrists, and forearms in synch. If your early vertical forearm isn’t working, the paddles won’t either, and that’s good feedback. Testers didn’t feel that these would be as good for strength building, because when cranking on them during hard sets, the paddles tended to waver, likely from the lack of holes. Three sizes.
Two Tips for Paddle Use

1. For all the basic flat paddles, remove the wrist straps when they arrive. With proper technique, you can control the paddle without the wrist straps. If you leave the straps on, then you’re allowed to keep bad technique because you won’t receive that valuable negative feedback when the paddle flies off or slips askew, letting you know that your built-in paddles—the tips of your middle fingers to your elbow (with a straight wrist)—might not be maximizing their efficiency with good early and late vertical forearm.

2. When using paddles there is sometimes a tendency to let the fingers creep too far apart or to clench them tightly together. Try to keep them in the same relaxed position they’d be in without the paddles: relaxed hand with fingers slightly apart, which lets water web up in the small spaces between the fingers, increasing your hold on the water. Not to mention that if you have your fingers tightly clenched together, you’re wasting good oxygenated blood that could be circulating to the muscles actually doing the work.
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3. Finis Freestyler | finisinc.com | $20
   The Freestyler is designed for one thing: lengthening your freestyle stroke. The skeg on the bottom enables a long glide upon hand entry, thus increasing your reach. These are great paddles for swimmers who have a tendency to break their wrists and dive their hands or start their stroke too early without extending. As with the Agility paddles, the Freestylers are not for strength building, but for developing, refining, and reinforcing good technique. Testers reported that during the propulsive phase of their strokes, the skeg produced some unwanted torque when they applied pressure to pick up the pace. Two sizes.

   These paddles would more aptly be named Stroke Tech, because testers quickly found that they never actually used them during IM sets; that's because the paddles worked better when reversing the left and right for breaststroke and backstroke. Most testers preferred not to have to stop and reverse their paddles at the transitions. Misnomer aside, testers loved these paddles. They tended to favor the smaller size for butterfly, backstroke, and breaststroke, and the larger ones for freestyle. Testers reported that the stiffness of the paddle makes it a powerful freestyle paddle, and the curved and thickened edges enhance the catch and hold on breaststroke and backstroke. The I.M. Techs are all-around paddles with multiple uses and are a great addition to any swim bag. Two sizes.

5. Speedo Power Paddles | speedousa.com | $20
   Great basic paddles with the right shape to encourage extension upon entry, stiffness to build strength, and plenty of holes to help keep your stroke on track—no wavering, even with larger sizes. The only thing testers would change about this paddle is the rubber tubing, which they deemed slightly too tensile; they preferred a stiffer, more resistant tubing. As mentioned in the intro, remove the wrist straps altogether to work your technique. Four sizes.

   The Sporti Power paddles are very similar to the Speedo Power paddles, but with fewer holes. Although the paddles are flat, they have a raised area where the palm rests, which some testers liked for added comfort and security. The paddles performed similarly to the Speedo paddles, although with more flex and fewer holes, they are not quite as stiff. However, at less than $5, these paddles are a serious bargain that anyone on a budget will appreciate. Three sizes.
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7. Sporti Swim Paddles II | swimoutlet.com | $8
   During our 2010 testing, paddles that conformed to the shape of a relaxed palm were deemed excellent for backstroke but problematic for freestyle because the shape encourages the hands to dive down instead of stretch out upon entry. Sporti’s improved strap system has helped solve that problem quite a bit—the new harness keeps the paddle flatter against the palm than the straps on similar older models did. Still, the backstrokers were the biggest fans of these paddles; freestylers preferred flatter paddles. Three sizes.

8. SwimPaddles.com Star Paddles | swampaddles.com | $15
   The Star Paddles emerged as a standout in our 2010 testing session and that hasn’t changed. No one knows why these paddles feel so good, they just do. They have numerous holes, which provide a great feel for the water, and they flex slightly through the entire stroke. The smaller surface area at the top of the paddle catches less water initially, but the wings give it a larger-paddle feel during the pull, without the shoulder strain of a larger paddle. The unique shape makes them good for working both technique and strength, which makes them great for both beginners and experienced swimmers. Strong swimmers wanting a large, stiff paddle to crank on for strength training should not choose these. One size.

9. TYR Catalyst 2 | tyrsport.com | $15
   Several of our experienced testers grew up using Catalysts and still love them. The unique lobster-claw design is great for technique, easy on the shoulders, and good for strength building. As with the Star Paddles, the smaller top part of the paddle cuts a clean entry, yet the paddle grabs sufficient water during the pull. The Catalyst 2s have a cutout in the palm, which increases your feel for the water and the pressure you’re exerting on it. This improved model provides more holes for more strap configurations and the material is slightly more flexible than that of the older model. The Catalyst 2s can be reversed to work other strokes; indeed, the breaststrokers had fun swapping left for right and working on their outsweeps. Five sizes.

10. TYR Catalyst Contour | tyrsport.com | $17
    The curve of TYR’s Catalyst Contour is not so severe that this paddle dips upon hand entry as other curved paddles reviewed did. The curve is just enough that it promotes a relaxed hand and good hold on the water. These paddles are billed as more about technique than power, but testers found that they hold a lot of water throughout the propulsive phase of the stroke, thus being great for strength building. The larger size is better suited for a strong swimmer with established good technique. The Catalyst Contour also has a palm cutout as the Catalyst 2 does, and the material strikes a great balance between flex and resistance. Three sizes.