

Training Aids:

Legitimate Tools or Frivolous Fads?

If you talk to parents of swimmers from other teams, if you read swim publications, or if you watch swimmers during warm ups at swim meets, you will notice a variety of training aids that swimmers lug around. Let's see, there are kick boards in every size and shape imaginable; there are tire tubes; there are paddles -- boy are there paddles!, round ones, rectangular ones, contoured ones, ones with holes, incredibly large ones, ones that cover the forearms, ones that inflate around the whole lower arm, etc, etc.; there are webbed gloves made out of lycra or latex rubber; there are fins - standard department store types, expensive scuba shop types, short stubby ones, monofins, and fins cut in a variety of shapes; there are ankle weights, wrist weights, and even head weights; there are fiberglass rods velcroed to the legs; there are suits with pockets in them; there are plain old sneakers used on kick sets; there are plain old t-shirts; there are plain old, really old, swim suits - two or three or four worn at the same time; there is tubing; there are stretch cords; there are short pull buoys, long pull buoys, and pull buoys that can be filled with water; and on and on and on.

When you notice a 10 year old star swimmer from another team lugging around a training bag with surgical tubing exploding from the torn end of the bag, you ask, "Could this be the reason she always wins?" Do you want to go out and buy surgical tubing for your young swimmer?

Or, between long course and short course season you are contemplating your child's swimming successes and short comings of the past season while you read an ad about a "revolutionary new" buoyancy device. Do you want to equip your child with it in time for the start of the season?

Who invents these things? What things really work and what things are commercial contrivances of questionable value? Can some of these devices do more harm than good? Should your child use some of these devices?

Most training aids are invented by coaches. There are hundreds, maybe thousands of training aids invented by coaches but only a few make it to commercial production. Most coaches do not invent a training aid for the profit potential but rather they are invented for the sake of improving an individual's or team's strength, speed, endurance, and/or technique.

Many coaches would add that training aids can do more than improve strength, endurance, and/or technique. They also add variety to a workout and help motivate swimmers.

What things really work? There are very few published independent studies done on

specific training aids to test their effectiveness in speed, strength, endurance, or technique enhancing qualities. (Actually, I could not find any published independent studies -- but there might be some out there.)

But good coaches do not need studies to know that some things really do work. Most coaches use kickboards. Most coaches use pull buoys. Many coaches, but I'm not sure most coaches, use paddles. Same for fins. Fewer coaches use surgical tubing. Almost all coaches try nearly every training aid at least once but almost no one uses all the training aids all the time.

So what things really work? The answer is: most training aids, whether commercially produced or coach/homemade, are effective to some degree when the coach and swimmer properly use them with respect to the developmental age of the swimmer, the psychological needs of the swimmer, the appropriate time during workout, and the appropriate time during the season. The answer also is: no training aid will work if not used properly.

Can some of these devices do more harm than good? The answer is a definite yes. No training aid is safe when improperly used. Most training aids are designed to increase resistance or to increase training speed. Excessive workloads with training aids can lead to overuse syndromes and injuries especially in younger children not physically mature.

Should your child use some of these devices? Who decides IF they should use training aids and if so, which aids to use? Questions like these are the reasons you and your Board of Directors hire a qualified professional coach. The coach makes these decisions based upon his or her experience and coaching education. If your coach is having your child use a training aid and you are concerned that use of that training aid may cause an injury, then speak directly to the coach about the extent and intensity of use for that training aid. If your coach is not using various training aids that you've seen or heard about and you are curious about, then once again speak with the coach.

When speaking with the coach keep these things in mind:

1. Approach the coach after practice or during office hours quietly and sincerely with an attitude of "Could you help me understand...". Many of the communication problems between coach and parent arise from abrupt challenges to coaches judgment calls.
2. Coaches have selected favorite training aids and don't like to be told they should be using additional or different methods. There is more than one way to accomplish a desired training effect and it is the coaches area of responsibility and authority to select that method.
3. There is a limited amount of workout time in the water and a coach must make decisions about the type of training aids to use and the amount of work using training aids. These things must fit in with an overall daily, weekly, and seasonal workout plan.
4. Smart coaches are not quick to jump on the bandwagon when a revolutionary new training device comes along. They want to speak with other coaches, observe its use, perhaps try it themselves, begin using it on a limited trial basis, and evaluate its effectiveness before using it on a regular basis with the whole team
5. One of the great strengths of American Swimming is in the diversity of approaches coaches use to develop young swimmers. From this diversity comes great new ideas. Your coach may be a future Olympic coach and her use, limited use, or lack of use of a training device is her special approach to training your young swimmer.

6. Many training aids are not designed for young age groupers to use. Coaches like to introduce various training aids in a progression following the swimmer's developmental age and ability to handle greater workloads.

7. Some training aids have a dual purpose, they can be used at low resistance for stroke development, and they can be used at high intensity for speed, strength, and endurance development. A coach may use this type of training aid primarily for skill development with younger ages and gradually use it for more intense work as the swimmer grows.

8. Motivation is a large factor in the use of training aids. If a swimmer gets to use all the "toys" at an early age they will become bored in years to come as they keep using the same "toys". Smart coaches use this as a reason for the gradual introduction of training aids.

These are not easy issues for coaches, athletes, and parents. Questions about "how much", "how hard", and "what type" are part of the sport. Coaches will make decisions based on firsthand experience, information from other coaches, and published reports. Whatever the decisions are, one thing stands out, there are no quick answers and no short cuts. A new super duper revolutionary training aid will not transform your age group swimmer into a superstar. And even if there was such a thing, what would it mean? In age group swimming we want steady growth, a sound aerobic base, excellent stroke development, and an appreciation for the relationship between day to day effort and the realization of goals.