

Age Group Training

By Rick Stacy of the Lake Erie Silver Dolphins

The thesis of this article is quite simple: young age group swimmers, those 8 to 10 years old, should be in a program that emphasizes stroke technique and a solid base of aerobic conditioning. This is not a plea for unlimited or mindless yardage for young swimmers. But it is a suggestion that guidelines for young swimmers in recent years have been too inflexible and understate the amount of work that young swimmers can and should be doing in order to develop to their full potential as senior swimmers.

Endurance training is the core of the Lake Erie Silver Dolphin team philosophy. We believe that this is particularly true for younger age group swimmers, those in the ten and under age groups. The fundamental goal of our age group program is to produce the best possible senior swimmers. Thus, we stress a program that emphasizes the future more than the present. We do very little sprinting or anaerobic training with our younger swimmers. We see success in age group sprinting as largely dictated by size and physical maturity, and not indicative of future development. Endurance training, on the other hand, develops a strong aerobic base, good stroke technique and solid practice habits, skills and traits that carry over into senior swimming.

Our endurance training for young swimmers is carried out in three forms. The first is long steady-state swims of 1650 to 4000 yards. These are done fairly regularly, approximately every week to ten days. The emphasis is on good technique, proper turns and streamlining, and continuous swimming. Such swimming is little more than lap swimming and is not particularly difficult, and is performed in all strokes and individual medley.

Secondly, our swimmers repeat sets of over-distance swims. The individual swim may vary from a 300 to 1000 yards, and the total distance in the set will run from 1000 to 4000 yards, depending on the skill level of the swimmer and the purpose of the set. The send-offs remain short, providing little time for more than brief stroke correction by the coach, and the swimming is in fact little more than a broken aerobic swim. Once more, the training is in all strokes and IM.

The third form of aerobic or endurance training is provided in long sets of shorter distances on very short send-offs, typically in the 50 to 200 range. The fundamental aim is to reduce the send-off, and this can with some justice be described as the core of our age group endurance program. Good ten and under swimmers in our program can hold a 1:20 per 100 send-off for long sets, many can hold a 1:15 send-off per 100 for 10-15 100's, and a few can hold 1:10 per 100 for sets of 5-8 100's.

We believe that endurance work of this type for our young age group swimmers is crucial and offers solid physical and mental benefits. Physically, there seems to be a window of opportunity for swimmers that closes or is not fully developed if substantial aerobic conditioning and over-distance training is postponed. While there are doubtless exceptions to the rule, swimmers who lack this endurance base in their early years of swimming seem to find it difficult if not impossible to catch up. This is particularly true for female swimmers, probably because of their early maturation.

A further advantage of endurance training is that it makes the execution of good stroke technique easier and thus more enjoyable. Endurance work appears to smooth out swimmers' strokes and make them more "flexible." Swimmers without a distance base in their training, and particularly those who have done more sprint training in their younger years, appear to have more "fixed" strokes that are resistant to change and further refinement as they mature and grow. This may explain why aerobic-based age group

swimmers appear to experience more steady improvement without the marked plateaus in development common to many swimmers.

The mental and psychological advantages of this type of training for younger swimmers are equally pronounced. Endurance training provides young swimmers with a constant sense of accomplishment and the confidence that they can do anything in the water. When they complete a 1650 or a long set, they believe that they are special, and the constant preoccupation with the need to swim best times is forgotten.

Age group endurance training also generates the discipline and work habits conducive to later success. If young swimmers are taught that swimming is an "occasional" activity and that all practices must be "fun," they are unlikely to be disciplined or consistent in their approach as senior swimmers. We encourage young swimmers to participate in a range of activities, but we also encourage them to commit to a regular practice schedule and to attend all practices which are not in conflict with their other activities. Though we play games with young swimmers, we try to get them past the point where they see only the game as fun. We want them to experience the sheer act of swimming, of propelling their bodies through the water more successfully and more gracefully than they have done in the past, as fun. We constantly stress the sense of accomplishment they should carry away from practice. We want them to be at practice as often and as regularly as possible, and we want them there not because they are going to play a game, but because they are going to be challenged.

In summary, we believe that an age group program should emphasize a strong component of technique work and aerobic conditioning. Although not an open-ended quest for yardage, young swimmers should be progressively presented with challenging workouts that develop their aerobic systems. We believe that such a program benefits young swimmers both physically and mentally, and that it best prepares them for longer and more successful careers as senior swimmers.

Below is a sample of workouts offered to this age group in past years. Four to five workouts per week are available to this group, and run for 1½ hours each.

7-21-91

4 X 50 Free/Stroke Drill :10 Rest
10 X 50 Fly/Stroke Drill :10 Rest
4 X 75 Breast/Stroke Drill :10 Rest
4 X 50 Back/Stroke Drill :10 Rest
4 X 200 2:40
4 X 175 IM 2:35
4 X 150 2:00
4 X 125 IM 1:55
4 X 100 1:15
4 X 75 IM 1:10
KICK 6 X 50 Dolphin/Back 1:00

10-8-91 –

10 X 50 Free/Stroke Drill:10 Rest
4 X 50 Fly/Stroke Drill :10 Rest
6 X 50 Breast/Stroke Drill :10 Rest
4 X 50 Back/Stroke Drill :10 Rest
8 X 300 4:30
 Odd: 100 Free/100 IM/100 Back
 Even: 100 Free/100 IM/100 Breast
Kick 6 X 150 2:45
 Odd: Flutter
 Even: Breast
Kick 1 X 100 Dolphin/Side
8 x 100 1:35
 Odd: Back
 Even: Breast
1 X 150 Scull

Among others, this group included Diana Munz [9], now a sr. national qualifier in the 200, 400, 800, 1500 & 200 fly, most recently U.S. Open champion in the 800; Erica Rose [9], now a sr. national qualifier in the 400, 800, 1500, 400 IM & 200 breast, and national open water 5000 champion; Jimmy Pulling [10], now a jr. national qualifier in the 200 & 400 and a sr. national qualifier in the 800 & 1500; Erin Abbey [10], now a jr. national qualifier in the 50, 100, 200 free, 100-200 fly & 200 IM, and a sr. national qualifier in the 100-200 back; Jeremy Saloman [10], now a jr. national qualifier in the 200 back & 200-400 IM; David Krahe [10], now a jr. national qualifier in the 400 free; Gwen Weingart [10], now a jr. national qualifier in the 100-200 breast and Emily Seidman [9], now a jr. national qualifier in the 400 IM.)

1-11-93

1 X 400/EZ [Breathe every 3rd]
8 X 50 [Good form only/turns]
 Odd: Fly-Back
 Even: Back-Breast
1 x 1000 13:00
2 X 500 Back 7:15
5 X 200 IM 3:00
10 x 100 1:40
 Odd: IM
 Even: Breast
16 X 25 IM 0:25

(Group included Munz and Rose, and Shelly Klaus [8], national age group record holder at 9-10 in the 1000 free, now a jr. national qualifier in the 400, 800 & 1500 free, 200 fly & 400 IM, and Anna Strohl [8], national record holder in the 2000 for 12 year-olds and now a jr. national qualifier in the 200 & 400 free and 200-400 IM and a sr. national qualifier in the 800 & 1500.)

9-24-94

1 X 1650 [Every 4th Length Drill]
1 X 50/Scull
1 X 1650
1 X 50/Scull
1 X 1650 Back [Every 4th Length Breast]
Kick 1 X 50 Dolphin/Side
12 X 50 FLY 0:45

(Group included Klaus and Strohl and Lauren Torpey [10], now a jr. national qualifier in the 400/800&1500. As 10 & unders, these 3 were part of a national record-setting 200 free relay.)