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GO WITH THE FLOW At TI, coaches emphasize streamlined swimming, with the head aligned to the spine.



WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE AND NOT A STROKE

to swim. This has been the story of my life in the last 39 years: the girl who sat by the poolside while everyone else was having a splash.

As far as I could remember, I've always had a fascination for water sports but a drowning incident in early childhood put a cruel and traumatic halt to all efforts to learn how to swim. Adolescent attempts at taking swimming lessons left me with little progress, while sailing and scuba diving classes were kept to the very basics because it wasn't prudent to let me out alone in deep water without the necessary skills to get me back to shore. After several years of frustration, I simply settled with the fact that I didn't have what it took to learn how to swim.

Not.

A few months ago, while contemplating the changes in my life from leaving a job of 12 years,

putting up my own production company, publishing my first book and embarking on a new journey made more significant by hitting the big 4-0, I decided it was time to do all the "unnecessary" things I've always wondered about during my stress-filled years of network life. Emboldened, I started with "tabla" drum sessions, Spanish language classes, tai chi lessons... and swimming.

Where to start? Obviously, after three failed attempts, traditional teaching methods simply did not suit my learning style. But as they say, when the student is ready, the teacher will appear. For me, the guru arrived in a lean, mean package that is Ria Mackay, official franchise manager of the Total

Immersion (TI) method in Philippines.

Curiously, TI students learn the same skills no matter their background is. Through the four sessions it took to complete the workshop, all were taught the same strokes at the same time, divided only by skill level. There was one teacher assigned per group of no more than five students, ensuring personalized coaching till you get your strokes right.

Mackay says they've seen students start from zero and end up more proficient at learning the TI method than experienced swimmers. "In TI, we teach proper techniques that involve unlearning bad habits and imprinting good muscle memory," she explains. "It makes it easier to teach those with very little experience. It's more challenging to change inefficient movements learned over the years."

The unique advantage of Total Immersion is that it teaches "fish-like" swimming, which focuses on being comfortable, slippery and fluid in the water rather than the traditional pulling, pushing and freestyle kicking usually associated with speed and proficiency. It really is a thinking man's method. "Through experience, we realized that the skills of 'fish-like' swimming are counterintuitive," says Mackay. "Going on instinct, you'll probably be doing 'human swimming' which can be clumsy, inefficient and exhausting. And the more you do, the more these struggles

»SWIMMING **the kick**

skills become permanent.”

In TI, swimming is taught with the same precision as in martial arts or yoga training. Every student, whether novice or elite, begins by learning a series of positions that are quite simple, but establish a profound connection with the water. The synergy produced by mastering these basic moves in logical progression is so powerful, you can actually see the results within the first hour. To prove this, students are videotaped at their entry level before the first session begins. At the end of the first class, they are taped again to show their improvement and to build confidence. In the “graduation” video at end of the workshop, one clearly sees the transformational shift from effort to grace.

My personal take: I came in with zilch in terms of skills and confidence, terrified by the very smell of chlorine in the pool and panicking when I drift where my feet don't touch the

ground. At the end of the first session, I was crossing the pool horizontally with basic strokes! By the third session, I made my first 50-meter freestyle crossing over a seven-foot depth. On graduation day, I managed the same length—twice. And when, at one point, I cramped and thought I would drown, I surprisingly learned how to tread!

Confidence is what an intelligent technique builds, and that is the energy source that propels the TI method. “We try to develop swimming as an art, before attacking it as a sport,” explains Mackay. “We urge students to take time to patiently master the basic positions first before doing the entire ‘form’ or sequence of moves. If you're able to swim with comfort, you can go through a whole range of skills with almost ridiculous ease and speed, regardless of age or physical condition.”

Here are some of Total Immersion tips:

1 Keep your head position neutral: Look directly at the bottom, not forward. “The head should always be aligned with the spine—streamlined position. We glide more in the water when we are in our streamlined position. When you look forward, there is resistance, because your bodyline is not straight, and when there is resistance, there is drag, and when there is drag, our hips and legs sink.”

2 Hide your head and lean on your chest. Water should flow over the back of the head most of the time. “When you hide your head and lean on your chest, your hips float up to the surface, and you allow the water to effortlessly support you.”

3 Use your core body as your engine, not your arms and legs. “Arm-churning or forceful kicking expend a lot of wasteful energy. Propulsion comes from the core-body rotation or the belly button traveling from side to side, not from moving our arms and legs rapidly.”

4 Imitate an archer as you recover in freestyle: high elbow, hand passing at the goggle level, and slice your hand close to your head while your leading arm is extended. “Early hand entry triggers the body roll in freestyle, and will allow you to glide and ‘swim taller’ underwater.”

5 Keep your head on the head-spine line as you roll to breathe. “Swivel your head, instead of lifting head up to breathe. Maintain perfect balance as your body rotates effortlessly from nose down to nose up for a breath. It is a challenge for most people to take a breath because they tend to lose their balance when they

attempt to get air. When you take a breath, keep your leading arm extended and lean your head on your arm for leverage.”

6 Fit breathing into your rhythm. “Exhale all your air while still face-down, and expel the last 20% forcefully, just as your face is breaking the surface. Your head and body will roll as one unit. Maintain fluid, rhythmic, and seamless movement with no hesitation or interruption.”

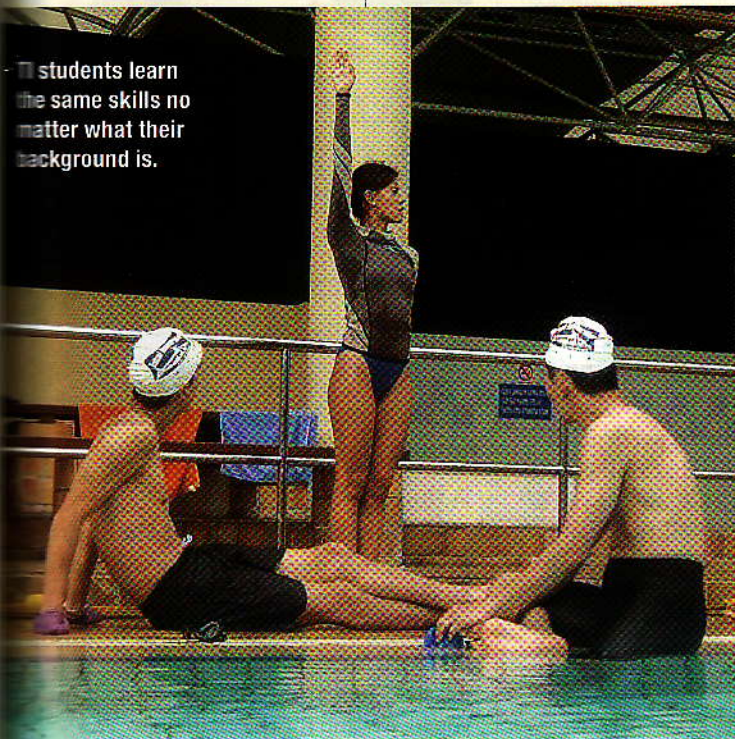
7 Keep your kick trailing inside your body-cylinder “Kick silently and gently with a long, supple leg.”

8 Kick from your hips, and avoid too much knee flexion (running or cycling motion). “Point your toes and try to imagine that you are kicking something with your instep [the inner arch of the foot between the toes and the ankle]. This corrects the common tendency of inefficient flutter-kicking style.”

9 Breathe every 3, 5, or 7 arm strokes! “Learn to breathe on both sides or what is called ‘bilateral breathing.’ Most people favor breathing on one side only because that's what they got used to. By practicing bilateral breathing, we learn to be comfortable on both sides, without interrupting the rhythm in swimming.”

10 Swim as quietly as possible, at any speed. “Too much splash or turbulence increases drag, and will slow you down. Go with the flow of the water, not against it. Remember, speed is a by-product of swimming efficiently!”

»For more information on Total Immersion, log on to www.totalimmersion.net or contact Coach Ria Mackay at rmackay@rocketmail.com.



Students learn the same skills no matter what their background is.