

VIRTUAL COACHING

The pandemic led to a boom in virtual coaching. How can an online coach help your swimming? By Tracey Baumann and Emma Levy

One of the ways a virtual coach will benefit your swimming, as we noted in our previous article, is helping to keep you motivated. Other benefits of following a virtual swim coaching programme include:

Regular video analysis to identify opportunities for improvement and current priorities

Individually tailored guidance on how to make the improvements, with practice sets to make sure the changes stick

Fitting coaching calls and swim sessions in to suit your busy schedule

Keeping you accountable for your swim practice and progress.

Finding the best coach for you, however remote you may feel, or wherever they are in the world

This is what Melissa, from Brisbane, Australia, had to say about her virtual coaching experience with a swim coach in the UK.

"I was initially sceptical about having a virtual swim coach but through a combination of fortnightly Zoom calls, challenging and engaging swim sets, video analysis and mentoring, my mindset and skillset as a swimmer (and a swim coach) has grown exponentially. I'm more graceful and swim with less effort. I understand how my joint mechanics and body connections work together to maximise propulsion and prevent injury. I'm faster - my speed has increased by more than 20% in just 12 weeks and although this was not my goal, this is testimony to the power of Virtual Coaching with SwimMastery".

HOW IT WORKS

To begin a virtual coaching programme, we ask the swimmer to send in videos of themselves swimming, preferably from several angles both above and below the water. The more footage they can send us of their swimming the more we can help them. We also ask them to swim several distances and to collect specific data that helps us to personalise the swim sets and coaching regime as much as possible.

We begin coaching with a Zoom call where we offer/provide a very in-depth video analysis and discuss the sets that they have swum. This first call is also an ideal opportunity for us to explain how we work, our methodology and the principles that we follow with SwimMastery. It is important that each swimmer we work with has a full understanding of what we are asking from them and why, so there is always ample opportunity for questions at any time. We remain in constant contact during the month between calls, and send out the required number of sets each week. The swimmer can choose how many sets they want depending on their time availability.

We tailor the sets specifically to target the parts of the stroke that the swimmer wants or needs to work on. Each set is designed to improve technique, be neurally challenging, and work on stamina and conditioning as a by-product. We typically choose three technique cues that run through each set. The swim sets are varied in terms of focus. For example, one set may be a tempo trainer pyramid where we will ask the swimmer to record stroke counts for different tempos. Another set may be without the tempo trainer, requiring the swimmer to hit given stroke counts over given distances.

The swimmer provides us with video on a monthly basis, so that we can do regular video analysis check-ins to monitor progress and to ensure that the technique steps are targeting the current priorities for stroke improvement, and having the desired effect. We gather the data from each of the swim sets every week and use graphs and tables to plot the progress the swimmer is making. Look out for our next article for more about this data analysis.

The benefits of virtual coaching are different from those of face-to-face coaching. As well as offering virtual coaching over an extended period, we also offer virtual coaching alongside in-person technique sessions in the pool.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT VIRTUAL SWIM COACH

It can be quite daunting looking for a virtual coach online. Before you begin, ask yourself what qualities, skills or services you are seeking in your best possible virtual coach. Consider the following:

Assurance that the coach can tailor your package to your personal needs. Often coaches say they can do this, but are they really doing it? In my opinion the only way to fully tailor a swim program to your personal needs is if the coach is spending a lot of time either observing you swim in person or receiving regular clips of under and overwater video footage of you swimming. Without this video footage the coach cannot be sure how you are swimming and therefore cannot fully tailor a program to your needs.

Alternative methods if you are unable to supply video footage
Some swimmers may not be able to video their swimming, for example due to local regulations on use of video in public pools. A good virtual coach can compensate for this to some extent through effective analysis of data in relation to the cues they provide for changes to stroke technique.

Analytical skills that identify and respond to underlying causes
A focus on anatomy, particularly joint mechanics, enables the best swim coaches to offer cues (and explain their purpose) that aim to maximise efficiency in the water while minimising the risk of injury. In contrast, an off-the-shelf tick-box approach to changing movement patterns can do more harm than good.

A mentoring approach with regular communications
Your best virtual coach will be responsive to your ongoing feedback, listening to you and altering your cues and swim sets and your program based on what they hear and the data you provide.

During the pandemic, I have had the pleasure of offering more and more virtual coaching to swimmers all over the globe. Covid has been a very difficult period for many reasons and for many people. However, it has also served to change the way we operate and live our lives. In some ways, it has kept people further apart, while in others it has brought us closer together. For me personally, being able to work with people on their swim stroke virtually has opened my eyes to the endless possibilities of ways that we can improve swimming around the world.

It has been extraordinary to witness the progress that many of my swimmers have made through their virtual coaching programs.

How could virtual swim coaching help you to achieve your swimming goals?

EXPERT ADVICE

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