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MEDIA REVIEW

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Developing Swimmers

By Michael Brooks (2011). Published in 2011 by Human Kinetics; 240 pages; \$18.95. ISBN 978-0-7360-8935-7

Reviewed by Stephen J. Langendorfer, PhD, Bowling Green State University

One of the newest competitive swimming-oriented aquatic texts from Human Kinetics is Michael Brooks' *Developing Swimmers*, a significant tome about coaching age-group swimmers. Readers may be interested that the 240 page book is available both in print as a paperback (\$18.95 - ISBN 978-0-7360-8935-7) and electronically as an eBook (\$16.95 - ISBN 978-1-4504-1145-5). I have not had the opportunity to review the electronic version on various eReaders, but I am a strong proponent of electronic resources because I believe they open up many new avenues for communication beyond what is available on a two-dimensional printed page. I am glad to see the work available in both formats.

The author, Michael Brooks, is an award-winning age group and high school swimming coach with diverse coaching experiences ranging from Phoenix's Brophy East swimming team to the North Baltimore Aquatic Club where Michael Phelps trained prior to his Olympic victories. He is now the head coach of the York (PA) YMCA Swim Team. From my point of view, one of his noteworthy qualities is that he continues to work with all swimmers from 8 & unders to high school and open swimmers ready to head off to college. This does give him a broad perspective on all ages and abilities of competitive swimmers, something he promotes as a personal strength within his text.

As advertised, I found *Developing Swimmers* to be one of the more comprehensive age group competitive swimming texts currently in press. Its 14 chapters are divided into four fairly comprehensive sections: (1) Recognizing and developing talent, (2) Assessing and refining stroke technique, (3) Training and preparing swimmers, and (4) Developing the competitive edge. The first section (Part I) establishes the strong bases for an age group program by focusing on talent identification, goal setting, long range planning, and holding high expectations. The five chapters of Part II are oriented toward stroke technique, both from a general pedagogical framework of what and how to teach as well as from the specifics of each stroke, start, and turn. He very logically focuses on the long axis, alternating strokes of freestyle, and backstroke in one chapter while combining the short axis, symmetrical breaststroke, and butterfly in another. The stroke descriptions in the specific technique chapters are complemented with clear black and white underwater photographs to illustrate key concepts and elements of the strokes and other competitive skills.

Part III with its three chapters describes the general training focus for an exemplary age group program, both at practice and away from the pool. It establishes a perspective of building slowly and gradually for the long haul. The final three chapters in Part IV are focused on the specific elements of age group competition.

Brooks describes how to help swimmers achieve their best competitive times at meets by careful coaching of affect and skill, that is, competitive attitudes and specific competitive tactics. Broadly, he describes what to do at individual meets as well as how to identify critical meets and plan an overall competitive season.

Because the text is new, out in 2011, much of the stroke and skill technique is contemporary and therefore should be of use to most age group and high school coaches who may not have access to the latest in competitive techniques. I do think that many experienced coaches might not find a great deal of new information in *Developing Swimmers*. I do think the way that Brooks has pulled the material together may provide even seasoned coaches with at least some new ideas.

As a specialist in the area of motor development, I was a bit disappointed that Brooks did not really employ a *developmental perspective* in his text as much as he could or should have, especially for a text so named. A *developmental perspective* is one that looks at how behaviors (in this case, competitive swimming skills) change over time in an orderly progression. Instead of employing a “true” developmental approach, which would have consisted of describing how younger swimmers perform their strokes and then how those strokes change as swimmers grow, gain strength and greater experience, he adopted the traditional *error correction perspective*. In the chapters on stroke technique, for example, he describes strokes as they are optimally performed by elite champion swimmers, not how younger swimmers actually do them. One among many reasons age group swimming suffers so much attrition is that virtually all coaches hold up the ideal elite stroke as a model for the younger swimmers. Over time, the inability to perform the elite pattern and swim as fast as elite performers creates a motivational disincentive among frustrated younger swimmers. Of course, to have adopted a real developmental perspective would likely have put Brooks and this text far outside the competitive swimming mainstream, which is a risky publishing proposition.

Despite my personal reservation, I do think that *Developing Swimmers* has a number of qualities to recommend it to other age group and high school swim coaches who may wish to compare their own philosophies and program procedures with Brooks’ long experience and great success.