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Mastering Swimming: Your Guide for Fitness, Training, and Competition

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Mastering Swimming: Your Guide for Fitness, Training, and Competition

By Jim Montgomery and Mo Chambers (with Forward by Rowdy Gaines).
Copyrighted in 2009 by Human Kinetics. 222 pages, paperback; \$18.95.

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

Mastering Swimming: Your Guide for Fitness, Training, and Competition is the latest addition to the Human Kinetics aquatic monographic collection and part of the new HK Masters Athlete Series. Anyone familiar with competitive swimming will recognize the name of lead author, Jim Montgomery, inductee in the International Swimming Hall of Fame who held 10 world and numerous other swimming records as an Olympian in the 1970s. Subsequently, he has had a most noteworthy career as a coach of the Dallas Aquatic Masters. His co-author, Mo Chambers, is no less an expert as head coach of the Mountain View Masters Swim team in California. Rowdy Gaines points out in his forward that both of these outstanding coaches have combined their talents and expertise to share a comprehensive vision and plan for achieving success as a Masters, fitness, or open water adult swimmer. The authors acknowledge that they also have drawn upon and solicited a diverse wealth of aquatic talent during the writing of their book. All of the aquatic star power associated with *Mastering Swimming* is impressive and holds strong potential for making a contribution to the Masters swimming literature.

I have to admit that my initial reaction to the table of contents was one of some disappointment. The four sections, “Taking the Plunge,” “Fine-Tuning Your Strokes,” “Conditioning for Success,” and “Competition,” struck me as an all too familiar formula typical of other competitive or fitness swimming texts. Fortunately, as I plumbed the depths of this text, I began to appreciate there is a certain depth and richness to the information that the co-authors have shared. For starters, the idealistic vision- and goal-oriented approach advocated by these two veteran coaches is one important hallmark of their book. They drew upon their own personal experiences in developing a vision and setting idealistic goals that have led them and their swimmers to great success. Such a goal-setting approach in chapter one is certainly an appropriate way for anyone to begin, whether an elite wannabe or average swimmer, hoping to improve fitness. An old cliché says that if you don’t know where you are going, then any path will get you there — but, then you will never know when you have arrived.

A trio of bulleted lists is presented in chapter two that identify (a) motivations that may drive a Masters swimmer, (b) the top 10 questions to ask before choosing a Masters swim club, and (c) workout and lap swim guidelines. Each is a down-to-earth set of suggestions that any novice Masters swimmer could find beneficial. Chapter 3, “Develop your water sense,” continues in a similar vein offering advice on foundational skills for novice swimmers, identifying the need for developing relaxation, breathing, balance, and streamlining.

Part II, "Fine-Tuning Your Strokes," is organized around five chapters, one describing each competitive stroke in depth and a final one illustrating the variety of competitive strokes and turns. Chapter eight even contains a sidebar called "the fifth stroke" that discusses the relatively recent advent of the underwater dolphin kicking component performed on starts and turns. I found it interesting that each stroke chapter is organized uniquely to focus on the special qualities and characteristics of that stroke. For example, chapter four, "Freestyle," has the major headings of breathing, width and length, depth: the catch and power phase, kicking, a sampling of stroke drills, and two sidebars, "in the mind of a champion" and "different strokes," that contrasts the new "straight arm windmill" or "shoulder-driven" freestyle stroke with the front quadrant stroke. By way of comparison, chapter five, "Backstroke," has the major headings of body position and kicking, arms, stroke tempo, backstroke style, and three sidebars, "in the mind of a champion," "backstroke drills," and "where am I going," that provides some hints about negotiating the pool on the back. My first thought was that each stroke chapter should be organized around the same elements, but having reviewed each chapter, I see the wisdom of constructing each chapter according to the uniqueness of each stroke. While each stroke chapter provides information primarily for the novice competitor, the authors have presented enough material that virtually any level of swimmer might find something useful in each chapter.

Part III, "Conditioning for Success," is comprised of five chapters, ranging from the short chapter nine, "Workout essentials," which identifies typical equipment and gadgets for swimming to chapters ten, eleven, and twelve detailing pool, dry land, and open water training and concluding with chapter thirteen, "Make your plan for success," that provides an extensive description about how to organize seasons of training sessions. As with the stroke chapters, these training and conditioning chapters contain a great deal of general and summary information that is primarily written for the novice competitor. That is not to say that veteran swimmers will not draw valuable information from these chapters; they certainly will.

Finally, part IV, "Competition," features two chapters, one about competing in pools and the other related to open water events. Chapter fourteen, "Competing in pool events," provides an overall summary of Masters swimming competitions including Masters rules modifications; what to do before, during, and after meets; and how to warm up and focus on racing. The final chapter, "Competing in open water," summarizes the basics for preparing and swimming in open water competitions. It includes information on how to train and modify one's stroke while working out in the pool, conduct workouts in open water, and prepare for open water competitions. The competitive information is fairly general and basic, but certainly is sound for the novice planning for their first efforts, either in a meet or an open water event.

This book represents sort of a conundrum for me. The authors are experts who write from the perspective of a former Olympic champion and as coaches from large, high powered, elite Masters swim programs. The chapters lead off with inspiring quotes from a wide variety of Olympic and national champions. A number of chapters feature "in the mind of a champion" sidebars in which a champion swimmer of that stroke or events describes some key elements that they have found useful to achieve success. The text is well written, uncomplicated, and easy to comprehend for the average adult swimmer. The scope and depth of the text

material clearly is focused on the novice swimmer. And, that is the what I perceive is the source of the potential problem.

I harbor what is perhaps a cynical suspicion that those of us who are very average swimmers from average Masters programs may not completely fit or fully benefit from the elite model and idealistic aspirations espoused in this text. I realize we all may benefit from understanding how the very best programs and swimmers perform, but I wonder if most of us non-elite swimmers can fully exploit the messages being delivered in *Mastering Swimming*, simply because those messages come from and are about exceptional swimmers who have achieved the elite accomplishment of champions. Of course, it is possible that I have remained an average swimmer for my 45 years of competitive swimming simply because I haven't employed enough of the suggestions touted in this text. Alternatively, it just may be that there are other factors (e.g., innate physical size and prowess, early experiences) beside the advice of champions and elite coaches that are required to achieve elite status. It might be an aquatic version of the age-old "chicken and egg" question: Which does a champion require first, elite experiences or talent?

Despite these mild reservations about the book, there is much to recommend *Mastering Swimming* as I have described in the previous paragraphs. Not only might the novice adult swimmer for whom the text is primarily oriented pick up valuable information, but long time and experienced Masters and open water swimmers such as me also can access important tips they may effectively incorporate into their strokes, workouts, and overall training plans.