

Somehow when you speak of balance, the appellation, “Grasshopper,” comes to mind...but I’m not going to use it.

As swimmers, when we think of balance, the idea of body roll, smooth and easy, comes to mind. But as Masters swimmers, as adults with complex lives and pressures, the idea of balance takes on more meaning.

Balance for us, is more than getting your hips up and your head in line. Balance comes from taking a step away, from a broader perspective that encompasses more aspects of our life than just swimming, yet a perspective that profoundly influences the satisfaction we can derive from swimming.

Here then are some thoughts on balance and on it’s influence on and by swimming.

1. Body Roll: Okay, balance IS body roll, being sure that you roll equally to both sides and avoid the freestyle “limp” that tends to occur when we breathe only to one side. Learn to alternate breathe. See what your breath-side is doing and try to mirror that motion and the timing on your opposite side.
2. Front to Back: If your head comes up ...your hips go down – not one of Newton’s more well-known Laws – but it still holds water. If you’re a flyer or a breaststroker, make sure your head comes up for only a short time, only when you’re at the most powerful part of your pull, and only when your lower body is underwater.
3. Up and Down: Much of the leverage in freestyle and backstroke comes from timing your underwater pull with your over-water recovery. Balance your timing above and below the water for greater pulling power.
4. Stop and Go: The older we get, the longer the recovery time seems to be after stress. Balance those hard workouts with rest to allow for recovery – or – balance the type of work you do to stress different areas on different days, allowing others to recover.
5. Fast to Slow: Balance the long, hard yardage you do (and obsess over) with focused, short yardage, or, race-paced speed work. These focused race-rehearsals are essential because, remember: If you want to swim fast ...you’ve got to swim fast.
6. On-Off: Don’t do freestyle all the time, even if you only compete in that stroke. Give yourself a whole-body workout by swimming off-strokes in workouts to work on strengthening your weaknesses.

7. With and Without: We love our toys: our fins, our paddles, our pull-buoys (you know who you are.) We love them because a) we feel like we swim better with them...and b) it's just easier. Both are good reasons to use toys. ...And both are bad reasons to rely on them. Balance your pulling and fin-work with more, honest swimming.
8. Good and Not Good: Have the discipline to work hard – make it hurt. But balance this with swims that also feel good and reinforce your confidence and the reasons you love swimming.
9. Mind and Body: Work your body hard. But work your mind equally hard. Think about your strokes, your streamline, and your strengths and weaknesses. Think to exhaustion and build the habits that will get you better at swimming.
10. Two Worlds: You're very lucky. You have an opportunity to live in another world – the world of the pool – and give yourself psychological relief from the stresses of that other world of day-to-day life. (You may even have more than two worlds.) Live in them separately and use them to rest from one another. Balance and compartmentalize.
11. Time and Again: As adults, our lives are complex with many responsibilities: family, work, selecting the right body paint for the Giants games, etc. Workouts are important but one, single workout is not. You're just not going to be available for every workout you expect to be at. Don't worry about it. The broad sweep will offer ample opportunity for enough workouts. Likewise, don't stress over a "bad" workout. For many reasons, you will have good days and bad days. Do what you can and don't obsess. Enjoy your swimming as one aspect of your balanced life.

Now you know more about balance and why it is one of the important aspects to manage and benefit from in our lives. Use it and enjoy it, think back on it, and take strength from it when you step up to the blocks for the next "big race."

Oh, and watch your balance there, too !

Peace, grasshopper.

Editor's Note: There was a classic TV show in the 60's called "Kung Fu" – about a Chinese prince wandering through America's old west and accomplishing amazing, sometimes mystical feats. From time to time he would recall in a flashback, the wisdom of the blind and aging master of his youth in China. The master would teach him a roundabout lesson steeped in allegory, and when its wisdom finally dawned on the young prince, the master would say something poetic which invariably began with: "And so, grasshopper..." The appellation, "grasshopper" meaning eager student, continues to be a 60's icon.