



Improving your technique (with Terry Laughlin from Total Immersion)

Podcast 2

The Effortless Swimming Podcast



Hi and welcome to the second Effortless Swimming podcast. My name is Brenton Ford and this is a podcast where you are going to learn about different things you can do in training, racing and outside the pool to improve your swimming.

Last episode we spoke with Ash Delany who is an Olympic back stroker and Ash talked about how to have more energy at the end of your race by not kicking hard until the last 25/30% of your race. He also talked about losing weight by cutting out sweets from your diet. He also mentioned some things that you can do in training to improve your underwater and to improve different things about your stroke just by working on them every single lap and focusing on them.

This episode we talk with Terry Laughlin from Total Immersion and Terry is well known for his method of swimming instruction which teaches you to be more efficient and more natural in the water. He has helped hundreds of thousands of people worldwide with his DVD's workshops and books and has helped a lot of adults and tri-athlete in particular. We chat with Terry about his story of how he came from being a swimmer to a coach and then developing his own method of swimming and learning to swim and how he has used that to help so many people worldwide. Some of the things he talks about in this chat, he talks about moving from being a slower swimmer in your squad to being a faster member of your squad and some of things you can do to do that. He also talks about the one thing you can change in your work outs to help push yourself harder and stay motivated during the set. The other thing he mentions is the aspects of your stroke of your technique which make the biggest difference between swimming slow and swimming fast.



So let's go to the interview with Terry Laughlin from Total Immersion.

I tried out for a swim team when I was in 8th grade and was cut. Then I tried out again in 10th grade and this time I made the team. I had a little summer swimming experience. I was basically a pretty clueless and



frustrated swimmer I never got out of the slow lane so to speak throughout high school I swam 10th, 11th and 12th grade and then when I was in 12th grade I was swimming in the New York city Catholic high school league which is not a hot bed of future Olympians, a pretty undistinguished league and **despite the fact the league wasn't very good even as a senior I didn't qualify for the league championships so I swam** in novice championship mostly against 9th graders so when I was in 12th grade. Then I went onto swim at St Johns University and I worked really hard, it was really my whole to work as hard as humanly possible and the first two years I improved a whole lot and then the last years I just kept getting sick and I slowed down again. I realise in retrospect that overwork was probably what caused me to have the health problems the last two years. So when I had completed my seven years of high school and college swimming I guess I had some scepticism about the pure hard work approach. I have never had any doubts about the value of diligent effort but sheer hard work certainly failed me and so I was pretty sceptical about the value of that when I finished college. There was also a sense of unfairness because there were other people that I felt were lazy and they swam much faster than I did and I just felt an inherent unfairness in that I could never reconcile with. Against all odds I was offered a college coaching position right after graduation and I mean I was probably about as unqualified for that job as anybody could be, in fact I was only 21 the first year I was coaching so I was coaching people that were older than me, I was coaching people that had beaten me soundly the year before and I had never taken any sort of coaching course. **I was a political science major and the college I went to didn't offer anything the physical education field. However I don't know why still, I don't understand why, but really from the first day the first week** that I was on the pool deck I felt pretty confident that I could observe what was going on in the pool and come to some reasonable conclusions about how to make people swim faster and it really proved to be the case that right from the first year that I was coaching I had a much better knack for helping other people swim fast than I ever had for swimming fast myself. That first team that I coached just had a phenomenal season and we broke every school record, we broke all the conference records there were probably about 16 or 20 colleges in our local New York City metropolitan college conference and we broke every conference record and every [freestyle](#) event and all of them by really massive margins and I was elected coach of the year by my peers. That was the first thing I had ever done in my life that you could say I had done with distinction so I felt I had really found my calling at the age of 21 and here I am almost 40 years later and I am still doing it, so obviously I felt like I found what I was meant to do in life.



That's a great story. It's amazing that went into coaching when you wouldn't guess that was where you would be heading but I think for the tens of thousands of people you have taught to swim I bet they are eternally grateful for that happening.

Well I think that the fact that I was so frustrated and clueless as a swimmer it helped give me understanding and empathy for a lot of people I coached since it gave me the patience to work with people who don't get it easily. So for that I am grateful.

What was it with the coaching, where do you think you went right with to have such a good result with your college team? What sort of things were you doing?

I found that right from the first week of practice I found that I was really interested with the aesthetics more than what the pace clock was saying and I was just really intrigued with the look of people's strokes and looking for patterns that I could recognise. So I kind of just really studied the swimmers who were fastest on the team that I was coaching and it **wasn't, you know I had not** made them fast at that point I was just starting. I studied people that were fastest and I studied people that were slowest and I tried to look for common patterns that I could see there were characteristics in the people that were swimming faster, and a different set of characteristics in the people that were swimming slowest and I did notice some things. I think one of the first things I noticed was that the people that were swimming faster looked taller in the water, they **weren't necessarily taller when** they stood on deck but when they were swimming they just looked taller. Their movements were generally more smooth and things like that. I went over to the slow lane I would give the faster swimmers a set then I would go over to the slowest lane and just work with them for 15-20 minutes on just trying to tweak their strokes until they started to look a little bit more like the people in the faster lane. **I just continued with that and working on tweaking, as I said I hadn't** studied any of the things related to coaching or performance or biomechanics or kinaesthetics or any of that stuff. I had no knowledge of the technical side of things but I got to feeling a pretty good degree of trust in my eye that I could recognise better swimming and I could recognise poorer swimming and use my eye and be will to, as I said, just tweak people until they started to look like the blue print that I had formed in my mind for a better stroke. All the swimmers on the team that year had really fantastic improvements but people that were slowest that I recognised as being a lot like the way I had been I was just starting to



see how much they improved that year in comparison to how static my own performances had been. So after that I was pretty sold on the value of working on technique as a priority.

It is interesting as a coach when you see others swimmers and you can pick out the different things in their technique which they need to work on. So it is always good to have those pair of eyes watching your stroke because that is where the improvement is found, in technique. You can train your heart out but if you haven't got the right technique you're not going to improve as much as you would if you were working on your technique.

I think actually one of the things that was really beneficial, I later recognised that starting with a blank slate so to speak allowed me to not be intimidated by technique because I think if I had studied it in the way it is normally taught it can be so technical I might have been intimidated but I got to develop a strong degree of trust in the value of observation and having a really basic aesthetic sense and following that and it gave me a lot more freedom to work on technique than I would have had if I had studied it formally in the way it is normally taught in academic courses.

There are so many different parts of swimming to look at, like freestyle for example, you can work on the catch your rotation, your pull, your recovery there are a lot of things to think about but if you can just simplify it and talk about how it should feel as you said the aesthetics, then it is a lot easier for people to focus on that and work on improving it rather than catching at 45 degrees and making it complicated. So it is a really good way to go about it.

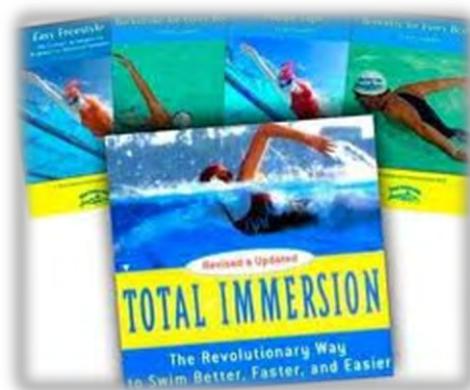
I can remember one example of a real eye opening moment that I had which was after I had been coaching six years I got a job where I was coaching at a pool that had an underwater window on it. I had never had access to it before, for six years I had been coaching from the pool deck and we were used to swimming looking a certain way. So the first week that I was coaching at this pool I gave the swimmers a set and I went down, climbed down the ladder, and just sat there watching them do the set. **I don't think** I had been down at the window for more than a minute before I saw something that I had never noticed from the deck before and it was just mind blowing for me to see that and that was watching people push off. The people that were well streamlined went very far very fast and the people that were only a little bit less streamline they didn't have



to be incredibly bad streamline all they had to be was a little bit less streamline and they slowed down so dramatically it was like they were running into a wall. Then the other thing was the people who were moving really fast in their streamlines as soon as they started pulling and kicking I could see them measurably slow down. It was so obvious that as soon as they started pulling and kicking they were swimming slower than when they were just streamlined and gliding underwater. It struck me that all the time that I spent planning workouts and all the time and attention I might give to the propulsive parts of swimming probably **wouldn't have as much impact as if I could figure out some way to have people maintain streamlining characteristics after they came to the surface and started swimming.** It took me a long time to figure that out I **mean that happening in 1978 and it wasn't until the mid to late 90's that I** really felt that I had a step by step method to teach active streamlining but it was something that really stuck with me and there were a lot of moments like that where I got a really powerful impression from observation and then bought it into my coaching. As I say it was a lot of experimentation and trial and error and so on because I had never had formal training.

When you go about tweaking someone's stroke, it might be the streamline you were talking about, what sort of steps do you go through? Do you get them to focus on a few things at once or just focus on the one thing? How do you go about adjusting someone's technique?

Well most of the work that we do in Total Immersion is we don't really do tweaking. Pretty much everyone that comes to us for instruction we start them with balance. Even if they look like a pretty decent swimmer, I certainly had other instances where I worked with swimmers in a less formal environment, but most people that come to us for instruction are coming to learn our method which means always starting with balance, skills and certain drills and stroke thoughts, that we teach balance. The very first thing we teach everyone is to realise the heads weight, to have the head feel weightless to feel like its hanging to become aware of whether you are activating any of the usual muscle in the back of the neck that you activate to hold your head up even a little bit as opposed to completely release its weight. So that would be a starting point that we do with



everybody. I have also been in situations where I have done work with some of the top college teams in the US, not very recently but I would say the most recent time was I think 2004/2005 that I did that, so I wasn't doing a workshop or anything like that. I was looking for things that I could help them with fairly quickly when I did that. I would just mostly look at the fluency of their movements I would look at how much they were disturbing the water. I would listen to how much noise they were making when they were swimming, things like that and look for ways to increase the grace and fluency and any ragged edges at all I could find. So if I am working with someone who is a pretty good swimmer they would not ask them to teach them the TI method, the focus will mainly be on how graceful and fluent their movements are.

I like your approach, you always start from the same spot in getting the balance right and you work on the other things. I went through your [freestyle](#) program two years ago, I bought the DVD and I had a look at the drills and went through them and I went to the pool and went through all the lessons and my stroke count dropped. At the start of the session it was 31 and I got it down to either 26 or 27 just from going through a couple of these drills and you can really feel the difference once you go through the drills and you become more aware of your balance and your body position and rotation. For anyone that's listening I highly recommend checking out Total Immersion DVD's and programs because I think anyone who is interested in swimming and want to improve it is a great way to go about it.

Well I appreciate that Brenton and I'm glad you had a good experience and a good outcome with it and considering how accomplished you are as a swimmer that you were open to the idea that you could improve over whatever level of efficiency that you had at that moment.

I think drills; most of your program is all drills as that is the way to improve in swimming is to use the drills to focus on the different parts of the stroke. There are some swimmers who don't like drills at all, maybe they had a bad experience when they were younger their coach may have flogged them with water drills or whatever it is. If you really want to improve then you have got to be going through some of these drills.

The last couple of years we have actually evolved a way to be a bit less reliant on drills and use them differently. If you were working with the DVD a couple of years ago you were probably following a program where



you might have been doing 25m drill repeats maybe even more, 50m drill repeats and these days we are using the drills more as to tune up a particular aspect of the stroke or bring a particular aspect of the stroke to a higher level of awareness. Once we do that we encourage the swimmer to try and swim whole stroke with that new piece of awareness right at the start. For instance when we are teaching freestyle the first drill we teach is superman glide and there are 3 or 4 focal points that we might draw the swimmers attention to in superman glide. Usually what we will do it is have them do maybe 4 repetitions of a superman glide and each repetition is only going to be 8-10 metres. The first 4 repetitions we will ask them to just focus on the feeling of the head being weightless and hanging between the shoulders, then after they have done that for maybe 2 minutes we will ask them to swim 2-4 25m's and just see to what extent they feel the same sensation of a weightless head and whole stroke and try to feel as well whether that's affecting other parts of the stroke. That would be more typical, so is a lot more integration of a new position, a new awareness, a new sensation that you heighten in the drill or highlight in the drill and then to bring it into whole stroke pretty quickly.

You mentioned that you prefer to start with a blank slate. By that do you mean someone who is pretty much brand new to swimming?

No not necessarily, we sometimes do. We don't have the luxury of doing that most of the time. It's not that we prefer to start with a blank slate but to some extent to try and create one. So everybody has some muscle memory, everybody has some habit patterns coming in for the most part. By one of the virtues of the drills is that they generally don't have a habit pattern that resides in the drill itself, the drill is different and new enough that they don't have any preconceptions or muscle memory of how to do the drill. It allows us to interrupt a habit and implant a new awareness and then let that new awareness imprint a little bit through some drill repetitions and then see whether they can bring it into the whole stroke. We are trying to create a bit of a blank slate, whereas most of the time we are not encountering one.

That's a good point. A lot of the swimmers that I work with too, they have got at least some experience they might have swum for 20 years, they might be swimming for the last 2 years, but creating a blank slate and trying to get them to almost forget what they have learnt up to that point so you can implant those new things into their technique it is a good thing to go about it.



Besides doing that what we are really trying to do with a lot of these students is simply plant the idea that they should be thinking in very specific and targeted ways in that when they leave the wall they should be thinking about one thing they want to try and do well on the way to the next wall. Just to start getting them in the habit of having a specific clear targeted thought on every lap every stroke so on. So that is one of the things we are trying to accomplish in the step by step drill progressions.

That works all the way up to the top swimmers too, I was talking to Ash Delany who is an Australian Olympic backstroker, he was talking about every lap or every set he knows what he is going to work on, whether it's he wants to go 12 kicks under water or he wants to swim on his arms for that lap and not work his kick too much. If you are focused more than one thing it is very hard to get improvement and be clear with what you are trying to do with that lap or that set.

I don't think that inclination that he has, I don't think it is very common and I think because a lot of the way swim training is designed at least here in the US there is a lot of generic repetition where the coach just gives numbers. We are going to do 20 x 100m's on this interval and they say ready go and there is not a lot more information so the swimmers don't really know where to put their focus. Sometimes the set itself is so tedious that they almost have to distract themselves and turn off mentally to bear the tedium. There are a lot of things that happen in swim training to some extent are in encouraging people to disassociate to go a mental walkabout. So anything that will encourage a swimmer to be mindful in some way while they are training is good.

I totally agree, there are a lot of sets that I know I have done in the past that there hasn't really been a goal for and just there to kill time or clock up the km's, I think every set or everything you do in a session should have some kind of goal whether it is working on your stroke count, your aerobic fitness or speed but you need to link it into what your overall goal is and know what you need to do in order to achieve that goal and have the right things in your program to do it.

The human brain itself really wants to have clear tasks. The brain evolved as having to solve really critical and basic problems of survival. Is that item something that is safe to eat, will it sustain me or will it poison me.



So a million years of that sort of evolution where the brain like to tackle pretty basic and concrete problems so it responds really positively when it's given concrete problems and not a lot of sets. It's kind of an abstraction 20 x 100m's ready go, what do I do despite count 100m's?

That's right; you need to know why are you doing it? Then you have a lot more reason to do it as well you put in more effort and you feel like you are actually getting some benefit from it. So all the coaches out there if you're listening give your swimmers the reason why you're doing that particular set.

How about yourself Terry do you still swim every day?

Not every day, there are times of the year where I am more focussed and more intense so I do compete, I do a lot of open water racing and a little bit of pool racing. Then there are times of year when I take a little bit of break so I might swim 2-3 times a week. I am in that phase right now; I am doing yoga and [strength training](#) and stuff like that a little more than I am doing swimming right now. Probably after the holidays I'll start to ramp up. I plan to go to the Masters World championships in June in Italy so I will have six months and I will start preparing in a more intensive way for that. The main thing is whenever I swim I just really want to feel like what I am doing is so enjoyable that when I leave the pool I can't wait to come back again.

Yeah that's right, you don't want to be leaving a session and thinking that was no fun, I don't want to go back next time.

I never look at my watch. I did 3000 yards at lunchtime today and the whole thing was absolutely thoroughly enjoyable. I had clear tasks on every set, I had a clear task I was trying to execute well on every lap and so and that's the thing that puts me into a flow state and makes it sort of timeless and just enjoy it.

I like that a lot. I think it's good for swimmers who swim in squad, to sometimes to go out on their own and just do their own session and take it easy and just enjoy the feeling of swimming. That can be lost when you're doing squad sessions because you are working hard a lot of the time and you forget what it feel like and how enjoyable it is to be able to glide through the water. Just the feeling of it, it is quite euphoric you would call it. Once you get it right.



I swam with Masters Groups until 2007. The last 4 years I have swum almost exclusively on my own just because I tend to practice very differently to how they do in the Master's workout so it was getting harder and harder to fit in what I wanted to do and not feel like I was in some conflict with what the coaches were giving at masters. I still race at Masters meets but I train solo now.

We have got some swimmers going to the World Champ's next year, so look for the Power Points guys there and I'll tell them to look out for you. I know we have quite a few swimmers training for it so it should be a pretty popular competition there.

Will you have any 60-64 men?

I think we might, I will have to ask and see who is going.

That's my age group. My main event there will be the 3km open water. I will certainly do pool racing but the 3km open water is what I am looking forward to the most.

Great. Where is that being swum is that in the lake or out in the ocean?

That's a good question, I don't know yet but I am game for either.

Ready for whatever is coming. Good to hear.

With Total Immersion what sort of stuff do you have available if swimmers want to learn the total immersion method? You have DVD's you also do workshops.

Yeah we are kind of renewing our presence in Australia. We have new leadership there and the coaches that we formally had, we formally had one person leading the whole operation and planning all the workshops and so on and we decided that we were going to give all the coaches autonomy whether they were in Sydney or Melbourne or Perth that they could plan their own workshops and lessons and so on. So we set them free to operate how they feel is best in their area and I have seen a lot of new energy from the coaches having gained that freedom and opportunity to do that. In Melbourne we have Peter Hendrick and Pat Baker and I will be there next November, I am coming to Melbourne and looking forward to swimming in a sea swim, maybe a race in the sea and maybe a pool event too if I can. I haven't been to Australia in about five years.



That will be good we look forward to having you. There are a lot of open water races in Melbourne there is usually one every weekend so no doubt you will be able to swim in one and in a years' time once you're here we will hopefully catch up and meet face to face.

Yeah look forward to it.

Well thank-you very much for being on the call. I have certainly got a lot out of it and I have no doubt that the people listening will at least learn something new that they can take back and implement into their own program.

Thank-you Terry it has been a pleasure chatting with you and we will hopefully catch up soon.

Thank-you for inviting me Brenton and congratulations on launching the podcast. Good luck with it.

Thank-you very much.

You're welcome, bye bye.

If you would like to find out more about Terry or his DVD's, books or workshops you can go to TotalImmersion.net.

To get bonus videos, updates and transcriptions from the podcast simply go to swimmingpodcast.com.

You can also find out more about Effortless Swimming and get free videos, audio and articles at EffortlessSwimming.com.

Don't forget to rate us in the iTunes store. I'm Brenton Ford I will be back next week with an interview with the world record holder for the Manhattan Island swim, so we will be talking to one of the top marathon swimmers in the world where he reveals some of his top tips for swimming long distances and swimming in open water races. See you next week, thanks for joining me, catch you later.

