

Why learn backstroke? Most elements of backstroke are identical to freestyle. These two strokes are called the **long axis** strokes, because to perform both strokes you rotate around your spine. Learning backstroke first allows you to master most elements of freestyle without having to deal with the disruptions of freestyle breathing and the difficulty of learning the asymmetrical freestyle arm movements. In many ways backstroke seems easier and more natural to most people. When you are able to swim both strokes, you should always add a bit of backstroke swimming to your workout. Swimming a different stroke for just a short period of time allows you to return to your main stroke with a refreshed awareness.

Similarities: In both strokes, the following elements are basically the same:

- **Posture:** Belly in, neck tall, chin in
- **Rotation:** Hips and core rotate around the spine
- **Kicking:** Six-beat kick (three kicks for each arm stroke)
- **Hips:** Strive for maximum hip rotation to each side
- **Catch:** Anchor your hand/forearm paddle early by using the elbow
- **Pull:** Lever your body past the hand/forearm anchor by pressing straight back

Differences: So what's different? Apart from the fact that it's upside down:

Stroke Element	Backstroke	Freestyle
Head Movement	None	Rotates to side when breathing
Breathing	Natural	Requires planning, disrupts posture and balance
Arm Stroke Timing	Symmetrical	Asymmetrical with a pause at full extension
Catch and Pull Power	Core centered	More forward
Arm Recovery	Straight-arm	Less straight

Before Getting Wet

Review Swimming Posture, Streamline, Kicking and Side Balance.

Note that in swimming posture your shoulders are rounded forward. This is **bad** land posture, but the point of swimming posture is to flatten the spine as much as possible. Just remember that when that when the coach yells **Posture!** you need to grow and flatten your spine. **Do not** pull your shoulders back into "good land posture" because that will arch your back.

- Swimming Posture and Streamline on the Mat
- Backstroke and Freestyle Kicking on the Mat
- Standing Swimming Posture, Standing Streamline, Standing Off-the-Wall Streamline

Backstroke Arms on the Deck

Begin in Standing Swimming Posture (belly in, neck long, chin in, shoulders rounded). Maintain good posture – eyes forward and feet planted – while rotating your core during this exercise.

- **Straight-Arm:** Begin with arms at sides, thumbs forward. Without bending your elbow, begin raising one arm overhead, leading with the thumb.
- **Reach.** Keeping your arm straight, as your arm goes past horizontal, begin turning your arm so that your pinky finger is leading at full extension overhead. In the water you will be thinking **thumb out, pinky in.**
- **Catch:** Keeping your head still and feet planted, twist your core to the side as the extended arm reaches its highest point. Continue moving your elbow in the same arc it

was moving in, and continue twisting your core. While keeping your wrist straight, allow your hand and forearm to drop. When your wrist and forearm are parallel to the floor, you have maximized the surface of your arm that is perpendicular to your direction of travel.

- **Pull.** Press your hand/forearm paddle towards the floor, applying pressure on your wrist and the heel of your hand (not on your fingers).
- **Snap.** When you can no longer press your forearm and hand as a unit, accelerate your hand towards your leg to **snap** the finish. This provides minimal propulsion but helps to get your arm out of the water and back out front. Without a little zing at the end of the stroke, your arm tends to stall and get “stuck” fully extended back towards your feet.

Begin slowly. Learn this movement pattern with one arm, then with the other. Then have somebody hold a kickboard under your hand/forearm at the catch position to provide slight resistance. Then try this motion alternating arms – in backstroke the arms never stop moving. At home, perform this exercise in front of a mirror.

Review Previous Pool Exercises and Drills

- Bottom Float, Dead Man’s Float, Dead Man’s Float to Front Balance, Back Balance, Dynamic Back Balance
- Extended Side Balance, ESB to Side Balance, Side Balance with Swimming Breathing

New Pool Exercises and Drills

One-Arm Backstroke: Begin in extended back balance position. The extended arm is the one you will stroke with for the entire length. Start every length with good posture and use swimming breathing (out through the nose, in through the mouth). Focus points:

- Thumb out, pinkie in.
- Full extension. Straight arm recovery with shoulder and arm close to head.
- Elbow catch. Elbow continues arc and sets up catch by poking deeper into the water.
- Rotation. Keep head rock-solid-still, looking straight up. (Watch for the flags! Always!)
- Dry shoulders. Each shoulder dry at one point during the stroke cycle.
- Snapy finish. Accelerate hand at end of stroke, so it pops out of the water.

Backstroke: Now use both arms. Remember the stroke is symmetrical. Use focus points above.

Above Water Video: Backstroke

Sample Practice Session Following Lesson 3

Be patient and work slowly and mindfully. Do not practice struggle.

- Bottom Float and Dead-Man’s Float to Front Balance: Five minutes
- Five minutes each, resting at the end of each length:
 - Back Balance
 - Extended Back Balance
 - Extended Back Balance to Side Balance (breathing on your back)
 - Side Balance with Swimming Breathing
 - One-Arm Backstroke (switch arms each length)
 - Backstroke