



## Butterfly - 5 Tips To Improve Your Racing

by Andrew Sheaff\*

Practice is where every swimmer improves their skills and improves their fitness. Improved skills and fitness should result in faster racing, but that's not always the case. To swim faster, you have to execute your races effectively, and this is a distinct skill that is often overlooked when preparing for competition. To help you improve this skill, I'm going to provide you with specific ideas to help you improve your racing.

As with all of these tips, I'm going to focus on the critical areas of race management, and then describe how each of those areas is relevant to each particular stroke. Today, we're going to explore some key ideas for how to effectively race butterfly events. While these ideas can be immediately implemented in your next meet, you have to PRACTICE these tips in order to be most effectively at executing these skills in competition. You want these strategies to be habits, and that's only going to happen with practice. Let's check them out.

**1. Know your breathing pattern.** Unless your Michael Phelps, most swimmers swim better butterfly when they're not breathing as opposed to when they are breathing. This is especially true as you move towards the end of your race. As you fatigue, the breath tends to get longer and longer, and higher and higher. Controlling your breathing will help your speed. At the same time, you need to breathe to ensure that you get the oxygen required to fuel your speed. To accomplish both goals, you need a plan.

For most swimmers, they'd be well served to determine a breathing pattern that works best for them, and stick to it from the start of race until the

finish. Your options include breathing every stroke, breathing every other stroke, or breathing for two strokes and then holding your breath for one. Breathing less than that is probably going to cause excessive fatigue, although you are welcome to try breathing every 3rd stroke. Experiment with these different patterns in practice, and determine which works best for you.

The worst strategy you can use is breathing whenever you feel like you need it. This is almost guaranteed to result in breathing every stroke the last lap, and not in a way that will aid your performance. Most swimmers won't feel the need to breathe early in the race, and that's precisely when you do need to breathe. Execute your chosen pattern from the start, and stick to it!

**2. Manage your legs.** In butterfly, the kick drives your rhythm, as well as helps ensure that your hips stay high in the water. If your unable to sustain an effective kick towards the end of your butterfly races, you'll find yourself riding lower and lower in the water, which will make continued progress harder and harder. If you haven't experienced it yourself, I'm sure you've seen swimmers 'go vertical' at the end of butterfly races. They only move up and down instead of forward! This all starts when the kick stops working.

To ensure that your kick is working throughout the duration of the race, you need to manage your legs. While it'd be nice to simply drive the legs for the entire race, that's a task us mortals fail to accomplish. As it's easy to sustain your rhythm and hip position in the water early in the race, you want to go light on the legs to start. Then, when you need them most, you still have the ability to use the kick to your advantage.

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## Current and Upcoming Events

### Go The Distance

January 1 - December 31, 2022; any pool

### The Miracle Mile - Postal Mile for Lung Cancer

January 1 - February 28, 2022; any pool

### Carol Chidester Memorial Swim Series

Meet #5: February 12, 2022; Severna Park, MD

Meet #6: March 21, 2022; Annapolis, MD

### David Gregg Meet

CANCELLED; February 6, 2022; Henrico, VA

### 47th Annual Sunbelt Swimming Championships

February 26-27, 2022; Charlotte, NC

### USMS Spring (SCY) Nationals

April 28 - May 1, 2022; San Antonio, TX

### USMS Summer (LCM) Nationals

August 3-7, 2022; Richmond, VA

## General Information

LMSC for Virginia Website: [www.vaswim.org](http://www.vaswim.org)

USMS Website: [www.usms.org](http://www.usms.org)

Nearby LMSCs

North Carolina: [www.ncmasters.org](http://www.ncmasters.org)

Maryland: [www.teamunify.com](http://www.teamunify.com)

Potomac Valley: [www.PVMasters.org](http://www.PVMasters.org)

Nearby Zones

Colonies Zone: [www.ColoniesZone.org](http://www.ColoniesZone.org)

Southeast Zone: [www.SouthEastZone.org](http://www.SouthEastZone.org)

Online Meet Registrations:

[www.clubassistant.com](http://www.clubassistant.com)

## LMSC Officers

Chair: Caycee Buscaglia

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How do you know how much to use? Play with it during practice. When you're practicing butterfly, perform some repetitions where you kick aggressively from the start and some where you're very cautious? What happens during the last quarter of each swim, or each set? How are your performances? Practice it in meets as well. Over time, you'll learn what strategy will be most effective for you.

**3. Dominate the Turns.** I'm sure you've seen your share of really slow open turns. You may have even been guilty of this swimming sin yourself. Slow turns are a common error, and fortunately, it's one that's easily prevented. For most swimmers, it's not because they don't know how to execute fast turns, it's that they simply don't do so.

Solve this problem by making it a point to turn up the intensity as you approach the wall. Upon contacting the wall, get OFF the wall as fast as you can. While hanging out on the wall might feel like a nice break, it's costing you precious time. Be aggressive all the way through the turn. Make this skill a habit by executing your turns aggressively every day in practice.

Once you've made aggressive turns a habit focus on timing your strokes so that you always turn on a full stroke. You'll need to adjust several strokes from the wall by making your strokes shorter or longer. There's no magic trick for doing this, outside of paying attention in practice. Make it a rule to end each lap on a full stroke, and you'll find yourself doing so sooner than later.

**4. Know your underwaters.** For many swimmers, underwater dolphin kicking is faster than swimming on the surface. However, it's only faster if you have enough air to stay underwater, and enough skill to kick well for every kick. You want to take as many kicks as you can, provided your swimming faster underwater than on the surface.

Beyond knowing how many kicks you should take in general, you want to be able to make your last wall as effective as your first wall. If you do too many kicks off the start, you'll go too long without oxygen, as well create too much fatigue in your legs. This may leave you too out of breath and too tired to execute an effective last wall. Unfortunately, it is your last wall where you dolphin kicks can be most impactful, as your swimming speed is likely to be lowest.

Instead, you're better off doing slightly fewer kicks than you could on the start to ensure that you can maintain the same number of kicks at the end of the race. How many you choose to take is up to you and dependent on your kicking skill and fitness. However, make sure it's a kick count you can maintain, and execute to a high standard. Know your kick count, and practice it to perfection.

**5. Have a plan.** There are a lot of different ways to swim each race, and many of them can work. It's important to know what's going to work best for you. While I can't necessarily predict what your best strategy will be, I'll provide you with some options. Regardless, I know that the

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plan that won't work is the 'see what happens' plan. Unfortunately, this a plan that a lot of swimmers use, even really fast swimmers.

Swim your race rather than someone else's. Know what race strategy is going to be most effective for you, and stick with it. Not sure how to approach your race? Here are some strategies to play with, as well as the distances that these strategies tend to work well with. Remember, to experiment in practice, and once you find a strategy that's comfortable, make it a habit. Regardless of your plan, remember to integrate the other tips into your race strategy.

Butterfly is a little bit different than the other strokes in that you can get yourself in a lot of trouble by swimming too fast early in the race. Relative to freestyle and backstroke, it often pays to be patient to start. Sometimes the first quarter of the race will feel TOO easy, even though that's right where you want to be.

— All out- This strategy is as exactly as it sounds, you go as fast as you can, for as long as you can. This strategy is perfect for the 50 butterfly. As there are very few individuals that can make this strategy work over 100 m/y, I would recommend being slightly conservative to start when racing this distance.

— Control, build, blast- For this strategy, the 1st quarter of the race is swum fast and controlled, the 2nd quarter is swum build to maximal effort, and the 2nd half is swum all out. This strategy is best suited for the 100 and 200 butterfly.

— Negative split- When negative splitting, the goal is to swim the 2nd half of the race faster than the 1st half of the race. At about the halfway point, you really make a move and then bring it home fast. This can work well for the 200 distance, particularly if you rely on your staying power rather than your blinding speed.

## Conclusion

While training sets the stage for fast racing as it develops your abilities, you actually have to execute your races to display those abilities. Too often swimmers simply attack their races with great enthusiasm, and little intention.

When racing butterfly events, you can avoid this mistake by planning your breathing, managing your legs, controlling your tempo, attacking your turns, and executing a race strategy. If you can accomplish these objectives, you'll be well on your way to achieving your goals.



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