

Advantage vs Technique when Officiating Backstroke Turns

This article on the backstroke was written several years ago by Tony Dixon. Tony was the Provincial Director of Officials from 2002-2007. Tony Dixon gave a lot to our organization and I still consider him to be my mentor.

Respectfully,

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Although the rulebook describes many rules and they are discussed in detail in clinics, there are really only two kinds of rules: those that address attempts to gain an advantage unfairly or unsafely, and those that address correct technique. To be more effective as well as fair officials, I believe it is important for us to understand the distinction between these two goals when we are working on deck.

Our first priority is to ensure a safe and fair race. In this respect we are acting on behalf of those swimmers who, by following the rules, may be disadvantaged or place at personal risk by a swimmer using an “illegal” technique.

Officials are also charged with an additional role, to ensure that the swimmer is indeed executing the stroke correctly. While some incorrect techniques provide an unfair advantage, in many cases an incorrect technique may actually be a disadvantage to the swimmer. Therefore, it is to the swimmer’s advantage to correct the problem as this may then result in improved times. Although sometimes perceived harsh, disqualification is an effective way to convey to the swimmer and coach this message. And, if the swimmer is to be recognized as completing an event successfully, then it is a requirement that all aspects of the event be executed in accordance with the rules.

With this in mind, let us consider the backstroke! Older swimmers are often disqualified for faulty backstroke turns and it is more often a source of controversy and frequent appeals than other disqualifications. Why is this so? I believe it is because it is difficult to describe the exact point at which a swimmer departs from “a continuous turning motion” which is the basis of correct technique. Just as starters have different cadences, so turn judges vary in their interpretation of this phrase. A failure by the swimmer to meet a turn judge’s interpretation may result in disqualification. Officials, particularly new ones, often feel challenged by the effort required to apply their interpretation uniformly to the many variations in turns observed while watching not just one, but two or more swimmers simultaneously, fearful that they will miss “something”.

However, I would like to suggest that observing a backstroke turn is no more challenging than observing a breaststroke or butterfly turn provided the focus of the official is in the “right place”, and that is with the arms. To see why this is so, we need to reflect again on the two types of rules. In the case of the backstroke, the only way a swimmer gains an “unfair advantage: is if more than one arm pull is used after the swimmer leaves the back before touching the wall. All other infractions relate to technique and usually place the swimmer at a disadvantage if they occur.

Take, for example, leaving the back too early. The swimmer may be disqualified for “a paused & extended arm layout after shoulder rotates beyond the vertical”, “swimming on the front prior to initiating the turn”, “swimming on the front after completion of arm pull” or a “kick independent of the turning action.” In all cases, the swimmer is going to execute a poor turn, and gains no unfair advantage. This does not mean we shouldn’t disqualify swimmers for obvious occurrences of such infractions. However, I would like to stress the word “obvious”. When we are so uncertain about this occurrence that we feel the need to consult with our colleagues before rendering a decision, the infraction is NOT obvious. Particularly as no advantage is being gained, the benefit of the doubt must go to the swimmer.

My own “rule of thumb” is to focus on the arms, as I have already recommended, in order to watch for any infraction that would provide an unfair advantage. Any obvious flotation infraction will be apparent even though my focus is on the arms, watching for a second arm pull.

If we can shift our attention to the arms of the swimmer doing a backstroke turn and away from looking for early turnovers, we will be catching the swimmers who are gaining an unfair advantage and not disqualifying swimmers for marginal turnovers that provide no advantage. It will also relieve the need of coaches to train their swimmers on how to save marginal turnovers that only handicap the swimmers further, such as using slow or “waving” arm pulls. In turn, there will be fewer occurrences of underwater recoveries or “arm motions independent of the turning action.” The primary benefit, however, will be a greater consistency among officials observing backstroke turns. Disqualifications for early turnovers will then be accepted more readily by the swimming community with the perception that all swimmers are being judged the same way.

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