

fitness

# stroke of genius

With Olympic swimmer **Libby Lenton** as inspiration and coach, we take a look at how swimming can give you a thrill

Some of us think a pool buoy is the bearer of poolside cocktails (it's actually a foam-rubber device used by swimmers to keep their legs afloat and immobile while they concentrate on improving their stroke). Others slog away lap after chlorinated lap, wondering what the mer-person in the next lane is doing differently to be able to move past so frequently. Whatever your pace, swimming lessons, or stroke-correction classes, are the best way to improve your style and enjoyment of the sport.

Swimming instructor of 15 years, Peter Callachor (also known as Peter Poolside) says the basic aim of coaching is to reduce the number of strokes a swimmer takes per lap—that is, to gain a more efficient stroke rate. “Even after three or four lessons, you’ll see a marked improvement in technique,” assures Callachor, who teaches at Sydney’s historic Bondi Icebergs pool.

And what greater motivation could there be to take lessons than those Australian gods and goddesses poised at the starters’ blocks at the Athens Olympics? Sure they’re elite swimmers who start their laps before sunrise, but have you noticed their arms, stomachs and legs? Can’t we all get a little of that, and feel the joy of gliding, strong and graceful, through the water?

One such goddess is Lisbeth “Libby” Lenton, who made history in March when she shattered the 100-metre freestyle world record by 0.11 seconds in the semi-final of the Olympic trials in Sydney.

## why take swimming lessons?

- If you already swim, stroke correction reduces the chance of injury through repetitive strain.
- Improving style motivates swimmers to keep swimming. You’ll learn drills (pool-based exercises that focus on particular skills) and programs that make each swim more interesting and beneficial.
- Those new to swimming for exercise will tone up. As Libby Lenton points out, “Swimming works pretty much every muscle in your body.”
- Learn to love it and you can do this low-impact exercise all your life, at your own speed.
- Once you stop thrashing and struggling, swimming has meditative qualities—and regular breathing calms the mind.



“Swimming is one of the most fantastic sports for getting fit,” says Olympic competitor Lenton. “Not only does it work your cardiovascular system, it works your arms, legs, and core—it makes you stronger.”

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This month Lenton, 19, is in Athens to compete in the 100-metre freestyle individual, the 50-metre freestyle and the 4 x 100-metre freestyle relay. So let's just say she knows a thing or two about technique. We asked her the four most valuable tips she could share on how to swim freestyle beautifully.

### Body position

Lenton says the best way to improve your form is to imagine you are perfectly horizontal. Many amateur swimmers let their legs dip downwards, but if you streamline your body so that your head, your shoulders, hips and heels are in a horizontal line, you'll reduce drag in the water, decrease energy output and subsequently be able to swim longer. "If you're not strong in the legs, use flippers," says Lenton. "Then progress to the pool buoy—anything to keep those hips up."

### The kick

The experts agree: the better a swimmer you become, the less effort you need to expend. "A good swimmer is a lazy swimmer with brains," says David Speechley, CEO of SwimEd (the Australian coaches and teachers association). Beginners tend to thrash around in a bid to go faster and further, generating a whale-like spray in their wake. "Most [amateur] swimmers don't kick in the water—they let their feet come right out of the water," explains Lenton. "My coach Stephan Widmer calls the right kick 'silent kicking'—keep your kick in the water, try not to splash, keep your hips square and stable, your ankles relaxed, and remember to kick up as well as down."

### The stroke

In what Lenton's coach calls "growing to the elbow", you should imagine your shoulder in line with your elbow and hand as you stroke through the water. This becomes easier if, as you roll your shoulders, you keep both elbows at right angles (see



photo 1, above). The elbow that's out of the water is at a right angle, held high and moving forward, leading your relaxed forearm before your hand enters the water and reaches out. Once in the water, the elbow returns to a right angle after reaching; this is called "the catch" and allows you to catch a lot more water than if you pull through with a straight arm.

Relax your hands—don't splay your fingers, but there's no need to hold them jammed together either. And keep the top of your hand in line with your forearm—

don't bend your wrist (see photo 2, left). "The most important thing," says Lenton, "is to not drop that 90-degree elbow angle and to not 'scoop' the water with your hand." It might feel strange at first, but with persistence, this technique will have you powering through the pool.

### Breathing

"Basically, relax," says Lenton. "My coach always says, 'Remember: you won't drown'." Lenton recalls that when she started swimming she shared the same problem as many inexperienced swimmers. "I'd rotate my head to take a breath, but then blow out air before breathing in. It's a waste of time and energy." Instead, make sure you breathe out underwater, creating a stream of bubbles before taking your next breath. Lenton takes one breath to every two strokes, and adds that whether to breathe out through your nose or through your mouth is a matter of personal preference—choose what works best for you.

### What next with your new skills?

Speechley says some students do stroke correction classes to improve their scuba diving or to build confidence for going sailing or surfing. Aussi Masters (see box below) offers inter-club competitions, Masters diving and water-polo contests, underwater or "fin" swimming (using a single giant fin shaped like a manta ray) and underwater hockey. —Alison Boleyn

### how to get the right lessons

Aussi Masters is an organisation which aims "to encourage adults, regardless of age or ability" with training schedules and an incentive program that rewards swimmers as they achieve greater distances. On its website ([aussimasters.com.au](http://aussimasters.com.au)) Aussi Masters lists some 200 clubs around Australia, most of which have associated coaches. The beauty of it, says David Speechley, is you're exercising with like-minded adults: "The emphasis is on fun and friendship, with fitness optional."

Most swim centres offer individual lessons—the ideal approach for beginners—otherwise expect to pay \$5-10 for a group lesson and perhaps extra for pool admission. Aussi Masters also offers weekends away for intensive stroke correction, with underwater videotaping and individual stroke analysis. The right coach, says Libby Lenton, is someone you feel comfortable with. Speechley agrees, and adds that a good group coach should offer fast, slow and medium lanes.