

Become One With The Water

Coach Scott Lemley talks about “feel for the water” and how it can be learned. He’s coached swimming at four levels: club (38 years), college (17 years), high school (17 years) and masters (10 years). He’s an accomplished masters swimmer having won the Sri Chinmoy La Jolla swim-run at the age of 40 with his 36 year old training partner, a marathon runner of some repute. Their combined ages was nearly twice that of the 2nd place finishers. Lemley is a member of the U.S. Martial Arts Hall of Fame and patented the fistglove stroke trainer 25 years ago.

When athletes talk about being “in the flow” they often describe that feeling as being “effortless”, moving with a sense of beauty and grace. Watch Roger Federer play tennis and notice how he moves across the court, completely fluid, never in a hurry, yet deceptively quick with both his footwork and his hands. Great tennis players “in the zone” say the ball looks huge and time slows to a crawl. They’re able to get to the part of the court exactly where they need to be BEFORE the ball gets there. Then they make perfect contact with that tiny sphere which is traveling 100 miles an hour and is both spinning around its axis and either curving towards them or curving away from them. They do this hundreds of times in a match and make it look easy.

For golfers the task at hand is very different; the golf ball, though much smaller than a tennis ball, doesn’t move at all. What great golfers need is the ability to see the perfect line from the ball to the hole, often 400 yards in the distance over hills and through trees. They must hit the ball and shape its flight during conditions which at times are both windy and rainy. When they’re on, these players only need to strike the ball once in order to roll it into a cup nearly a quarter mile away. Being a successful golfer requires a very different kind of zone than a tennis player yet it’s still understood at the highest level as attaining a “state of flow”, being one with the game.

Basketball players refer to how huge the rim seems when they’re “in rhythm” and can drop the ball straight through the hoop touching nothing but net, over and over again, from any spot on the court, all the while being pushed, shoved and blocked by other 6 foot 6 inch 250 pound supremely gifted athletes in the process.

How do we explain the ability these athletes demonstrate? Is it extreme talent? Is it the product of decades of nearly constant and perfect practice? I think it’s a combination of a thoroughly practiced physical skill, an uncommon degree of focus and a high level of sensory perception. We might say they have “the touch”. Oddly, “the touch” is as universal a term as it is elusive. Universal in that some people have “the touch” for everything from making money to producing hit records. Or throwing an unhittable baseball at a batter 60 feet away. And elusive in this respect - though many of us may have experienced having “the touch” or “being in the zone” at least once in our lives, understanding how we got there and knowing how to get back seem nearly impossible.

I’ve coached swimming for close to 40 years and almost every swimmer I’ve ever talked with has related to me at least one time in their lives when a race felt completely fluid and smooth, when they were “in the flow”. They didn’t talk about their power or their conditioning; they talked about how “effortless” it felt. They didn’t try hard. In fact, some said they didn’t try at all. I’ve asked all of them if they ever felt like they were “one with the water” and most said that was an apt description though their state often defied further explanation. I believe being “one with the water” is the result of a level of mind and body coordination which is not the ordinary focus of the common swim practice. I learned many “mind and body” exercises through my years practicing Aikido and one in particular helped me understand how to become “one with the water.”

At the highest level, martial artists seem to defy gravity, ignore normal human speed limits and exhibit extraordinary reflexes. They can draw a sword, cut a fast moving ceramic pellet shot from a rifle in half and sheath that sword in the blink of an eye. They can reach out and catch an arrow out of the air. And while those are certainly the flasher movements one can see in a martial arts demonstration, there are other, more subtle benefits which I found just as powerful. I learned how to heighten my sense of touch, both internally and externally. This kind of body awareness is known as the state of kinaesthesia and encompasses three main sensations: the sensations of position and movement of joints; the sensations of force, effort and heaviness associated with muscular contraction; and the sensations of the perceived timing of muscular contractions. I first learned this by practicing martial arts while blindfolded. By masking one sense, especially sight, the other senses are heightened, senses like touch, hearing and balance. I was a martial arts instructor before I became a swimming coach and it wasn’t long after I started coaching that I asked myself if there was a swimming analogy

for how crucial sight was to the practice of martial arts. I believe it's how the hands grab the water. To a great extent, that's where the rubber meets the road for swimmers. So I *blindfolded* my swimmers' hands in various ways over the space of several years and started to see some amazing changes in their ability to feel the water.

It's been known for a long time that sensory inputs from the skin are crucial for normal motor behavior, that their importance in both kinaesthesia and motor control has a strong connection. I could write about neuroplasticity and how quickly the brain compensates for lost senses but the truth is I'm not a neuroscientist and I can't quote a single study about the specific roles cutaneous inputs play during motor behavior. I can quote a great number of coaches and swimmers who have experienced this heightened sense of touch after using a pair of fistgloves. John Leonard, Executive Director of the American Swim Coaches Association, described their use as resulting in a ". . . surprising and dramatic change in the hands' sensitivity . . ." likening the effect to "voodoo" and suggesting that some day sports scientists will figure out why wearing fistgloves produces that effect. "As usual, coaches are ahead of the curve in figuring out why things work long before the eventual scientific explanation" he said.

The fistglove is a dual-use teaching aid. First, when they're worn they take a swimmer's hands out of the "balance" and "propulsive" equations. The hands are often "misused" to create balance. I believe hands should be used primarily to propel. By wearing a slick latex covering on the hands and turning them into small, slippery, ball-shapes, they become utterly useless for balancing OR propelling the swimmer. Swimmers must create a balanced state through body position. At the same time, the only way for swimmers to propel themselves forward is to employ the "under utilized" surface area of the forearms. The highly innervated skin of the hands compels swimmers to focus mainly on the end of the lever-arm, the hand, for propulsion. The skin on the forearm, though not nearly as sensitive to the pressure of the flow of water as the hands, is in fact much greater in area than the hands. When wearing fistgloves the hands are "cloaked" thus making it easier for swimmers to become aware of the position of the forearms vis a vis creating propulsion and results in accentuating the "high elbow" posture underwater. When the fistgloves are taken off, the hands become uncommonly sensitive to the forces of the water's pressure allowing for very precise placement and a very precise degree of force application. This insures the hand-forearm lever has minimal backwards movement, or what coaches and swimmers call "slipping." After wearing a pair of fistgloves swimmers experience just the opposite of slipping, what Terry Laughlin, the founder of Total Immersion, calls The Fistglove Effect.

In his latest book, *Freestyle Mastery*, Terry says "The first time I used fistgloves, I experienced *transformative* change in awareness. As I wrote at the time, it felt like "Alexander Popov's hands had been magically grafted onto my arms." Why get used to training with paddles when you feel so ineffective when you take them off? With the "fistglove effect" Terry says, "What could be better than a practice aid that makes your 'normal equipment' feel *extraordinary*?"

The great historian and member of the International Swimming Hall of Fame and the coach of World Record holders on three different continents, Cecil Colwin, was an enthusiastic promoter of "clenched fist swimming". After using a pair of fistgloves he said their use ". . . almost miraculously enhances sensitivity to the flow on both the palm and the knuckle-sides of the hand, a reaction that is quite unique, and will doubtlessly cause considerable excitement among coaches who are serious about improving the fluency and dexterity of their swimmers' stroke mechanics."

What kind of stroke mechanics could your swimmers learn if they were "aquatic sensory geniuses", if during every practice one of their goals was to become one with the water?

For years the phrase "aquatic motor genius" was used to describe talented swimmers like Mark Spitz. His ability was unprecedented and he reportedly was able to break World Records in practice. He was an NCAA qualifier in every distance from the 50 free to the mile. He certainly wasn't the biggest, strongest swimmer in the world but his feel for the water was considered off the charts. This elusive "feel" has been the source of debate for a long time. Can you teach it or do you have to be born with it? I'm not sure you can teach it. I AM sure it can be *learned*.

I believe the mind leads the body. I believe becoming an "aquatic *sensory* genius" must occur before you can become an "aquatic motor genius." Try the fistglove, the world's first true proprioceptive training aid and BECOME ONE WITH THE WATER. Contact keith@totalimmersion.net or go to www.totalimmersion.net today!