

Thoughts on Feel for the Water

Coach Scott Lemley talks about “feel for the water” and how it can be learned. He was a full-time professional swimming coach for 40 years, retiring in 2019, and had success at four levels: club (38 years), college (20 years), high school (17 years) and masters (10 years). He’s an accomplished swimmer finishing as the co-winner of the Sri Chinmoy La Jolla swim-run at the age of 40, holds the rank of Sandan in Sei Shin Kai Aikido and is a member of the U.S. Martial Arts Hall of Fame (Aikido Instructor Of The Year - 2007). He patented the fistglove™ stroke trainer in 1995 (U.S. Patent #5,419,727).

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 you’ll 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’re able to make perfect contact with that tiny sphere which is traveling at nearly 100 miles an hour and is both spinning around its axis and either curving towards them or 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 - it’s a stationary target. What great golfers need is the ability to first see the perfect line from the ball to the hole, often 400 yards in the distance, over hills and through trees. Then they must hit the ball with a club and shape its flight during conditions which at times are both windy and rainy. When great golfers are “in the flow”, they’ve been able to approach what’s normally a par 4 hole, strike the ball just once and watch it roll it into a cup 300 yards away. Being a successful golfer requires a very different kind of zone than a tennis player’s 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 nearly any spot on the court, all the while being pushed, shoved and blocked by other 6 foot 6 inch, 250 pound, gifted and skilled athletes in the process.

How do we explain the ability these athletes demonstrate? Is it *extreme* talent? Is it the product of years of nearly constant and perfect practice? In part, 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 to 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 seems nearly impossible.

I coached swimming for 40 years and nearly every swimmer I've talked with related to me at least one time in their lives when a race felt completely effortless, fluid and smooth, when they were "in the zone". They didn't remember how much power they had or how good their conditioning was; they were mostly amazed with how fast they swam without even trying. I believe for a brief moment they were "one with the water", the resulting state from a high level of mind and body coordination. I learned many "mind and body" exercises through my practice of martial arts and one in particular helped me understand how to better become "one with the water."

At the highest level, martial artists seem to defy gravity, ignore normal human speed limits, display incredible power and exhibit extraordinary reflexes. They can draw a sword and in a single cut, slice a high velocity ceramic pellet shot from an air rifle perfectly in half and sheath that sword in the blink of an eye. They can reach out and catch an arrow out of the air. They can break a dozen bricks or boards or concrete blocks with a single blow. And while those are certainly the flashier abilities one can see in a martial arts demonstration, there are other, more subtle benefits which I found to be just as powerful: I learned how to heighten my sense of touch, both internally and externally. This kind of body awareness is called *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 experienced a sense of "full body awareness" by practicing martial arts while blindfolded. By masking one sense, especially sight, the other senses can be heightened, senses like touch, hearing and balance. This was a true revelation for me.

I was a martial arts instructor before I became a swim 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. What sense could I mask to enhance a swimmer's kinaesthetic state? I believe one of our most important traits is our ability to "hold" the water, the opposite of what happens to swimmers all too often when their hands "slip" and they can't create enough leverage on the water to effectively propel themselves. To a great extent, that's where the rubber meets the road for us. That's what coaches have always called having a great "feel for the water." So I *blindfolded* my swimmers' hands in various ways with various materials over the space of several years to see if I could affect their ability to feel the force of the water's pressure. As it turns out I could and thus was born the fistglove™ stroke trainer.

The fistglove™ is a dual-use teaching aid. First, as they're being worn they take a swimmer's hands out of the "balance" and "propulsion" equation. We often use our hands (or "misuse" them) to maintain our balance when we swim. Swimmers should create a balanced state through body position and the hands should be used primarily for propulsion. By wearing a slick latex covering on our hands and turning them into small, slippery, ball-shapes, they become utterly useless for balancing OR propelling. Balance can only be found through body position and the only way for swimmers to propel themselves forward wearing fistgloves™ 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, to push against the water. The surface of the forearm, though not nearly as sensitive to pressure as the hand, is in fact greater in area. When wearing fistgloves™ the hands are "cloaked" thus making it easier for swimmers to become more aware of the water's pressure on their forearms resulting in very effective "high underwater elbow" positions. I don't think there's a swimmer alive who hasn't been warned of "dropping" their elbows. Here's the cure.

Their second use as a teaching aid occurs when the fistgloves™ are removed; the skin on both the palm and back sides of the hands becomes uncommonly sensitive to the force of the water's pressure allowing for very precise placement and a very precise degree of force application.

After wearing a pair of fistgloves™ swimmers experience just the opposite of slipping, or what Terry Laughlin, the founder of Total Immersion, called The Fistglove™ Effect. In his 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 coach, historian and member of the International Swimming Hall of Fame, 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."

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.

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 enhance their feel for the water? For years the phrase "aquatic motor genius" was used to describe talented swimmers like Mark Spitz whose ability to swim fast was unprecedented; he reportedly was able to break World Records in practice and everybody knows what he was able to do in meets. He certainly wasn't the biggest, strongest swimmer in the world but his feel for the water was off the charts. This elusive "feel" has been the source of debate among coaches 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

becoming an “aquatic sensory genius” is a necessary step before we can become an “aquatic motor genius.”

When asked about how important “feel” is and how it can be enhanced through the use of fistgloves™, Laughlin said “I can testify that the effect is cumulative and lasting. Until I first used fistgloves™ I had no clue what 'feel' felt like. Or should feel like. But after using them pretty regularly for a few years, that feeling--temporary at first--became permanent. I've heightened it even further since then--I'd even say it's continuously improving. But first I had to know the sensation I was seeking.”

I believe the use of a pair of fistgloves™ can permanently enhance your feel for the water. Go to feelthewater.net and order a pair and “feel” for yourself.