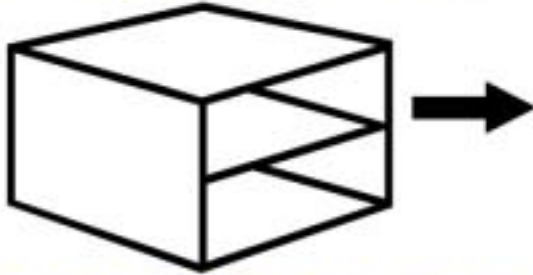


THINKING OUT



OF THE BOX 24/7

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Frank Busch, now in his 16th year as Head Coach at the University of Arizona, is one of the best and most respected coaches in the United States. Four of his swimmers won gold at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens ... Amanda Beard, Roland Schoeman, Ryk Neethling and Lyndon Ferns. Coming into the 2005 NCAA Championships, both his men's and women's teams are ranked among the nation's top five. We spoke with Coach Busch after a recent practice session.



The University of Arizona coaching staff

We're here to talk about how you emphasise technique in your program. From a seasonal perspective, what role does technique play?

Technique is always a major part of our program. It doesn't matter what training phase we're in; as a coaching staff, we can't stand watching things go on that are counterproductive. If your technique is not good, then it's counterproductive.

And you'll pull a kid out of a workout, stop him or her if you see something wrong, and suggest some changes?

We will, though there's really a fine line with that. But we start off each year with a real technique emphasis for the first six weeks of the program. While we're doing that, we're getting our kids fit, training both in the water and outside of the water.

We start talking about certain things from the very beginning, and we harp on them all the way through. Then, as we begin to get into sets of any significant length, we're constantly reminding the person about technique, especially during the breaks in the set or between sets.

Are there any specific things you tend to notice and correct over and over again? You know, are there certain generic errors you find swimmers making?

I'm not sure there's one specific generic thing. We constantly work on balance and we constantly work on catch. The more you swim—and the longer you swim—the greater the tendency to forget about balance, to forget about the catch and, in some cases, to forget about the finish. I'd say that, particularly when you're tired, you're not going to catch as well or finish as well, which usually messes up your balance and your stroke.

I notice your swimmers are all using snorkels. Do you do a lot of swimming with snorkels?

In the last two years, we've gone from a little bit of snorkel use to a lot of snorkel use. And we do it in all phases. Whether it be in drills or actual sets, whether pulling or kicking, we now use snorkels in all phases of our training.

What's the reason?

Well, the main reason is to eliminate the breath, which seems to take out the initial problem with making corrections in the Freestyle stroke. What I mean is when you are trying to teach someone a specific part of the stroke, and you're asking them to emphasise it, they're also going to have to remember to breathe to survive. It tends to take them out of their focus just enough that it would take additional time to get your point across.

Putting the snorkel on eliminates the breath. Obviously, breathing is a very important part of what you're doing, and if you eliminate the need to turn your head to breathe, you can just concentrate on the repetitive movements being taught, whether that's catching better, rotating better ... whatever it is, just eliminate the breath, and they will learn it faster.

And when they race and throw the breath in, they work it into the new pattern?

Yes. That's our goal.

I noticed you have about five or six coaches on deck, and you divided the team into different groups. Are the groups stroke-based?

They're based mainly on the distance you perform in your race. They're not necessarily based on stroke.

And is there some technique work going on in those smaller groups?

Oh yeah, always.

How does that differ from what you do on a seasonal basis?

I'm not sure it really does. It's just constant reinforcement, only in a smaller group. When we're training together as an entire team, the coaches are all watching. And when we break up into smaller groups, it's usually one coach with 12 or fewer athletes, which gives you a little bit more of a small-team-atmosphere feeling, so you can really be focused in on the flaw you'd like to correct.

What about one-on-one coaching in terms of technique?

We do a lot of filming. We used to do it five days a week; now we only do it three days a week—on Monday, Wednesday and Friday prior to practice. We'll usually take three or four kids for an hour's time, and they come in at one o'clock, before practice. We usually spend about 15 or 20 minutes per kid. We start by filming them. Then, while they're watching their film on the TIVO, we're filming someone else. So there's constant feedback and reinforcement about what we're trying to do.

While filming them, is the coach commenting so that when the swimmers are watching the videos, they can hear those comments?

Yes, that's going on, but the main feedback comes when the athlete and coach are one-on-one as they watch the video. After a coach has filmed an athlete, he goes to the monitor while another coach is filming and making comments on the next person.

What would you say you do that's unique, insofar as your approach to technique?

I don't know if we do anything that's really unique, other than we try to just think out of

the box a little bit. So often kids hear the same thing when they're 12, and they hear them again when they're 18. If they still haven't bought into it or picked it up, then we need to do something that we believe is either going to rattle them enough that they'll make a change or prove to them that a change is needed.

We're willing to do just about whatever it will take for that to happen. We won't just go on to the next thing until we've accomplished what we need to accomplish. We won't move on until the athlete gets it. We don't just pass over something and say, "Ah well, she's not going to get it." We'll sit on it until she gets it right.

Does that ever seem to get heavy-handed?

Not at all. We want to make it fun for the kids. It's not about browbeating, and it's not about ridiculing, and it's not about nagging on one particular point. It's about, "This is important, and you've got to do it right if you want to improve."

We sell them on the importance of that, and they'll buy into it. We probably put more emphasis on the process than the actual change we want them to make. Our feeling is this: just get them in that process and they'll accomplish the goal. We show them that this is what we want and why, and we try to make it as simple and straightforward as possible.

Give me some examples.

We really believe strongly in leverage and the catch in Freestyle. And we spend a lot of time with different drills that I'm sure other coaches have done, but we'll do it, too.

One thing we do is what we call the Bow Drill. The idea is this: with one hand, you just keep fishing out the water, trying to feel your catch, while the other hand is poised, like a buoy, in the recovery. And as soon as you feel you've got hold of the water, then you pull through and release the bow and your recovering arm, "the arrow," shoots forward.

How does it feel?

Kind of like a pole vault. We want you to really feel it. Once you grab onto the water, then you've got it, and you come through with the arrow and get your leverage right on it, which creates the rotation.

So, even though it's something other coaches have done, we might do it a little differently. We're always looking for a catch phrase—a way of explaining something so the kid goes, "Oh, yeah." The light goes on and she says, "I know what you're talking about."

What about using tubing?

It's for Freestyle. It's really been great lately. We put the surgical tubing on the swimmers and ask them to swim to the other end of the pool. We pull them backward while they try to

stop us by holding their arms and hands out. This allows them to feel the water pressure as we're pulling them backward. They try to hold themselves back a little bit. It's like sculling, but it's reverse sculling because instead of worrying about pushing forward, they just try to feel the forces and the pressures against their whole arm.

That's one of the great things about having this coaching staff together—this is all we do. This is all these guys think about. They're thinking out of the box 24/7: Rick (DeMont), Rody (Greg Rhodenbaugh), Augie (August Busch), Bill Behrens and Roric (Fink).

They're all thinking out of the box all the time. And they're always kicking it around. They'll be saying, "Let's try this," or "Let's try that."

The combination of elements you have now seems to be working really well...

The coaches just like what they're doing so much. If you took away all the other stuff in coaching—all the paperwork and the rules and all the other stuff—these guys would show up just for the pleasure of making people faster.

They're all problem-solvers.

Yeah, they are. They really are. That's a good way of looking at it. All they're thinking about is: "How can we get this person to be better? Where's the hang-up—is it physical, is it psychological?" Whatever it is, we're going to deal with it.



"There are so many things you can do with a front-end snorkel. They are ideal for putting balance in the Freestyle stroke, and they are great for stroke technique, drills and distance per stroke. The snorkel eliminates the distraction of the breath, thereby allowing the swimmer to concentrate on technique"