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Totally immersed

Swim like the fishes to get a better workout in the pool

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Inside Bay Area

WHEN YOU were a child you probably learned to swim by thrashing your arms around like mad and kicking for dear life.

As you got older, you probably became a little less spastic (we hope), but you likely still do some version of what swimmer Terry Laughlin calls "human swimming."

"Most swim schools teach people to get from Point A to Point B without drowning," explains Laughlin, an author and swimming coach based in New York. "Human swimming involves churning out endless laps of pulling and kicking that is awkward, tiring and unsatisfying."

Laughlin is the mastermind behind an alternative approach to swim instruction called Total Immersion, which aims to teach people how to swim more gracefully and more in control.

The method, outlined in his 1996 book "Total Immersion," suggests that people can move through the water more gracefully — like a fish — if they bring their bodies parallel to the water's surface and sweep their arms diagonally down and around to cut through the water and glide forward. They call this the "tao of swimming."

You might think you already do this, but before and after video footage from a recent two-day Total Immersion workshop led by Bay Area swim instructor Leslie Thomas proves that most people don't.

The before footage shows athletic adults taking fast strokes with their arms and dragging their kicking feet below the water's surface. Their torsos are clearly not parallel to the water line at all. In the after footage, the same people are swimming markedly more parallel, taking fewer strokes and gliding forward rather than struggling to power across the pool.

"Think of your body as a teeter-totter, and your legs are one side with a big kid on it and your head is another side with a small kid on it," explains Thomas. "The big kid side creates too much drag to move forward efficiently. But if you push the little kid side down a little, meaning your head, the big kid side will lift and you'll become more parallel and able to move forward with less effort."

Thomas gives two-day workshops around the country and teaches private lessons all over the Bay Area. The workshops cost \$445. Individual lessons cost about \$40 per session, and Thomas offers packages for three- and six-week private courses. Her clients are mostly weekend warrior triathletes who have the running and the biking part down but need a little help with the other third.

"I did a couple of triathlons last year, and swimming was by far my weakest sport," says Lucienne Bouvier, a physician from Fremont. "When a 70-year-old lady beat me, I knew I had to do something about my swimming."

Bouvier took the two-day course early last year and started training one-on-one with Thomas soon after.

"It totally changed my swimming," she says. "Before the course, it took me 30 strokes to get across the pool, and now I can get across in 17. It's a much more efficient way to swim."

Pat Guthrie, a 59-year-old Oakland resident, saw a similar decrease in her stroke count since taking the course in

June 2004. But because the workshop only covers freestyle, Guthrie hired Thomas for weekly lessons so that she could learn the method for the butterfly, breast and backstrokes, as well.

"What's interesting is if I'm swimming somewhere on vacation like in Las Vegas, people will come up to me and say, 'Your stroke is really good!'" she says. "Nobody every complimented me on my swimming before!"

Guthrie has noticed that her core muscles, including her abdominal, thigh and lower back muscles, are stronger since she changed her stroke. And with good reason. Total Immersion demands that swimmers power their arms and legs from their core, rather than use them as independent paddling units.

It's easy to understand, but most people can't just dive in and do it successfully. Lessons involve many drills back and forth across a lap pool, learning to lift your hips, sink your head and move your arms in a smooth, circular and slicing motion.

"Intellectually, I got it faster than I could make my body do it," Guthrie says. "It wasn't that hard, but it took some time. But I kept at it and then I had these breakthroughs."

Both Laughlin and Thomas say that there is some resistance to Total Immersion in the swimming community from those who know nothing of the so-called "human" way and feel as though their swimming will inevitably improve with repetition and training. Thomas admits she was one of them until a friend brought her to a workshop. She became an instant convert.

Laughlin says that people who oppose the method have either not tried it or are born aquatics.

"Some people are just naturally better in the water than others, and I wasn't lucky to be born as one of those people," he says. "I loved the sport, but it didn't love me back and I had to find a way to become more satisfied at what I did."

Laughlin developed the method through years of coaching and observing those he thought looked innately comfortable in the water. Swimmers are apparently fans; his "Total Immersion," book, revised and published again in 2004 (Fireside, \$15), has sold 125,000 copies. He believes that the method is effective for any type of swimming, be it competitive or recreational.

"It's like Windows: an operating system for swimming," he explains. "It doesn't matter if you're doing word processing or graphics — Windows is the operating system for anything you do on a PC. Similarly, I want TI to be the operating system for anything you do in the water."

For more information, visit <http://www.totalimmersion.net>. To contact Leslie Thomas, visit <http://www.swim-art.com> or call (415) 299-9098.