

Hi BNSC families,

This one is for everyone who has ever heard their swimmer say, “We just did the same thing as yesterday,” or “Coach said it was a distance day and I don’t know what that means,” and thought, “What is actually going on at practice?”

I want to walk you through what a “normal” practice looks like in each group, how the weeks are designed to build on each other, why the younger kids seem to repeat the same skills, why the older kids have “distance days” and “sprint days,” how technique looks different as swimmers get older, and how attendance and time off really affect progress.

How a Practice Is Structured: The Basic Recipe

No matter what group your swimmer is in, practices generally follow the same structure. We get the body warm, we sharpen a skill, we do a focused main set that lines up with our season goals, we put a little “finisher” on top, and then we bring them back down with a cooldown. Starts, turns, and other skills get layered in along the way.

What that looks like changes a lot from group to group, so let’s walk through them.

Stroke 1: Foundations and Repetition on Purpose

In Stroke 1, practice is all about comfort, safety, and learning what I call the alphabet of swimming. They can’t write essays if they don’t know their letters, and they can’t swim real workouts if they don’t have basic skills.

A typical Stroke 1 practice starts with a very simple warmup. That might be some easy kicking with a board, blowing bubbles, floats, glides, or a few very short swims from one side to the other. This isn’t about conditioning yet; it is about getting their face in the water, remembering how to move, and calming any nerves.

Then we hit a technique focus. For younger swimmers, we really do focus on one main thing at a time. It might be rocket streamlines, side breathing in freestyle, or straight-arm backstroke with a steady kick. You will absolutely hear them say, “We do this every day,” and they are not totally wrong. At this level, repeating the same skill is how their brain wires it into their body. Motor learning research backs this up: kids build stable movement patterns through lots of correctly guided repetition, not through constant variety.

The main set in Stroke 1 is really just a slightly more organized way of practicing that same skill. For example, we might do a series of 25s with a specific instruction on each one. Every push has a rocket streamline, or every length we breathe to the side, or every turn we touch with two hands for breaststroke. It feels simple, but it is laying the groundwork for everything that comes later.

We usually finish with something fun that still sneaks skills in. Simple relays, kick races, or games that use the same movement we just practiced are common. Then there is a short cooldown, which might just be easy swimming or jump-and-stretch time to reset before heading home.

Weeks in Stroke 1 are designed to pound the basics in kindly but firmly. One or two main skills will show up over and over that week. It will sound repetitive if you listen to your swimmer, but that is exactly the point. We want those clean streamlines, safe entries, and basic freestyle and backstroke mechanics to be automatic before we ever think about harder training. Two to three practices a week is ideal here to reinforce those patterns. If they only come once in a while, their body forgets between sessions and we are constantly starting over.

Stroke 2: Building Legal Strokes and Early Endurance

In Stroke 2, they are ready for more. They should be fairly comfortable in the water, and now the focus shifts to making their strokes more legal, more consistent, and a little more “workout-like.”

Practice starts with a warmup that looks more like traditional swimming. You will see some easy freestyle and backstroke, a little bit of kicking, maybe some gentle drills. It is still short and manageable, but we are waking up the muscles and getting the heart rate up.

The technique block in Stroke 2 splits time between making strokes legal and introducing turns and IM transitions. We might break down breaststroke kick, butterfly timing, or how to do a proper open turn. We are still very “coachy” here with lots of explaining, showing, and stopping to correct.

The main set now has more structure. That might be 25s of stroke and 25s of freestyle mixed together, or a set of 50s where each one has a focus like kick, pull, whole stroke. They start to swim repeatedly on a pattern with a little rest between them. This is where we introduce the idea of real aerobic work, but in kid-sized chunks.

We almost always end with some kind of short race, challenge, or “fast” work. Maybe that is a few 25s from a dive with a focus on a strong breakout and finish. Then they cool down with easy swimming to loosen their bodies before they hop out.

From week to week in Stroke 2, we build by layering skills and gradually increasing how many lengths they can do with those skills intact. One week we might hammer home breaststroke timing; the next week we are still reinforcing it, but adding it into IM sets. The same with turns: we drill them slowly, then ask them to use those turns in slightly longer sets. This is where three practices a week really starts to matter if you want them to fully benefit. Coming only once a week is basically hitting the reset button over and over.

Stroke 3: Real Work with Real Refinement

Stroke 3 is where practices start to feel like “real swimming” while still having a big technical emphasis.

Warmup in Stroke 3 will usually be longer. It is a mix of freestyle and backstroke, some stroke work, some kick, and some drill. We want their heart rate up and their mechanics tuned in before we ask them to work harder.

The technique time is still important, but we now expect them to use those skills under more fatigue. That might be a butterfly drill into swim, a backstroke underwater count, or breaststroke pullouts that must be repeated correctly over and over.

The main set is where they start to get challenged. This could be a set of 75s IM, 100s of free, or a mixture of strokes that fits our weekly focus. It is longer and more mentally demanding than in the younger groups. They are learning how to hold it together when they are tired, which is a direct preview of racing.

Often we add a finisher that is short but sharp. It might be a broken 100, a few fast 50s, or some hard kick work. That is where we connect the daily work to what a real race feels like. Then they cool down and stretch out.

Across the weeks, Stroke 3 practices build by increasing total yardage, asking for more consistent technique, and slowly introducing more race-like efforts. One week may lean into IM skills, another into freestyle endurance, another into speed and breakouts, but they all connect. This is the age and level where three to four practices a week really makes a difference. The science is simple: endurance and skill retention both depend on repetition over time. If they skip too many sessions, their engine and their mechanics do not develop as steadily.

Performance 1: Themes, Intent, and Training Like a Racer

Performance 1 is where swimmers start to experience clearly themed practices. This is where you will hear things like distance day, IM day, and sprint day. They have enough foundation to handle deeper training, and we start treating them more like serious age-group athletes.

The warmup here usually includes a decent amount of continuous swimming with built-in drills and kick. We use this time to get their heart rate up and to revisit stroke details without burning them out early.

We often have a pre-set between warmup and the main set. This might be kicking, drill work, or a short series of build-up swims that prime whatever system we are going to use in the main set. If it is a sprint day, the pre-set might include some fast 25s with lots of rest. If it is a distance day, the pre-set might be longer aerobic swims at a moderate pace. If it is an IM day, the pre-set usually cycles through all four strokes with some focus on turns or transitions.

The main set is where the theme really shows. On a distance day, they might be doing longer repeats with controlled effort, building their aerobic engine and teaching pacing. On IM day, the set might cycle through all strokes and IM order, focusing on transitions and legal movement. On sprint day, the set will have high-intensity swimming with generous rest, aiming for high-quality speed and sharp mechanics. Sometimes we call it red line or threshold work, where they sit in that tough but sustainable zone just under all-out to build their ability to hold strong pace.

This is also where technique work starts to look different from the stands. In Performance 1, you will not always see us pulling kids out of the pool, grabbing their arms, and manually moving them into positions like we do with little ones. Instead, we use drills, constraints, and specific set designs to “bake in” better technique without them overthinking every stroke. For example, a set might be 8 x 50 free where we ask for three dolphin kicks off every wall and breathing every three strokes. To a swimmer, that sounds like “we did 8 x 50s and coach yelled at us about underwaters and breathing.” To us, that is a technique set aimed at streamlines, body position, and rhythm. Another example might be doing 12 x 25 backstroke with a strict underwater count and a goal of matching stroke counts every length. Your swimmer might tell you, “We just did a ton of 25 back and had to count stuff,” but what we are doing is training their body to hold length and control instead of spinning.

We frequently add a finisher that ties into the day’s focus. That might be a short broken race, a few fast 50s, or strong turns and breakouts off the blocks. Then they warm down to flush out some of the fatigue.

Week to week, Performance 1 practices are not random. We might organize the week so that early in the week has more distance or aerobic work, midweek leans into IM or threshold work, and another day highlights sprint and race skills. Over a month, you would see the yardage gradually increase, the sets get more challenging, and the race-pace work get more specific. Four practices a week is ideal at this level if you want them to see the full benefit of the training progression. Missing often breaks up that pattern and makes it harder for them to adapt to the workload.

Performance 2: Senior-Level Planning, Technique in Disguise, and Bigger Consequences

Performance 2 follows the same structure but at a more advanced level. These swimmers are doing the most challenging combination of volume and intensity on the team, and their practices are tied very directly to their end-of-season goals.

Warmup is longer, multi-part, and more independent. I expect them to know how to get themselves ready and to take ownership of their focus. The pre-set is usually very specific to the main set theme: underwater work for sprint days, strong aerobic free for distance days, or stroke-focused drills for IM and stroke days.

Main sets in Performance 2 are where you see classic swimmer training in full swing. Distance days might feature long repeats at a steady but challenging effort, building cardiovascular

capacity and mental toughness. IM days can be brutal mixtures of all four strokes with short rest, pushing technique under fatigue. Sprint days may look very short on paper with lots of 25s and 50s, but they are extremely intense, focusing on race pace or faster with the kind of rest that lets them really hit those speeds. The science behind this is well established: you need both volume to build the engine and high-intensity reps to sharpen speed and neuromuscular coordination.

Technique at this level is almost never “stop the lane and move their arms around for five minutes.” Instead, we are constantly shaping technique through the way we design sets and the rules we give them. A swimmer might tell you, “We did 20 x 25 fly, it was horrible.” From my side, that set might be written with one-kick-one-pull patterns, breathing every second stroke, and strict control off the walls, all of which are technique cues. Or they might say, “We just did a bunch of 50s where we had to hit the same time over and over.” That is a pace and efficiency set, teaching them to hold form, tempo, and effort without falling apart. We are still coaching stroke details constantly; it just looks more like targeted drills, specific instructions on each repeat, and quick corrections between intervals than like a private lesson in the shallow end. We almost always finish with something that reinforces racing skills. Starts, turns, breakouts, finishes, or a short “test” piece show up often. Then warmdown and recovery become very important, especially in heavy training blocks.

Weeks in Performance 2 are planned like a mini-cycle. There are heavier days and slightly lighter days. There are planned distance, IM, and sprint focuses across the week to avoid overloading the same systems every single day. Over several weeks, we increase the workload, then step back slightly to let them absorb some of that training before building again. At this level, five to six practices per week is really where the full benefit shows up. Coming three days a week while others are coming six creates a big difference in conditioning, race readiness, and how they feel in the water.

Attendance and Time Off: What Changes As They Grow

One of the big questions is always how often kids should come to practice. The honest answer is that it depends on age, group, and goals, but there are some general truths.

Younger swimmers in Stroke 1 and Stroke 2 can get away with a bit more flexibility. They are still learning basics, and their bodies are incredibly adaptable. Missing a week here and there is not ideal, but they can bounce back relatively quickly, especially if they are active in other ways. Two to three practices a week is a great target at those levels if you want steady progress. As swimmers move into Stroke 3 and then Performance 1 and 2, the cost of missed practices grows. Training adaptation is cumulative. Their aerobic system, strength, and even their feel for the water all depend on regular, repeated exposure. From a sports science standpoint, detraining can start within a couple of weeks of completely stopping; aerobic capacity and efficiency drop, and it takes time to build them back up again.

That is why taking a season off looks very different at 10 years old than it does at 15 or 16. At 10, they can often come back and re-learn and rebuild with less long-term impact. At 15 or 16, especially if they are in Performance groups, an entire season off usually means losing a lot of the engine and technical sharpness they have spent years building. It does not mean they can never get it back, but it does mean the path is longer and slower than it would have been if they had stayed in the water, even at a slightly reduced schedule.

None of this is meant to guilt anyone. Life happens. But it is important to be realistic about how training works. Swimming rewards consistency over time. The more often a swimmer shows up and engages with the plan, the more their body adapts and the more likely they are to feel good about their performances at the end of the season.

If you have made it this far, thank you for caring enough to want to understand what is happening in the water when you drop your swimmer off. The yardage, the themes, the repetition, the “same drills again,” the distance days, the sprint days, and the technique work that does not always look like traditional lessons from the stands are all intentional and tied to how we want them to perform and feel when it matters most.

If you ever want to see how your swimmer’s specific group plan lines up with their goals, I am happy to talk through it. We are building this season together: swimmers doing the work, coaches designing the plan, and parents supporting the process from the stands.