

TAP, TAP, TAP: A BLIND SWIMMER'S GUIDE TO TAPPING

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When I got back in the water after going blind, the most common question I have heard was: "How do you keep from crashing into the wall?" While I am on my own for practice, relying on a stroke count that has generally kept me safe but somewhat slow. For races, things are entirely different.

In a race, my heart is racing, my brain is going a mile a minute, and my arms and legs are moving as fast as they can. My adrenaline is at an all-time high and all I am thinking about is what I have to do to finish. That kind of makes it hard to keep a correct stroke count. And, in a sport where a missed count could mean the difference between walking away from the pool or being wheeled away on a stretcher with a cracked skull, an incorrect count doesn't fit in well.

In light of this, an alternative solution was implemented long before I even went blind. For a race, I have a tapper on each end of the pool. For the few minutes of the race, two people stand with a five-foot pole with a tennis ball on the end, solely focused on me.

When I get close to the wall, they reach out and hit me with the tennis ball-tipped stick, telling me that the wall is there so I should act accordingly. In the end, it is still up to me to execute the turn or the finish correctly, but now I know that the wall is there and I can do just that.

Once I've pushed off, the tapper remains there until the next turn or until the race is over. Then, since they are normally coaches in their normal lives, they go back to what they were doing earlier.

Some have witnessed this happening and viewed it as borderline abuse, but I disagree. As I always say, "I'd rather be hit by that tennis ball than by that wall." Having hit my fair share of walls, I do know what I am talking about. I can see why people are confused because I always tell my tappers to hit me hard, sometimes purposely insulting them before a race to "get them pumped" so they'll take their anger out on me.

Having raced with tappers for the past six or seven years, I have come to like particular people for particular events and pick them accordingly when given the opportunity. In the end, it has always been my call on who gets the job because there is a mutual sense of trust that I see nowhere else.

While tapping sounds like a system that has worked for me, it has come with its share of problems and dark times. Several years ago, I discovered one coach who I get along well with cannot get a hang of tapping me when I am swimming backstroke. However, she is excellent at tapping during a butterfly race and I therefore reserve her for one of those posts. Another coach had a rough start when practicing with me but has improved with time and help from others who have done it, as it is quite a different prospective for them than it is for me. Obviously, she needs the former more.

The moment that sticks out as the biggest "tapping mishap" happened near the end of the college swimming season this past winter. A misunderstanding led to me not being tapped on my finish of a 1,000-yard freestyle race. Me, believing that the tapper was still there like she had been for every turn, put all my energy into completing that last lap, going as fast as I could when my hand accidentally went into the pool's gutter and my head hit the wall. The resulting cracking sound and the screams that followed could only be compared to the sound of a gun going off in the crowd.

Today, I just consider myself lucky to have walked away from that mishap. One teammate of

mine had been in the locker room at the time and heard the noise but didn't make anything of it at the time. When he came out and saw me holding an ice pack to my head, he had trouble believing that I had caused the noise, not buying that a human being could cause such a sound. But that was exactly what had happened.

But, despite all this, I am still in the pool. I've got many more stories to share, ranging from mistakes with paperwork to a tapper forgetting to show up for a race, but I do hope this answers that age-old question. Finally, I'll give a shout-out to my first tappers... my parents.