

History of Rules and Rule Changes in the Sport of Swimming

For FINA there is opportunity to change swimming rules every four years at a FINA Technical Congress. All member federations are invited to submit proposals that are reviewed by the Technical Swimming Committee. The Committee then recommends action to the Bureau. All proposals come to the Congress with a Bureau recommendation. The Congress then votes on the proposals as recommended by the Bureau.

The next Congress is in the summer of 2017 in Budapest.

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FINA, Technical Swimming Chairman

START

There was a time when three starts could occur before a disqualification. If there was movement, two such starts could be called back and charged on the field but no false start disqualification charged to an individual until the third start. This was changed in about 1990 to allow two starts. The first false start was charged on the field with an individual disqualification called on the second start.

This was the rule until 1998 when it became optional whether to use a one start rule or a two start rule. If one, the individual disqualification would come at the end of the race. If two, the first start would be recalled, charged to the field and the individual disqualification would be made at the completion of the race after the second start.

The starting rule has now been the same since 2001. Any swimmer starting before the signal shall be disqualified. If the starting signal has been given before the disqualification is declared, the race shall continue with the disqualification at the completion of the race. It is important to note that false start disqualifications must be observed and confirmed by both the Starter and the Referee.

As you might imagine each change was controversial. The convincing point for me was a statement from an Olympic athlete who said: "Many guys play games at the start. They try to distract you or draw you off the blocks. Your first start is the best one. If I could concentrate on my own start and not worry what the guys next to me were doing, that would be great."

Breaststroke

There was a long period of time when a breaststroke swimmer was required to have the head above the "calm surface" of the water throughout the race. As coaches and athletes tried new ways to swim breaststroke, the rule was changed in 1996 to allow some part of the head to break the surface during each cycle of one arm stroke and one leg kick.

The other big breaststroke change came in the kick. In about 1990, we began to see some Breaststroke swimmers use a butterfly kick on the starts, turns and sometimes throughout the race. Television showed this very clearly but it was difficult for the officials to see from the deck level. As a result, rule proposals were submitted to allow butterfly kicking in the breaststroke. All of the proposals failed when they were first submitted to the Congress. Four years later for the 2005 edition of the rules a single butterfly kick was allowed at the start. There have been several changes since that time to clarify the timing of the kick, etc. to the present version allowing a single butterfly kick during the first arm stroke at the start and each turn.

Backstroke

There was a time when there was no restriction on how far an athlete could be underwater. The 15-meter surface requirement came into the rule book for the 1991/1992 rules after some elite athletes were swimming the whole distance underwater. There were several factors in the decision. The audience could not really see the athletes, therefore, it was not very entertaining for the audience or for television viewers. Another reason was the potential danger for young swimmers who held their breath trying to emulate this style.

Turns - Swimmers used to have to remain on the back until the touch of the wall for the turn. Most used the cross over turn that we often see in the medley. For the 1992 rule book, there was a proposal to allow the backstroke swimmer to turn to the breast to execute the turn. Most of the FINA TSC thought that the purpose was to eliminate the concern as to whether the swimmer actually brushed the wall as he/she turned. After the Congress passed the change, an international coach came to me and asked if I would bring some of the Technical Swimming Committee members to the pool to view turns that his swimmers were trying in anticipation of the rule change. Imagine the surprise when the swimmers turned to the breast quite far from the wall and were able to do a free style type flip turn, completely legally under the new rule. Over the 1992 – 2000 period of rule changes, the backstroke turn rule was adjusted several times to clarify the requirements of the turn.

Butterfly

The butterfly is the newest of the strokes recognized in our sport. It has probably had the fewest changes in the period 1980 to present. There have been changes to allow more latitude in the turn rules for example but no real changes to the stroke or kick. The 1998 rule book introduced the requirement to surface by 15 meters.

Butterfly events made their entry to the Olympics in 1956 in Melbourne, Australia.

Freestyle

The only real change in freestyle, for obvious reasons, is the requirement to surface by 15 meters.

This appears for the first time in the 1998 FINA rules.

Individual Medley

There have been minimal changes to the Individual Medley over the years. There have been primarily wording changes to make clear that there are to be four different strokes in the event. Recent experiments with turns within the event may spark some change in the rule for the Congress in Budapest in 2017.