

## SPECIFIC STRATEGY FOR THE MEDALISTS VERSUS FINALISTS AND SEMI-FINALISTS IN THE MEN'S 200 M BACKSTROKE AT THE SYDNEY OLYMPIC GAMES

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The performances of the men's 200 m backstroke at the Sydney Olympic games (final and semi-final) were studied using 12 video cameras. The four 50 m velocities, stroke frequency, stroke length, and turn velocities were calculated using a specific competition analysis computer program. The medallists swam faster than the non-medallists finalist in the three first 50 m laps of the race. However, these differences were not statistically significant. For the whole group ( $n = 16$ ), the 200 backstroke velocity was mainly related to the second 50 m ( $r = 0.93$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). For the stroke frequency and stroke length, three different strategies were observed. The faster swimmers swam with a higher stroke frequency and a shorter stroke length than the slower swimmers.

**KEY WORDS:** swimming, biomechanics, performance. Olympics

**INTRODUCTION:** The purpose of this study was to identify whether there was a specific strategy for the medallist, versus finalists and semi-finalists who perform better at the Olympics. The start phase, velocity, stroke frequency, stroke length and turns were studied for each lap throughout the race and related to the final result.

**METHODS:** Subjects. Sixteen swimmers were studied. They consisted of the swimmers that qualified from the heats to the semi-finals. Out of these 16 swimmers, eight swam the final, and three were medallists.

**Data Collection.** During the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, the 200 m backstroke was analyzed using a total of 12 video cameras. Eight of these cameras were located on the catwalk that ran above the center lanes of the pool, positioned approximately 18 m above pool deck. Seven of the cameras were Sony TRV-900E digital cameras operating at 50 Hz. The high speed camera was a Motion Scope PCI 1000 S Mono high speed camera operating at 125 Hz. Following is a list of the cameras used and their positions:

1. 7.5 m from the start – looks at the first 15 m of the race (all lanes)
2. High speed camera at the 7.5 m mark to obtain more information on the race start (middle 3 lanes only)
3. 12.5 m from the start – looks at lanes 1-4 between 5 m and 20 m
4. 12.5 m from the start – looks at lanes 5-8 between 5 m and 20 m
5. 25 m – to obtain accurate information on the 25 m splits for each swimmer (all lanes)
6. 37.5 m from the start – looks at lanes 1-4 between 30 m and 45 m
7. 37.5 m from the start – looks at lanes 5-8 between 30 m and 45 m
8. 42.5 m from the start – looks at the turns (all lanes)

Two Sony lipstick cameras operating at 25 Hz were located beneath the pool with one at approximately 5 m from the wall at one end and the other at 12m. These cameras covered the view from 5 m to 15 m for most of the lanes of the pool to give depth information on the starts and turns.

The last two cameras were located in the gantry above the first level of spectator seating and were positioned at the 25 m mark. These cameras were the Sony PC100E model (25 Hz) that were operated remotely by staff members in the analysis room using BNC cables over a length of approximately 140 m. Four cables were used for each camera to operate the tilt and pan functions. These cameras were connected to a laptop computer via an A-D card. These cameras were used to check the consistency of the information that was being produced by the digitization process. Each camera could only compute the analysis information for one lane in a race.

The competition analysis computer program could perform analysis on all swimmers from any heat and lane. Variables that were determined from the competition analysis included the start time (time from the gun until the swimmer's head passed through the 15 m mark) and turn time (period from the swimmer's head passing the 7.5 m mark on his way into the wall and then return to this point after having completed the turn). Finish time was defined as the time that it took for the swimmer's head to pass under the flags (5 m from the wall) until the swimmers hands touched the wall at the end of the race. The performance was also divided into 25 m sections in order to accurately determine the velocity through different phases of the race. Swimming velocity was measured for each 25 m section of the race while the free swimming time was the time within a 25 m section that did not include any start, turn or finish sections. Stroke length (meters) and stroke frequency (number of arm stroke cycles per minute) were also calculated in each free swimming section of the race. Stroke length was defined as the distance that a swimmer travels for a complete arm stroke cycle (right hand entry to right hand entry). The number of stroke cycles that would occur in one minute if the present rating was continued was defined as the stroke frequency.

The stroke length and interval velocity were calculated using two different methods and a comparison between the results of each was made. If the information provided by both methods was within a pre-determined variance, the analysis was accepted for the interval timing option and information was computed for the next race section. The first method of calculation was from the interval timing option. This used the race timing at the known locations e.g. 15 m mark from the start and the 25 m for the first race section. The distance and times were known so the velocity could be calculated for this interval. The stroke frequency could only be calculated using the digitizing option where the operator digitizes the swimmer's head at hand entry and then counts a number of strokes before digitizing the head at the same position in the stroke. Digitizing the head provided both the location of the swimmer in the pool and the race time at that location. Using this stroke frequency and the velocity calculated from the known distances and times, it was possible to calculate the stroke length using the formula  $V = SL \times SF$ . The second method of calculating the stroke length and interval velocity was to involve the use of the stroke digitizing option, which was described to calculate the stroke frequency.

**Statistical Methods.** Means and standard deviations were computed for all variables. A one-way ANOVA analysis was used to compare the results of the medallists to the non-medallist finalists and the semi-finalists. For the whole group, single and stepwise regressions were calculated between the 200 m velocity (independent variable) and the other studied variables (dependent variable) using the Stat View 512+ program. In the stepwise regressions only the variables that added significantly to the prediction equation were retained. The cluster method of analysis was used to define the three main technique strategies used by the swimmers. In all statistical analyses, the 0.05 level of significance was adopted.

**RESULTS:** The comparisons of the main variables between the medallists, non-medallist finalists and semi-finalists are presented in the Table 1. The medallists swam faster than the non-medallists finalists in the three first 50 m lap of the race. However, that difference was not statistically significant. The medallists did not swam faster in the last 50 m lap. They had a higher stroke frequency and a shorter stroke length throughout the race. However, these differences were significant only in the 3rd and 4th 50 m laps. Compared to the semi-finalists, the medallists swam faster all the time except in the last 50 m lap, and had always a higher stroke frequency and a shorter stroke length.

For the whole group (n = 16), the 200 m velocity was related to the velocity of the four 50 m lap ( $r = 0.76$ ,  $p = 0.94$ ; Fig. 1;  $0.93$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$  and  $0.53$ ,  $p \leq 0.03$  respectively) and the 3 turns velocities ( $r = 0.62$ ,  $p = 0.59$ ,  $p = 0.75$ ; respectively,  $p \leq 0.01$ ). It was not related to the start velocity ( $r = 0.40$ ,  $p = NS$ ).

Table 1 Comparison of the Main Studied Variables (**mean  $\pm$  SD**) between the Medallists (M), the Non-Medallist Finalists (NM-F) and the Semi-Finalists (SF)

	M N = 3	NM-F N = 5	SF N = 8
200 m velocity (m.s-1)	1.63 (0.02)*	1.60 (0.01)**	1.58 (0.02)***
Start velocity (m.s-1)	2.20 (0.06)	2.15 (0.06)	2.11 (0.06)***
50(1) velocity (m.s-1)	1.73 (0.03)	1.69 (0.03)	1.66 (0.02)***
50(2) velocity (m.s-1)	1.64 (0.01)	1.62 (0.01)**	1.58 (0.02)***
50(3) velocity (m.s-1)	1.61 (0.02)	1.58 (0.018)**	1.55 (0.022)***
50(4) velocity (m.s-1)	1.56 (0.01)	1.56 (0.02)	1.55 (0.04)
50(1) SF (cycle.min-1)	47.0 (0.9)	43 (2.5)	42.2 (2.3)***
50(2) SF (cycle.min-1)	43 (1.3)	40.5 (2.1)	38.8 (2.1)***
50(3) SF (cycle.min-1)	43.2 (0.3)*	40 (2.3)	39 (1.6)***
50(4) SF (cycle.min-1)	44.6 (0.2)*	41.2 (1.9)	40.8 (2.4)***
50(1) SL (m.cycle-1)	2.21 (0.07)	2.32 (0.13)	2.37 (0.11)
50(2) SL (m.cycle-1)	2.29 (0.05)	2.40 (0.14)	2.45 (0.11)
50(3) SL (m.cycle-1)	2.24 (0.02)	2.37 (0.12)	2.39 (0.08)***
50(4) SL (m.cycle-1)	2.10 (0.026)*	2.28 (0.09)	2.29 (0.09)***
Turn 1 (m.s-1)	1.91 (0.05)*	1.85 (0.04)**	1.80 (0.03)
Turn 2 (m.s-1)	1.86 (0.03)	1.82 (0.03)**	1.78 (0.02)***
Turn 3 (m.s-1)	1.82 (0.04)	1.77 (0.04)**	1.70 (0.04)***

SF = stroke frequency; SL = stroke length

\* Significant difference between medallists and non medallist finalists.

\*\* Significant difference between non-medallist finalist and semi-finalists.

\*\*\* Significant difference between medallist and semi-finalists.

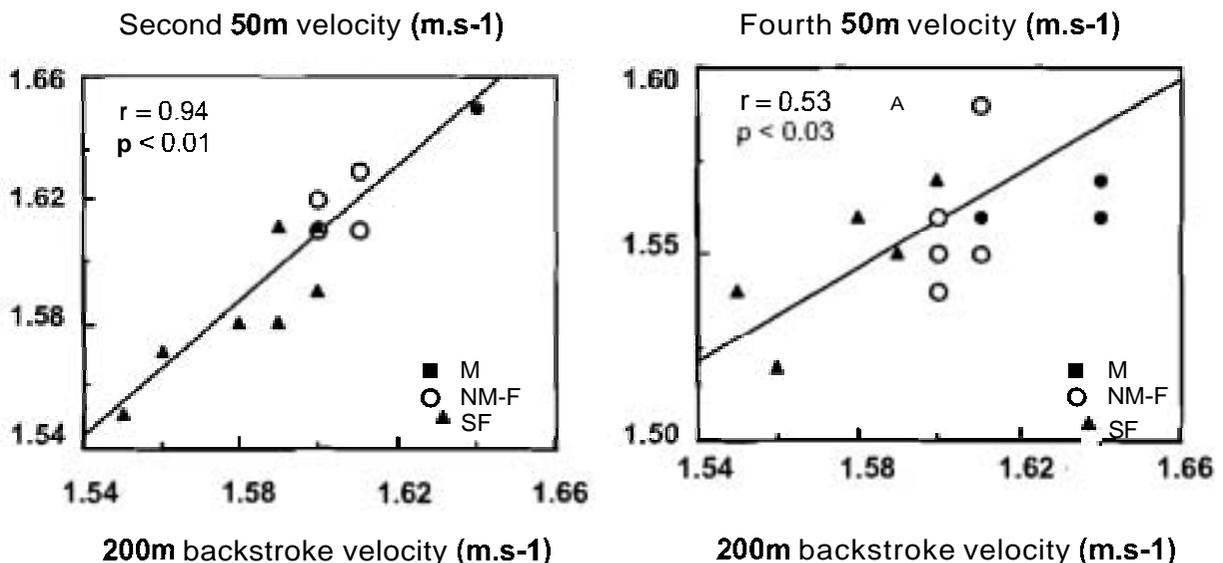


Figure 1 – Relationship between the second 50 m velocity (left) and the fourth 50 m velocity (right) and the 200 m backstroke velocity.

To further investigate the relative importance of these variables, stepwise regressions were calculated between the 200 m backstroke velocity and the eight separated velocities. The 2nd 50 m lap velocity (V50-2) was the most important factor, while the 4th 50 m lap velocity (V50-4) was the second most important factor. It increased significantly the relationship between the 200 m velocity and the V50-2 from 0.94 to 0.98,  $p < 0.01$ , following the equation:

$$200 \text{ m backstroke velocity} = 0.74 (V50-2) + 0.23 (V50-4) + 0.046$$

The swimming technique (stroke frequency and stroke length) was analyzed by the cluster method to determine the three main technique strategies used by the 16 swimmers (Table 2). T1 included most of the faster swimmers, out of them the three medallists. It was characterized by the highest stroke frequency and the lowest stroke length. In contrast, T2 consisted of only two finalists and was characterized as a lower stroke frequency and higher stroke length than T1. T3 consisted of the slowest swimmers with the lowest stroke frequency and the highest stroke length.

Table 2 Description of the Three Main Technique Strategies Used by the 16 Swimmers

	<b>T1, N = 4</b> The 3 medallists	T2, N = 5	T3, N = 7
200 m velocity	1.62 (0.02)	1.60 (0.01)	1.58 (0.21)**
<b>50(1) SF (cycle.min-1)</b>	46.4 (1.52)	45.1 (1.2)	41.1 (1.6)***
<b>50(2) SF (cycle.min-1)</b>	42.9 (1.1)'	41.1 (1.1)	37.9 (1.2)**
<b>50(3) SF (cycle.min-1)</b>	43.1 (0.03)'	40.5 (0.81)	38.1 (1.2)***
<b>50(4) SF (cycle.min-1)</b>	44.4 (0.5)'	42.0 (1.6)	39.8 (1.2)
<b>50(1) SL (cycle.min-1)</b>	2.22 (0.06)	2.26 (0.09)	2.43 (0.08)***
<b>50(2) SL (cycle.min-1)</b>	2.29 (0.05)	2.35 (0.06)	2.51 (0.09)***
<b>50(3) SL (cycle.min-1)</b>	2.24 (0.02)'	2.33 (0.05)	2.44 (0.07)***
<b>50(4) SL (cycle.min-1)</b>	2.12 (0.05)'	2.23 (0.07)	2.33 (0.07)***

SF = stroke frequency; SL = stroke length

\* Significant difference between T1 and T2

\*\* Significant difference between T2 and T3

\*\*\* Significant difference between T1 and T3

**CONCLUSION:** In the men's 200 m breaststroke, the medallists swam faster than the non-medallists finalists in the first three 50 m laps. For the whole group (n = 16), the second 50 m lap was the most important variable of the race. The technique strategy was very different from one swimmer to another. The faster swimmers swam with a higher stroke frequency and a shorter stroke length than the slower swimmers.

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