

THE PROMISE OF SWIMMING

The Hand is Always There

2/20/18

PREFACE

This is a book about Mary Elizabeth (Beth) Musser. It's written to honor her contributions to life and living, especially her 60-odd-years teaching people how to swim. It's meant to communicate some of her innovative techniques to help teach non-swimmers to become swimmers, and swimmers how to enjoy the water even more.

Beth is gone now; she left us on April 11, 2011. However, from the relaxation of her easy chair, over many visits, she provided most of the content, and collaborated in the layout and planning for this book, even choosing the title. We also both sought additional wisdom from many of the thousands of people she taught, coached, and coached with.

Through this book, in as few words as possible, she wants to help you and your family, have fun in the water, using swimming as a metaphor for "Growing old gracefully."

--Chris Musser

Introduction to Beth Musser

This book can help you, your friends, parents and children learn how to swim, and Beth knew a little bit about that.

However, it's not a "How to Manual."

If you want to learn how to swim, it will take a qualified and committed relative or teacher, over an extended period of time, to guide you in the process of learning to swim safely. Take swim lessons, join a swim team, hangout at the YMCA, etc., that's what Beth would say.

Water, especially over your head, can be a dangerous place, and sometimes you're on your own, especially if you are alone.

In a swimming and teaching career that spanned six decades, Beth Musser swam for famous competitive swimming coaches Charlie Sava and Beth Kaufman (the founder of national age group swimming) in the 1930's, for the San Francisco Fairmont Plunge Synchronized Swimming team in the 1940's, alongside Ann Curtis, 1940 Olympic Champion (and friend for many years), demonstrated synchronized swimming at the opening of the United Nations in San Francisco in 1946, taught at Tomahawk Lodge and Silver Hills Country Club in Novato, California, formed the Novato Aquanauts, Novato's first competitive AAU swim team, in her back yard pool in the 1960's, coached at College of Marin, Sonoma State College, the Napa Seahawks, Hamilton Voodoos, Petaluma Swim Club, Santa Rosa Neptunes (who had an Olympic Gold Medalist, Maya DiRado, in 2016) and in her own backyard pool for many years. Beth also competed until late in life. At the age of 74, in 1986, she won 4 medals at the First International Masters Competition in Montreal, Canada in the 1,500 meter swim and other events.

Along the way she coached Olympic Champions, like Rick Demont, (first man to swim the 400 meter freestyle under 4 minutes, and Olympic Gold Medalist) earned a masters degree in Sports Physiology, was interviewed by CBS Evening News on The Sonoma State College pool

pad, and taught swimming to more than 30,000 people from the ages of 2 to 92. Her instruction, no doubt, ended up saving many lives in the water, too. We'll list an example or two of that a little farther on.

Her legacy includes developing many techniques to teach the handicapped, and helping to form the credentials of a number of coaches of prominent swim teams throughout the United States.

From: http://www.marinscope.com/novato_advance/obituaries/obituaries-johann-enslin-mary-elizabeth-beth-musser-alex-m-bentley/article_820fa537-025d-53aa-9f19-1bef9f30dbf8.html

"Beth was well known for her more than 60-year-career teaching swimming. She instructed everyone from disabled children and Olympic Champions to 90-year-old grandmothers, and she coached competitive swim teams for youth and seniors. She finished her career coaching Master's Swimming at Sonoma State College, where she was employed for 20 years. In an interview on CBS National Evening News while coaching the Sonoma State College Masters Swim Team, she observed, "I would like to think that the process of aging is a graceful process," using swimming as a metaphor for moving through life."

And here's our first tip, what Beth would sometimes call a "nugget," because it's all about the little things, and every tip helps, and Beth collected them over a lifetime. We're going to sprinkle them throughout, realizing that's much better than just listing them at the end (although we'll do that, too, in Chapter 12).

Jeanne Haley, one of Beth's best students and coach of the Novato Riptide swim team, offers advice on competition: "Some of my students may not feel comfortable competing against their friends, or another particular person, so I advise them to compete against *"The Clock."*

CHAPTER ONE (GETTING STARTED)

Blowing Bubbles

There's never been a more effective technique to help people get comfortable in the water, especially children, than getting them to blow bubbles underwater with their eyes open, as they watch you, smiling, blowing bubbles back.

This is always done on the student's timetable, not yours.

In the 60 years I helped her teach or watched Beth teach swimming, I never saw her force *anyone* to do *anything* (at least in the *water!*)

And you can't teach anyone until you get their complete confidence, safely sitting on the steps first. It's about joking around with students while watching them like a *hawk*. Sometimes slow starters become the best swimmers.

So, after the student is *comfortable*, take slowly deeper dips with your head into the water in front of him or her, smiling all the time, until you are underwater with your eyes open, blowing bubbles, smiling and waving at them. And usually, soon, they will be trying that themselves. Ask if they want to hold hands with you when they do, or sit on a step farther down. Take your time. Have fun.

For everyone, old or young, just dipping another step is a mountain to them.

Until they're under water, looking at you, waving back.

After that's done you can try the hard stuff: Little girls like to have tea parties under water where everyone serves tea to each other while they blow bubbles. I like to prepare lunch and serve little boys imaginary grilled cheese sandwiches and then we pretend to eat them with our mouths open. Even adults respond to imagining or performing some mundane task, comically, underwater while blowing bubbles, always with eyes open.

This means you have to start without goggles, for their safety, because goggles come off, or fill with water, easily.

And a good swimmer will almost NEVER hold her breath. You ALWAYS blow bubbles, slowly, while you are under water. The two states of breathing while swimming are: 1) take a breath 2) blow bubbles slowly until you need another breath.

You actually use up less oxygen, prepare better for the next breath, and lower the carbon-dioxide in your blood (the main stimulus to breathe) when you blow bubbles.

So relax. Blow bubbles. Have fun!

Nugget #2 about breathing:

CHAPTER TWO

The Bamboo Pole

No image captures Beth's teaching technique quite as well as a picture of her walking a pool deck with a bamboo pole.

She decided early on she wasn't going to jump into the water every time a pupil was struggling, and if you teach them correctly, they will struggle in the water.

The Boy Scouts of America call it, "Reach, Throw, Row, Go," reach being the safest and easiest lifesaving action, especially if you happen to be standing on a pool deck with a bamboo pole in your hands.

However, safety was not the pole's only function for Beth.

Indeed, the pole was the key to her entire technique. With it in her hands she would take non-swimmers into the deep end of a swimming pool without a life vest or flotation device, many times on their very first lesson. Here, **always with a confident helper treading water next to them**, she'd teach them to swim unassisted from the bottom of a 9-foot pool to the surface, paddle over and grab onto the side, and climb out; *water safe, on their first lesson*.

The sense of confidence that this instilled in her students from the beginning, and the example that this set, cannot be underestimated.

Beth's techniques were developed out of necessity. She had to work fast. Many of her pupils were the children of ranchers who had ponds on their property, or families that were

leaving on vacation to such water venues as Stinson Beach, Lake Berryessa, or the Russian River in Northern California.

She knew that with only an eight-lesson schedule, she might be lucky to finish six or seven before her pupils left town for pools, rivers, lakes and beaches.

Beth viewed this as a great responsibility. She knew she had to develop a way to get them water-safe, *fast*, so she did.

Her techniques reflected a number of guiding principles. A primary one, call it the first general principal, was that flotation devices, *especially* life vests, were only for playtime. They were never allowed in the pool during a lesson.

However, even without one, beginning swimmers love to be towed around a pool at the end of a pole by an attentive adult. So, ***always with a helper treading water in the pool next to them***, and after she knew her students were comfortable putting their face in the water and blowing bubbles with their eyes open on the pool's shallow steps, she would ask them to grab onto the pole one at a time and she would make sounds like a choo-choo train and slowly drag them down the side of the pool to the deep (excuse, me, 'other') end.

When they got there, she'd say, "OK, now when you're ready, (*name here*), just put your hands on the edge of the pool and hang there, and I'll stay right here watching you with the pole next to you for you to grab on to it, if you want to," and she'd kneel down at the side of the pool next to them, sometimes holding their hands, until they got comfortable.

When she'd gotten sometimes 3 or 4 of them comfortably hanging on the edge of the pool, she'd turn to their parents watching apprehensively from the benches and chairs and say, "Wow, isn't that great, they're in the *other* end of the pool on their very first lesson, and I think that deserves a GREAT BIG ROUND OF APPLAUSE," and everyone would clap.

This was the second basic principal of Beth's technique: immediate enthusiastic acknowledgement of all her student's efforts.

Then she'd push the bamboo pole down into the water and it would touch bottom 9 feet down and quickly pop back up to the surface, and she would say, "Look what happened to the pole, it came right back up, know why?" And some sharp student would usually say, "Because it has air in it?" And she would tell them "Yes, and you do too." And then she would ask, "Do you think if you went down you would come up?"

Sometimes she'd ask them how steel ships weighing many thousands of tons floated on the water, illustrating the same principle.

Then she would have each child in turn, ***when they were comfortable***, grab the pole, blow bubbles and pull themselves a hand or two down the pole under water and back up again, grabbing onto the side. *Whether or not they accomplished this, everyone would clap again, even for "just trying."*

And then she'd suggest to the bravest kids that they blow bubbles, pull themselves down the pole hand over hand more and more, until they touched bottom, and then pull themselves back up to the surface.

After they did this, it usually didn't take her long to get the most capable students to climb down the pole, let go and kick to the surface, where they'd dog-paddle to the side and climb out.

And when they could do that, they were (well on their way to being) water safe, many times in their first lesson.

So if you're serious about teaching people how to swim (especially more than one), get a stout pole that floats and carry it around with you, really.

Beth had many other uses for the bamboo pole, too. But that's for the chapter on "Tips." You guessed it, here's another nugget from:

CHAPTER THREE

Having Fun in the Water isn't a Joke

If it wasn't fun or enjoyable for her students, Beth didn't do it.

Not that learning to swim isn't a lot of hard work; just that Beth insisted that everyone *liked* the work.

She gained an appreciation for this elementary principal, teaching her own four small children to swim, and from her experiences growing up swimming on competitive and synchronized-swimming teams in San Francisco in the 1930's and 1940's.

She knew that the difference between children enjoying her lessons or not, was usually the difference between their learning to swim or not.

Beth started with instructions to the parents when they booked swim lessons over the telephone. She'd admonish, "Do not tell your kids they're going to Beth's house to learn how to swim. Tell them they're going to Beth's house to have fun in the water." Parents were required to keep things cheerful with anything that had to do with swimming and Beth's lessons.

(Editor's note: From talking to Beth, and while drafting this chapter and reminiscing, I was surprised how little attention was ever paid to explicit "fun and games.")

Beth's lessons were "fun," because they were safe, healthy, and gave children confidence in the water and in their lives.

But Beth knew the mechanics, too. When small children walked away from her pool in the early days they would have a colored star sticking to their foreheads, and later on, they'd receive a stamp on their hands of fun symbols or comic figures as a reward for their efforts (this lasted a lot longer than sticky stars!)

Here's another nugget from:

CHAPTER FOUR

Technique is a Personal Thing

Proper swimming technique can mean different things to different people.

You have a different body from the person swimming next to you, but in the water there's a place for everyone.

None of us are built the same: my feet may not be as turned out as yours are, making it more difficult for me to do breast stroke (or ballet).

People have had a variety of experiences in the water: you may have been raised in Europe, where the breast stroke is taught before freestyle, and you learned freestyle breathing relatively late in life.

People have been taught differently: you may have had the benefit of a competitive or professional coach or teacher, or maybe none at all.

You may have a disability, or longer or shorter legs and arms than your teachers and peers.

The point is to find out what works for you.

Good technique also changes over time, strokes and technique evolve.

Don't get "hung up" on a particular technique; learn as many as you can. Your movement in the water should work for your body; whether you're a beginner or an elite athlete.

However, some things should be taught to everyone. For example, one of the most important principals to teach, especially to the very young, is *counting*. We'll call this guiding principal number three.

Counting while you swim is one of the best ways to learn physical coordination there is. When people learn to do one movement with their legs, a different movement with their arms, and those movements must be coordinated through their brain, it promotes the physical coordination that will be important to that individual for the rest of their life, no matter what activities they perform

However, all success comes from practice, doesn't it? Swim as much as you can, whenever you can, until you're good at it.

We really like this nugget, from:

CHAPTER FIVE

"Freestyle"

What is usually termed "freestyle" swimming, used to be called the 6-beat American Crawl. Each arm stroke is matched with 3 beats of kick, the entire cycle (for the legs) being, left right left, right left right, as first the left, then the right arm circles the body. This is also called the flutter kick. However, become comfortable with the fact that some people are better kicking 1 or 2 beats to each arm cycle, instead of 3.

Beth started teaching her students "freestyle," by teaching them to do the "windmill," with their arms. This can be learned outside of the water. She would ask parents to stand their children in front of a mirror, and have them circle their arms around their head as they touch an imaginary balloon in the sky, and then down as far as possible to brush their thighs, keeping their

arms straight and moving them like a windmill, one arm up while the other is down. Some kids get the windmill right off the bat, some don't.

Then after they've learned the straight-armed windmill, children have a natural ability to raise their elbows and put their fingertips in the water first, and that's a very good thing, called high elbow technique, which makes for a relaxed stroke.

Tell them to reach over a barrel. Have them stand on the pool deck and hold their elbow in the air like it's hanging on a clothesline. You can tell them their elbow is a puppet on a string to get them to relax when their elbow is in the air.

However, there have been some very successful Olympic swimmers that can't get their elbows in the air, especially distance swimmers and backstrokers.

In a mature *competitive* stroke, the hand should reach as far as possible in front of the body when it enters the water, and then turn sideways, inward, and pull down in line with and underneath the body, fingers closed, finally exiting the water in back of them, brushing the thigh. The elbow exits the water first and begins the recovery stroke. The elbow should be as high as possible in the air, and the hand should almost brush the ear as the arm moves to the front, without straining. This should be done as relaxed as possible, especially the fingers, which should separate and be very relaxed for the recovery stroke, as you kick your legs in time, counting to yourself, "123, 456, 123, 456 . . ."

dip shoulder and water at eyebrows

Here's a tip from a good freestyle swimmer:

CHAPTER SIX

Backstroke

In backstroke, take advantage of the straight arm.

Start your students out by having them kick on their back away from you while they are looking at you. The arm goes in the water straight behind the head, while dipping the shoulder a bit, and it enters the water, little finger first. (Some people may have difficulty doing this).

Have them imagine throwing a ball under the water at their legs. The arm will bend under the water, just like in freestyle. Pretend that you are pulling yourself on a rope, hand over hand to the other end of the pool. This also helps students to feel their "pull" in the water. Let the hand relax as it sweeps down past your body, pushing the water towards your feet, on the power stroke.

Teach a 6-beat kick, 3-beats for each arm stroke, but after they are comfortable kicking like this, let them find a kick that works for them; some people only kick 1 beat per arm, instead of 3.

You can count: 1-2, 1-2, from the beginning to the end of the power stroke. (This additional tip courtesy of Charlie Sava, per Beth.)

Arch the back without becoming uncomfortable; the head should lean comfortably forward. Relax.

Always swim with other people around. For your safety and theirs, especially yours.

“Kick, kick, kick! Pull, pull, pull, pull!” Beth would yell in encouragement.

Here’s a nugget you back stokers might enjoy, from:

CHAPTER SEVEN

Breast Stroke and Elementary Backstroke

Breaststroke

Most people are born with their feet turned out, and this makes them natural breast stokers, so if you start them early enough they will have a natural kick. They all understand how a frog kicks. If you have one handy, set a frog or toad in the water, and watch him go.

Pull (1) and glide (2), the progression is: arms, head, kick, glide. Bring both hands under the chin in the recovery stroke.

To kick properly, you need flexibility from the knees on down.

”Tell the kids to drop their knees first and then make a sweeping circle motion with the lower legs. Drop and sweep, drop and sweep. Pretend you’re a frog, though the tendency is to kick out to the sides. Rhythm is very important. Do not practice this with fins on. Something that can help a student with their breaststroke technique is learning the elementary backstroke, too, as they can watch their legs move while they swim.”

Hold the glide as long as you can in practice. Breaststroke is all about the glide. Go as far as can with each stroke, try to swim to the end of the pool with the least strokes possible.

Elementary Backstroke

The main thing to remember about *elementary backstroke*, aside from getting as comfortable as possible doing a “frog kick,” is to push your arms straight out from your body when you start your power stroke, and then sweep them down. Otherwise (if you put your arms over your head somewhere), you’re doing an inverted breast stroke, a completely different beast, and a harder stroke to learn.

The elementary backstroke is probably ***the most important stroke to learn*** for safety reasons. Why? Because it’s easy to do, you’re on your back and can breathe, and (especially when you relax) you can get help from your body’s natural tendency to float.

Here’s a great tip from a breaststroker:

CHAPTER NINE

Butterfly Stroke

The butterfly is the most beautiful stroke to watch when swam well, but that’s the problem, how to look like you know what you’re doing.

In the butterfly it's all about the rhythm, and it's helpful to remember that the body always follows the head. Push off from the side of the pool with your arms straight ahead of you. Pull the arms toward your chest to the side and then, as you cup the water with your hands, pulling straight down towards you. This will tend to incline your body a little bit out of the water, and when that happens, raise your head and take a quick breath.

The legs are doing the dolphin kick. The count is:

(under const.)

CHAPTER TEN

Health, Competition, Sportsmanship

Swimming can make you more successful in life. At the very least, if you swim regularly, swimming will make you *feel* more successful, whether you are or not!

Why is this? Oxygen.

The more you get, the better you feel and the healthier you are. It's amazing how 40 quick laps of a 25-yard pool can help you solve a problem you've been working on for days, usually by seeing an option that you didn't see before.

Besides, you look better, and need less sleep, and heal faster when you're sick. What's not to like?

Swimming has social benefits, too. An organized swim team is a healthy place for young (and older) people to be. Young, healthy people, best friends until the race starts, and when the race is over, even if they lose, giving it up quickly with a very healthy attitude: "I tried, I want to get better, and I know I'm not going to win them all. Maybe I'll just try harder"

Healthy and engaging, swimming and other physical competition teaches you from an early age how to handle success and defeat as you go through life.

Bring it on, tip # :

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Hand is Always There

Editor's note: I had wanted to call this book "The Miracle of Swimming." And that was our working title, because, like Beth, I had seen the water completely transform people: a child without legs becoming a competent swimmer, a child with neuro-muscular difficulties becoming a nationally-ranked athlete, people saving other people's lives in the water, making the old look young again.

But when Beth realized, after a few sessions, that this was a serious project and one of us would see it to completion, she wouldn't let me call it that. So we talked it over for a while, and finally the word "promise" appeared. She liked that.

Although Beth believed faithfully in God, she also believed that God helped those who helped themselves, and a benefit always came from doing the work, and being prepared.

It wasn't that Beth had any trouble acknowledging miracles, it was just that, with her attitude, she always expected everything to turn out all right.

FOUNDATIONAL NUGGET: I guess there probably is a single, most important tip to get your students to trust you by insuring their safety, and that is that you are always close, always looking at them, and never distracted. And your hand is there immediately should they ever reach out for it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

EVEN More Tips

No one can swim tense. Relaxation is the key, because if you don't relax while you swim, you will swim poorly and waste energy. Beth used to say, "The slower you swim, the faster you go."

Just like counting, have your students practice swimming freestyle slowly and in order: push out from the wall pushing off with your legs with your arms out in front, glide for a couple of seconds, then start kicking the legs, counting: 123456, 123456, take a couple of strokes, then add the breathing. Because you are breathing last and swimming slowly, this will cause you to relax.

There is always a power stroke and a recovery stroke. In the recovery stroke in "freestyle," the arm should be completely relaxed as it swings through the air and is then placed in front of your body as far as possible as you dip the shoulder a bit, where and when it becomes the power arm, while the other arm now is in recovery

Half of your body is relaxing while the other half works, and this is the key to technique and distance.

Float. Then start swimming. Feel the water support you. Learn to pull yourself through the water as relaxed as possible.

Use the whole leg. It's important to kick from the thighs. When you do that, you will not only go faster and get a better workout (the thigh muscle being the largest in the body, using the most oxygen when it moves), but the rest of the leg will move naturally, too.

Kicking should not always take a lot of effort. The legs should beat with a relaxed, deep motion that conserves as much energy as possible. Get a kick board. Practice just kicking, without the arms.

Don't start kids in lessons until after they're at least 18 months old, because their lungs aren't developed enough to take the occasional "water down the wrong pipe," that will happen when you learn how to swim.

Never force anyone to do anything, ever.

Practice a variety of swimming tasks and skills

Pat your students on the back; congratulate them often and effusively. Tell them they're progressing even when they're not!

Be blind to social status or any other differences between your pupils; all of your students must feel just as important as everyone else in class. This will teach them sportsmanship. Encourage your students to help each other. Ask your older students to help the younger students with their technique. Kids will eat this up, and make them respect and care for each other.

Mainstream handicapped children with regular kids to give everyone an appreciation for each other's disabilities, as well as the accomplishments of the handicapped.

As they get better, working with fins is also good for swimming fitness and technique. They help the feet float to the surface in a natural position, making you relax, and this also helps develop the thighs.

Diving is not head first, as any kid will realize. It's fingertips first!

NEVER use the words "deep end" or "drown"

Teach kids with their peers, Try to have everyone in your lesson around the same age and ability, if possible. It's always nice to have someone around who is really, really, good, too, to use as an example. This is one of the tasks your assistant performs.

Try silly strokes (like sculling with your hands on your back as you bring your knees to your chest and paddle your feet.)

When they start to get good, have your students kick their legs and scull with their arms until they can raise themselves up in the water (good training for the muscles.) Tell them try and get their belly-buttons out of the water. (BTW, any Water Polo player will be very familiar with this exercise.)

Kids are naturally competitive so try racing your students, starting the faster kids last so that everyone will get a chance to finish first.

At the end of the lesson always allow playtime for at least 10 minutes, now you can bring in the tubes and life vests, masks and snorkels, dive for rubber dog rings and bones, etc. The students will see this as a reward for their efforts, and try harder in the lesson if they know they can look forward to playtime.

Variety!

Provide emotional support and your students will develop confidence. Ask them about their lives, school and play that has nothing to do with swimming. Show an interest in them.

Always watch your children "like a hawk" as Beth used to say, especially younger children, whether there is a lifeguard present or not.

It is a regular occurrence that a good swim teacher or lifeguard will become momentarily distracted, and that always seems to be the time that a child will chose to overextend, and find himself in trouble in the water. "Bang them over the head," constantly, with the fact that if they get into trouble and no one sees them, they're on their own.

Always swim with other people around, and if possible, a buddy. Constantly take the time to visually check on your buddy or the other people swimming near you.

If a child does gulp water, don't make a big deal out of it. If you swim for a lifetime, you will gulp water many, many times. A good swimmer learns how to handle this fact of life.

When a child gets water in their lungs, have them exit the pool and lift both arms straight over their heads, helping clear the trachea as they cough. Do not let them back into the pool until you are sure they are OK.

However, if a student gulps water and becomes afraid, you will have to back off for a while, and coax the student as soon as possible after that to get "Back on the horse." ("Get the horse in the water?")

*It is the editor's experience, that, depending on the age or maturity of the child, many times when you ask a little girl to do something, she'll do it to the best of her ability. However, when you ask a little boy to do something, he'll do **the exact opposite**.*

Kids will try to "show off" to their parents or whoever is watching. This is a good thing, and can help you motivate your students. However, do not let this tendency get out of control.

Chat with parents constantly and ask them to always sound positive when talking about swimming.

Teach young children breathing by telling them to turn their heads like a doorknob

It's VERY IMPORTANT to cherry-pick your assistants to be responsible, attentive, positive young adults who like people and like to teach

And if you do and practice all of the above, you will realize the true promise of swimming:

Perfect Health!

The End

Copyright 2018 Christopher J. Musser