

sandwiches, a bowl of grits, a western omelet, French toast, and a stack of chocolate-chip pancakes (“for dessert,” he says). Being 19 doesn’t hurt, of course, but if Phelps can keep his abs well groomed despite eating enough for four, you should be able to make sizable strides with just a modest amount of effort. Here’s our seven-step plan for leaving everyone in your wake.

Swim Tall

“Water is 1,000 times denser than air,” says Laughlin. “So the single most important factor is to slip your body through the smallest hole in the water.” Imagine a central axis extending from the top of your head to the opposite end of the pool. Rotate your body along this axis with each stroke, stretching your leading arm (the one reaching out front) as far forward as you can. Keep the muscles in your lower back and abs taut as you power through the water—doing so will keep the propulsion coming from both your arms and legs and stop your midsection from sagging like an old first-mate’s belly.

Drop an Anchor

Swimming with just your hands is like jumping with just your feet. Instead, grip the water with your entire forearm and hand, holding your forearm at a right angle to your upper arm and digging in like you’re gathering sand with a shovel. Keep your hands broad, flat, and firm. You’re not pushing your arm through the water as much as anchoring it and pulling your body over it.

Keep Your Head Down

Freestylers used to hold their heads high. That forced the rest of the body to drop, turning it into a high-drag plow. “I look pretty much straight down at the bottom of the pool,” says Phelps. Not only does this technique cut drag, it keeps your torso high, reducing strain on your neck and lower back.

Find Your Glide Path

In the pool, fewer strokes is better. Your goal should be a high DPS—swim-speak for “distance per stroke.” Elite swimmers like Phelps can easily traverse a 25-yard pool

in seven strokes (each hand entry counts as a stroke). Try to keep yours below 20 by conserving momentum. Pull yourself over your anchor and continue to glide forward with one arm forward and the other back. “You’ll travel farther and faster with your legs streamlined near your axis,” says Laughlin. When you begin to slow, start the next stroke.

Drag Your Feet

“If you’re a good kicker, you’re a good swimmer,” says Phelps. The secret is turning your feet into fins. Here again, leverage rules: Your legs should be taut, scissoring you through the water, while your feet remain flexible. This will help them snap at the downstroke of

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each kick, adding oomph and helping twist your torso along the central axis. If your feet don’t flex well, buy a set of kicking fins (we like the Slim Fin, forcefin.com) to add flexibility.

Don’t Waste Your Breath

Gasping for air every time your head nears the surface is a great way to drown. Instead, make each breath count. Emphatically exhale the air from your lungs (all of it, not just 90 percent) before snagging a quick, full breath on the high side. Beginning swimmers need to breathe after each stroke, but as your endurance improves, try breathing on alternate sides—that is, after three strokes. It’ll reduce the strain on your neck and shoulders that results from always breathing on the same side.

Put Yourself on Heavy Rotation

Each stroke begins with your leading arm having entered the water, and that side of your body, the low side, pointing almost at the bottom of the pool. The other side of your body, the high side, should be raised, with the arm that just finished its stroke getting ready to return to the water. Power is triggered when you drive down the high side of your body, Laughlin says, throwing your high-side arm forward along the central axis into the leading position and forcefully rotating your hips and torso. Meanwhile, your low-side arm becomes the pulling arm underwater, working with your rotating torso to provide acceleration.

