

Inside the Rulebook – Backstroke

Backstroke, maybe the most elegant of the strokes. As its name indicates, it is swum on the back and uses a simple arm stroke and kick for propulsion. The first Olympic backstroke competition was the 1900 Paris Olympics.

While a swimmer may opt to start any event with an in-water start, backstroke is the only stroke that requires swimmers to line up in the water facing the start end with both hands on the gutter or the starting grips. Toes may not be in, on, above, or bent over the lip of the gutter.

Any type of stroke may be used, though most swimmers use an alternating arm stroke. Any type of kick may be used, though again most swimmers use an alternating kick.

After the start and after each turn, the swimmer may be completely submerged, but the head must break the surface of the water no further than 15 meters from the wall. Once the swimmer breaks the surface, he/she may not be completely submerged until the next turn or the finish.

The swimmer is required to be on the back throughout the swim (why else would it be called backstroke?!). But there is one exception to this rule. When turning, the swimmer may opt to turn onto the breast (or stomach) to execute the turn. This is not required, but most non-beginners will choose to do this. If the swimmer elects to turn over onto the breast, the turning motion must be immediate, continuous, and without delay. This may be initiated by an immediate single arm stroke (or a stroke using both arms simultaneously) followed by an immediate turning action. Some part of the body must touch the wall, after which the swimmer changes direction; the swimmer must be on his/her back immediately after leaving the wall. The turn requires timing and coordination; any delay in this turning action results in a disqualification, so swimmers practice this turn regularly.

The race is over when the swimmer has completed the prescribed distance and touches the finish wall.