

Coaching Applications

What Swimming Coaches Should Know About Atrial Fibrillation and Cardiac Health

Tim Henrich, and Gregory Soukup.

Department of Human Performance, School of Nursing and Health Professions,
University of the Incarnate Word 4301 Broadway San Antonio, Texas 78209
1+210-829-6036: FAX 1+210-829-3174 <henrich@uiwtx.edu>

Abstract

Recently there have been anecdotal discussions about the incidences of Atrial Fibrillation in competitive master swimmers. This is an abnormal heartbeat generated in the upper chambers of the heart. AF could lead to clotting of the blood and that clot ending up in the lungs or brain causing stroke or even death. We propose that the causes could be related to cardiac health problems that impact the heart's pacemaker, problems with the valves or even the long-term parasympathetic stimulation that slows the heart rate as a result of long-term aerobic training. Master swimmers on your team could have this problem and are being successfully treated by a physician. In other cases master swimmers may be treating themselves using a valsalva maneuver to stop the AF or using a washcloth soaked in cold water. Other cases involve the AF stopping when the swimmers put their faces in the water which along with the cold cloth is the diving reflex. The coach may or may not know about the condition of their athletes and there is the issue of privacy. We recommend that master swimmers fill out a PAR-Q or exercise participation questionnaire and fully inform the club and the coach about their physical condition. Because of the Health Information Privacy Act a coach or swimming pool operator may have this information withheld from them by their swimming participants. Coaches, team physicians and master swimmers need to work together to protect the health of master swimming participants.