



ARTISTIC IMPRESSION IN FIGURE PERFORMANCE

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Artistic Impression in figure competition is not listed as a judging factor, however, even though judges are trained to evaluate only those aspects of performance as related to the figure, at a subconscious level their score may be influenced by extraneous factors in particular “manner of presentation”.

For routines, Manner of Presentation is defined as “the way in which the swimmer presents the routine for the inspection or consideration of the viewer” – i.e. judge. This same definition is certainly applicable to figure performance. Synchronized swimmers, in both figure and routine competition, must demonstrate complete control and command. A good figure performance must have total command – confident, poised and effortless. Other judging factors include stability, extension, uniform motion, stationary (when applicable), and ease of performance. These judging factors can be, and should be, demonstrated in the presentation portion of the figure as well as in the figure itself. This includes the entrance and set up – swimming out, acknowledgement of the judges and reader, assuming the designated layout position, the “break” from the layout or vertical at the completion of the figure and the exit. All of these factors constitute part of the artistry and command of figure performance.

Our job, as coaches, is to make sure our athlete’s presentation of their figures is equivalent to, or in most cases should surpass, the technical ability of their figure performance. Just as we spend considerable time on walk-ons, swim outs and bows for routine competition, time should also be spent preparing the athlete on the presentation of their figures.

How to achieve this commanding performance:

1. Make sure your athletes know **WHERE** to **line up each figure**. This needs to be automatic. Give your athletes a quiz on this subject, i.e.
 - In my Back Layout for the Kip, I line up my _____ with the marker.
 - In my Back Layout for the Back Walkover, I line up my _____ with the marker.

A judge can usually tell the experience level of the swimmer by this one mastery of lack of mastery of this basic, essential skill.

2. **Swim outs** need to be quick and confident. For the novice athlete (or any athlete who is slow and low in eggbeater) it is appropriate to breaststroke out quickly to line up with the marker while scanning the judges’ panel. When the athlete reaches “center stage” they should eggbeater at this point and then acknowledge with a nod (and a smile doesn’t hurt) their correct draw number. All of this should be done with the best posture possible, with eye contact and a pleasant, confident, calm & commanding look. The athlete should then begin getting into their layout.

For a higher skilled athlete the swim out to “center stage” should be done in eggbeater. This is an opportunity for athletes to show their strength by performing their eggbeater high, fast and smooth, their charisma and command by their posture and their smile, and their confidence with eye contact as they acknowledge the panel and the clerk of course (reader).

3. The same effortless command should continue as the athlete assumes the **Layout Position**. For the **back layout** the most widely used technique is for the athlete to extend on the back while their head is turned looking at the marker. One leg is extended on the surface while the other is slowly brought up from under the surface. When the underwater foot meets the surface foot, the head should be looking at the ceiling or sky in a very long EXTENDED Back Layout Position. The chin will feel slightly higher than the forehead, the neck long, the entire top of the body should be completely dry. Hips, knees and feet fully extended. Sculling should be CALM, relaxed and effortless.

The higher level athlete, as they take the back layout, will not just look at the marker for bearings but will use this opportunity to look at the judge(s) in alignment with the marker.

Again, the judge can often assess the category of score and skill level of the swimmer just in the set up of the Layout Position.

Assuming the **Front Layout Position** is similar to the back. The athlete lies on her stomach focused on the marker or spot where they are to line up. One leg and foot is extended on the surface and other is extended about 8 – 10 inches below the surface. As the lower leg slowly rises to the surface to meet the other, the head stays turned maintaining focus on the marker. However, even though the head delays, by the time the feet meet in the Front Layout Position, the head should simultaneously be focused forward, or face down, in the Front Layout Position.

The high level athlete in total command will, at this point, drop their hands below slightly on an angle and lie completely motionless before taking the first scull of the front pike take down, (if the figure starts with that transition). This is the highest level of “seemingly effortless performance”. In contrast “white water”, sloshing, “oceanic turbulence” and even too much “Jello” or ripples of the water, indicate a labored, less skilled performance.



Eggbeater out with confidence.



Sculling should be calm, relaxed and effortless.

4. Completion of the figure and the **figure “break”** should look effortless and in keeping with the tempo of the figure. On the **“break” from the vertical descent**, a back tuck somersault should be executed. It should be extremely compact and relatively slow (implying the figure was soooooo easy).

Most of the time the judge is deciding their final tenth of a point score at the completion of the underwater vertical and into the tuck. Therefore, it is important for the athlete to make sure they maintain their vertical underwater and performs this clean, controlled tuck.

5. The **break from the Back Layout Position** in the novice/intermediate athlete is executed by simply sitting up. This is achieved by piking the hips down under the head and shoulders. The more competent/advanced swimmer will break from the back layout with a knee bend, or a slight leg kicking type of action. This action needs to be in tempo with the figure or perhaps even a little slower to communicate the feeling of control, confidence and effortlessness.
6. The **break from the Front Layout Position** is simply a matter of sitting up by drawing the knees under the body. The goal again is to give a confident, effortless, well-timed finish to the figure.
7. **Exiting and surfacing** from the break should be easy – exhaling should not be heard and the confident athlete will eggbeater off looking at the panel and the scores. Others may choose to swim off in breaststroke above water, or submerged underwater as to not hear the scores.
8. **Aesthetics** also play a roll in the “look” of command and effortlessness we want in figure performance. As a coach you must analyze what looks best on your athlete. For example: do the splits look best with the right or left side to the judges?

A judge should have no preference as to which way an athlete faces on the figure, so as the coach, you must analyze and individualize the best direction for each figure on each athlete. Be flexible. For a variety of reasons through the course of the year you may have to change your opinion as the athlete progresses.



Drills:

Practicing the correct line-up with the marker and the presentation and exits of the swim-ins and swim-outs are two skills that, once learned, can be practiced without a coach.

Simply line up 3-5 chairs along the pool similar to a judging panel. Place the marker in line with the center chair. Have the athletes practice lining up each figure with the marker. A teammate can tell them if they have hit the target, so to speak, and lined up properly.

Athletes can also practice the swim out the same way. Attach balloons on a stick (with faces for fun) so the athletes can practice looking at the judge's panel while swimming or eggbeatering out. Have them do vertical descents, then tuck and exit. They can also practice the breaks from the front and back layout positions and then exit.

Before meets (especially the first couple of meets in the season) a mock panel like above should be set up and each athlete should perform (and ideally be judged) on all of these aspects of figure performance.

Good luck, have fun and be creative with your ideas!

