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Kinematic measures and stroke rate variability in elite female 200-m swimmers in the four swimming techniques: Athens 2004 Olympic semi-finalists and French National 2004 Championship semi-finalists

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Abstract

The purpose of this work was to study stroke rate variability in elite female swimmers (200-m events, all four techniques) by comparing semi-finalists of Athens 2004 Olympic Games (group O, n=64) and French National 2004 Championship semi-finalists (group N, n=64). Since swimming speed (V) is the product of stroke rate (SR) and stroke length (SL), these three variables and the coefficient of variation of stroke rate (CVSR) of the first and second 100 meters were determined (V1, V2; SR1, SR2; SL1, SL2; CVSR1, CVSR2) and differences between the two parts of the events were calculated (ΔV; ΔSR; ΔSL; ΔCVSR). When the results for the four 200m events were analysed together, SR1, SR2, SL1, and SL2 were higher (α = 0.05, p < 0.001) and ΔV, ΔSR, ΔCVSR were lower (p < 0.01) in group O than in group N. The Olympic-standard swimmers exhibited faster backstrokes and longer freestyle strokes (p < 0.05). CVSR1 and CVSR2 were lower for freestyle and backstroke races in group O than in group N (p < 0.001). Stroke rate variability appears to depend on an interaction between the biomechanical requisites of the task (techniques) and the standard of practice.

Key words: Performance, swimming, variability, dynamic systems, stroking characteristics
Introduction

Analysis of performance, an important step in defining training programs, involves an evaluation of strategies used by elite athletes. To assess those used by elite swimmers, several groups of researchers have analysed technical and kinematic characteristics during international competitions to investigate their relationship with performance (East, 1970; Craig and Pendergast, 1979; Chengalur and Brown, 1992; Chollet et al., 1997; Chatard et al., 2001a; Chatard et al., 2001b; Thomson et al., 2000; Girold et al., 2001). Likewise, in female 200-meter events, it has been shown that high performance is associated with long stroke length and/or high stroke rate (Craig and Pendergast, 1979; Craig et al., 1985; Chengalur and Brown, 1992; Chollet et al., 1996; Chollet et al., 1997; Chatard et al., 2001a; Chatard et al., 2001b; Thomson et al., 2000; Girold et al., 2001). Stroke length depends on technical skill and is described as an index of motor effectiveness (Chengalur and Brown, 1992; Chollet et al., 1996; Chollet et al., 1997; Seiffert et al., 2005) while stroke rate would be more related to neuromotor and energetic capabilities (Wakayoshi et al., 1993; Wakayoshi et al., 1995). Changes in stroking characteristics within a race have been interpreted as a strategy used by swimmers to deal with several factors such as increasing fatigue, adversity and optimization of transition zones (starts and turns) (East, 1970; Craig et al., 1985; Costill et al., 1992; Chollet et al., 1996; Chollet et al., 1997; Sidney et al., 1999; Girold et al., 2001; Seiffert et al., 2005). It is likely that these changes in stroking characteristics are dependent on swimming style (Craig et al., 1985; Chatard et al., 2001a; Chollet et al., 2001b; Girold et al., 2001) and the standard of the swimmer (Craig et al., 1985; Keskinen and Komi, 1993; Chollet et al., 1996; Chollet et al., 1997; Seiffert et al., 2005). Observing women’s 200-m backstroke events, Craig et al. (1985) reported that a large decrement in stroke length exhibited by the swimmers was compensated for by increasing stroke rate. Conversely, a continuous decline in stroke length and stroke rate was observed in the other
three events. During the Sidney 2000 Olympic Games, stroke rate in female semi-finalists in the 200-m freestyle and breaststroke events declined during the first 50 m then increased during the last 50 m, associated with a continuous decline in stroke length during the last three 50-m stretches (Chatard et al., 2001a; Chatard et al., 2001b; Girold et al., 2001). Although adaptation of stroking characteristics to race conditions has been interpreted as a factor of expertise (East, 1970; Craig et al., 1985; Costill et al., 1992; Sidney et al., 1999; Seiffert et al., 2005), several authors have nevertheless postulated that higher performance swimmers consistently exhibit more stable stroke length and stroke rate (Chollet et al., 1997; Sidney et al., 1999; Seiffert et al., 2005).

Chollet et al. (2001, 2004) and Seifert et al. (2004a, b) recently applied the theory of dynamic systems to interpret changes in stroke length and stroke rate. A dynamic systems perspective focuses on the ability of biological systems to generate spatiotemporal patterns using complex subsystems characterized by a large number of degrees of freedom (Schöner and Kelso, 1988). This theoretical model interprets locomotion as a self-organized phenomenon whose rhythmic pattern emerges from the interactions between the neuromuscular system and the environment (Newell and Corcos, 1993; Donelan et al., 2001; Masani et al., 2002; Danion et al., 2003; Donelan et al., 2004). Using this theory, Chollet and co-workers (Chollet et Boulesteix, 2001; Chollet et al., 2004; Seiffert et al., 2004a, b) hypothesized that due to their biomechanical requisites, each swim stroke tends toward stable forms of coordination (i.e. attractors). Measuring lag-time between the propulsive phases, Seifert et al. (2004b) proposed that when an elite freestyle swimmer increases his speed, the so-called catch-up coordination pattern (i.e. when the propulsive phase of one arm starts at the time the propulsive phase of the other arm finishes), observed at lower speeds, moves into a superposition coordination (when the propulsive phases of the two arms overlap) to pass
through a phase of opposition. The change from one mode of coordination to another depends on "control characteristics" that can be swimming speed, stroke rate or even stroke length.

All of these studies presented analysed changes in these spatiotemporal characteristics. But to our knowledge, no investigation has been conducted to examine the inter-cycle variability of these biomechanical factors. This inter-cycle variability is known, however, to be an important indicator of performance standard and motor skill (Newell and Corcos, 1993; Slawinski et al., 2001; Danion et al., 2003; Davids et al., 2003; Yoshino et al., 2004).

Furthermore, any given swim stroke performed in competition requires, like competitive walking (Brisswalter et al., 1998), a specific motor response to achieve proper execution in compliance with the sport’s rules.

The purpose of this observational and exploratory study was to compare the stroke length, stroke rate, and stroke rate variability in elite female swimmers participating in 200-meter events. Comparisons were made between strokes and between expert swimmers of different standard of performance (Athens 2004 Olympic Games and French National 2004 Championship semi-finalists). We hypothesized that stroke length, stroke rate, and stroke rate variability would depend on the four types of stroke and standard of performance.

**Materials and methods**

Experiments conducted by the authors were funded by the French Swimming Federation and the International Amateur Swimming Federation who granted permission to use the data for research purposes and publication.

The 200-m event performances of the female semi-finalists of the Athens Olympic Games n=64, mean standard = 97.15% of world record, mean stature (171 ± 6; 175 ± 6; 171 ± 6; 173 ± 6 cm) for butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke, and freestyle respectively, mean age (23 ± 4; 21 ± 2; 22 ± 3; 23 ± 5 yrs respectively), and the female semi-finalists of the French National
2004 Championship, n=64, **mean standard** = 91.58% of world record, mean **stature** (172 ± 4; 172 ± 6; 170 ± 4; 171 ± 6 cm) for butterfly, backstroke, breastroke, and freestyle respectively, mean age (21 ± 2; 20 ± 4; 19 ± 3; 20 ± 2 yrs respectively) were recorded. The same video recording set up and data processing system (Figure 1) were used for both competitions.

**Video recording**

**Four** transversal cameras equipped with a wide angle to obtain a wider field of vision were positioned perpendicular to the long axis of the pool, at 7.5 m, **15.0 m**, **25.0 m** and 42.5 m from the starting block. **The cameras** were linked to a Videonics MX1digital video mixer. This digital video mixer accepts input from four video camera sources on the same screen display (Hewlett Packard 1024x768), and allows switching of one camera image to another. Adobe Première 6.0 was used to convert the analogic video signal into a digital video signal (AVI) and reframe at 50 images per second. The film of each race was analysed with dedicated software (Actriss, Brest, France) that calculated the time between camera points for each swimmer. The developed software includes all the typical options such as drawing references and collecting time data and includes all data in the database. The files are replayed in slow-motion, so the film can be repositioned image by image with the zoom. The software uses the appropriate characteristics (identification of the water lines, identification of the swimmers, determination of intermediate times from the oblique transversal lines generated in superposition with the analogue video signal produced by each camera) to align each image with the most distant water line. To calculate stroke duration, the system included an eight-bit micro controller (PIC 16F84) triggered by the official chronometer linked to the computer's data acquisition system. Clicking on the water line at different moments characteristic of the swimming stroke generates the instantaneous stroke rate. The external chronometer is linked to the official chronometer added after the mixer using a transparent filter **that** does not affect image resolution. The time point of each arm
entry was noted for each swimmer during the entire race (one observer per line). The durations of the strokes recorded for the female 200-m freestyle Olympic champion are presented in Figure 2.

**Swim speed**

Swim speed expressed in m.s\(^{-1}\) (V) was recorded as the mean for the first 100 m (V1) and the second 100 m (V2), excluding the starting (SZ), finishing (FZ), and turning zones (TZ) (Figure 1).

**Stroke rate and stroke length**

Stroke rate was calculated for each cycle using the equation \(\text{SR} = \frac{60}{\text{stroke duration}}\) and expressed in strokes per minute (s.min\(^{-1}\)). Stroke length was determined with the equation \(\text{SL} = \frac{V}{\text{SR}/60}\) and expressed in meters per stroke. Mean stroke rate and mean stroke length were calculated using all values recorded for each 100 m, for each of the four pure swim zones (excluding the starting, finish, and turning zones) and for the first 100 m (SR1, SL1) and second 100 m (SR2, SL2).

**Stroke rate measurement system training process**

Eight coaches with a scientific background were trained using video recordings obtained during the preceding competition. With the help of scientific experts, for each of the four swimming techniques, the characteristic moments of the onset of each swim stroke were identified. Each operator then analysed the same video recording 30 times searching for the same values as noted by the scientific expert evaluator.

**Evaluation of the instantaneous stroke rate measurement system**

After each training phase, to quantify reproducibility of the instantaneous stroke rate measurement system, each observer interpreted the video recording of one race of the same swimmer 30 times. The within-participant standard deviation or the standard error of
measurement as described by Bland and Altman (1986), \( s_w = \sqrt{\frac{1}{N} \sum_{j=1}^{N} s_j^2} \) (where \( N \) is the number of participants and \( s_j \) is the standard deviation for the \( j \)th participant) was calculated. To determine the agreement of the measurement method, the 95% confidence interval was calculated to assess observer bias \( d \pm t_{0.05, n-1} \frac{s}{\sqrt{n}} \) (where \( d \) is the mean of the differences between measurements by two observers for the same participant, \( s \) is the standard deviation of the differences between measurements by two observers, \( n \) is the sample size and \( t_{0.05, n-1} \) is the t-Student value with \( n-1 \) degrees of freedom and 95% confidence). In addition, the mean and confidence intervals of the coefficients of variation determined by each of the eight observers for the same participant were calculated.

**Coefficient of variation of stroke rate**

For each event, the coefficient of variation of stroke rate (\( CV_{SR} \)), defined as the standard deviation divided by the mean, stroke-by-stroke, was determined for the first (\( CV_{SR1} \)) and the second 100 meters (\( CV_{SR2} \)). The variation between \( CV_{SR1} \) and \( CV_{SR2} \) (\( \Delta CV_{SR}= CV_{SR1}-CV_{SR 2} \)) was also calculated. 73 ± 21 strokes in butterfly and breaststroke and 217 ± 31 strokes in backstroke and freestyle were analysed.

**Statistical analysis**

Values are expressed as mean ± standard deviation. The Shapiro Wilk test was used to check the hypothesis of normal distribution. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied to test the dependences of \( V, SL, SR \) and \( CV_{SR} \) on the four swimming techniques (butterfly, breaststroke, backstroke, freestyle) and on the performance standard (Olympic and National). Two-way ANOVA was applied to test the interaction effects [four swimming techniques x performance standard]. The student Newman-Keuls post-hoc test was then applied to identify particular differences. For each of the four swimming techniques, \( CV_{SR1} \) and \( CV_{SR2} \) were compared using one-way ANOVA. For each event, the relationships
between $\Delta CV_{SR}$, $\Delta V$, $\Delta SR$, and $\Delta SL$ were analysed using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient. Data analysis was performed with Matlab 6.5 Stats Toolbox (The MathWorks, Inc.) and STATISTICA 5.1 (StatSoft France, Inc.). The threshold for significance was set at level $\alpha = 0.05$ for all tests.

**Results**

**The Olympic semi-finalists were** older (23 ± 4 vs. 20 ± 3 yrs, $p < 0.01$) and specifically for each event, butterfly (23 ± 4 vs. 21 ± 2 yrs, $p < 0.05$), breastroke (22 ± 3 vs. 19 ± 3 yrs, $p < 0.05$) and freestyle (23 ± 5 vs. 20 ± 2 yrs, $p=0.0504$). It was hypothesized that stroke length, stroke rate and the coefficient of variation of stroke rate depend on the four swimming techniques being performed and the standard of performance. Results of the comparisons between the Olympic-standard (group O) and National-standard (group N) swimmers are presented in Table 1. Comparisons between the four swimming techniques are presented in Table 2 and Figure 3.

**Swimming speed**

The two groups of swimmers differed according to standard (ANOVA: variable $\times$ standard of performance, Table 1) technique (ANOVA: variable $\times$ swimming technique, Figure 3), performances ($p < 0.001$), swimming speed ($p < 0.001$) and variation in the swimming speed between the first and the second 100 meters ($p < 0.001$). **Overall** (Olympic and National groups analysed together), V1 were ($1.50 \pm 0.05; 1.44 \pm 0.04; 1.28 \pm 0.04; 1.63 \pm 0.02$ m.s$^{-1}$), V2 ($1.39 \pm 0.06; 1.38 \pm 0.05; 1.22 \pm 0.05; 1.61 \pm 0.09$ m.s$^{-1}$) and $\Delta V$ ($0.11 \pm 0.02; 0.06 \pm 0.02; 0.06 \pm 0.02; 0.01 \pm 0.08$ m.s$^{-1}$), for butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke and freestyle respectively. $\Delta V$ butterfly was greater than $\Delta V$ backstroke, $\Delta V$ breaststroke and
ΔV freestyle. ΔV freestyle was lower than ΔV butterfly, ΔV breaststroke, and ΔV backstroke (p < 0.001).

Stroke length

Standard of performance (ANOVA: variable × standard of performance, Table 1) and type of swimming technique (ANOVA: variable × swimming technique, Figure 3) affected SR1, SL2, and ΔSL (p < 0.05). For the overall population (Olympic and National groups analysed together), SL1 were (1.83 ± 0.13; 2.19 ± 0.14; 2.15 ± 0.21; 2.21 ± 0.17 m), SL2 (1.73 ± 0.12; 2.13 ± 0.15; 1.98 ± 0.21; 2.15 ± 0.15 m) and ΔSL (0.09 ± 0.04; 0.06 ± 0.08; 0.17 ± 0.09; 0.06 ± 0.07 m) for butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke and freestyle respectively. ΔSL was higher for breaststroke than butterfly, backstroke and freestyle (p < 0.01). When the results for the four 200m events were analysed together, SL1 and SL2 were greater in group O (2.12 ± 0.24; 2.03 ± 0.24 vs. 2.05 ± 0.21; 1.96 ± 0.21; p < 0.05). Specifically, SL1 and SL2 were greater in group O for freestyle (p < 0.05). ΔSL was greater in group O for breaststroke than for the three other strokes (p < 0.001).

Stroke rate

Standard of performance (ANOVA: variable × standard of performance, Table 1) and type of swimming technique (ANOVA: variable × swimming technique, Figure 3) affected SR1, SR2, and ΔSR (p < 0.05). SR1 were (49.37 ± 3.73; 39.91 ± 3.03; 35.98 ± 3.89; 44.72 ± 3.69 s.mn⁻¹), SR2 (48.39 ± 3.66; 39.09 ± 3.33; 37.24 ± 3.88; 43.94 ± 3.08 s.mn⁻¹) and ΔSR (0.98 ± 1.41; 0.81 ± 1.52; -1.25 ± 1.82; 0.78 ± 1.43 s.mn⁻¹), for butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke, and freestyle respectively. ΔSR was lower for breaststroke than butterfly, backstroke and freestyle (p < 0.001). When the results for the four 200m events were analysed together, group O exhibited higher SR1 and SR2 (43.71 ± 6.27; 43.11 ± 5.61 vs. 41.68 ± 5.76; 41.22 ± 5.29, p < 0.001) and lower ΔSR (0.01 ± 1.51 vs. 0.54 ± 1.92, p < 0.05). SR1 and SR2 were higher in group O for backstroke (p < 0.05), Table 1.
Stroke rate variability

Swimming technique (ANOVA: variable × swimming technique, Table 2), standard (ANOVA: variable × standard of performance, Table 1) and the interaction of these two factors (ANOVA: variable × [standard of performance × swimming technique]) affected CV_{SR1}, CV_{SR2}, and ΔCV_{SR} (p < 0.01). CV_{SR1} for butterfly was lower than CV_{SR1} for backstroke (p < 0.05) and breaststroke (p < 0.01). CV_{SR2} for breaststroke was greater than CV_{SR2} for backstroke (p < 0.05) and butterfly (p < 0.05). ΔCV_{SR} for backstroke was greater than ΔCV_{SR} for breaststroke (p < 0.05). When the results for the four 200m events were analysed together, CV_{SR1} and CV_{SR2} were lower in group O (5.03 ± 1.31 vs. 6.41 ± 1.87 and 4.37 ± 1.68 vs. 5.46 ± 1.66), and specifically for backstroke and freestyle (p < 0.001; Table 1). For the overall population CV_{SR1} was greater than CV_{SR2} for butterfly, backstroke and freestyle (p < 0.01, table 2). For backstroke and freestyle respectively, ΔCV_{SR} was positively correlated with ΔV (r=0.67; 0.69, p < 0.01), and ΔSR (r=0.73; 0.74, p < 0.01) and negatively correlated with ΔSL (r = -0.57; -0.67, p < 0.01). For breastroke ΔCV_{SR} was positively correlated with ΔSR and negatively correlated with ΔSL respectively (r=0.46; -0.64, p < 0.05). Evaluation of reproducibility and agreement did not reveal any bias in the measurement method used to determine stroke rate, stroke-per-stroke. The mean of the coefficients of variation determined by eight observers for the same participant was 7.4% (95% interval of confidence: 7.1-7.8%).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to compare kinematics and stroke rate variability in female 200-m swim events. The main findings were: (i) stroke length and stroke rate were different for the four techniques. Stroke length was shorter for butterfly and longer for backstroke and freestyle; (ii) stroke length and stroke rate were influenced by standard.
The Olympic-standard swimmers exhibited faster backstroke and longer freestyle strokes; (iii) Stroke rate variability depended on event and standard. Olympic-standard swimmers exhibited less stroke rate variability in backstroke and freestyle. In butterfly, backstroke and freestyle, stroke rate variability decreased during the second 100-m in the overall population.

Stroke length and stroke rate: Between-stroke comparisons

Stroke length were longer for alternating arm strokes compared with simultaneous arm strokes, as previously reported (Craig and Pendergast, 1979; Craig et al., 1985; Chengalur and Brown, 1992; Keskinen and Komi, 1993; Chollet et al., 1996; Chatard et al., 2001a,b). For alternating strokes, one arm is in the propulsion phase while the other is in the recovery phase (Seiffert et al., 2004a,b; 2005). These alternate actions, together with a profiled body position, ensure a continuous motor effect at low energy cost (Costill et al., 1992; Wakayoshi et al., 1995). Moreover, body roll, which allows the arms to go further ahead in the beginning of the underwater action, as well as a longer upsweep when finishing the stroke, allow a longer stroke length in freestyle and backstroke (Schleihauf et al., 1988; Costill et al., 1992; Lerda and Cardelli, 2003). Although most studies indicate that stroke length is greater for backstroke, then in declining order for freestyle, butterfly, and breaststroke (Craig and Pendergast, 1979; Craig et al., 1985; Chengallur and Brown, 1992; Chollet et al., 1996), our results and those published recently by others (Chatard et al., 2001a,b; Girol et al., 2001) show that the decreasing order is freestyle, backstroke, breaststroke, and butterfly. Since the early work of Craig and Pendergast, (1979), the increase in stroke length of 200-m female swimmers has been greater in freestyle and breaststroke than in butterfly, probably due to the possibilities of exploiting the gliding phases in breaststroke and freestyle swimming (Chollet et al., 2004; Seiffert et al, 2004a,b).
The changes observed in **stroke rate** over the last 35 years (East, 1970; Craig and Pendergast, 1979; Craig *et al*., 1985; Chengalur and Brown, 1992; Chollet *et al*., 1996; Chatard *et al*., 2001a, b; Girold *et al*., 2001), illustrate a similar trend. Since 1970, small **stroke rate** changes for 200-m butterfly and backstroke races have been recorded (≈ 50 s.min\(^{-1}\) for butterfly and 42 s.min\(^{-1}\) for backstroke) while **stroke rate** decreased by more than 10 s.min\(^{-1}\) for breaststroke and freestyle races. Thus, it appears that for optimal performance in backstroke and butterfly races, **stroke rate** must rise above a minimal threshold. Unlike freestyle and breaststroke, the butterfly stroke induces biomechanical constraints hindering full **exploitation** of the gliding phase. Indeed, in breaststroke, the centre of gravity is lower during the phases when the arms move forward, enter the water, and push downward (Martins-Silva *et al*., 1997). Furthermore, major intra-stroke variations in the **speed** of the centre of mass are correlated with less efficient swimming (Vilas Boas, 1996; Barbosa *et al*., 2005). Swimmers thus adapt their strategy to limit the **loss of speed** during the non-propulsive phases by better coupling the propulsive actions of their propulsive segments (Martins-Silva *et al*., 1997; Chollet and Boulesteix, 2001). With the backstroke however, the propulsive action is discontinuous because of the anatomic configuration of the shoulder joint at the beginning of the pull phase and the roll of the body at the end of the push phase as the arm leaves the water (Schleihauf *et al*., 1988). Thus the best backstroke swimmers adapt their strategy by moving their arm out of the water more rapidly (Lerda and Cardelli, 2003), which probably implies a more rapid **stroke rate**.

**Stroke length and stroke rate: between-group comparisons**

The Olympic swimmers had longer **stroke length** than the National-standard swimmers, confirming data reported by others (East, 1970; Craig and Pendergast, 1979; Craig *et al*., 1985; Thomson *et al*., 2000). **Stroke length** has been interpreted as an index of high propulsive **effectiveness** (Wakayoshi *et al*., 1993, 1995) resulting from greater propulsive
force generated by the arms and legs (higher peak force) (Chollet et al., 2004), associated with more effective coordination patterns between propulsive and gliding phases (Chollet and Boulesteix, 2001; Chollet et al., 2004; Seiffert et al., 2004b; Seiffert et al., 2005). When the results for the four 200m events were analysed together, the Olympic swimmers were also characterized by higher stroke rate, which persisted throughout the race. These results are in line with data from many studies that have identified stroke rate as a factor of performance (Chengalur and Brown, 1992; Thomson et al., 2000; Chatard et al., 2001a, b; Girold et al., 2001). The capacity to maintain a high stroke rate until the end of the race is associated with muscular power (Wakayoshi et al., 1993), neuromotor control and muscular endurance (Keskinen and Komi, 1993). Like others (Chengalur and Brown, 1992; Chatard et al., 2001a) we found that the highest backstroke rate was observed in the Olympic swimmers, probably related to coordination patterns characterized by more rapid arm movement out of water as has been observed in expert swimmers (Lerda and Cardelli, 2003).

Nevertheless, some of our results are in disagreement with the literature. For the 200-m breaststroke races, we did not find any difference between group O and group N for stroke rate or stroke length. This contradicts data reported by others (Craig et al., 1985; Chengalur and Brown, 1992; Thomson et al., 2000; Chatard et al., 2001b; Girold et al., 2001). The discordance could be related to the study populations, since it is known that swimming speed, stroke rate, and stroke length are not linearly related (Craig and Pendergast, 1979; Keskinen and Komi, 1993; Wakayoshi et al., 1995). This could explain why differences between swimmers of different standard (for example Olympic series swimmers versus finalists) are no longer observed in populations of similar standards (for example semi-finalists and finalists).

Variability in stroke frequency: between-group and between-stroke comparisons
Our original approach was to analyze **variability of stroke rate** in a population of elite Olympic- and National-standard swimmers. The values obtained in this population can serve as a reference. Statistically, all of the significant differences in the coefficients of variation were greater than the **confidence interval** of the measurement method, indicating the absence of a methodological bias in the statistical interpretation (Bland and Altman, 1986). The greater variability in the breaststroke rate could be explained by changes in the coordination patterns often observed in this stroke (Seiffert *et al.*, 2004a, b). The breaststroke is characterized by a greater time lag between arm and leg movements and a longer glide time that enable the swimmers to shorten or lengthen transition phases between arm and leg movements (Chollet *et al.*, 2004). The underwater recovery movement of the arms and legs creates drag at high swim speed (Kolmogorov and Duplichsheva, 1992; Chollet *et al.*, 2004). The propulsive forces of the limbs are also greater than in the other three strokes (Chollet *et al.*, 2004). Thus logically, coordination patterns could vary during the same race. During the first hundred meters, production of faster speed associated with a **lower stroke rate** is probably related to the generation of greater propulsive forces (Martin-Silva *et al.*, 1997; Aujouanet *et al.*, 2006) and more effective swimming technique allowed by lesser neuromuscular fatigue (Craig and Pendegast, 1979; Alberty *et al.*, 2003; Aujouanet *et al.*, 2006). Higher propulsive forces associated with more effective swimming technique and coordination (optimized duration of glide phase and better continuity in the arm leg action) lead to **greater speed and longer stroke length** (Craig *et al.*, 1985; Chollet *et al.*, 1999; Soares *et al.*, 1999). For Chollet *et al.*, (2004), better 200m swimmers favour a streamline position during the glide phase to maintain their speed. Less rapid stroke rate (Wakayoshi *et al.*, 1995) and better continuity in the propulsive phases of the arm and leg action probably reduce intracyclic variations in speed and similarly, reduce energy cost (Vilas-Boas, 1996). **Conversely**, at the end of the race, the swimmer increases propulsion by increasing stroke...
rate. This would induce greater stroke rate variability for breaststroke than for the other three strokes. In butterfly, the coordination pattern would remain stable for different swimming speeds (Chollet and Boulesteix, 2001). This could explain the lower coefficient of variation of stroke rate compared with the other strokes. In butterfly, swimmers have to achieve a precise synchronization between breathing and three movements (one-arm and two-leg), each leg movement comprising an ascending phase and a descending phase (Costill et al., 1992; Chollet and Boulesteix, 2001). This leaves less room for modifying coordination patterns. The variabilities observed for backstroke and freestyle were greater than in butterfly, suggesting that, as observed in running and walking, a major part of the variability depends on movement asymmetry (Newell and Corcos, 1993) and the requirement successively to redirect the centre of mass forward after each lateral movement of the limbs (Donelan et al., 2001; 2004). The Olympic swimmers exhibited less stroke rate variability in freestyle and breaststroke races, providing confirmation of the lesser movement variability in the most skilled athletes performing high-speed tasks strongly influenced by movement asymmetry (Newell and Corcos, 1993; Brisswalter and Mottet, 1996; Danion et al., 2003; Davids et al., 2003). Lesser stroke rate variability was a characteristic feature observed in the backstroke and freestyle Olympic-standard swimmers.

Sidney et al. (1999) also showed that the capacity to maintain a constant stroke throughout the race is a characteristic skill in 100-m and 200-m swims. Several authors found that movement variability is an important indicator of performance standard and motor skill (Newell and Corcos, 1993; Sekiya et al., 1997; Danion et al., 2003; Davids et al., 2003). In runners, it has also been demonstrated (Candau et al., 1995), that stride rate variability and stride rate are related to energy cost. For runners, stride variability has been found to be associated with increased speed (Nilsson and Thorstensson, 1987, 1989; Candau et al., 1995). In the same
way, we found that at higher speeds, Olympic-standard swimmers exhibited less stroke rate variability compared with National-standard swimmers.

Variability in stroke frequency: fatigue effects

The decreased stroke rate variability observed in the overall population during the second 100-m of the butterfly, backstroke and freestyle events does not confirm the increased stroke rate variability observed with fatigue in walking and running events (Candeau et al., 1995; Slawinski et al., 2001; Yoshino et al., 2004). In these events, increasing stroke rate variability with fatigue was interpreted as the consequence of the perturbation of the anterioposterior and vertical movements of the centre of mass (Slawinski et al., 2001). These additional excursions of the centre of mass involve in an increase of kinetics, and potential energy variation, which provoke an increase in mechanical work (Slawinski et al., 2001). In our study, stroke rate variability correlated with decreased speed and stroke rate, in agreement with studies showing that stroke rate variability is rate and speed dependent (Nilsson and Thorstensson, 1987, 1989; Candau et al., 1995). An experimental comparison between changes in stroke rate variability arising from fatigue at constant rate and speed would be useful to measure the effects of neuromuscular and metabolic fatigue on the course of stroke rate variability. Similarly, the lower coefficient stroke rate variability observed in the butterfly race was not correlated with any kinematic measure and cannot be appropriately interpreted without complementary measurements concerning, for instance, energy cost or intracyclic speed variations.

Tentative of interpretation using the dynamic systems theory

In the dynamic systems theory, movement is considered as an emerging property that results from the interaction between the self-organization capacity of the neuromusculoskeletal system, represented in our study by individual skill or standard, and the task requisites, represented in our study by the four swimming events (Schöner and Kelso, 1988; Newell and
Corcos, 1993; Brisswalter and Mottet, 1996; Davids et al., 2003). The measures *stroke length*, *stroke rate* and *speed* were considered as control characteristics that correspond to a specific coordination pattern (Seifert et al., 2004a, b). This coordination pattern emerges from the swimmers' adaptation to the biomechanical requisites of each type of swimming stroke (Chollet et al., 2004). Using the dynamic systems theory to improve understanding of the results of the present study, the differences in the variability of the swimmers' motor patterns could be interpreted as an effect of the stroke requisites that set specific limits for self-organization. The lower variability in backstroke and freestyle observed in the Olympic swimmers could thus be interpreted as stability and optimal *effectiveness* obtained by system coupling (Newell and Corcos, 1993; Brisswalter and Mottet, 1996; Masani et al., 2002; Danion et al., 2003; Donelan et al., 2001; 2004). Considering the entire population, the higher variability in breaststroke can be interpreted as the capacity of elite swimmers to exploit the high dimensionality offered by the motor system's many degrees of freedom. Several studies have indeed shown that skilled performers can freeze or unfreeze the degrees of freedom in the chain of movement as the prevailing task constraints demand (Newell and Corcos, 1993; Davids et al., 2003).

**Conclusion**

*Faster swimming* observed in Olympic semi-finalists was associated with differences in *stroke rate*, *stroke length* and *stroke rate variability*. These differences were dependent on the interaction between the biomechanical requisites of the task (swimming techniques) and individual skill. *Stroke rate variability was greatest for breaststroke with* freestyle, backstroke, and butterfly in decreasing order. Female Olympic swimmers were characterized by greater backstroke rate, longer freestyle *stroke length*, and less *stroke rate variability*. For backstroke, breaststroke and freestyle, a lesser *stroke rate variability* during the second
one hundred meters was correlated with decreased speed and stroke rate. The findings from this exploratory study open the perspective of experimental and confirmatory analysis of stroke rate variability by imposing fixed stroke rate and stroke length. This would enable a better understanding of the effects of voluntary modulation of stroke rate or amplitude to adapt performance to competitors or fatigue during the course of the race.
LEGEND OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Video recording set up (SZ, start zone; TZ, turn zone; FZ, finish zone; T1, T2, T3 and T4, pure swim times between camera points).

Figure 2. Stroke rate modulations observed in the Olympic champion during the female 200-m freestyle Olympic final.

Figure 3. Performance measures with confidence intervals (95%) for the four swimming techniques: butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke, freestyle. Swim speed \((V1, V2 \text{ in } \text{m.s}^{-1})\), stroke length \((SL1, SL2 \text{ in } \text{m})\), stroke rate \((SR1, SR2 \text{ in } \text{s.min}^{-1})\). *Different \(\alpha = 0.05\).
Figure 1.
Figure 2.

![Graph showing the duration of each stroke during the race.](image)
Figure 3.

**Swim Velocity**

- V2
- V1

<table>
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<th>Breaststroke</th>
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**Stroke Length**

- SL2
- SL1

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**Stroke Rate**

- SR2
- SR1

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Table 1. Performance characteristics for group O (Olympic semi-finalists) and group N (French national championship semi-finalist). Values are mean (standard deviation).

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<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
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<th>Breaststroke</th>
<th>Freestyle</th>
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<tr>
<td>Performance (s)</td>
<td>O 130.52 (1.33)</td>
<td>132.42 (1.73)</td>
<td>148.07 (1.97)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>N 139.74 (2.57)</td>
<td>*** 139.94 (4.01)</td>
<td>*** 158.03 (2.66)</td>
<td>*** 127.34 (3.17)</td>
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<tr>
<td>V1 (m.s⁻¹)</td>
<td>O 1.54 (0.02)</td>
<td>1.48 (0.01)</td>
<td>1.33 (0.02)</td>
<td>1.64 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>N 1.45 (0.03)</td>
<td>*** 1.41 (0.03)</td>
<td>*** 1.24 (0.02)</td>
<td>*** 1.55 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V2 (m.s⁻¹)</td>
<td>O 1.44 (0.02)</td>
<td>1.42 (0.03)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>N 1.33 (0.03)</td>
<td>*** 1.33 (0.04)</td>
<td>*** 1.18 (0.02)</td>
<td>*** 1.50 (0.03)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ΔV (m.s⁻¹)</td>
<td>O 0.10 (0.02)</td>
<td>0.05 (0.03)</td>
<td>0.05 (0.03)</td>
<td>-0.02 (0.11)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>N 0.11 (0.03)</td>
<td>0.06 (0.02)</td>
<td>0.06 (0.02)</td>
<td>0.06 (0.02)</td>
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<td>SR1 (s.min⁻¹)</td>
<td>O 50.1 (4.1)</td>
<td>41.0 (2.8)</td>
<td>36.6 (4.9)</td>
<td>44.3 (4.0)</td>
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<td>N 48.5 (3.2)</td>
<td>38.7 (2.9)</td>
<td>35.7 (3.1)</td>
<td>44.3 (2.9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SR2 (s.min⁻¹)</td>
<td>O 49.3 (4.0)</td>
<td>40.7 (3.2)</td>
<td>37.9 (4.2)</td>
<td>44.1 (3.6)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N 47.3 (3.0)</td>
<td>37.4 (2.6) ** 36.8 (3.7)</td>
<td>43.7 (2.5)</td>
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<td>ΔSR (s.min⁻¹)</td>
<td>O 0.8 (1.3)</td>
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<td>-1.3 (1.7)</td>
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<td>N 1.2 (1.5)</td>
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<td>-1.0 (2.2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SL1 (m)</td>
<td>O 1.85 (0.15)</td>
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<td>N 1.79 (0.11)</td>
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<td>2.11 (0.15) *</td>
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<tr>
<td>SL2 (m)</td>
<td>O 1.76 (0.14)</td>
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<td>N 1.69 (0.09)</td>
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<td>1.94 (0.17)</td>
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<td>ΔSL (m)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>N 0.11 (0.04)</td>
<td>0.05 (0.08)</td>
<td>0.17 (0.2)</td>
<td>0.05 (0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CVSR1 (%)</td>
<td>O 4.77 (0.78)</td>
<td>4.61 (1.26)</td>
<td>6.09 (1.18)</td>
<td>4.63 (1.43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N 4.84 (1.14)</td>
<td>7.20 (1.54) *** 6.69 (2.16)</td>
<td>6.92 (1.65) ***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CVSR2 (%)</td>
<td>O 3.99 (0.85)</td>
<td>3.09 (0.70)</td>
<td>6.43 (1.85)</td>
<td>3.96 (0.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N 4.27 (1.75)</td>
<td>5.73 (1.49) *** 5.57 (1.35)</td>
<td>6.26 (1.53) ***</td>
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<tr>
<td>ΔCVSR (%)</td>
<td>O 0.78 (0.85)</td>
<td>1.55 (1.36)</td>
<td>-0.34 (1.98)</td>
<td>0.67 (1.53)</td>
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<td>N 0.56 (1.12)</td>
<td>1.47 (1.07)</td>
<td>1.11 (2.41)</td>
<td>0.66 (0.97)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Swim speed, stroke rate, stroke length and coefficient of variation for the first and the second 100 m and for the differences,* Difference between group O (Olympic semi-finalists) and group N (French national championship semi-finalist), p < 0.05; ** Difference between group O and group N, p < 0.01; *** Difference between group O and group N, p < 0.001.
Table 2. Coefficients of variation for the four swimming techniques, butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke, freestyle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Butterfly</th>
<th>Backstroke</th>
<th>Breaststroke</th>
<th>Freestyle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CV_{SR1} (%)</td>
<td>4.8 (0.9)</td>
<td>5.9 (1.9)</td>
<td>6.4 (1.7)</td>
<td>5.8 (1.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CV_{SR2} (%)</td>
<td>4.1 (1.4)</td>
<td>4.4 (1.7)</td>
<td>6.0 (1.6)</td>
<td>5.1 (1.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔCV_{SR} (%)</td>
<td>0.7 (0.9)</td>
<td>1.5 (1.2)</td>
<td>0.4 (2.3)</td>
<td>0.7 (1.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are means (standard deviations). * Different from backstroke, p<0.05 (**, p<0.01); † different from breaststroke, p < 0.05 (††, p<0.01); ‡ different from butterfly, p < 0.05 (**, p<0.01).


8. Chatard, J.C., Girold, S., Cossor, J. and Mason, B. (2001a). Specific strategy for the medalists versus finalists and semi finalists in the women’s 200m backstroke at the


