

# BACKSTROKE

**With one exception, backstroke rules are very simple – “freestyle on the back”:**

1. **Backward start *in the water*, with no toes on, or past lip of gutter (if any):** “*Standing in or on the gutter, placing the toes above the lip of the gutter, or bending the toes over the lip of the gutter, before or after the start, is prohibited.*” – Starter responsible if in violation before or at start.
2. **Swim and finish on the back – any kind of arm stroke and kick allowed:** “*The swimmer shall push off on his back and continue swimming on the back throughout the race.*” (101.4.2) “*Upon the finish of the race, the swimmer must touch the wall while on the back*” (101.4.4)
3. **Swim on surface, except** at finish, during turns, and during first 15 meters of each length: “*Some part of the swimmer must break the surface of the water throughout the race, except it is permissible for the swimmer to be completely submerged during the turn, at the finish and for a distance of not more than 15 meters (16.4 yards) after the start and after each turn. By that point, the head must have broken the surface of the water. Additionally, once some part of the head of the swimmer has passed the 5 meter mark (long course and short course meters) or 5 yard mark (short course yards) immediately prior to reaching the finish, the swimmer may be completely submerged prior to the touch.*” (101.4.2)
4. “*Upon completion of each length, some part of the swimmer must touch the wall.*” (101.4.3)

**THE BIG EXCEPTION: optional turn toward breast.**

5. **During the turn the shoulders may be turned past the vertical toward the breast after which a continuous single arm pull or a continuous simultaneous double arm pull may be used to initiate the turn.** (101.4.3)

**WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?**

**6. Examples of LEGAL backstroke turns (finish must be on back):**

- a. Stay on the back, touch the wall, push off on the back.
- b. Roll toward the breast, immediately contact the wall, push off on the back.
- c. Roll toward breast, immediately execute flip turn ending in touch of wall, push off on back. **NOTE:** A small head, arm, or hand **movement used as leverage to execute the flip turn** is usually considered part of that rotation and not an independent action – this is a judgment call.
- d. Roll toward breast, immediately take a single arm pull (using one or both arms), followed immediately by flip turn and/or touch of wall, push off on back.

**7. Most common backstroke DQ:** (“delay initiating arm pull” or “delay initiating turn”) after rolling toward the breast. **Examples of ILLEGAL turns:**

- a. Roll past vertical toward breast, then fail to immediately and continuously pull and/or flip and/or touch wall.  
Usually seen as flotation or “gliding” (kicks are irrelevant) before or after arm pull, before or after flip turn, or before touch of wall. (NOTE: in High School swimming this is legal within backstroke flags.)
- b. Two or more arm pulls while toward breast.
- c. No touch of wall.

**8. Judging backstroke turn toward breast:** after shoulders are past vertical toward breast, **observe the hand(s) of the arm(s) about to pull** (ignore any pull already in progress before going past vertical). When the hand first stops (or does not start) moving rearward, the swimmer must be executing the rest of the turn, or already be in contact with the wall. The hand(s) may move rearward very slowly and/or as part of a wide sculling motion.

**Another frequent DQ:** not on back off wall or at finish. Judges should observe relative position of shoulders **after** feet leave the wall and **at** (not after) finish touch.

**VIDEO**