

Swimming Fast Under Pressure

By Dr. Alan Goldberg

Do you ever wonder why so many good swimmers seem to fall apart at the big meet? How come they tend to go faster in practice than at Championships? Why does someone always go faster in a relay or off event than he would in his best event? There's a one-word answer to all three of these questions...PRESSURE! There's much more pressure in the bigger meets and your best events than there is in relays or practice.

Pressure tightens a swimmer's muscles, chokes off their breathing and robs them of their confidence. Big meet pressure can make a well-conditioned swimmer feel completely out of shape after just 75 yards of her first race of the day! It can turn your arms into Jell-o and your legs into lead. Pressure is what 7-time Gold Medalist Mark Spitz was referring to when he said, "racing is 90% mental and 10% physical." If you can learn to handle the pressure of competition, then you will start to swim to your potential. If that sounds good to you your next question should be, "HOW do I do that?" I thought you'd never ask. To swim fast under pressure you have to learn to relax. The biggest secret to swimming fast when it counts the most is to keep yourself loose and calm. The more relaxed that you are, the faster you'll go. Relaxation is the key to speed in the pool. Unfortunately, not too many swimmers understand this important connection. As a result, they go into their races and put far too much pressure on themselves. "I've got to get my cut." "I have to beat Jenny!" "I've got to make finals." It's these kinds of pre-race thoughts which will make it impossible for you to relax and, as a result, rob you of your speed.

The bigger the race, the more important it is for you to stay cool and calm before the start. This should be your goal before every one of your important races. If you accomplish this goal, I can almost guarantee that you'll swim the way that you want to. However, too many swimmers, coaches and parents don't focus on this pre-race goal. They get much more caught up in the "outcome" goal (beating someone, time or place). Outcome goals will take care of themselves if you make staying relaxed and loose before your events your primary goal.

Now that I've told you something you probably already know, that relaxation is the solution to the pressure problem and the key to swimming excellence, what you can actually do to stay calm when the heat of competition is turned up extra high.

Stretch: Stretching is a great way to calm yourself and stay loose as long as when you stretch you keep your entire focus of concentration on what you are doing.

Tip #1

Focus on YOU: Paying too much attention to your competition pre-race will raise your level of nervousness. Keep your focus on yourself before your race and you'll stay looser.

Tip#2

Talk with teammates/friends: If hanging out with your buds pre-race keeps you loose and distracts you from thinking too much about your race, get in the habit of making that an important part of your pre-race ritual.

Tip #3

Listen to music: A lot of swimmers keep themselves in control by listening to their favorite

music. Be sure that the tunes that you play in your head are calming and don't wire you up for sound.

Tip #4

Distract yourself: Many swimmers think too much about their race or opponents just before the start, and therefore work themselves up too much. Find other things that you can do pre-race that will distract you from these pressure-causing distractions. You can read, play video games, do homework (sorry about that), etc.

Tip #5

Go somewhere relaxing mentally: I teach many of the swimmers I work with to go to a "safe place" in their mind's eye where they feel completely relaxed and far away. This can be a beach, a vacation spot, or anywhere else. If you mentally practice visiting this special place at night before bed, it will be available to you on race day.

Tip #6

Do Diaphragmatic (deep belly) breathing: You can not freak out if you are breathing from your diaphragm. It is physiologically impossible. Learn to do diaphragmatic breathing. Sit quietly, inhale through your nose to a slow count of 4, pause, then exhale through your mouth to a little faster count of 7 or 8. Focus your concentration on the rise and fall of your diaphragm as you do this. Practice this at home for 4 minutes a day. When you're under pressure, one or two of these breaths will then help you chill out.