

Coaching and Recruiting the Habit of Mental Toughness

By Rick Paine and James Robinson

Although mental toughness is spoken of quite loosely among coaches, it goes mostly undefined, is frequently misunderstood and seldom viewed as a habit. A recent survey revealed little consistency with how coaches define mental toughness. The more frequent answer was, "I know it when I see it".

While it is true that many of us may recognize mental toughness when we see it, the more important questions are perhaps-can it be recruited, coached, and developed into a habit?

We find that indeed mental toughness can be recruited and developed. It remains, however; an inside-out, self-leadership, principle driven, developmental process for athletes.

"Every day, I read in the newspaper about children being born, but it never mentions one being born mentally tough. In the same paper, I also read about "mentally tough" and accomplished athletes passing away. So my guess is that someplace between birth and death, athletes became mentally tough." James Robertson

What is mental toughness?

Amanda is a college swimmer. A consistent comment from Amanda's coaches throughout high school and college is that when observing her behavior after a race, you can rarely tell whether the race was good or bad.

"You will never see her throw her goggles after a bad race or see her doing cartwheels down the deck after a good race."

Amanda consistently keeps herself in the meet. She is always ready to swim one race at a time.

John is a high school and club swimmer who is working toward achieving Junior Nationals standards. If you watch John's races or workouts, you will notice that he always gives 100 percent and never gives up.

"John is not the most talented or gifted swimmer. But when it comes to training, he is one of the most consistent and intelligent swimmers you will ever see," said his club coach.

What mental factors do Amanda and John share that help them remain mentally tough? What mental factors can be recruited and can also be developed?

Remaining in control.

Mental toughness for both of these swimmers started out with self-awareness, with an understanding that they could control their thoughts, emotions, and thus their behavior. Swimmers lacking self-awareness and self-control rarely exhibit mental toughness.

How many swimmers have you known whose entire three or four day swim meet is dictated by the results of their first event?

Deciding in the "Gap".

There is a small gap of time between the stimulus they receive and their response. Between each stimulus, such as the conclusion of a race, the human brain has a moment of time to create its response; the Gap. The decisions swimmers make in that moment of time either enhance or tear down mental toughness.

We have all seen the self-absorbed swimmer who after a bad race throws his goggles and storms off the pool deck. Do you think this swimmer learned anything from the race that would help him improve? Do you think "goggle throwing" is a genetic trait that he is destined to live with?

Decisions become habits.

All swimmers are capable of deciding what their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors will be in the Gap. Human

beings have the power of choice. Why Amanda and John choose to remain positive, stay in the meet mentally, and continue making their best effort regardless of the circumstances, is beyond the scope of this short article. The point is that they do and that other swimmers have the same opportunity to choose.

At some point in their life experiences, Amanda and John, when faced with adversity, chose to work through it. They made the choice once, then they made it again and before long their choices became habit. Each choice was like a small thread of steel. With each decision to compete rather than fold, another small thread of steel was added and before long the habit of mental toughness became like a steel cable, strong enough to support them in any situation.

The typical club/high school swimmer will take approximately 23,000 freestyle strokes per week during training. Do you have any doubt that doing anything 23,000 times a week becomes a habit? The question is, "is it a good habit or a bad habit?"

Life Skill.

Amanda and John have learned that mental toughness is a life skill and not one merely reserved for swimming. Other swimmers make the mistake of thinking they can decide one way in their school work, home life, social lives, and character choices, and another way in the swimming pool. It does not work that way. As swimmers learn to use the Gap and control their thoughts, emotions, and behavior throughout their lives, the habit of choice spreads through their entire lives.

Hitting The Wall.

Mental toughness is reinforced or negated in moments of fatigue, struggle, extreme challenge and at times with what individuals perceive to be failure. In most races longer than 50 meters, swimmers will experience hitting the Wall. When their lungs are burning, their arms ache and their legs are numb they will have a decision to make, "do I slow down or do I work through it."

When swimmers hit the wall how, why, and how quickly they respond, and whether they are proactive or reactive is an ultimate test of mental toughness. Do they proactively and instantly work through the challenge, the commitment from within, and learn from the experience or do they fold their tents and take the easy way out?

Why does one swimmer choose to accelerate into the last turn, stay streamlined and take 8 fly kicks off the last wall of a 200 back while the swimmer next to her chooses to slow down going into the turn and pop for air at the backstroke flags? Is this a God-given talent or a habit developed by consistent practice?

How do your swimmers or recruits respond when they hit the wall in a race or in practice?

For practice, pick out the face of one swimmer. Visualize them facing adversity in practice and competition, and briefly describe how that swimmer responds.

An Expression of Mental Toughness

Some years ago we met Dr. Loehr, author of *Mental Toughness Training for Sports*, and his description of *Why Do I Run* left an impression on us. His story also serves as an example for coaches and athletes who are still questioning if and how mental toughness can be developed. Here is our edition of Jim's story.

I am talking about myself when I ask the question, "Why Do I Run?"

Those who don't run cannot understand.

I've been running for many years, so is running any easier now? Not really, it still always seems easier not to run for just one day. That's what I tell myself almost every day as I lace up my running shoes, "You really don't need to run, but just for today. Don't push so hard, just today." This is how my brain attempts to trick and deceive me, one small decision at a time. My brain knows that when I give in once, the next decision to cave in gets easier and is just around the corner. Steel cables are torn apart the same way they are created, one small strand at a time.

The only thing that has gotten easier about running is covering greater distances in shorter periods of time.

My struggle is always the same and I understand it always will be. Some days I dread running, yet in a sense I crave it.

So why do I still run? To stay in condition, to maintain my health, to feel better in the long run—all partial reasons I suppose. The real reason is confirmation—confirmation that I am expanding my control, my commitment within, my ability to control my thoughts, emotions, and behavior. .

Each day I must make a conscious choice—a choice to run or not to run. A choice to work toward a higher goal or to give into my mind and body's urgings to something more comforting and pleasurable...at least for the moment.

Who is in control? Which path do I choose to follow? I make myself feel guilty when I don't run—when my weak will wins out over character. I still think running is a test of my resolve, my long term commitment to myself, not of just my physical strength, but of my mental strength as well. Running is a challenge of my will, character, and resolve; of mind over matter. Running is me against myself. It's a challenge of being proactive to my character or being reactive to short term pleasure or relief.

Each run is a small success, the richest and most deeply satisfying success. Running remains strangely but unmistakably tied to my self-discipline, self-confidence, self-control, self-realization--all terms that my coach used, but that I never really understood the meaning of until now.

In a world where I often feel controlled and put upon, running helps revive my sense of strength, my control and influence, and my personal conviction that I do make a difference; that I am being responsible for myself.

An addiction or choice you ask? And the question is a fair one. There is always the danger of losing perspective, or losing balance in my life. So long as I choose for the right reasons, the value in running remains true and real. So long as I control running and it does not control me, the balance remains. Positive addiction or not, the value is in deciding. When the choice is gone, I become controlled and victimized again. When the choice is gone, running is just one more thing in my life that tells me that I am not in control, that I am at the mercy of fate, the moment, emotions, others, or to circumstance. I run as a choice, not out of necessity, or its real value is gone for me.

Why do I run? I run for balance and as a life skill. The contest is me against myself.

Why do your swimmers "swim"?

Picture the same swimmer as in the previous question. When they swim do they exhibit traits of mental toughness? How tough are they on themselves in their strength and dryland training, technique and stroke work, and with their commitment to practice and competition?

Myth

Born Tough.

It is a myth that mental toughness is a trait, meaning that swimmers are either born with or without it. While it is true that certain traits support mental toughness, the habit of mental toughness can be developed and fostered within any individual. It remains however; largely an inside-out, self-leadership, principle driven, developmental process, which is where our article started.

I can motivate swimmers.

Long term, it is a myth that we can motivate swimmers and create mental toughness. Mentally tough swimmers are more internally, or what we refer to as intrinsically motivated than externally or extrinsically driven. Swimming through the Wall demands strength that comes from a person's own will, conviction, and motivation, not from the external wishes, demands, and rewards and threats of others. Motivation and mental toughness are both inside-out jobs. When asked about his role in motivating players, Coach Wooden (John Wooden, Hall of Fame UCLA Basketball Coach) told us that his job was not in motivating players. That was the player's job. His job included recruiting highly motivated players, with the talent and skills to fit within the UCLA system, and providing an environment where they could flourish. Coach Wooden drew a very definite line between being able to teach and inspire players versus motivating them.

"The term motivation comes from God within," I recall him saying. "Their teammates have more influence over them than we do."

All athletes need to know that their coaches believe in them, but their true motivation comes from within. We as coaches can create an environment that promotes mental toughness and present opportunities in practice that reveal it.

Summary

Coaching Mental Toughness

- Promote self-awareness among all of your swimmers.
- Reinforce that mental toughness is a life choice, not simply a swimming choice.
- Insist that swimmers choose to control their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors;
- Create consequences for unacceptable displays of emotion and behaviors; and,
- Coach swimmers on making a mental choice in the "Gap", that small amount of time between stimulus and response.
- Remind them that habits are like small strands that become cables of steel, and that...
- Habits are formed by skills, knowledge, attitude, repetition and execution; and
- that their habits soon define them.
- And finally,
- Support swimmers in working through, and being strengthened by adversity.
- Recruit highly motivated athletes with the talent and skills to fit within your system and provide an environment where they can flourish.

Recruiting Mental Toughness

Self Awareness.

When talking with swimmers, estimate their level of self-awareness. We are not talking about maturity. Are they aware of their actions and choices in and out of the pool and their impact on performance?

Life Skill.

In addition to talking with a swimmer's coach in reference to mental toughness and self-control, talk with their parents and high school counselor about the same issue. "How does Jerry/Susan react to pressure at home (classroom, etc.)?"

Learning from Feedback.

Ask yourself this question while observing their practice or races; "When they make mistakes, do they process the feedback and learn from it? Or, do they react negatively, stop short of process appropriate feedback, and fail to learn from the experience?" Ask teachers, parents, counselors how the prospect receives feedback, especially when it is negative.

Look for Patterns.

Always look for patterns in how recruits think, feel, and behave.