

SWIMMING FAST WHEN IT COUNTS: TOP 10 MENTAL TOUGHNESS TIPS

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There's no question that success in the pool on race day is 95% mental and 5% physical. By the time that big race rolls around, all the hard work has been done. That lifetime best swim is already inside of you, just waiting for you to release it. Make use of these ten mental toughness tips to help you get that fast swim out when it counts the most:

1. STAY CALM & LOOSE PRE-RACE – Staying loose and relaxed the hours and minutes before you swim is the secret to going fast under pressure. Tight muscles wreck your stroke mechanics and kill your endurance, making it impossible for you to swim to your potential. Loose muscles allow your body to perform as trained. Listen to relaxing music, talk with friends, keep yourself distracted from thinking about the race, keep your breathing slow and deep and have fun pre-race to help yourself remain calm and loose.

2. LEAVE YOUR GOALS AT HOME ON RACE DAY – Your goals are a motivational tool that helps drive you to work hard each and every day in practice. They should NEVER be brought on deck with you on race day because they will weigh you down. Swimmers who think about or dwell on their goal times right before and/or during their races, make themselves too nervous and physically tight to swim fast. Remember, you don't have to think about your goal times at meets in order to reach them.

3. STAY IN YOUR OWN LANE – Keep your pre and during race focus of concentration in between your two lane lines on what YOU are doing and NOT on the competition. The more you concentrate on what you are doing, the more relaxed you'll stay, the faster you'll go and the better chance you'll have of actually beating the competition. Conversely, the more you think about and focus on what other swimmers are doing, the more nervous you'll get, the slower you'll go and the less likely you'll be to beat them.

4. STAY IN THE "NOW" BEFORE AND DURING YOUR RACES – One of the more costly mental mistakes swimmers make is to allow their pre- and during- race focus of concentration to "time travel." When you mentally leave the now and jump ahead to the future or fall back to the past, you'll make yourself uptight and sabotage all of your hard work. Discipline yourself to keep your focus in the "now," both before and especially during your races. At the meet, focus on one race at a time and during your races, focus on one stroke or turn at a time.

5. BE AWARE WHENEVER YOUR CONCENTRATION DRIFTS AND IMMEDIATELY BRING IT BACK – It's perfectly normal for you to lose your focus before and during your races because there are usually tons of things that can distract you. Understand that losing your concentration won't really hurt you. What will cause you to consistently swim slowly is losing your focus and not

quickly returning it back to the right focus. Discipline yourself to recognize the instant your concentration leaves what YOU are doing in the NOW and quickly bring yourself back.

6. KEEP YOUR RACE FOCUS ON FEEL, NOT ON THOUGHTS – Swimming fast happens when you are focusing on the feel of what you are doing without thinking about it. For example, this could be how much water you're pulling, feeling a stretch under your arm each stroke or feeling your body move forward rather than up and down. Thinking thoughts like "I've got to go faster," "She's pulling ahead of me," or "My arms and legs feel like lead," is a major distraction that will always slow you down. Focus on feel when you race and when thoughts intrude, quickly return your concentration back to the feel of what you're doing.

7. HAVE FUN – If you want to have the meet of your life, then you have to understand that this can only happen when you are having fun before and during the meet. Fun = speed. If you make a meet or any race too important, and you're too serious going in, then that will drain all the fun out of you and in its place will be a lot of nervous tension. When you're having fun, you're mentally and physically loose and relaxed, and as we talked about in point No. 1, staying calm and loose is the secret to swimming fast under pressure.

8. FOCUS ONLY ON THINGS THAT YOU CAN CONTROL – There are a lot of things at meets and in races that are directly out of your control. For example, you have no direct control over how fast your competition swims, what kind of pool you're competing in, who's in your heat or the time you went in your last race or meet. When you focus on these "uncontrollables" either before or during your races, you'll get nervous and physically tight, lose your confidence and swim poorly. Instead, keep your concentration only on those things that you can control.

9. KNOW THAT LAST MINUTE DOUBTS AND NEGATIVE THOUGHTS ARE NORMAL – It's very common to have last minute doubts and negative thoughts pop into your head right before you race. Know that you can still swim your best with this negative thinking going on just as long as you stay calm, accept the thinking for what it is – simply brainwave activity – and then quickly refocus your concentration on the task at hand. Try not to fight with the negative thoughts, replace them with positive ones, or work to keep them out of your mind. This approach only makes the negative thinking stronger. Instead, notice them, accept them as normal, and then refocus.

10. TRUST AND LET IT HAPPEN – You'll always swim your very best when you relax, trust your training and let the fast swim come out, as opposed to trying too hard and forcing it out. When you make a race too important, there's a tendency to respond by tightening up and muscling the race. Instead, trust your training and your body, know the fast swim is inside and just let it happen.