

You don't have to go to practice today. You get to.

BY OLIVIER POIRIER-LEROY 1

Little tweaks/things in a swimmer's mindset can make a profound difference.

When a swimmer views hard sets and competition as a challenge and not as a threat, they perform better.

When a swimmer steps up **behind the blocks and they are excited about the prospect of racing**, not fearful, they swim faster.

And when swimmers understand that they don't have to go to practice and work their butt off, that they get to, they train faster and have more fun doing it.

Although swimmers tend to look at a high-performance mindset with a sense of awe, a measure of *I don't even know where to start to be as mentally tough as elite swimmers*, being sharp between your ears only requires a couple key changes.

And one of them is **taking a little control of the language you use**.

Language like "*I have to*."

THE DEFLATING POWER OF *I HAVE TO*

A lot of the time, *I have to* is simply a mindless product of the language we use. A linguistic habit when talking about doing something requires a bit of effort or might cause a little unpleasantness.

I have to do my homework. I have to go to bed early tonight. I have to use social media less. I have to eat dinner. I have to stop and buy toothpaste on my way home.

So commonplace, you probably don't even notice it peppering your conversations and self-talk, including the narrative you use when talking about your swimming.

I have to swim fast or else it will feel like the season is wasted. I have to go practice tomorrow morning. I have to win this race. I have to work hard or else I will get in trouble from coach. I have to swim faster today. I have to be more motivated to train hard.

BUT...I THOUGHT WE LIKED SWIMMING?

When you *have to* do something, the context is clear: you don't want to do it.

I have to spend more time working my core. I have to make more morning workouts. I have to eat better. Ugh.

The soaking negativity that is all over *I have to* is a little silly when you step back and think about what you are saying. You love swimming, you like hanging out with your friends at the pool, and getting better in the water is exciting, and yet the language you use spells out a different story.

I have to is being forced to do the thing you love. *I have to* means swimming fast and working hard is a burden.

And while the negativity that wafts off *I have to* like the scent of mold from that pull buoy that's rotted under the bleachers can seem harmless, or like an insignificant tweak in language, it leads to a lot of needless resistance when it comes to your effort. And makes things far more struggle than necessary.

Look...

I know that our sport is tough. Demanding. Often unfair.

There will *always* be things within it that we don't want to do. **Early morning workouts.** Swimming backstroke in a lane teeming with breaststrokes. Going to finals at a meet when you didn't qualify for any second swims. Swimming is hard. Training is hard. Racing is hard.

But we certainly don't need to make it harder by loading up our self-talk with *I have to*.

You don't have to go to practice. You don't have to work hard. And you don't have to swim with the best technique you can. You get to do these things.

TWEAK YOUR SELF-TALK WITH A REMINDER THAT YOU "GET TO"

Compared to the powerlessness of *I have to*, rephrasing your self-talk with *I get to* gives you an immediate sense of control.

I get to opens the door for possibility. *I get to* acknowledges that this sport and this moment is to be unwrapped like a present being torn open by an under-slept three year old on Christmas morning.

I get to makes things a little more exciting.

- *I get to see what I am capable of.*
- *I get to swim fast today.*
- *I get to do this sport.*

- *I get to challenge myself.*

I get to reminds you that this is a choice. It's maybe not a surprise to hear **that choice is motivating**. When we feel like we have choice, we have control, which translates to confidence.

I get to reminds you that you could be doing something else, you could be elsewhere, but you are here, in this moment, taking things to the limit.

I get to, and the appearance of choice that it provides, is like a little mental escape hatch—just knowing that this is a choice changes the outlook we have on what is coming.

I get to is a reminder to be grateful. That being able to swim is a privilege. That getting up and racing is something you get to do, not something you have to do.

Because really, no one has a gun to your head. And even though we like to bemoan the struggles of our sport—*I swam more kilometers lasts week than I drove!*—**we secretly love the chlorine out of this sport**.

There's something about complaining the difficulties involved that certify the time we spend on it. To struggle is to strive. But that doesn't mean the struggle needs to be coated with a sense of dread and distaste.

THE WORK YOU DO IN THE WATER IS SOMETHING YOU HAVE CHOSEN TO DO. REFLECT THIS DECISION WITH THE LANGUAGE YOU USE.

- Write *I get to* on your water bottle. It will serve as a reminder when you are struggling physically and mentally in practice to stay on pace. When coach has you start over the main set because someone pulled on the lane rope.
 - Write *I get to* in your **logbook after you have had a practice**. It'll be a simple way to help pick yourself up from the dumps of having a lousy session in the water, a reminder that one bad workout doesn't make you a bad swimmer, and give you a sense of perspective.
-
- Tell yourself *I get to* when you are bagged, grumpy, sore and water-logged with fatigue on day twelve of a two-week training camp.

I get to won't make things easy. The challenge, the **discomfort, the pain and agony of pushing yourself** to the brink will still be there.

But *I get to* shows that you choose the discomfort.

And you have chosen to suffer this sport for the reasons that promote feelings of competence and confidence: getting better, pushing yourself, chasing limits with your friends.

When things are hard, and they will be, remember that you get to do this.