

Mundanity of Excellence



Excerpted from *Champions: The Making of Olympic Swimmers* by Daniel F. Chambliss, New York: Morrow, 1988.

The champion athlete does not simply do more of the same drills and sets as other swimmers; he or she also does things better. That's what counts. Very small differences, consistently practiced, will produce results. In swimming it could be doing all turns legally, or swimming one extra set of repeats after practice every day, or wearing gloves on your hands to keep them warm at a meet. American historian John Morton Blum reportedly has said that to be successful a writer need produce only three pages a day—every single day. Often the trick is doing little things (like good turns) correctly, all the time, every time. Championship training consists of doing more and more of these little things—and they are, finally, innumerable—each one consistently, so that each one produces a result.

The results of such quality training inevitably add up. Swimming is swimming, we can say—in practice, or in meets, it's all the same. If you swim sloppily 364 days a year, nothing great is going to happen on the day of that one big meet, no matter how excited you get. Nowadays top-level swimmers tend to treat workouts as meets, where every swim counts; they have to

win each repeat, always do great starts and turns. Steve Lundquist, for example, decided early in his career to try to win every swim in every practice, and eventually he did that. Many Mission Viejo swimmers took time every day to psych up for workouts, which they treated as intense competitions. It was not uncommon to see swimmers at Mission Viejo

swimming within seconds of their lifetime bests in practices, going all out every day. When they eventually got to a meet, there was nothing new to be overcome, and the conclusion was all but foregone: for all the closeness of the times at Nationals, the same people often do win, year after year.

When Rowdy Gaines studied the starter in the Olympic Games, that was not a new “trick” he invented that day. He always checked the starter, as do many swimmers, because he knows that sometimes it makes a difference. He wasn’t “cheating” to win that day. He was simply attending to details that other people didn’t, and he had the good luck that the officials didn’t recall the start. Mike Heath and Mark Stockwell and the five other swimmers in that race could have anticipated the gun, too, perhaps with good results, but they didn’t. Gaines did.

These little things matter not so much because of their physical impact, but because psychologically they separate the champion from everyone else. Having done the little things, the champion can say “I have done what no one else has done, and I know it; and they know it, too.” The little things, the details, then can be important for their testimonial value, their symbolic value, in setting one apart as someone special or different—someone to be watched and to be paid attention to. “This guy takes this seriously (and we don’t); he really does deserve to win.” “Why should I hurt myself in this race when Christine wants it that bad?” The little things, far from being an aggravation for top-level athletes are the part they most enjoy: the polished points that mark the craftsmen of sport.

One result of this we call “confidence.” Some people believe that confidence is “mental” or is “all in your head,” as if you could just, one day, decide to have it. Or they believe that you get “confidence” when you buy a cassette tape that tells you to relax, think positively, visualize your races, and so on. They believe that confidence is a mental trick, like hypnosis, that can take one to incredible feats. But the confidence of the champion is not some trick learned by listening to an inspiring lecture. Confidence is not the cause of championship; it is the result of setting up difficult tasks and then doing them. As one coach put it, “Mental preparation is something you do in the water everyday.”

Our usual view of champions tells us the opposite. We think they are special people, larger than life: unusually good-looking, successful, happy all the time, patriotic, and self-confident. Failures don’t get much TV coverage. For the sake of drama, reasonably enough, storytellers enhance some part of the story and downplay others. And we think reasonably: My God, this guy is nothing like me, I could never do what he does.

But there is no magic that separates Olympians from everyday people, despite the fact that the title suggests Greek gods. No one is born to make the Olympic finals; potential doesn't win a gold medal. Doing it is the only thing that counts. The truth is simple: Most swimmers choose every day not to do the little things. They choose, in effect, not to win. They say, "I could do this workout if I wanted to," or "I could have rolled with the start," or "I would have won if I had been healthy." In some sense, everyone "could" win in the Olympic Games, but "could" doesn't count. The gold medal is reserved for those who do.

The doing—this alone makes champions different. The excitement they feel comes from the raw physical and emotional reality they face every morning as they swim six miles, paying attention to all the details. Certainly the Olympic Games represent a rare opportunity to demonstrate publicly one's heroic capabilities. But champions do not wait four years to find their heroic opportunities; they create those opportunities, every day.