

ABCS OF MENTAL TRAINING: X IS FOR “X-GAMES MENTALITY”

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I was brainstorming with colleague Lenny Wiersma about what my “X” article was going to be. I was leaning towards “x-pectations” but being a Californian he suggested “X-games” and noted that swimmers could learn a lot from the free-wheeling, chillaxing mentality of X-gamers. I agreed, so this article will address how swimmers can benefit from a no fear, enjoy the ride, kick-butt-and-take-names mentality.

No Fear

Many X-games events are about speed, height, and testing gravity. What you need to succeed in these events are guts; fear will certainly be your downfall (literally and figuratively). The athletes who participate in these games love the adrenaline rush and love to challenge themselves to go bigger and be bolder than everyone else. It’s mentally impressive. So what can athletes who swim in straight lines learn from this? A lot, but what I’d like you to gain is perspective in that the only consistently “scary” fear swimmers often have is losing/not swimming well. X-gamers have those same thoughts of losing but to them it’s simply a concern. They’d laugh if you said “I’m afraid to lose” and tell you that the physics of swimming is a lot more forgiving than the physics of a half-pipe. Next time you catch yourself being afraid to fail ask yourself “is this a fear or is this a concern?”

Accept the Challenge

My outside impression of most X-gamers is that they get genuinely pumped for someone who performs a new trick that they’ve never seen before. Watch a skateboarder throw something “sick” and you’ll see his competitors jump out of their seats in excitement, knowing they just witnessed something cool. I love this about the X-games. Competitors enjoy seeing the bar raised. They see this as a new challenge and then they work hard to top it. They are constantly trying to up their game and go beyond what others thought was possible. In swimming terms, instead of being hard on yourself because someone beat you or broke your record, see this as a new challenge. Embrace this as an opportunity to assess your habits and see what you can do better. Get excited to see a competitor’s hard work pay off, but in your head throw down the gauntlet and say “I’ll beat you next time” or “I’ll break your record soon.”

Have Fun and Get Lost in the Moment

X-gamers compete because they love it. In the 2006 Olympics Lindsey Jacobellis, a snowboardcross rider, had a big lead on her opponent and was about to win her race but decided to do a trick over a jump rather than just hitting the jump cleanly. She fell and it cost her the gold medal. When asked why she did the trick she responded, “I was caught up in the moment...I was having fun and that’s what snowboarding is. I was ahead. I wanted to share with the crowd my enthusiasm.” Sure, she had a little too much fun and in hindsight she admits she messed up. However, she knows she was the fastest that day, the outcome just doesn’t show it. What this example demonstrates is that the number one priority of a lot of X-gamers is to enjoy what they are doing. Winning helps make the sport more enjoyable, but ultimately, they just want to compete their best and have fun doing it. This translates to all sports—the more you love it, the harder you’ll work. The harder you work, the better you’ll do. Ultimately, have fun and everything else follows. Even if you don’t win, you’ll likely swim faster if you enjoy the process.

Roll Like I Roll

In the last Winter Olympics they interviewed a snowboarder who was admittedly nervous before he competed. They asked him how he calmed himself down. He said something to the effect of, “I reminded myself I knew what I was doing. I told myself to go put on a show and just roll like I roll.” I loved this phrase because I think it’s something important for all athletes to remember—that you just have to go out and do your thing. Whatever the sport, it’s what you do every day. You know what you’re doing; you know how to swim fast. Simply put, go swim how you swim.

Make it Great!