

TIP OF THE MONTH:

How to Mentally Prepare for Better Races

by Seminole Aquatics Head Coach Tony Ackerson

Over the years I've seen thousands—literally thousands—of swimmers in various stages of preparation for their races. And it is fascinating to me to see the myriad of ways that people prepare themselves to swim fast.

The mental aspect of swimming fast is often overlooked by a lot of coaches. Many of them think, incorrectly, that if an athlete simply works hard and pay attention to the details of their event (i.e., having good starts and turns, etc.), then the athlete will automatically be a good RACER. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Often, well-meaning parents and coaches can contribute to swimmers doing poorly in races by vaguely urging the athlete to "focus" or get "pumped up" for a race. The irony of this is that in all of my years of coaching swimmers, I've *never* seen a single race failure that could be attributed to the swimmer not taking a race seriously enough. In fact, it is usually just the opposite—the swimmer (or parent, or coach) puts WAY too much emphasis on the swimmer succeeding.

Little League baseball coaches will tell you that when a child tells himself over and over again "I can't drop the next ball, I can't drop the next ball", the same kid will almost ALWAYS drop the ball! The same holds true to shooting free throws in a basketball game, or just about any pressure situation you can imagine. Why is this? It's because *the athlete is primarily focusing on avoiding a negative outcome*. So in swimming, when I see a kid behind the blocks, shoulders hunched up high around her ears, biting her fingernails and looking worried, the results are usually equally predictable. The swimmer is focusing on what's going to happen if the race goes poorly, what her teammates will think, what her parents will say, how hard she's worked, how bad it will feel if she doesn't do well, etc, etc. In short, when the swimmer creates an environment where *the body is surrounded by so much pressure and negativity, it's virtually impossible to do well*. So, what should you do?

Mental visualization is a great race strategy, and I had good experiences with it back in my own collegiate swimming career. The premise is simple: You find a nice, quiet place to relax each day (or night—I used to do this right before going to sleep), and you spend 5-10 minutes taking a body part and tensing it, then relaxing it, until your entire body feels loose and supple. Some people take this a step further, and try to imagine the most relaxing place they've ever been, such as lying on the beach in the warm sun.

Once you're totally relaxed, you imagine the pool that your big race is going to be held at. You picture everything—the sounds, the smell of chlorine, the locker rooms, your teammates warming up—and you think about what your race will be like.

You see yourself on the blocks, getting a perfect reaction to the start, and executing the best dive and breakout of your life. You feel the power that you want to have on that day, and you imagine every detail of the race being carried out to perfection. Finally, you imagine the best finish of your life, and then your joy at seeing your team's reaction to the swim you just did. And then you drift off to sleep with that image fresh in your mind.

When you do this a few hundred times, you get to your big race feeling fully prepared to do well. Everything feels familiar, because you've already done the race so many times in your mind.

I know that this sounds funny to some people, and I don't blame them for thinking as much. But it DOES work for a lot of people, and the basics that I've described here—being in a relaxed and confident state of mind going into races—are an absolute must for every athlete.

