

How to Swim for Yourself

By Mike Gustafson//Contributor | Wednesday, November 8, 2017

Over the years, when swimmers email me questions about competitive swimming, I often come back to the same mantra: “Swim for yourself.”

The questions I receive mostly have to do with pressures – external pressures, pressures from coaches, parents, teammates. Of course, there are a lot of internal pressures as well. Pressures to succeed. Pressures to perform well. Pressures to win.

I never learned how to “swim for myself” until I was around 20-years-old. It wasn’t that I was necessarily swimming for other people — I didn’t necessarily swim for my parents, teammates, or coaches. But at the same time, I wasn’t swimming only for myself. I wasn’t swimming just for the pure love of doing something just because I could.

It happened when I failed: At my end-of-season championship meet, I had failed to accomplish my personal goal. I quickly realized that I just wasn’t swimming for the right reasons. I realized that I was swimming for so many other reasons – swimming because I felt like I had to, swimming because I felt like I would let people down if I didn’t, swimming because I swam the season before, and so, I should just keep swimming.

Suddenly, instead of feeling preoccupied with swimming as a way to interact with the world (teammates, coaches, college, friends, etc.), I began to just swim as a means to interact with myself. I began to imagine that no one else was involved with this sport: No teammates, no coaches, no parents, no competitors. I imagined that it was only me, and some water.

A weird thing happened: I began to swim for myself. I took ownership over my mentality. Rather than finishing a race and wondering why I wasn’t swimming fast, I realized that I had a negative attitude about the sport for multiple seasons. So I changed that attitude. I realized that I wasn’t eating as healthy as I should be. So I changed my nutrition. I realized that I was preoccupied with what people thought about me. So I changed that, too.

If you’re like me, struggling to “swim for yourself,” here are a few changes you can make to help:

1. Stop analyzing psych/heat sheets.

The only thing you’ll gain from overanalyzing psych sheets is your placement in the context of other people. Psych sheets will not help you swim faster; they will only show you how fast everyone else could swim. I used to pour over psych and heat sheets, and it filled me with anxiety. When I shifted that energy over to self-focus, I found a new sense of individualism.

2. Get to practice early; leave practice late.

I’ll fill you in on a secret: If you’re that swimmer leaping into warm-ups five minutes late, you’re not swimming for yourself. “Swimming for yourself” means you just don’t let yourself be late. In other words, you care. Truly, deeply care. So even if you’re struggling with caring, try it for one month: Try showing up to practice ten minutes early; try doing a few sprints from the blocks at the end of practice. You’ll be amazed at that feeling you get when you take ownership over your own schedule.

3. Focus on process, not product.

Sometimes, when I was a swimmer, I dropped so much time in a month, I thought I was an all-star. Then other times, I couldn't drop time for years. I lived and died by whatever the scoreboard told me. I fixated on personal bests. I worried about my all-time best races. I was so fixated and focused on these end-of-year races that I forgot about the nine months of important racing and practicing beforehand. Championship races are not won or lost on the day of the race itself: Championship races are won in November, during those cold Monday mornings when you just don't feel like it. Focus on process, not product. Don't get too high if you swim fast. Don't get too low if you swim slow. No matter how you swim, be excited that on Monday morning, you get to start it all over again.

4. Cheer for your teammates.

Some people think "swim for yourself" means "only pay attention to yourself." Don't do this. Truthfully, the more you care about how your teammates swim — the more you cheer for them, the more you root for them, the more you help them — the more responsibility you'll take for your own swimming. It might not make sense, but swimming for yourself just means holding yourself accountable not only to yourself, but to the team around you. If you're only self-focused, you're not going to swim as fast as if you had an entire team behind you. Cheer. Root. Support. Be a leader. Oddly, when you do this, you take even more personal responsibility, too.

5. Try your hardest when no one is looking.

We all want that glorious feeling: Bringing home an Olympic gold medal relay in front of thousands of screaming fans. But if you swim for yourself, your hardest work will be accomplished when there are no screaming fans, no onlookers, no one there to cheer you on. When you're in the last in the lane, and you can either decide to work harder or loaf: This is when you "swim for yourself." When you decide not to loaf, but to do whatever you can to work your way back to lead. Swimming for yourself is when you try your absolute hardest when no one is looking.