

# Q IS FOR QUALITY PRACTICE

## BY DR. AIMEE KIMBALL//MENTAL TRAINING CONSULTANT

Often when people talk about being mentally prepared, the focus is on competition. However, when you stop to think about it, you spend more time practicing than you do competing.

Therefore, it is essential to make sure you aren't just going through the motions at practice, you have to make each training session a quality one.

### Let's Call it Preparation

I've always had issues with calling practice "practice." To me, the word practice has the connotation of just going over your skills and repeating what you already know. I am not suggesting there is anything wrong with the physical act of practicing. Just the opposite. I think that practice is extremely important, and because of its importance, we need to view it as more than just something swimmers do because it comes with the sport. I would rather people refer to this time in the pool as "preparation." I believe that if you connect everything you do during your "practice time" to the fact that it is preparing you for your meet that you will take it more seriously, have a better attitude, and have a more intense focus. All of these positive mental changes will then help you to perform better at competition. For example, instead of dreading yet another 6 a.m. practice that your coach is forcing you to attend, if you realize the morning session is an opportunity to prepare your body and your mind for the upcoming meet, you may be more motivated, thus making you more productive.

Additionally, by thinking about your "practice time" as "preparation," you can enhance your confidence on race day. Before your meets you will be able to look back and remember all of the little things you did to prepare for each event. In knowing you made the most of your time, you can trust that your training has you fully prepared to race your best.

### Quality Control

How many times have you gone to practice just hoping you survive the training session? If you feel training is a chore and do just enough to get by, that's probably not what I would consider to be top quality.

To assess the quality of your training, first identify what makes a quality practice. You can define this for yourself and may want to include things like: self-talk, attitude, focus, pushing yourself harder when you're tired, doing each drill as designed, setting the pace for your lane, swimming hard until the completion of each set, etc.

Then, take your last five practices and grade them using the criteria you just created. Use a grading scale like those in school:

*A (4 pts) = Excellent, B (3 pts) = Good, C (2 pts) = Average, D (1 pt) = Fair, F (0 pts) = Poor*

Next, average the number of points for each practice. For example:

*Day 1: A=4                      Day 2: B=3                      Day 3: A=4                      Day 4: C=2                      Day 5: A=4*

*Total Points: 17                      Average Grade: 17 (pts) /5 (days)= 3.4                      Overall Grade: B+*

If you don't average a 3.5 or better, you probably are not making the most of your practice

time. Having a “B” average is enough to keep you at your current performance level. In order to improve, it will take “A” type training.

While you may think an “average” day is acceptable, if you have those kinds of practices too often you are going to develop bad habits. It is especially important to focus on having an “excellent” practice on days when you are tired because that’s the most difficult time to have proper technique. If you can get yourself not to settle for being average and can push to be better than just good, you are ensuring that you will be able to swim well and maintain form and speed at the end of a race.

### **How to Improve My Practice Quality**

In addition to making sure you have proper nutrition habits and warm-up correctly, improving your practice quality is as simple as making sure you are focusing on the correct things. Here is a checklist to make sure your mind is where it needs to be in order for you to get the most from each moment in the pool:

#### *Pre-Practice Mental Checklist:*

- 1) What specifically am I going to improve on today?
- 2) What will I do to make sure I get better at this?
- 3) Why is this important for me to improve?
- 4) My goal by the end of practice is to....
- 5) How can I have a positive influence on my teammates today?

Note that sometimes it helps swimmers not to just focus on themselves, but to focus on teammates as well. There will be some days when you are exhausted and find it very difficult to be motivated. On these days, it can help to focus on being a positive influence on others.

#### *During Practice Mental Checklist:*

- 1) What am I working on in this set? What is the purpose of this drill?
  - a. How can I use this in my race?
- 2) Is there anything else I need to do to prepare myself for the upcoming meet?
- 3) What is my mindset right now?
  - a. Can I improve my attitude? Focus?
- 4) What do I want others to say about me after this practice?

### **Carpe Momentum (Seize the Moment)**

With each practice you have the opportunity to get better, to stay where you are, or to get worse. When you know that what you do today prepares you for tomorrow it makes practice easier. Remember, if you do all of the hard work in training, meets will be a lot more fun.

### **Make it Great!**

#### **ABOUT AIMEE C. KIMBALL, PHD**

Dr. Aimee C. Kimball is the Director of Mental Training at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center’s Center for Sports Medicine. She received a PhD from the University of Tennessee where she specialized in sport psychology.

She is an Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology Certified Consultant, and is a member of the American Psychological Association, the United States Olympic

Committee's Sport Psychology Registry, the USA Swimming Sports Medicine Network, and the NCAA Speakers Bureau.

As a Mental Training Consultant, Dr. Kimball has worked with professional, collegiate, high school, recreational, and youth athletes in a variety of sports, and assists the Pittsburgh Steelers in analyzing potential draft picks.

She has been a featured speaker at conferences across the nation and has appeared in Men's Health Magazine, Runner's World, Athletic Management Magazine, various local and national newspapers, and has appeared on ESPN, NPR, and news broadcasts across the country.

She is a Clinical Faculty member in the University of Pittsburgh's Department of Orthopaedics and an adjunct faculty member in the Sports Marketing Department at Duquesne University. Currently, Dr. Kimball works with athletes and other performers to assist them in achieving success in sport and life. For more information contact: 412-432-3777; kimballac@upmc.edu

