

ABC's of Mental Training: Y is for Young Athletes

From USA Swimming website - AIMEE C. KIMBALL, PHD



Swimming is a lifelong sport. Many people learn to swim as a toddler and continue through the days when their knees can no longer handle pounding the pavement. While many people swim just for fun in the summer months or on trips to the beach, many choose to dedicate themselves to swimming competitively. This article addresses some tips for young athletes who want to be successful in competitive swimming.

Train Hard

You'll hear it from your coaches: the harder you work, the easier competition is. Training hard not only prepares your body for "easy" success, but preparation also lays the foundation for confidence.

Don't just go through the motions at practice. Focus on getting better, faster and stronger with every lap. It's your choice. You can just show up and exert minimum effort, or you can be physically and mentally present and train like you want to be a champion.

Be Coachable

You'll experience many coaching styles in your swimming career, some you will love and some you will not. Regardless of your personal opinion, keep an open mind. Your coach is in this role because he is passionate about the same sport as you and wants to help you improve. If you write him off because he teaches you something different than a previous coach or because he doesn't communicate the way you'd like, you may be passing up an opportunity to further develop. Over time you will learn what works for you and what doesn't. Eventually you will get to a point where you feel comfortable talking to your coach about your training. If you disagree with your coach, engage in a discussion and allow him to educate you on his philosophy and the science behind his training methods. Being open to new ways of training and alterations in technique is the only way you will improve as a swimmer.

Understand Growth and Development

During the middle school and high school years, your body will go through incredible changes. Understand that these changes will often positively impact your speed, but there are times during the growth process where you may get slower or become less efficient.

While you are in the midst of your growth spurt, you may see your times improve significantly. When this growth period is over, you may not drop time at the rate you were. Don't let this impact your confidence. You may be in a phase where improvement has more to do with your body than your training. Also, keep in mind that others may hit their growth spurts after you, so someone you used to beat easily may now be able to keep up. Don't assume your hard work isn't paying off. Others may just be catching up to you in the development process.

Find Balance

Swimming is an exhausting sport. You train before and after school and exert more energy before 7 a.m. than some athletes do all week. While it is a very time-consuming sport, it is important to have a life outside of swimming. Try other sports, be in student council, take

piano lessons. Find other activities that you enjoy so swimming doesn't consume you. Because swimming is often year-round and starts at a young age, balance is key to avoiding burnout and continuing to enjoy the sport for years to come.

Address All Components

Swimming requires a commitment in and out of the pool. Mental training, healthy eating, stretching, and dry land conditioning are all important factors in long-term swimming success. When you address everything that impacts you in the water you will be more prepared, more confident, and better able to handle the rigors of swimming at a competitive level. Obviously I am biased, but I truly believe the mind has a tremendous impact on success. Your work ethic in practice, your ability to push through pain, your confidence at meets, and your ability to control anxiety are just some of the mental components of swimming. The earlier you start addressing your mental game, the more likely you are to have what it takes to transition to higher levels of competition and to make the most of your physical ability.

Summary

There are lots of things to consider when choosing to be a competitive swimmer. Overall, if you love the sport, are willing to work hard at it, and focus on continuing to improve, you can have a long and successful swimming career.

Make it great!