

## **A Swimmers Guide To Mental Toughness**

### **By Dr. Alan Goldberg**

If you really want to maximize your potential as a competitive swimmer and reach the goals you've set for yourself, then you have to start today to train yourself mentally as well as physically. Without the right head set and mental strategies you'll always swim slower than your capabilities. In order to gain the Competitive Advantage and swim like a winner, you've got to first think like one. Understand and practice the following ideas and steps and they'll help you on your way to becoming a champion! Remember you can't go fast without using your head, and you can't develop mental toughness without consistent practice.

#### **#1 Keep your Swimming Fun**

Do not wait until you win before you start having fun. Champions go fast because they are having fun! When you enjoy yourself you'll be physically looser and will swim much faster. Make your practices and meets fun! If you're too serious and turn your swimming into all work and no fun you will definitely run into performance difficulties and be a candidate for burnout. Remember, fun and speed go together. If you find yourself dreading your meets something's wrong.

#### **#2 Have Clear Goals**

You can't get to where you want to go unless you know exactly where that is. Your success as a swimmer starts with a dream, a goal of how far you'd like to go in the sport. The more detailed a picture you can paint of this goal, the better your chance of turning your dream into reality. Saying you want to be as good as you can or go faster are goals that are general and too vague to be useful. Qualifying for Senior Nationals, or going 50 flat in the 100 fly are clear, specific and more reachable. Your goals are like magnets, which will pull you in their direction. The more specific and detailed you make them and the more time you spend thinking about them, the stronger the pull. Try to have your goals broken down from long term to intermediate to short term so that even on a daily basis you will have specific goals for practice. This will help you stay motivated over the long haul.

#### **#3 Make Your Practices Important**

Use Simulation in Practice - Most swimmers spends the same amount of time practicing weekly. However, only a small fraction of athletes improve to their potential. The reason behind this lies in your practices. Practice does not make perfect, perfect practice makes perfect. Too many swimmers go through the motions in practice. They put their time in but not their minds or their emotions. They daydream during sets or wish they were elsewhere. During difficult sets they look for ways to dog it. You will compete the way you practice. Practice just like meets, mentally as well as physically, that is make your practices important, use your imagination to simulate meet or race conditions. Take a few of those long, boring, painful sets and pretend you're actually competing. Practice race turns, finishing fast, getting your pain to work for you, etc. The more important you can make your practices and the more similar to actual meets, the more you'll get out of them. Every chance you get, set-up specific race-scenarios in your head and then swim as if everything was on the line. If you consistently practice this way, the way champions do, you will soon find your meet times dropping.

#### **#4 Focus on Your Race One Stroke at a Time**

Not on Winning or Qualifying - You will swim your best when your concentration is on your race, one stroke at a time. You will choke-and swim badly when you get caught up with outcome thoughts (i.e. winning, losing, qualifying, times, etc.). The outcome of your race, which is in the future, is totally out of your control! Swimmers who get distracted with this kind of future focus almost always swim tight and feel heavy. Stay in the now as you race concentrating on what you are doing, while you are doing it. If you find yourself thinking "What if..." that's a reminder that you are mentally in the future and need to change focus.

#### **#5 Concentrate -**

In order to swim as fast as you can you've got to have your mind in the right place. Concentration is the key mental skill to swimming excellence and mental toughness. Here's how to do it!

- **Step 1: Recognize**

Recognize that you are mentally in the wrong place, i.e. in the future worried about an outcome or a swimmer in the next lane.

- **Step 2: Bring Yourself-Back**

Quickly and gently bring yourself back to a proper focus. You learn to concentrate by catching yourself when you're not concentrating! This is the heart of championship concentration.

#### **#6 Learn to Quickly - Let Go of Your Mistakes and Failures**

Champions do one thing better than everyone else. FAIL!! When a champion has a bad race they not only use this failure for feedback ("What did I do wrong ... How can I improve") But just as important, they let it go quickly. In other words, they don't dwell on the past. When you hang onto your bad races and mistakes in a meet, the one thing you can count on happening is that you'll get more of them! Learn to recognize when your mind's in the past and quickly & gently let it go. Telling yourself things like "Here we go again", "Why does this always happen to me" are indicators that your focus is stuck in the past. Only go into the past if your past is a positive, self-enhancing one!

#### **#7 Stay within yourself - Swim Your Own Race - Stay Mentally in the Here**

You will swim your very best when you can learn to mentally stay within yourself, focusing on what you have to do and are doing. Psych-outs and intimidation can only occur when you choose to start focusing outside of yourself, on another swimmer. Staying within yourself means that you have to want to mentally stay in your own lane when you compete. Thinking about someone else's best times, how fast they finish or how awesome they are will only make you choke and swim tight. Stay in the "here" by recognizing when you're in the wrong mental place and bringing yourself back right away to what you're doing.

#### **#8 Control your Eyes and Ears for Championship Meet Performances**

Related to #7, learn to control what you look at and listen to, both before and during the race. That is, only visually focus on things that keep you calm, composed and ready to perform well. If looking at the gallery, or other racers, makes you uptight...don't do it! Instead look down at the blocks, or at a spot across the pool, or one on the water, which keeps you, relaxed. Similarly, make sure any things you "look" at in your mind's eye are positive and confidence enhancing. If you are using imagery and keep seeing a false start, either change the image or actively look at something else. Controlling your ears means that you only want to listen to things that will keep you calm, composed, and confident. If your self-talk is making you uptight change it! Or block it out by listening to a Walkman. Control your eyes and ears for mental toughness.

### **#9 See What You Want to have Happen, Not What You're Afraid Will Happen**

Winners in and out of the pool have learned to use their imagination (mental rehearsal and imagery) to help them reach their goals. Make it a practice to focus on exactly what you want to have happen, not what you're afraid will happen. Focusing on positive images will calm you down, raise your confidence, and increase your chances of achieving your goals. Practice mental rehearsal 5-10 minutes at a time, preceded by relaxation in an area free from distractions. Make your pictures (sounds, feelings) as vivid and detailed as possible, seeing, hearing, and feeling yourself performing just the way you'd like to.

### **#10 Let it Happen = Speed**

When you swim your fastest there is an automatic, effortless quality to your performance. You are working hard without trying hard. It feels easy, yet powerful. When you get in to a meet situation you have to remember that in order to swim your best, you have to relax and let the race happen. If you make your race too important, you'll get into trying too hard and will swim slower. Trust that you've done everything you need to, your body and muscle memory knows what to do, and then just let the performance happen. Swim with effortless effort.

### **#11 Swim with No-Mind to Go Fast**

A corollary to #10, if you want to go fast you've got to keep your conscious mind and all of its' thoughts out of the pool. In your best races, not only did you swim on autopilot, but also most likely there was a no thinking quality to your race. Conscious thought slows you down and distracts you. You want to swim unconsciously with no mind. In baseball Yogi Berra once said "a full mind is an empty bat." The same applies to you and your swimming. The more you think, the slower you'll go. Practice, in practice, doing "no-think" swims.

### **#12 GIGO - You Swim the Way You Think**

The difference between your best and worst swims is usually related to your mental "strategies" just before and during your race. That is, what you think, say to yourself, and image both before and during your race determines whether you'll go fast or slow. If you program garbage into your computer (brain) before a race ("what if I false start", "what if I blow my turn," or "he'll probably catch me at the finish and win") you will get garbage back out in your performances. Learn to "program in" good stuff and that's what you'll get back out.

### **#13 Be Positive - Nothing Good Comes from Negativity**

When you're negative or down on yourself you sap your energy, drain your confidence, and insure that you will swim poorly. Practice being positive about, yourself, teammates, and coaches, **NO MATTER WHAT**. A positive attitude will help you overcome hardships and setbacks and keep you going. A negative attitude will trick you into giving up too soon. Winners in and out of the pool are positive. "Can't," "Never," and "impossible" do not exist in the dictionary of their minds.

#### **#14 Reframe Adversity**

Learn to look at obstacles and setbacks as a way to get more motivated and to increase your confidence. Most swimmers complain bitterly about pool temperature, lane assignments, rain, and fatigue. The great swimmers use any kind of adversity to help them get the competitive advantage over their opponents. For example, you can do 1 of 2 things with the pain and fatigue of a race. You can dread it, fight it, complain about it and consequently tighten up and back down from it=going slower; or you can reframe it. You can say to yourself "everyone in this race has to deal with this pain, and I'm mentally tougher to handle it than everyone else...pain and fatigue is an indicator that I'm going fast, that my body's working well, and a signal for me to move towards it, stretching it out and lengthening the stroke." Learn to think like a winner by reframing. When your swimming gives you lemons... make lemonade out of them.

#### **#15 Act as if - If you want to become a Winner, First You Have to Learn to Act like One.**

Acting as if is the master strategy of champions. If you act the way you want to become, you'll become the way you act. Acting as if has to do with your posture or how you carry yourself physically. Watch swimmers after they've had a bad race and you'll see some interesting stuff. Their heads will be down; shoulders drooping, facial expression down, and they'll be dragging their feet. If you act this way physically, -- like a loser, you'll perform like one. A winner's fall back position is to act as if. If you're-totally intimidated and freaking out before a race, act as if: act calm and confident. Have your head up, put a smile on your face, pick your shoulders up and put a spring in your step. Even if you're dying inside. Show your opponent someone who on the outside looks in control.

#### **#16 Learn to be Your Own Best Fan**

It's real easy to be nice to yourself and supportive when you're winning. Champions, however, separate themselves from everyone else because they've learned to be supportive to themselves when things are going badly. Getting down on yourself for bad performances will not help you in the long run. It will kill your motivation and make you an unhappy camper. Learn to be your own best fan. Someone who is here to share the success and to help you through the tough times. After all, that's when you need support the most, especially from yourself.

#### **#17 You Are Not Your Races**

Learn to separate who you are as an athlete and person from how you do in your meets. You are not the results of your races. If you have a great meet this does not make you a great person. More important, if you have an awful meet, this does not make you the scum of the earth. If you get caught up in putting your ego on the line whenever you compete, you can be sure of one thing, you'll take a fall a whole lot. A swim meet should never be viewed as a measure of self-worth and respectability. By you, your coaches, or your parents!!

#### **#18 Learn to Relax**

In order to stay within yourself and swim your own race you need to have the ability to handle competitive pressure. For many, this ability does not come naturally. You can learn to stay composed under pressure by practicing one or two of the many relaxation techniques available to athletes. Probably one of the best is to learn to slow and deepen your breathing. By taking a few slow diaphragmatic breaths you can very quickly calm yourself down pre-race. Practice at home, sitting for 5 minutes at a time, inhaling slowly through your nose to a count of 4, and then exhaling to a count of 7- 8, and continuing this process for the allotted time. Every time you drift, you can practice recognizing that you've lost your focus and then bring yourself back.