

Staying Focussed (or keeping your eyes on the prize) Staying Motivated

By Wayne Goldsmith

The great Austrian philosopher Arnold Schwarzenegger is supposed to have said, "Success comes from staying in close contact with your goals".

Every swimmer has goals or dreams. For some the dream is finishing their first event. For others it's an Olympic Gold. The challenge is turning dreams into reality.

Goal setting is one powerful method of staying motivated and focussed on the achieving of success. However, the actual setting of goals is not difficult. It's a relatively simple matter to sit down, pull out a pen and piece of paper and write "I would like to beat Susie O'Neill at the Olympics". The process of setting goals is much more than just writing down a list of things you would like to achieve this year.

The great news is that psychological skills can be learned, can be trained, just like swimming skills, swimming technique and swimming fitness. Skills like concentration, imagery, self-talk, relaxation, motivation, focussing and goal setting are just some of the mental skills techniques that can be learned and mastered with a little effort.

However, mental skills are not magic – they are not a secret formula for turning ordinary performers into champions. Having a motivation session with a coach or psychologist the evening before a big event is unlikely to make up for months of poor training habits.

Mental skills, like any skills, need to be practised. Knowing about mental skills, but not actually practising them is the same as knowing that long swims increase swimming endurance but never doing more than 25 metres in training. How often have you heard a great athlete comment "Success is all mental" or "It's 99% mental"? If mental skills are so important it makes good sense to practice them regularly.

Let's focus on one particular mental skill - **GOAL SETTING**.

Goal Setting

Goal setting is part of every day life. It's the way our minds and bodies operate. We set goals, then do them. Goal – I want to eat that Tim Tam in the fridge. Motivation – I like the taste and I am hungry. Action – Get up and go to the fridge, open the door and get the Tim Tam.

Goals direct behaviour in a particular direction, and if we are motivated to act we move. There is a strong relationship between goal setting and motivation.

Psychologists today tend to talk more about Goal Management than simply goal setting. Goal management is the total process of using goals to focus in on a task and keep motivated in moving towards it.

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Goal management is setting goals, evaluating goals, monitoring goals, chasing goals, reviewing goals and adjusting goals.

Having goals and dreams is one thing – being able to stay focussed and motivated to achieve them and work towards them every day is another.

One technique for staying motivated to work towards your goals is to give them a definite time frame. **A goal is a dream with a deadline.**

Having a target date for your goal also makes a commitment to evaluation – a time or moment when you will evaluate, review and if necessary adjust your goals.

For example:

Goal: I would like to be a better swimmer this season.
This goal has little direction, is very broad and is not precise.

Alternate Goal: By February 2000, I will aim to improve my freestyle. To achieve this I will have my technique corrected by the coach this week, work on my technique every session and commencing next Monday morning at 6:00 am I will start the day with 30 minutes of stretching and strengthening exercises. Each Sunday I will do an extra swim session and in December I will enter all the freestyle events at three meets race to evaluate my progress.

Same goal – but with more direction and with a clear **process** of achieving success.

Process Goals

Without doubt, staying motivated means concentrating on **Process Goals**. Concentrate on the process, the actions taken to actually achieve the performance rather than the outcome goals or performance goals.

For example:

Outcome Goal or Performance Goal: I would like to win the club championship in March next year.

This goal is focussing on the dream of “winning”.

Process Goal: I would like to win the club championship in March next year. My medley and backstroke are my weak events. I will concentrate on improving them by attending swimming sessions more regularly, working on my swim technique, improving my turns and stretching my hips and calves every day to improve my kick.

Same goal, but with a focus on the day to day **PROCESS** of success rather than just on the dream of a future victory.

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Effective Goal management leads to confidence. It develops an attitude of “**I CAN DO**”. Setting goals and achieving them leads to developing a self-belief that anything is possible.

An athlete needs to stay focussed on the **IMMEDIATE**, not the **ULTIMATE**. An athlete needs to have dreams but ask, “What can I achieve in training today?”, “What can I achieve in this training session?”, “What can I do right now to help me achieve my dreams”.

This immediate action to achieve an ultimate success formula is a powerful daily motivator.

You should concentrate on the PROCESS of doing a personal best, rather than the actual OUTCOME (i.e. doing the time, winning, getting a medal). Focus on the **CONTROLLABLE** aspects of the performance like the number of strokes per lap swimming, how far you streamline, how aggressively you attack your turns and so on.

The goal of competing in a race may be to win - come first. However, in most cases **WINNING** is something over which you have little or no control. You have no control over the talent of the other swimmers in the race. You have no control over how much training the other swimmers in the race have done. You have no control over the commitment or dedication of the other swimmers.

The only thing you have some control over in terms of the race outcome is your own performance. Therefore it makes sense to focus on those things over which you have control to achieve the best possible result.

Swimmers will often worry about the outcome of a race and stress about winning or losing. By taking control of your performance and reinforcing the importance of concentrating on the skills and techniques you have learned in training, the “freak – out” experienced by many swimmers prior to a swim meet can be reduced. Of course the time to be working on swimming skills and techniques is at training. Getting to the meet and worrying about how to get that great performance is too late. The skills and techniques that will make the dream a reality are the things you practice as part of your daily training routine.

In training – **MAKE IT HAPPEN**. In racing – on the day of the meet – **LET IT HAPPEN!** If you concentrate on doing the little things right in training all the time, you can make the success happen. If you just roll through training, not concentrating on great technique, missing out on sessions, don't stretch etc, but then try to turn it all around on race day, it's too late!

Make your success happen in training, then on race day, let the skills and techniques you have developed in training every day help you achieve your goal. Success means leaving nothing to chance.

Success means not relying on luck. Success means taking control over your performance by working on doing the little things right in training every day.

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Nothing can absolutely guarantee success. But you can increase the likelihood of success by MAKING things happen through your own hard work, commitment and dedication.

Someone once said, "Life has taught me one thing about little things...there are no little things". Effective goal management and working methodically towards your dreams by implementing a plan of action and doing the "little things" right each day, will keep you motivated and focussed. Set goals that are clear, precise and measurable sure, but most importantly, set into ACTION the process of achieving those goals immediately and work towards them daily.

Be an achiever – Be the athlete who achieves through careful planning and daily actions.

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