

Staying in the “NOW” for Very Fast Swims

By Dr. Alan Goldberg

I bet you never knew that swimmers have a brake pedal that they unknowingly use at all the wrong times. Here you are in your big race with 50 to go and tough opponents on both sides of you. Time to step on the gas and what do you do instead? You jam your foot on the brake and slow yourself right down! Or it's your shave and taper meet and your one big chance to finally make the cut in your best event. What happens? Halfway through the race you hit the brakes again and fall way off your pace!

So what's this mysterious brake pedal I'm talking about that causes so many swimmers to slow down when what they really want to do is speed up? It's nothing more than a very common mental mistake that swimmers of all levels make called "time traveling." Time traveling involves losing your focus on what's important in the "here & now" and beginning to concentrate on something in the past or the future.

For example, a past focus might be thinking about your last race while you're standing behind the blocks for your next one, ("If my first race is bad the rest of my meet is usually bad!"), worrying that you didn't train hard enough as you wait for the starter to begin the race, or focusing on how you always seem to swim poorly in this pool. A past focus right before and during your swims will always slow you down because it distracts you from concentrating on the things that help you go fast like your feel of the water, finishing your stroke, feeling long and smooth or kicking hard. Swimmers will know when they are mentally in the past because they use words and phrases like "here we go again", "I knew this was going to happen", "This always happens to me", "I can never break that time," etc.

Time traveling into the future involves mentally getting ahead of yourself. It's interesting to note that in too many 200's, the 3rd 50 is usually slower than the last 50. Why? Because during that 3rd 50 the swimmer starts to shift his or her focus into the future to the end of the race. Other examples of future focusing include, thinking about the time you want for this race, concentrating on needing to win, dreading how you'll feel at the end of the race if you're feeling this badly now and worrying about your next race before you've finished this one. A future focus is most often responsible for choking in swimming and is why a lot of swimmers seem to fall apart under pressure. Like a past focus, concentrating on these future thoughts makes you uptight and distracts you from paying attention to the things that get you to go fast.

The trick to swimming fast when it counts the most is to keep your concentration in the "now" of the race. This is your "gas pedal" in the pool. This means that you have to focus on one race at a time, one lap at a time, and one stroke at a time while you swim. By staying in the "now" just before and during your swims, you will dramatically increase your chances of getting the times that you really want. Being in the "now" means that you usually focus on how the swim feels and nothing else.

So if you want to go fast when it counts the most you have to train yourself to keep your focus of concentration in the "now" of the race. This means that if you begin to notice that you're starting to "time travel", quickly and gently return your focus to the task at hand right now. By quickly bringing yourself back to the "now" every time that you drift, you will increase your chances of getting that fast time