# Avoid the Biggest Mental Mistake Swimmers Make



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### Cullen Jones behind the block, preparing to race.By Dr. Alan Goldberg//Competitivedge.com

### THE PROBLEM

The secret to swimming fast under BIG meet pressure is simple to understand and yet so much harder to do: You have to learn to **stay physically loose and mentally composed behind the blocks before your races.** If you allow yourself to get too nervous pre-race, your muscles will get too tight for you to swim to your potential. What's the biggest cause of out-of-control, pre-race nervousness? **FOCUSING ON THINGS THAT YOU CAN'T DIRECTLY CONTROL!** Swimmers who go into their events thinking about and/or focusing on these **“UCs**” or **UNCONTROLLABLES** will always lose their confidence and get derailed by runaway nerves.

### AN EXAMPLE

Sandy qualified for Nationals for the very first time in her life, a dream come true! Initially she was thrilled and so proud to be able to compete in this meet, being one of a select few from her club who was going. However, as the date of the meet crept closer, her excitement slowly began to morph into worry and then outright fear. No matter what she tried, she couldn't stop herself  from thinking about the other “unbelievably fast” swimmers who would be there. As she entertained these thoughts, and shared them with teammates, her self-confidence started to crumble. By the time she got to the meet, she was filled with a sense of dread, looking like a deer caught in the headlights. She couldn't seem to stop focusing on how good some of these athletes were. They were swimmers whom she had been reading about in the swim magazines over the years, and here she was going to race against them? I don't think so! What she really wanted to do was get their autographs and then get out of there!

She was a nervous wreck behind the blocks. She felt like she didn't belong in this heat or the meet and couldn't stop comparing herself to the racer in the next lane whose seed time was just a little faster than hers. When the starter called the swimmers up on the blocks she felt physically paralyzed and could barely catch a breath! Her race performance reflected exactly this. She swam terribly, adding a good 7 seconds from her qualifying time and recording the slowest time in this event.

### WHAT ARE THE UNCONTROLLABLES

The UCs reflect all of the things both before and during the meet that you have no **DIRECT** control over, and **“DIRECT”** is the key word here. When you go into a meet or race, and either before or during your event, you are concentrating on things that are directly out of your control, you'll get nervous, lose your confidence and swim poorly. In Sandy's case, the huge UC she was concentrating on was the competition. As a swimmer you have no direct control over your competition and how big, strong or fast they are. No matter what you do, you can't directly control how fast another swimmer goes. You can only control what is going on in between your lane lines.

### BEWARE OF THESE UNCONTROLLABLES

* The venue and whether the pool is “fast” or “slow.”
* How your training and/or taper has gone up until this point, (the past).
* Your opponent's size, reputation and speed.
* Your last event and anything else in the PAST.
* How fast you'll swim, whether you'll final, i.e. anything in the FUTURE.
* Other's expectations of you/what they'll think or say about you.
* Who is watching.
* Whether your parents will be disappointed in you.
* Your coach and how he/she acts before and after your events.
* How big this meet or race is.
* How you feel that day, both physically or emotionally.
* How fast your teammates are swimming.
* The time of your races.
* The officiating.
* The kind of warm-up you have.
* Things going on in your life outside of swimming, i.e. academic/personal.
* The unexpected, i.e. the touch pads fail and you have to wait.

### HANDLING THE UNCONTROLLABLES

Understand that the UCs are mental traps and they are lying in wait for you and every other swimmer at the meet. How do you avoid a trap? First, **YOU HAVE TO SEE IT!** You have to be aware of what your uncontrollables are. That is, what are the things that happen out of your control that tend to get you upset and run away with your composure? Make your own list of these UCs and put it up in your bedroom so that you will be able to clearly see it every day. **Awareness is a key first step here!** You avoid the UCs by first knowing that what you're paying attention to right now is out of your control.

**Second, you have to discipline yourself to quickly return your focus of concentration back to what you are doing right now that you CAN control.**

For example, if you're behind the blocks and suddenly start thinking about how good the swimmer in the next lane is, then quickly bring your focus back to your set pre-race ritual, i.e. look down at the back of the blocks, focus on the feel of your stretch, slow and deepen your breathing, jump up and down, etc.

Remember that the uncontrollables usually happen unexpectedly, and because of this, they will temporarily capture your focus. However, as long as you immediately become aware that  your concentration has drifted off, and then you quickly return it to things that you can control, you will avoid falling into this performance-disrupting trap!

**As a sports psychology consultant, Dr. Alan Goldberg works with swimmers at every level. A presenter at the Olympic Training Center, swim coaches clinics and clubs around the country, Dr. G specializes in helping swimmers struggling with performance problems, get unstuck and swim fast when it counts the most. He works over Skype, providing one-on-one consultation with swimmers and other athletes around the world. Dr. G has written over 35 mental toughness training programs and books. In addition, he is a regular contributor to Splash Magazine. For more FREE mental toughness tips and swim articles, go to Dr. Goldberg's website, www.competitivedge.com and click on “choose your sport” and then “swimming.” You can also visit him on Facebook, follow him on Twitter and sign up for his free, monthly mental toughness newsletter.
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