

The Key to Beating the Swimmers You Desperately Want to Beat

By Dr. Alan Goldberg

Whether it's because they may annoy you in practice, or they're hyper competitive with you both in training and meets, or they seem to take great joy in beating you every chance that they get and then rubbing it in your face, certain swimmers seem to have the maddening ability to really get inside your head.

When you have to go against them in sets or races, all you can focus on is your burning need to beat them! And if you're like a lot of the swimmers that I've worked with over the years, this obsessive focus on another swimmer may actually be the main reason you consistently underachieve and rarely beat them.

This can be incredibly confusing and frustrating. As a swimmer, you're taught to race other athletes, so how come when you attempt to race them, you always seem to fall short? ***The answer to this mystery lies in your pre-race and during-race focus of concentration!***

Let me explain.

Far too many swimmers mistakenly believe that beating another swimmer requires that you think about and focus on them, both behind the blocks pre-race and, more importantly, during your race. They feel that unless you keep an eye on this competitor, you won't be able to stay ahead of them when they challenge you or catch them when they're ahead. This belief, that racing and beating another swimmer means that you have to focus on them is flat out wrong! ***In fact, having too much of your mental energy and concentration on your opponent is exactly why you won't swim fast and beat them!***

The reason for this is very basic. ***Going fast, whether in practice or at meets is all about keeping your focus in between your two lane lines on what you are doing in the moment.*** That is, swimming to your potential requires your focus to stay ***on the feel of what you're doing***, one stroke at a time. Your speed comes from you concentrating on how much water you're pulling, staying long, keeping your hips up, your under-waters, etc. This varies depending on the particular swimmer and the stroke you're doing, but speed always comes from focusing on feel.

The problem with becoming too preoccupied with other swimmers and your need to beat them is that it diverts your concentration away from feel and to your thoughts. ***No one can swim fast while they're thinking about the swimmers around them.*** Even if your thoughts are urgent, like, "Oh no, she's catching me, I have to go faster!" or "I know he's a back half swimmer, so I have to create more distance between him and me right now!" When any swimmer allows themselves to focus on their thoughts while they're racing, they will consistently slow down. Furthermore, thinking about who you need to beat, what they may be doing right now or what if they beat you, will always get you nervous. When you get nervous, your muscles will tighten, your breathing will get faster and shallower and these physiological changes will kill your endurance and slow you way down!

Think about it this way: When you race, focusing on the feel of what you're doing, moment to moment through your race is the "gas pedal!" When you do this, you will always go fast. However, when you allow your focus to drift to your thoughts about others, you will be diverting your focus away from the "gas pedal" and immediately slow down. Any time you focus on your thinking while you're swimming, this is the "brake pedal!" You'll always go slower.

So if you really and truly want to consistently kick another swimmer's butt, then your job is to make sure that before and during your race, you keep your focus on the feel of what you're doing. I'm not saying that you can't "race" another swimmer. What I am saying is that 95% of your focus needs to be on feel of what you're doing and way in the background, that remaining 5%, can be on where another swimmer may be. ***Beating other swimmers always happens when you focus more on what you're doing and much less on what they're doing.***