

Why Swimmers Should Be All About the Process in Working Toward Goals

By Olivier Poirier-Leroy

If you are fed up with inconsistent performances and want to take your swimming to the next level, start by nailing your process.

“Trust the process!”

“Follow the process!”

You’ve probably heard these from your coach or from former swimmers who blog and Tweet about this stuff on the interwebs. But maybe it’s time you sat down and considered how powerful a process-focused mindset can be for you in the water.

Why focus on the process?

The process takes something complicated, like swimming a race perfectly from beginning to end, and breaks it down into a series of controllable steps. It’s like a checklist that you steadily work your way through, methodically doing each step to the best of your ability

Compare this to being all about the outcome or results, where you are *only* looking at the end of the checklist, ignoring the successful completion of all those little steps that go into an epic swim.

For the swimmer who obsesses over the goal, it adds uncertainty and anxiety to their preparation that makes performance crash (aka “choking”).

A smarter and more enjoyable approach to achieving those big goals starts with being process-focused.

What being process-focused looks like

Let’s throw together an example of what a process-based swimmer’s mindset looks like on race day. Race day is where the pressure is on, expectations are running high, and swimmers either rise to the occasion or crumble under the nerves.

A process-based swimmer is all about:

- Doing your designated meet warm-up properly. Not getting out halfway because the pool is too busy or getting in late because you are talking to your friends from another team.
- Nailing your pre-race routine. Instead of watching with awe as other swimmers put up clock-busting times, you methodically go through your stretches, visualization, etc.
- Use the right self-talk to keep yourself centered. As opposed to letting yourself get swept away by the pressure of the moment, [you channel the nerves and anxiety to crush your race](#).
- Stick to your race strategy. Instead of basing your swim on how fast or slow other swimmers are going, you stick to a race strategy that puts you in the best position to be successful.

For the results-oriented swimmer, who just wants to “win,” the process can seem silly. Counter-intuitive. But this is just one in a line of paradoxes of what it takes to swim at your best.

You don’t swim fastest with brute strength alone, you do big things only by doing what others won’t, massive swims are a result of focusing on small details, and you produce your best performances when you don’t obsess over the result.

Building a process that you can believe in

Feeling intrigued by the process? Ready to start taking a more process-oriented approach to your swimming? Here are some keys for developing a process that you can believe in:

Your process should be in your control.

There is enough uncertainty as it is in the pool—you can’t control what other swimmers are going to do, you can’t predict slipping off a turn, and your crystal ball left out stubbing your finger on the lane line while warming up. Your process should only include things you can control. These include things like: effort, mindset, preparation, nutrition, sleep habits, focus.

Get practice with it. Those in-season meets are a perfect time for mastering your race-day process. Just like practice is a series of opportunities to execute a stellar process. Being all about the process should infect your training and competition. The more often you do it, the more you can rely on it, and the less stress and frustration you are going to deal with in the water.

Your process in practice should progress. One of the first things I ask swimmers when they email me to seek help for a plateau in the water is, “Are you progressing with your process?” Doing the same thing over and over in practice is just gonna get you the same results. Shave :05 off your intervals. Take one less stroke. Do one extra dolphin kick off each wall. Eat one extra healthy meal. Improvement requires continual adjustments to your process. Progress with your process for more, uh, progress.

Be sneaky with doing the things in your process.

The magic of a process is that you *do it*. Which means you shouldn't be afraid to start small. If you decide that perfect attendance is going to be the big game changer, you might be tempted to make a process goal of, “Don't miss a practice ever again!” But this goal will soon overwhelm you, especially on the days where you are tired and beaten up. A better, and sneakier process-based goal would be something like—“Drive to the pool so that I am there 15 minutes before practice starts.” Make the things in your process so easy that you can't say no to them.

The next step

What are some controllable things you can focus on each day at the water?

Your process doesn't need to be overly complicated. Pick a handful of things and nail them each day at the pool. When Mary T. Meagher was 13 years old, [she decided that she was going to break a world record](#). Her process? Showing up to practice on time every day and doing each turn to the best of her ability. That's it. Seriously. Two years later, she would put on one of the most legendary performances in history, smashing the world records in both the 100 and 200m butterfly.

The beauty of a simple, controllable process is that excellence will organically spread from consistently making a couple decisions to the best of your ability.