

SWIMMING -

Sports Psychology and Peak Performance

HOW SPORT PSYCHOLOGY AND MENTAL TOUGHNESS TRAINING CAN MAKE YOU A CHAMPION IN THE POOL

As a sports psychology consultant, Dr. Alan Goldberg works with swimmers at every level from Olympians right down to age groupers. A popular presenter at the Olympic Training Center, swim coaches clinics and clubs around the country, Dr. G specializes in helping individual swimmers get unstuck and swimming fast when it counts the most. He is the author of *Smoke on the Water*, a mental toughness guide for swimmers, *DMTS (Developing Mentally Tough Swimmers)* a coach's guide for developing mental toughness, *Swimming Out of Your Mind*, a 6-CD sports psychology/mental toughness training program, *The Racer's Edge*, a 2 CD mental toughness meet companion, and *Swimming Fast When It Counts The Most*, a mental toughness workbook for swimmers. In addition, Dr. G is a regular contributor to *Swimming World Magazine*.

Before the prelims of the 400 IM at the 1988 Olympic Trials Eric Namesnik was loose and relaxed. By qualifying for Trials he had achieved a huge goal and there was absolutely no pressure on him. He was totally oblivious to the other swimmers in his heat. He had nothing to lose! He just went for it! (Ever wonder why so many swimmers seem to go faster in practice than they do in the big meets? If you have too much on the line when you get up on the blocks you're going to swim far below your potential.)

Namesnik swam a great race and when prelims were over he discovered that he had qualified for finals with the second fastest heat of the day! He started to think, "All I have to do is swim the same time I did in the morning and I'm going to the Olympics." This thought was followed by numerous others about the competition he'd be facing in the finals. By the time the finals rolled around Namesnik had worked himself into a nervous, pressured frenzy. No longer relaxed, he was "in awe" of the other finalists. As a result he swam over 3 seconds slower!! (Sports psychology's greatest secret to swimming fast is stupidly simple! The more relaxed you are, the faster you'll go.) Putting pressure on yourself by building up the importance of the race will guarantee that you swim it badly!

Do you know how important your head is in your swimming? Are you aware that most races are won and lost before the start? The difference between your best and worst races is between your ears. Going fast is almost always a result of either not thinking or having positive thoughts bopping around in your head pre-race. Choking, on the other hand is a direct result of over-thinking and/or having negative thoughts playing in your mind.

Do you have dreams of becoming a champion? Do you have a big goal that you're shooting for? Want to get as good as possible? Are you plagued by performance problems that leave you swimming slowly when it counts the most? You can lift the level of your training and improve your performance by starting to train your mind as well as your body. Sports psychology and mental toughness training will help you turn those dreams of yours into a reality.

Far too many swimmers just work on the physical part of their swimming, training in and out of the pool. However, they leave the mental part to chance. They ready their bodies and hope that on the day of the meet their mind will show up. Understand this! All the physical training and stroke technique work in the world won't help you if you get too nervous before your races, concentrate on the wrong things, are unable to let go of past bad swims, think negatively or lack self-confidence. Sport psychology can help you systematically train your mind to work with, not against your body.

How many past races can you remember where your head got in your way? Most frequently your toughest opponent is not in the next lane! They're in your lane and you know them all too well. It's you!!! But don't despair! This is the good news because with a little work on your part you can learn to develop championship concentration, think like a winner, maintain a positive attitude and stay cool in the clutch. Sports psychology training can help you do this and more!

Years ago a young swimmer was referred to me for excessive pre-race nervousness. It seems that before

every one of her 200's, her best events, she'd throw up! (Where does nervousness come from? It's not your opponent that makes you nervous, nor the size or importance of the meet. It's not your heat, lane assignment or pool conditions either. What makes you nervous is YOU! Stress comes from inside, not outside! It's what you say to yourself and focus on that's the guilty culprit here.)

After chatting with her by phone I learned that she was putting much too much pressure on herself. As she explained, "The 200 is my distance. I own it! I'm supposed to go fast." What I found interesting is that she always swam much faster in her off events. Why? She put no pressure on herself.

Despite the fact that she flunked "stress management 101" when it came to her 200's, she was able to learn how to shift her focus and drop her performance-disrupting expectations before she swam. After all, anyone can learn how to develop relaxation and focusing skills. In addition she was able to learn other sport psychology tools which gradually turned her into a mentally tough competitor, regardless of the event that she swam.

Let's face it. You'd never leave your physical training to chance. You'd never do a season long taper to prepare for the biggest meet of your life. So why leave the mental part of your swimming up in the air. Start today to build mental toughness. Check out some of the sport psychology tapes and books that I've developed over the years for swimmers.

Swim- Series

The Biggest Secret to Swimming Fast Under Pressure

Do you ever wonder why so many good swimmers seem to fall apart at the big meet? How come they tend to go faster in practice than at Championships? Why does someone always go faster in a relay or off event than he would in his best event? There's a one-word answer to all three of these questions...PRESSURE! There's much more pressure in the bigger meets and your best events than there is in relays or practice.

Pressure tightens a swimmer's muscles, chokes off their breathing and robs them of their confidence. Big meet pressure can make a well-conditioned swimmer feel completely out of shape after just 75 yards of her first race of the day! It can turn your arms into Jell-o and your legs into lead. Pressure is what 7-time Gold Medalist Mark Spitz was referring to when he said, "racing is 90% mental and 10% physical." If you can learn to handle the pressure of competition, then you will start to swim to your potential. If that sounds good to you your next question should be, "HOW do I do that?" I thought you'd never ask. To swim fast under pressure you have to learn to relax. The biggest secret to swimming fast when it counts the most is to keep yourself loose and calm. The more relaxed that you are, the faster you'll go. Relaxation is the key to speed in the pool. Unfortunately, not too many swimmers understand this important connection. As a result, they go into their races and put far too much pressure on themselves. "I've got to get my cut." "I have to beat Jenny!" "I've got to make finals." It's these kinds of pre-race thoughts which will make it impossible for you to relax and, as a result, rob you of your speed.

The bigger the race, the more important it is for you to stay cool and calm before the start. This should be your goal before every one of your important races. If you accomplish this goal, I can almost guarantee that you'll swim the way that you want to. However, too many swimmers, coaches and parents don't focus on this pre-race goal. They get much more caught up in the "outcome" goal (beating someone, time or place). Outcome goals will take

care of themselves if you make staying relaxed and loose before your events your primary goal.

Now that I've told you something you probably already know, that relaxation is the solution to the pressure problem and the key to swimming excellence, what you can actually do to stay calm when the heat of competition is turned up extra high.

#1 Stretch - Stretching is a great way to calm yourself and stay loose as long as when you stretch you keep your entire focus of concentration on what you are doing.

#2 Focus on YOU - Paying too much attention to your competition pre-race will raise your level of nervousness. Keep your focus on yourself before your race and you'll stay looser.

#3 Talk with teammates/friends - If hanging out with your buds pre-race keeps you loose and distracts you from thinking too much about your race, get in the habit of making that an important part of your pre-race ritual.

#4 Listen to music - A lot of swimmers keep themselves in control by listening to their favorite music. Be sure that the tunes that you play in your head are calming and don't wire you up for sound.

#5 Distract yourself - Many swimmers think too much about their race or opponents just before the start, and therefore work themselves up too much. Find other things that you can do pre-race that will distract you from these pressure-causing distractions. You can read, play video games, do homework (sorry about that), etc.

#6 Go somewhere relaxing mentally - I teach many of the swimmers I work with to go to a "safe place" in their mind's eye where they feel completely relaxed and far away. This can be a beach, a vacation spot, or anywhere else. If you mentally practice visiting this special place at night before bed, it will be available to you on race day.

#7 Do Diaphragmatic (deep belly) breathing - You can not freak out if you are breathing from your diaphragm. It is physiologically impossible. Learn to do diaphragmatic breathing. Sit quietly, inhale through your nose to a slow count of 4, pause, then exhale through your mouth to a little faster count of 7 or 8. Focus your concentration on the rise and fall of your diaphragm as you do this. Practice this at home for 4 minutes a day. When you're under pressure, one or two of these breaths will then help you chill out.

Swim- Series

Swim in Your Own Lane for FAST Times

One of the biggest and costliest mental mistakes made by swimmers at every level is getting too caught up with their competitors. You know what I mean. Before the race you "study" the heat sheet and freak yourself out by all the faster times you see. Or, perhaps you pick out one opponent pre-race and study his size and muscle development. Why is it, you wonder that their biceps are bigger than your thighs? Then too, you might think to yourself how you have never, ever beaten this swimmer. Or maybe you're OK until the race starts and this other swimmer begins to pass you. Then it seems like you spend most of your race in her lane thinking about her.

A few swimmers out there will actually go faster by focusing on an opponent. This type of swimmer, a "racer", always seems to get motivated by racing someone else and will perform better as a result. The "racer" has figured out a way to stay focused on his race while he races the guy in the next lane. However, MOST swimmers are NOT "racers" in this sense of the word. They get too distracted when they focus on or think about who they're going up against. As a result, they get too nervous, lose their confidence and stop paying attention to their race, all of which slows them down immediately! Mentally leaving your lane before or during a race is a great way to psych yourself out and ruin a perfectly good swim. If you're like most swimmers and you want to start swimming faster under pressure, then you have to begin to discipline yourself to STAY IN YOUR OWN LANE before and during your swims. This means that you want to keep your concentration on what YOU are doing. In general, every time your focus leaves your lane and drifts to an opponent's lane, you will quickly slow down. Why?

Because in order to go fast you have to focus on those things that help you go fast like your rhythm, keeping your stroke long and smooth, maintaining a proper breathing pattern, finishing your stroke, etc. When you swim well you automatically focus on these things. Because concentrating on these elements gets you to go faster, I like to call them the "gas pedal" in swimming. However, if you begin to get distracted by that "world record holder" in the next lane or that teammate you're real competitive with, then you will immediately "take your foot off the gas." In this way, moving your concentration over to your opponent's lane is like stepping on the brake pedal. Every stroke that you take in a race where you are thinking about who is in the next lane is a slow stroke!

So if you want to swim fast when it counts the most you have to learn to stay in your own lane. This means that the instant that you find yourself mentally drifting to an opponent either before or during the race, you want to quickly and gently bring your

concentration back to what YOU are doing. If your focus drifts back again two seconds later, no problem! Quickly and gently bring your focus back! Every time you leave your lane you want to repeat this "bringing yourself back" process. As a swimmer, a break in concentration won't hurt you. What will hurt you big time is when you lose your focus and you don't bring it right back! You don't want to swim more than one stroke mentally in the wrong lane. So start today to practice swimming in your own lane. Pick something in your set to focus on, (i.e. the feel of the water, finishing your stroke, your elbow being placed in the right position, staying long and smooth, etc.) and whenever you find yourself leaving that focus and going somewhere else, bring yourself back to that concentration point. Remember, you can't swim fast if you're always spending time in someone else's lane.

STAYING IN THE "NOW" FOR VERY FAST SWIMS

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.

If you want additional mental toughness training tools to teach you how to better stay in the "now" and focus under pressure, go to www.competitivedge.com, click on Dr. G's products and look for his 6-tape series, SWIMMING OUT OF YOUR MIND or his two tape, meet companion, THE RACER'S EDGE.

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Swim- Series

It's your sport, love it or leave it

I was talking to a collegiate athlete the other day who had been swimming since she was nine years old. One of the fastest swimmers on her team, Jenny had a full ride to a D - I program. She was going into her junior year and from the outside looking in, seemed to have the world by the tail. She already held a number of school records, was All Conference and a major point scorer during Championships. There was of course the slight problem of her slump over the past several months and the minor fact that she spent so much time crying after practices. Perhaps this was related to

that ugly little secret that Jenny had kept hidden all these years: She hated swimming! Maybe it was the fact that her father had pushed her too hard for too long. His obvious disappointment and anger whenever she did poorly certainly didn't help. The guilt trips he put on her whenever she wanted to take time off also took a toll. His sticking her nose into her training and those long conversations he'd have with her coach both annoyed and embarrassed her. Regardless of the reasons, Jenny hadn't really enjoyed being in the pool since her very first year.

Back then she absolutely loved the sport. She loved being with her friends, loved the hard work and looked forward to the challenge. Meets were great fun and she loved to compete. Unfortunately all that changed the instant her father figured out that she had some talent for the sport. So all these years Jenny swam to keep her father happy. She swam not to disappoint him. She swam to get the coach to like her. She swam because she was good at it and so she wouldn't let other people down. In sum, Jenny swam for all the WRONG reasons! Jenny didn't really have any goals of her own. It seemed that all "her" goals really belonged to her father or coach. How about you? Do you know why you're swimming? Do you have dreams of going far in this sport? Do you have big, far away goals that you want to achieve? Or, like Jenny, have you lost your direction and aren't quite sure why you get into the pool every day? Are you swimming for yourself or just to keep other people happy?

Keep this in mind if you have any desire to reach your potential in this or any other sport. Without love and passion for what you're doing, you'll never, NEVER be successful! If you don't love what you're doing it will be impossible for you to maintain the drive and motivation necessary to achieve swimming excellence. Your love of the sport keeps you going through all those hard practices. It motivates you to get right back up after a disappointing loss or setback. Your passion for swimming will help you ward off burn-out and survive the frustration of extended slumps or plateaus. If you love what you're doing you'll get more out of each and every practice. Passion and success go hand in hand.

When I talk with swim teams I'm always telling the athletes, "If you want to go fast, you have to HAVE FUN!" You have to enjoy the process. You have to love the pain and fatigue. You have to love the challenge and competition. The heart of all this love is knowing who you are swimming for. You can't have this love and passion without swimming for YOU. Just about every Olympian I've talked to over the years has this passion and knows that they are swimming for them themselves, not for their coaches or parents. These Olympic swimmers all report having parents who were smart enough to know that the sport belongs to the swimmer, not the parent. To love what you're doing and be successful in the pool you must have total ownership of your swimming. Whether you love going fast, the challenge, the quest to be #1, the competition, the hard work, the socializing or a combination of some or all of these doesn't matter. What does matter is that you swim for yourself, and because you like the sport. You'll never burn out or become a drop-out statistic if you keep that love and passion with you whenever you train and compete.

