

2nd Edition

# Smoke on the Water

A SWIMMER'S AND COACH'S GUIDE  
TO DEVELOPING MENTAL TOUGHNESS



DR. ALAN GOLDBERG

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TO DEVELOPING MENTAL TOUGHNESS

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THE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

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# Introduction

what it takes to become a champion

There's absolutely no question that swimming is an intensely physical and demanding sport. To excel you must not only have tremendous endurance, upper and lower body strength, quick reflexes and good flexibility, but also a willingness to constantly push the limits of your own capacities and a high tolerance for the pain and fatigue of oxygen debt that comes with this pushing. In addition, you have to develop and fine tune the proper stroke techniques, starts and turns that will help you achieve success. Without **CONSISTENT** and proper training in all of these physical aspects of the sport you can **NEVER** become a champion.

Unfortunately, too many swimmers in the sport today stop their training at this physical point. They make a critical mistake in assuming that all you need to go fast and perform well are the above mentioned physical attributes. Consequently, they leave one of the **MOST IMPORTANT** parts of their training and performance to chance, **THE MENTAL SIDE!!!** There is **FAR** more to swimming than the starts, turns and strokes that you work on daily in the pool and attempt to put together in those meet situations! To become a champion at any level and to go as fast as **YOU** can, **YOU HAVE TO LEARN TO USE YOUR HEAD!!!!!**



This is what Mark Spitz told me in an interview I conducted with him for an article I was writing. Spitz said, “In practice, becoming a champion is 95% physical and 5% mental.” Meaning, you have to pay your physical dues to excel. You have to work your butt off to reach your dreams. “However, once you step up onto those blocks, the percentages flip flop. Becoming a champion is 95% mental and 5% physical!” Meaning, once it’s race time, the physical training is all done. The fast swim is already inside of you and the only way to get it out is by having the right head set.

When a swimmer consistently goes faster in practice than he does in big meets, this is **NOT** because of a lack of physical strength, endurance or poor stroke execution! It’s because of mental factors like focusing on the wrong things right before and during your races or being too nervous pre-race. If you always seem to nail your starts and turns when it doesn’t really count, but then hopelessly blow them under competitive pressure, this is **NOT** a problem of physical technique. If your stroke looks long and smooth in practice but then completely breaks down under the pressure of big race competition, this is **NOT** a technique problem! Both of these situations are because of the wrong things going on upstairs between your ears!!!!

When a club swimmer of mine continued to miss his Olympic Trials cut by a fraction of a second for an entire year, this was not because he needed to work harder on his mechanics or build up his training base. The main issue was his pre-race focus of concentration. He couldn’t stop himself from thinking, “This is the race where I’ll finally do it! I’m going to get my cut here!” As a consequence of this over-focus on outcome, he’d tighten himself up physically and make it impossible for himself to swim long, loose and fast.

Too many swimmers today fail to realize their potential because just before the race they're feeding themselves this kind of mental garbage! They're focusing on a time that they need, the swimmer in the next lane who is a super-android, or what will happen if they don't win, place or drop enough time. Then there are the swimmers who get totally distracted and freaked out because they're thinking about what their parents or coaches will say or do if they don't have a great swim.

***TO BECOME A CHAMPION IN THE POOL, TO REALLY REACH YOUR PHYSICAL POTENTIAL, YOU MUST BEGIN TO SYSTEMATICALLY TRAIN THE MENTAL DIMENSION OF YOUR SPORT!***

The great athletes in swimming today not only have the strokes, reflexes, conditioning and strength, they also have the right "head." In other words, **THEY ARE MENTALLY TOUGH**. Either directly or indirectly, they have trained themselves over the years to excel in this psychological dimension. Michael Phelps' mother once said that ever since her son was 12, he would spend time every night training himself to completely relax on cue. Within a few years, he was able to very quickly and effectively calm himself down so that even under the most stressful competitive situations, he was still able to keep himself calm and composed. We saw the impact of his mental prowess in his 8 gold medal performance at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing!

If you've ever choked, gotten psyched-out or intimidated before, gone much slower in big meets than in practice, slower in off-events than your best ones or have been stuck at a particular time barrier too long, then you **KNOW** exactly what I am talking about when I discuss the mental side of swimming.

To become a champion and to maximize your physical abilities, you must start to consistently train this mental side, your “inner swimmer”. You must take a little bit of time every day to learn to handle competitive pressures, concentrate and block out distractions, rebound quickly from setbacks and mistakes, develop confidence, learn to better handle the pain and fatigue of oxygen debt, avoid psych-outs and intimidation and learn to think and act like a winner. These are the mental skills displayed by winners! **YOU** can learn them too!

If you truly want to become the best swimmer that you can be and gain that **COMPETITIVE EDGE** over the competition, then you must start **TODAY** to train the mind of a champion. Mental toughness will lift your performance level up several notches. It will help you stay centered in your swim regardless of who’s in the next lane, how **BIG** they are, or what’s at stake in this race! However, if you leave the mental side of your training to chance,...if you never learn how to handle big meet pressure,... if you concentrate on the wrong things before and during your races,...or if you never learn how to effectively let go of your bad races and disappointments, then all of your ability, hard work, sacrifice and good coaching will get wasted.

To become a champion you must learn to balance your training. You must train your “inner” as well as your “outer” swimmer. This workbook was designed with that in mind. To help you directly develop the mental skills that will help you maximize your physical potential. If **YOU** want, **YOU** can develop the mind of a champion. All it takes is a **LITTLE** extra effort both in and out of the pool. A little extra practice time is a very small price to pay in order to be able to stay calm under pressure and go fast when it counts the most. It’s a small price to pay if it helps you learn to effectively handle the last minute

negative thoughts and self-doubts that get you into trouble in those high pressured meets when things don't seem to go your way.

## **WHY MOST SWIMMERS FAIL TO DEVELOP MENTAL TOUGHNESS**

SO...let's get the real unpleasantness out of the way first. Let me tell you why this workbook won't work for YOU. Let me tell you why you won't be able to develop mental toughness. The biggest mistake that athletes make with mental training is that they fail to **PRACTICE** it properly. They hear about techniques that help you think like a winner or stay calm under pressure, but they **DON'T** practice these techniques. If you read this book without taking time to **CONSISTENTLY WORK** on the exercises, then you will not gain as much as you can from it. Sure you'll get a few great ideas and some chuckles from my weird sense of humor and this might even lift your race and practice performance up a bit...BUT, if you are **REALLY** serious about becoming a champion and taking your swimming as far as you can, then you **MUST** take the time to **CONSISTENTLY PRACTICE** and develop these **SKILLS**.

Mental skills in swimming are no different than your physical skills in that you must practice both in order to excel. If you never work on fly or backstroke, then you can't expect yourself to be able to effectively race those strokes in a big meet situation. If you consistently lose time on your turns but you systematically avoid working on them in practice, then your overall racing will always be held back by your inefficiency on the walls. Similarly, if you never work on techniques for concentrating on what's important and blocking out distractions, then you will **NOT** be able to stay focused under big meet pressure.

***MENTAL SKILLS MUST FIRST BE PRACTICED IN A NON-STRESSFUL ENVIRONMENT BEFORE YOU WILL BE ABLE TO DEPEND UPON THEM TO WORK FOR YOU IN THE HIGH STRESS OF A BIG MEET!***

Proper practice means that you must spend time with these on a consistent basis. Ten to thirty minutes a day is all that it may take for you to begin to excel mentally in the pool. Like all learning endeavors, you **MUST** remain patient. Give yourself enough time with each of these skills to properly learn them. If you rush through the book and these exercises or if get easily frustrated because you don't have immediate success, then you'll be robbing yourself of the chance to truly get better as a swimmer.

Remember, the best athletes and coaches in and out of swimming actively use their mental skills to raise their performance to another level. The coaches who consistently produce winners either directly or indirectly integrate this mental dimension heavily into their teaching. They work to teach their swimmers to be mentally tough and **MENTAL TOUGHNESS IS SOMETHING YOU CAN LEARN TOO....**

**DON'T REINVENT THE WHEEL**

This workbook is based on an important operating principle of peak performance and success:

***IF IT'S POSSIBLE FOR ONE PERSON IN THE WORLD TO DO SOMETHING, THEN IT'S POSSIBLE FOR YOU.***

If someone excels tremendously in your sport, then it's possible for you to reach a comparable level of success. All that may be missing right now is the **HOW**. What I mean by this is that if you can find out the **STRATEGIES** that successful swimmers use, i.e. how they train, how they handle pressure, how they deal with bad breaks and setbacks, how they maintain motivation, how they deal with pain and fatigue, etc., and if **YOU** start to **REGULARLY** use these strategies, then **YOU** too can dramatically improve your level of performance in the pool!

Now before you jump up and scream that what I'm saying isn't true, save your breath! **I ALREADY KNOW MY OPERATING PRINCIPLE IS A BIG LIE!!!** Just because you study and use all of the training strategies of a Michael Phelps, Ryan Lochte, Katie Hoff, Dara Torres, Rebecca Soni, Matt Grevers or Natalie Coughlin does **NOT** mean that you will be able to perform as good as them.... **HOWEVER**, the "lie" that I'm presenting as an operating principle is a **GOOD** lie to organize your athletic life around. Let me explain.

If you find out the success strategies of really good swimmers, what they do physically, mentally, how they handle the tough times, how they manage injuries, etc., and you start to practice **JUST LIKE THEM**, then you will significantly lift your performance level. If you **ACT AS IF** this principle were true, then you will achieve **FAR MORE** as a swimmer than you would have otherwise. **DON'T REINVENT THE WHEEL**. Study the successful athletes in this sport and learn from them. If you are real daring, let me suggest that you even call them up on your cell phone and talk to them!!

**000000000HHH!!!** Now that's a **REAL** scary thought! Little old you, call up **BIG FAMOUS SCARY THEM** on the phone!!!! That's right! Put that hi-tech phone of yours to good use and call them up and pick their brains. Believe it or not, most will actually be more than happy to help you. **DON'T TRAIN OR COACH IN A VACUUM.** If you are open to learning you will improve far more quickly and be much more successful than if you think that you have all the answers. **TALK TO, READ ABOUT AND STUDY THE EXPERTS.** It's one of the **QUICKEST** ways that you can improve and go faster.

Speaking of experts, that's exactly where the exercises in this book come from, the experts! Not me! I'm no expert!! I'm a thief! That's right!! **A CROOK!** I've stolen **EVERYTHING** in this workbook from great swimmers, coaches and other athletes around the world! And I did it **JUST FOR YOU!!!** Now all **YOU** have to do is **TAKE ACTION** and **USE** these strategies!

## **YOU HAVE A SUPER SWIMMER INSIDE**

As a swimmer you have tremendous potential. You have incredible hidden resources!

***YOU HAVE THE ABILITY TO DO THINGS THAT YOU NEVER IMAGINED!***  
***YOU HAVE THE ABILITY TO GO FASTER THAN YOU EVER HAVE!***

Now whether you believe this inspirational gobbledygook or not, what I'm saying is **TRUE!**

Motivational speakers across the country throw around statistics like,

“you only realize 5 % of your potential” or “you have 50 times more ability than you think you do”.

Personally, I have no idea how much of **YOUR** potential you’re actually using right now or if you have 20, 40, or 50 times more ability than you think. What I do **KNOW** from my work with swimmers, athletes and other performers outside of sports is that you are **NOT** operating on all of your cylinders! You do **NOT** know what your limits are, nor how much you can achieve!

I’ve seen the impossible accomplished too many times to really believe that most limits can’t be broken. Roger Bannister’s sub-four minute mile blew the lid off that impossible back in “54”. Mike Powell broke Bob Beamon’s long jump record, another impossible. A kid named Dick Fosbury set a world record and won a gold medal at the “68” Mexico City Olympics by going over the high jump bar backwards! Carol Johnston, a collegiate gymnast from Cal State Fullerton got 2 second place finishes on the final floor at the NCAA Championships and only had one arm! Jim Abbott, a pitching phenom for the N.Y. Yankees back in the early 90’s didn’t have a right hand and still pitched a no-hitter! Eric Weinmeyer, a blind man successfully scaled Mount Everest, one of the most dangerous climbs in the world. Jim Dreyer, an open water swimmer who had a life long fear of the water until he was 33 years old, successfully swam across all of the Great Lakes to raise money for Big Brother, Big Sister! And let’s not forget Dara Torres’ showing in the Beijing Olympics, her 5th!!! Torres won three silver medals at the ripe old age of 41!!! The wonders of your limitless ability are all around you. There is little that you cannot achieve if you have



the right **STRATEGIES**, are **MOTIVATED ENOUGH** to succeed and are **PERSISTENT**. The only **REAL** limits that exist out there are the ones that you have in your mind. When you overcome those inner limits then you'll start doing the impossible, **REGULARLY!!!**

# Chapter One

the mind body connection

## **ALL PERFORMANCE IS SELF-FULFILLING**

*or*

## **RACES ARE WON AND LOST BEFORE THE START**

One of the first things that you must understand if you're going to develop the mind of a champion is the idea that **ALL PERFORMANCE IS SELF-FULFILLING**. What I mean by this is that **YOU ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU EXPECT AS A SWIMMER**. Go into a meet expecting to false start, blow a turn or get toasted by the opposition and you will. Go in expecting to have fun and swim **YOUR** best and chances are great that you will! This is because of the Mind-Body connection. Let me explain. If you go into a meet situation and you're telling yourself things like, "God those other swimmers are **SOOO** much faster than me...Will ya look at the size of those arms!! I feel so lousy...Last meet I choked big time, missed all of my turns and swam like a turtle.... and, I have totally sucked in practice all week.... What

if I don't qualify...**AGAIN?!!**, etc.," then you are setting yourself up to have a disappointing race.

When these kinds of thoughts bop around between your ears, here's what's beginning to happen inside your body: Your muscles start to tighten up; your breathing becomes faster and shallower, your heart and pulse rate increase and the blood circulation is cut down in your hands and feet. The end result, performance-wise of all these wonderful physical changes are: your reflexes will slow down (this means that the timing of your start and turns will suffer); Your arm and leg speed will slow down, which means that both your kick and rate and fluidity of your stroke will suffer, (tight muscles will do this to you **EVERY** time), With tight muscles your stroke will become shorter, you'll lose that all important feel of the water, (from the loss of circulation in your hands and feet), and your endurance and strength will suffer big time! What I'm saying here is that the difference between your **BEST** races and your **WORST** ones (if you've paid your physical dues-you're in shape, have the strokes etc.) is "upstairs", it's mental and has to do with what you think, say to yourself and focus on, **BEFORE, DURING** and **AFTER** you race. Your **MENTAL STRATEGIES**, (thoughts, self-talk & focus) before your best races are **VERY** different than the ones that you use before your **WORST** ones. Let's find out how!

## **DISCOVERING YOUR "INNER COACH"**

### **EXERCISE #1 REVIEWING PAST PEAK PERFORMANCES**

Find yourself a quiet place, free from distractions. Think about the last time you had an awesome meet, (for you!), the last time that you really felt great and went fast, either for one race or for the entire meet. If

you can't remember a time when you went fast in a race, then think of times in practice when you swam to your potential. With your eyes closed, use your imagination right now to go back to this and **SEE**, **HEAR** and **FEEL** everything that went on during this swim that made it so special. **FIRST** focus on what was going on for you **BEFORE** the meet or swim started. What were you thinking? What was the voice of your "inner coach" saying to you about the meet and your first race? Were you looking forward to it or not? Did you have any imagery going on pre-event? What were you concentrating on?....**SECOND**, what was going on for you (if anything) mentally **DURING** your race? Where was your focus of concentration? What kind of self-talk, if any were you aware of? if you missed a turn or screwed up your breathing pattern, how did you deal with it mentally? What did you say to yourself about these things?... **THIRD**, what went on mentally after the swims and meet ended? How did you make yourself feel?

## **EXERCISE #2 REVIEWING PAST BAD PERFORMANCES**

Sit quietly and comfortably in a place that's free from distractions. Now I'd like you to do something I'm sure you'll **REALLY** enjoy. Think about the last time that you really stunk the place out, so-to-speak. Think about a time when you had an awful performance, the last time that you got into the pool and totally embarrassed yourself! Close your eyes and turning on that DVD player in your mind's eye, I want you to go back in time and "see", "hear" and "feel" everything that you did back then which made this meet so "special". **FIRST**.... focus in on what was going on mentally **BEFORE** the meet started. What kind of expectations did you have? What was your pre-race self-talk like? Were you dreading the meet or any particular races? What kind of imagery, if any did you entertain? What were you focusing

on? **SECOND**...What was going on for you mentally **DURING** your swims? What kind of self-talk did you have? What were you focusing on? How did you deal with your mistakes? If you messed up in one race, how did it affect the rest of that race and any others? **THIRD**...What happened after the meet? What did you say to yourself? What kind of feelings did you generate inside?

If you spend a little time with these two exercises, examining both your good and bad swims, you'll soon discover that **HOW** you swim is **DIRECTLY** related to **WHAT** you think about and focus on before, during and after each race. In fact, most often, races are won and lost **BEFORE** you even get off the blocks!!! How often have you mentally taken yourself out of a race **BEFORE** the start because you got psyched out by another swimmer, the event, your lane assignment, what happened the race before or the size of the crowd?

### **EXERCISE #3 COMPARING GOOD AND BAD PERFORMANCES**

Take 5 minutes or so with a pen and paper to jot down what you just discovered to be the mental differences between your good and bad races. Make a list of the kinds of self talk that you were aware of before and during your good races. Then do the same thing for the self-talk related to the bad ones. Now compare the two. If you want, you might find it useful to examine several good and bad meets. You should begin to see a pattern develop.

This first series of exercises should help you understand that good and bad races are **NOT** random, but instead are **DIRECTLY** related to your headset. If you go into a meet feeding yourself negativity and mental garbage, your swims will reflect this. When you make mistakes

or things otherwise don't go your way, you'll have a tendency to hang onto these and bring yourself down further. Conversely, if you go into the meet with positive self-talk and optimistic thoughts you will perform much closer to your potential. You'll quickly rebound from bad breaks or poor swims and they will have no adverse effect on how fast you go.

These exercises are important because they will provide you with an awareness of your before and during performance **MENTAL STRATEGIES**, (thoughts, self-talk & focus). It's this **AWARENESS** that will help you make the necessary changes to become a mentally tough swimmer. Without an awareness of what you're doing wrong mentally, you will **NOT** be able to change negative or self-defeating thoughts or behaviors. Instead, you will become a victim to them.

### ***AWARENESS IS THE KEY TO CHANGE.***

If you are having trouble with the mechanics of a particular stroke change, **BREAKTHROUGHS** here will only happen **AFTER** you become aware of **EXACTLY** what you are doing **WRONG**. This information will then help you discover **EXACTLY WHAT YOU NEED TO DO DIFFERENTLY THAT'S RIGHT!!!** Once you can see and feel your faulty stroke mechanics, **THEN** you are in a position to change them. This same principle operates mentally. You must **FIRST** get to know your negative performance related thought patterns before you can change them. If you seem to fall apart under the pressure of those bigger meets or certain opponents seem to knock you off center and out of your lane, you have to become aware of **HOW** you mentally sabotage yourself in these situations before you can then correct the problem.

As a swimmer, it is critical that you do not underestimate the power of your “inner coach”, i.e. your self-talk in effecting how well you perform. I’d like to demonstrate that power to you in a “hand’s on” way with the following exercise:

#### **EXERCISE #4 THE POWER OF THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION**

Find yourself a space that’s free from distractions. Stand up with your feet shoulder width apart and arms resting comfortably at your sides. Understand that this is an exercise to test how good you are at using your imagination. Raise your arms so that they are perpendicular to your body, at shoulder height, shoulder width apart, so that your palms are facing each other. Take your left palm and turn it up towards the ceiling. Take your right thumb and stick it up in the air. **CLOSE YOUR EYES AND USING YOUR IMAGINATION ONLY**, imagine that in your left hand, the palm-up one you have a very heavy book, like a Webster’s unabridged dictionary. Imagine that attached to your right thumb is a string which is connected to a balloon filled with helium.

Using **ONLY** your imagination, imagine that your left hand is getting heavier, and heavier and falling...and that your right hand is getting lighter and lighter and rising. Allow yourself enough time with each of these suggestions so that you begin to imagine them happening. Repeat these suggestions of heaviness and lightness to yourself for 1-2 minutes. Now open your eyes, look at both arms and see if you can notice a difference in the physical feelings in each. If you really let your imagination run free, chances are good that you both saw and felt a difference. The left arm probably felt heavier and more fatigued than the right one.

## THE G.I.G.O. FACTOR

If you did experience feelings of fatigue and tension in your left arm, **UNDERSTAND** that these feelings were very **REAL**. The thing that was in your imagination was the book. This exercise highlights very clearly how the thoughts and self-talk that you entertain in your head pre-or during a race go directly into your body, make physical changes, and these, in turn, **DIRECTLY** affect your performance. For example, if you're telling yourself at the start of a race or midway through it that you're too tired to go fast and the pain is going to be TOOOO much, then those "self-suggestions" will literally weigh you down, tighten your muscles, tire you out even more, and slow you down! If you think that just because you felt terrible in the water during warm-ups that you'll therefore swim **THAT** way, then you'll be **RIGHT**!

This is what I call the **GIGO** factor. **GIGO** is an acronym taken from old computer terminology and it stands for Garbage In, Garbage Out. If you program garbage into a computer, i.e. the wrong instructions, it will give you garbage back out, i.e. it won't run the program! Similarly, if you program garbage into **YOUR** computer, i.e. your brain, the garbage that you'll get back out will be in your performance. For example, let's say that you are 150 into your 200 free and you need a good time here to qualify. As you begin to experience the very first signs of fatigue and oxygen debt kicking in, you think, "Oh God... here it comes again...What if I die? I'll won't make this cut and this is **EXACTLY** what happened to me in that last meet!" Your focus of concentration on your cut is the "Garbage In". The "Garbage Out" of course will be, you'll tighten up, feel even more tired and then slow down for yet another disappointing race!!!



Your **SELF-SUGGESTIONS** will not only have a powerful impact on how well you swim, but even on how fast your teammates go. That's right! Even though swimming is an individual sport, it's also very much a team sport. Teams get into slumps and fall apart because of the **GIGO** factor. In 1987, I worked with the University of Massachusetts women's soccer team during the NCAA Division I tournament. The UMass women had gotten to the Final Four five years in a row and lost each time in the first game. The team's self-suggestion floating around was "we can't win the big game". This same dynamic operates for swim teams. Until you and your teammates change those negative messages into more helpful, positive ones, you won't be able to change how well you swim!

***REMEMBER, PERFORMANCE IS SELF-FULFILLING.... YOU ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU EXPECT.***

Tell yourself you "can't" do something, i.e. "I can't swim well if I have a lousy warm-up") or "this "always" happens to me, I always die on the last twenty-five," then don't be surprised if you're absolutely right **AGAIN!!!!** It's critical that you learn to make your self-suggestions and "inner coachings" positive. Instead of Garbage In, Garbage Out, you want Good Stuff In and Good Stuff Out!

To get you started on this process **KEEP A DAILY PERFORMANCE JOURNAL.**

Start to log all your thoughts, self-talk, feelings and attitudes before, during and after you practice and compete. **DO NOT DO THIS EXERCISE WHILE YOU ARE PRACTICING OR COMPETING.** Log these thoughts at night when you can really concentrate on them.

If you try to do this while you're at the pool, you'll become too distracted. The purpose of this exercise is to help you become more aware, **NOT** more distracted. Try to capture the exact words, phrases and even the voice tones that you use on yourself. Not only will the journal help you to begin to develop an awareness of any negative thought patterns, but just the process of paying attention to, and recording these negative self-suggestions will help you begin to eliminate them.

# Chapter Two

## 5 steps to becoming a champion

I want to provide you with a road map for becoming a winner. Follow it closely and I **GUARANTEE** you that your performance level will rise several notches and your times will steadily drop! Ignore this road map and I can also promise you that your successes will be few and far between. Like all the ideas and strategies in this workbook, these 5 strategies belong to hundreds of world class and Olympic level athletes in and out of swimming. All you have to do is read about and then follow them closely.

### **#1 START WITH THE END IN MIND - HAVE A DREAM**

If you want to be as good a swimmer as possible and go as far as possible in the sport, then you have to **BE SMART** about your training. This means simply that you have to have a clear goal or direction. You have to know **WHERE** you want to go in order to get there. As a

competitive tennis player, I unknowingly limited my potential because, despite the fact that I worked hard and trained every day, I had no clear direction. I had no big dream, nor any specific goals that were useful to me. I just put my time in and wanted to get as good as I could.

Most successful athletes begin their careers with a dream. Sometimes that dream is so big and so unrealistic that they are too embarrassed to even share it with anyone because they are afraid that they'll be ridiculed for having it. A dream will give your life a focus into which you can then channel all of your energies. A dream or goal will provide you with the motivation to persist in the face of obstacles, disappointment and defeat. A dream will draw you like a magnet towards it's final achievement.

What I am saying here is that one of the very first steps in becoming a champion is to use your imagination! You create your own reality. Start by using your imagination to think about how far you want to go in this sport. Do you want to swim on a national level? Do you want a college scholarship to a big swimming school. Do you want to go all the way and win a Gold Medal at the Olympics? **EVERY GREAT ACHIEVEMENT STARTS WITH A SHAKY THOUGHT OR FANTASY.** The more you dwell on this fantasy, the more it will begin to take shape and become more real to you.

***REMEMBER...ANYTHING THAT YOU CAN CONCEIVE OF (DREAM),  
AND BELIEVE IN, YOU CAN ACHIEVE!***

Motivation is all about having a **BIG ENOUGH WHY**. Why are you training? Why do you want to put all that time and energy into the pool? Certainly it's **NOT** because you're a masochist! Why are you

sacrificing and giving up other more enjoyable things so you could soak in chlorine and go back and forth endlessly staring at that wonderful black line? If you have a big enough **WHY**, then it will motivate you to put the work in so that you can accomplish anything! So the question before you now is, “What is your **BIG ENOUGH WHY**? What is your swimming dream? Sure, I know what happens when you let your imagination run away with these questions. There’s a little inner voice that raises its ugly little head and starts to put you down, or ridicule you for being so stupid to believe that you could actually do **THAT**. Humor yourself and me right now! Suspend judgment and disbelief. Think about your dream...what are your big, scary swimming goals? Let’s **START WITH THE END IN MIND**.

## **EXERCISE #1 YOUR FUTURE SWIMMER**

Sit quietly in a room where you will be undisturbed for the next 15-20 minutes. Have your arms and legs uncrossed and close your eyes. Go to a very relaxing place in your mind’s eye which we will call your **RESOURCE PLACE**. You can create this place in your imagination or you can mentally return to a special beach, lake, mountain or special location that you’ve been to before. See, hear and feel everything that you would if you actually were in this special place. Try to fill in the details of the scene, all the sights, movements, colors, lighting, sounds, physical sensations, smells, etc....

NEXT...Imagine that you can see what we’ll call your **FUTURE SELF** in this place, the swimmer that you are growing to become. Your ideal or dream swimmer. Imagine that you can watch him or her as they stand in front of you. What do they look like? How do they carry themselves. What do they sound like? How do they move?

NEXT...Imagine that you can watch them begin to swim. Study very carefully what they do. Their coordination, upper body strength, confidence and power. Watch them as they practice executing their starts and turns, but do so by carefully taking note of everything that they do. Notice their focus of concentration. Watch everything about them and how they conduct themselves in and out of the pool.

NEXT...Imagine that you can float up out of your body from where you are observing and float right down into their body so that **NOW** you become your ideal swimmer in your imagination. Pretend that you are actually them, that you can associate and identify completely with this super swimmer. Imagine that you can see, hear and feel **EXACTLY** what they see, hear and feel. If you were this swimmer right now, what would you believe to be true about yourself and your abilities? Now, **AS IF** you were this swimmer, spend some time moving through the water exactly like them. Feel what it is like in your imagination to power through the water and control your body just the way that they do. Carry the exercise over to performing in a big meet situation. See, hear and feel yourself, as this **FUTURE SELF** swimmer on the blocks at this big meet,...right at the start of that race...Next, imagine yourself in the race as this future self, performing exactly the way that they would perform.

Spend 10 minutes a night with this exercise before you go to sleep, pretending in your imagination that you are actually living your dream. It's been said that **YOUR IMAGINATION RULES YOUR WORLD**. This is a constructive way to take control of that world. Regular practice of this exercise will help you get one step closer to turning your dream into a reality.

## ***MOTIVATION FROM GOAL SETTING THAT REALLY WORKS***

What's the best way for you to move towards that dream? And how can you keep yourself motivated through the long haul? First, understand that **MOTIVATION IS A PERSONAL THING - IT'S UP TO YOU!!!** You can not depend on other people to get you motivated. Sure, coaches, parents and other swimmers can help steer you in the right direction. They can inspire you a bit and pique your interests. However, it's totally and completely up to YOU to DO the heavy lifting, the actual work. This is why it's important for you to have a big goal that's really excites YOU and is worth working towards and sacrificing for.

## **EATING ELEPHANTS**

However, you can't just simply stop here the way most swimmers do! If all you do is have a big dream, and you don't ground that dream in the day to day reality of practice, then you won't go anywhere as an athlete. One of the biggest mistakes swimmers make in relation to goal setting is they pick out a huge, faraway goal for themselves, i.e. "I want to go to the Olympics", they write it down on a piece of paper, and then they completely forget about it. If you want to be successful and have the motivation to keep you going when the going gets tough, then you must figure out a way of taking your ultimate goal and breaking it down into smaller and smaller pieces.

***IN OTHER WORDS, YOU MUST TAKE YOUR DREAM AND BREAK IT DOWN INTO YEARLY, 6-MONTH, MONTHLY, WEEKLY AND ESPECIALLY DAILY GOALS IN ORDER TO MAKE IT HAPPEN!***

This is known as the “eat an elephant” strategy. The only smart way to eat an elephant is to break it down into bite size pieces. You eat an elephant one bite at a time. If you try to shove an entire leg into your mouth at one time, then you’ll get a crushing case of indigestion. Same thing with that big dream. If you constantly focus on how far away it is and **ALL** that you have to do to accomplish it, then you’ll get mental indigestion, i.e. you’ll get **DISCOURAGED** and lose your motivation.

It’s the accumulation of very small successes on a daily and weekly basis that fuels your motivation and keeps you going. It’s the idea that **INCH BY INCH ANYTHING’S A CINCH, YARD BY YARD IT MIGHT BE HARD!**

In 1984, Canadian swimmer Alex Baumann finished eating his elephant by winning double gold medals in the 200m and 400m IMs. He achieved a secondary goal by setting both Olympic and World Records in the process! What worked for Baumann was to stay focused **NOT** on the long term goal, the elephant, but the short term ones. His goals were to try to improve his times or parts of his race. He always stayed focused on the **SMALL** parts taking it **ONE** day at a time!

Understand also that your goals should function like a road map to help you start your journey, keep you on track, and insure that you end up where you were heading. Therefore you want to be smart about those goals.



## **FIRST - ASSESS WHERE YOU ARE RIGHT NOW!**

If your goal is to reach national or world class status as a swimmer and/or to get a college scholarship, and your times are currently just a wee bit slower than that, start by honestly assessing your **STRENGTHS** and **WEAKNESSES** in every aspect of the sport. Look at your upper and lower body strength, coordination, flexibility, endurance, skill level, physical speed, ability to tolerate pain and fatigue, motivation, persistence, mental toughness, etc. Consult with your coach or someone who really knows you and swimming. Be open and honest with yourself. You can't get better unless you first acknowledge your weaknesses.

***YOU HAVE TO START FROM WHERE YOU ARE, NOT WHERE YOU THINK YOU SHOULD BE!!***

**NEXT - FIND OUT WHAT SKILLS ARE NEEDED TO REACH YOUR GOAL** What do the best swimmers have that you don't? How fast are they? What do they have, skill and strength-wise that enables them to compete at this level? Talk to your coach, college and even Olympic level coaches as well as college and national caliber swimmers to help you with the answers. And remember about asking the experts!! If you do get an opportunity to talk to some of these athletes, find out exactly **HOW** they did it. What was the road that they took?

Knowing where you are **NOW** and what you **SPECIFICALLY** need to work on to reach your dream will provide you with a very clear path to follow to success. Once you have this path outlined, all you have to do is follow it! It's similar to using what I call the "1-10 exercise".

***ON A SCALE OF 1-10, WHERE 1 = YOU'RE THE WORST SWIMMER IN THE WORLD AND 10 = YOU ARE THE SWIMMER WHO'S REACHED THAT GOAL OF YOURS, WHERE ARE YOU? COME UP WITH A NUMBER. NOW, IF YOU CAME UP WITH A 4 OR 5, WHAT DO YOU SPECIFICALLY NEED TO WORK ON TO RAISE YOUR NUMBER TO THAT 10.***

One important point that I am trying to get across here is that your success starts with **YOUR** ability to **DREAM**. Dream big! Have humongous, scary goals...BUT...If you are going to build your castles in the sky, **MAKE SURE THAT THE FOUNDATION OF THAT CASTLE IS ON THE GROUND!** In other words, you must tie your big goal to your daily, in-practice goals for the whole process to really work for you. If you can connect what you are doing in practice **TODAY** to that goal you have 3-4 years away, you will get much more out of practice and will maintain a high degree of motivation.

In other words like former Olympic gold medalist Pablo Morales, you have to be able to ask yourself on a daily basis, “How is what I’m doing right **NOW** and **TODAY**, going to help me get to where I really want to go?”

For example, A very talented figure skater was having trouble dragging herself out of bed every morning at 4 am to train in an ice cold rink for 2 hours before school. (Not that you can relate to this as a competitive swimmer). After missing several practices from over-sleeping, she came up with a way to get beyond the day to day discomfort of having to leave that warm bed. Her big goal three years away was to win the World Championships. To get that far she knew she’d have to beat a top Romanian skater. She found a photograph of this skater and put

the picture by her bedside, right near her alarm clock. Under the photo she wrote the following words: “Comrade, while you were sleeping, I was training”. This was all that she needed to bring her long term goal into the present. This is what you must do:

## **PLAN FOR THE FUTURE, BUT WORK IN THE PRESENT!**

In a small way, everyday, bring your long term goals into the pool with you by working on a tiny piece of them. **UNDERSTAND** that when you run into that pain and fatigue and want to back down, when the coach turns away and you have an opportunity to dog it...STOP...REMEMBER...you now have an opportunity to **TAKE ONE SMALL STEP CLOSER TO YOUR GOALS**. Remember why you’re in the pool going through all this physical and emotional torture! Who is it for? **YOU...YOU...YOU! NO ONE ELSE...**So take that opportunity to make practice count.

Use the following goal-setting exercises to help you take the first important step in becoming a champion: **START WITH THE END IN MIND**. Refer to the Goal Setting Guide at the end of this section to help you develop effective goals.

### **GOAL EXERCISE #1**

- 1) Write out a list of ALL the goals that you wish to attain in swimming.
- 2) Prioritize them in order of importance to you and in relation to time. That is, label which are short term (up to 30 days), intermediate

(4-6 months) and long term (a year and up). Remember, intermediate and short-term goals should lead you directly to your long-term goal.

Break the short term goals into smaller chunks (remember the elephant) by developing 2-4 mini-goals or steps that you can take to help you reach these short term goals. Mini-goals should be workable on a daily basis, in practice or on your own.

**ASK THE EXPERTS!** Consult with your coach, sport psychologist, strength trainer, nutritionist, or other experts to help you identify exactly what you need to work on.

3) Check your goals against the Goal Setting Guidelines at the end of this section to be sure that your goals meet all the criteria.

## **GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESSFUL GOAL SETTING**

1) Make sure the goals are **YOURS** (not your coach's, parents' or friends). This one is absolutely crucial! You should **NOT** be swimming **FOR** your parents or anyone else except **YOU!!!!**

2) Make your goals **CHALLENGING** but **REALISTIC**. Stretch yourself with your goals but make sure that you don't have to grow another arm and leg in order to achieve them.

3) Make your goals **SPECIFIC**. Vague and general goals like "I want to drop time or go faster" are not as helpful as "I want to qualify for junior/senior nationals in the 100 and 200 freestyle".

4) Make your goals **MEASURABLE**. You have to be able to specifically monitor your progress. Luckily in swimming this is relatively easy to do with times.

5) Make your goals **COMPATIBLE**. (A goal of wanting to drop 4 seconds in your 100 free is not compatible with a goal of training once a week).

6) Your goals should be **FLEXIBLE** to allow for **CHANGES**. (If you set a goal too high or low, you need to be able to make the appropriate adjustment. Remember, your goals should NOT be etched in stone, they should serve as general guideposts for your efforts.

7) Set a **TIME FRAME** or **TARGET** date for each goal. (Time pressure will help you stay motivated towards completion)

8) Put your goals in **WRITING** and **POST THEM**. (Write down your goals, sign them and keep them continually in front of you. This will help you make more of a commitment to working on them. **REMEMBER INK THEM, DON'T JUST THINK THEM!!!**

**PRIORITIZE** your goals. (Arrange the goals in relation to their importance to you and your long term objective)

***ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL: THE SOLE PURPOSE OF YOUR GOALS IS TO MOTIVATE YOU TO WORK HARD AND NOTHING MORE!***

Your goals should **NEVER** be used as a measuring stick in practice to beat yourself up because you don't think you're going fast enough in that particular practice to ever reach them. They should **NEVER**

be used to determine the success or failure of a particular season. (i.e. “If I don’t get my goal times then this season has been a total waste!”). Instead, your goals are simply a motivational tool to help you continue to push yourself on a daily basis **IN PRACTICE. YOUR** goals, and especially if they are truly **YOURS**, should help you answer the following question each and every day that you get into that pool: “Why am I putting in all of this hard work, suffering and sacrificing?” And of course, the answer has to do with what you truly want to accomplish for yourself in the pool.

## **STEP #2 THE ULTIMATE SECRET TO ATHLETIC SUCCESS**

There is one factor that separates successful swimmers and other athletes from everyone else. It has nothing to do with more talent, ability or God-given gifts. It’s a factor that can neutralize disabilities and enable a less talented performer to ultimately beat out a more talented one. It’s a simple “secret” so common that it is regularly dismissed by most swimmers. It’s a four letter word: **WORK!**

The secret to success in swimming is plain, ordinary, simple and **CONSISTENT HARD WORK**. That’s right! There is no shortcut to excellence. You have to do it the old fashioned way! Athletes who make it in every sport aren’t necessarily more talented, stronger, or faster. Their edge almost always lies in their work ethic. They **WANT** that goal more and therefore are willing to do all the sweaty, uncomfortable extras that most other athletes won’t do.

Your **DESIRE** as a swimmer and a never-say-die attitude will take you much further than your natural talent or skills would by themselves.

Hard work will put success in a picture where no one else can see it. Ask Rocky Blier, Pro Football great and Hall of Famer for the Pittsburgh Steelers. In the late 60's, Blier was drafted by the Steelers out of college but never got to play because he was also drafted by Uncle Sam and sent over to Vietnam. During his tour of duty he stepped on a land mine and took shrapnel in his foot and leg. After a military discharge, he hobbled back to the States, unable to walk without a limp and excruciating pain.

However, when Blier returned to the states, he had this crazy notion that he wanted to pick up his football career where he left off! No one in Pro Football wanted to have anything to do with someone who could barely walk, never mind run. Blier, however, had other things in mind and spent month after painful month **WORKING** to get back in playing shape. He gutted his way through the impossible and not only made the Steeler team, he became All-Pro and the major reason that they achieved so much success in the late 60's and early 70's! Was Blier more talented than many of the other players that he beat out at his position? **NO**...actually he was crippled...His secret? He wanted it more and therefore was willing to **WORK, WORK, WORK**.

Understand that not everyone has the physical talent and ability to make the Olympic Team. However, if you have a big enough **WHY**, that is, you **REALLY** want something, **AND** you are willing to “pay your physical dues”, then what you do accomplish will take you **FAR BEYOND** the normal limitations of your physical abilities!

### ***IF YOU WANT TO BECOME A CHAMPION THEN IT'S UP TO YOU***

One other important aspect of hard work. If you want to go as far as possible in swimming then **YOU** have to take responsibility for

your training. **NO ONE** can make you great except **YOU**! Too many swimmers put this all-important responsibility on coaches, parents and everyone else except themselves. When something goes wrong they get into pointing the finger and blaming, “The water was too cold”, “I would have gotten a better time today, but I had to swim in the up-hill lane”, “I would be a much better swimmer if I had a better coach”.

This mentality of “**GOOD SWIM, GOOD SWIMMER, BAD SWIM, BAD COACH**” is the way loser’s think! It’s up to **YOU** to take your training seriously enough to work hard towards **YOUR** goals. That’s right! They are **YOUR** goals!!! When you blow off practice, dog it or goof around when coach isn’t looking, or complain about having to do extra hard sets, then you’re only fooling and hurting **YOURSELF**! Remember the 10 most important 2-letter words in becoming a champion!

***“IF IT IS TO BE, IT IS UP TO ME”***

### **STEP #3 CHAMPIONS BELIEVE IN THEMSELVES N.M.W. (NO MATTER WHAT)**

**SWIMMERS ARE LIMITED MOST BY WHAT THEY BELIEVE IS POSSIBLE.** Your belief system can make or break your competitive career in and out of the pool. What you believe can either empower you to spectacular races or drag your swims right to the bottom of the pool. The one characteristic of successful swimmers is that they have a strong belief in themselves. Even if they suffer setbacks, slumps, injuries or big failures, they maintain a positive belief in themselves and their abilities.



Remember, performance is self-fulfilling. **YOU ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU EXPECT.** It's your belief system that sets this all in motion.

Let me explain: If you don't believe that you can do something, then you will be less determined and persistent in your efforts to accomplish that task.

When you run into setbacks and obstacles, (which you have to in order to ultimately become successful), then you will be less likely to hang in there to see them through. **WHEN YOU FAIL TO PERSIST, YOU WILL PERSIST IN FAILING!** Each time you fail you will have more "evidence" or proof to support your **FAULTY** belief that you **CAN'T**. Thus you have set in motion the self-fulfilling cycle of losing!

However, if you go into any situation and believe in the back of your head that you **CAN DO** it, a whole different cycle is set into motion. When you fail or run into obstacles, you'll keep your determination and persist until you are successful because deep down you **KNOW** that you **CAN** do it! **WHEN YOU PERSIST IN BEING PERSISTENT, YOU HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO ULTIMATELY REACH THAT GOAL.** This is the self-fulfilling cycle of winning because each success reinforces your **CAN DO** beliefs!

If there's one event that always seems to push your "can't do" buttons, one time that you think you'll never break, it would be easy for you to stop believing in yourself and your abilities. If you went into your next practice session and had to swim that event or break that time, yet still **BELIEVED** that you couldn't do it and **NEVER** would be able to,

your resultant apprehension and lack of persistence would insure that you would continue to stay stuck!

To become a champion, you must start by learning to believe in yourself. That's right, I said **LEARN!** You can learn to develop the belief of champions. **THE BIRTH OF EXCELLENCE BEGINS WITH THE UNDERSTANDING THAT YOU CAN CHOOSE YOUR BELIEFS.** You can choose beliefs that empower you or those that hold you back! It's just like having your own garden. What you reap in terms of performance depends on what you plant, or your beliefs.

***“YOUR MIND IS LIKE A GARDEN. WHAT YOU HARVEST DEPENDS ON WHAT YOU PLANT. PLANT WHEAT AND IT WILL GROW. PLANT STINKWEED AND THAT’S WHAT YOU’LL GET”***

Years ago I spoke to a freshman wrestler on the phone who had just upset the defending State Champion. The funny thing about his victory was that he didn't know **WHO** his opponent was. **NO ONE ON THE TEAM HAD TOLD HIM HE WAS SUPPOSED TO LOSE.** This young man did **NOT** know how great his opponent was and so did **NOT** develop any negative beliefs about the outcome of his match, beliefs which would have surely held him back.

Your beliefs are so powerful that they can neutralize a handicap that exists or create one that's not there. Years ago, Amy van Dyken made the Olympic team and medaled. In high school, Van Dyken had such bad asthma that she couldn't even swim 25 yards without having to stop to catch her breath!!!! Similarly 1996 Olympic gold medalist in the 400IM, Tom Dolan had such bad asthma that he would frequently pass out in practice from a lack of oxygen because of his physical handicap.

Speaking of handicaps, here's a little something that you might want to keep in mind about your physical limitations:

***'THERE IS NOTHING THAT YOU CAN'T ACCOMPLISH IN THIS WORLD. YOU HAVE NO HANDICAPS. YOU HAVE NO LIMITATIONS. PERHAPS YOU MAY HAVE TO FIND YOUR OWN UNIQUE WAY OF DOING THINGS. IT MAY TAKE YOU LONGER THAN EVERYONE ELSE. YOU MAY HAVE TO WORK TWICE AS HARD AS EVERYONE ELSE....BUT YOU HAVE NO LIMITS'.***

Too many swimmers are far more limited than those with physical afflictions like asthma, chronic knee problems or serious allergies. They are **NOT** limited physically. It's far more tragic than that! They are limited mentally by what they **BELIEVE** is possible for them. As a swimmer and a person, you have tremendous potential. **YOU HAVE A SUPER ATHLETE INSIDE. BUT**, you must start to believe in that super athlete in order to get him or her out!

## **A FABLE ABOUT BELIEFS AND LIMITS**

Once upon a time, a farmer noticed some unusual activity behind his barn which continued for several weeks. Two huge majestic birds continually circled the area, coming and going at different times. When the farmer went outside to investigate, he noticed a huge nest perched at the top of the barn. After a little research he realized that the birds were eagles.

One day he decided to try a little experiment. He snuck up to the nest, took out one of the eggs and placed it in one of his chicken coops with some other eggs in a nest. Two weeks passed and all the eggs in the

chicken's nest hatched, including the strange looking, larger one. All the new born chicks were then taken out by their mother to parade around the barnyard and to learn all the things that chicks need to know, i.e. how to walk like a chick, scratch for feed, etc. All the chicks learned their lessons well, including the huge, funny looking one that had come from that strange egg.

Months passed and the chicks grew into chickens. While they'd flap their wings and squawk a lot, they never flew because **EVERYONE KNOWS** that chickens can't fly. The biggest "chicken", which looked very much like an eagle, followed all the other chickens around, acting like a chicken, which is of course what he **BELIEVED** himself to be.

One day he was in the middle of the barnyard scratching for kernels of corn when this majestic bird soared overhead. Everyone in the yard stopped to gawk. The big "chicken" who was really an eagle asked King Rooster, the wise old sage of the barnyard, what kind of bird could fly so powerfully and gracefully. King Rooster proudly replied, "That, son, is an Eagle, the greatest bird of all!" The funny-looking chicken, gazed wistfully up to the clouds and replied, "Oh how I wish I were an eagle so that I might fly like that". Whereupon King Rooster and everyone else listening began to roar with laughter. "Don't be silly, son", the rooster advised, "You're a chicken and everyone **KNOWS** that chickens **CAN'T** fly!"

And so for the rest of his life, the big, funny looking chicken stayed in the barn yard acting like a chicken, wishing he was an eagle and never even attempting to fly.

***"BELIEF IN LIMITS CREATES LIMITED PEOPLE"***

Is it easy for you to learn to believe in yourself? Like everything else I've been discussing in this workbook it takes hard work and consistent practice. But this will be harder than most things that you have to do because it involves other people. Let me explain.

Too many swimmers today are not into taking risks and truly going for it. These athletes are more concerned about being one of the gang than they are in pursuing their own dreams. If you have a big goal in swimming, a huge dream, then the one thing you won't be able to do is "fit in". If you decide to really **GO FOR IT**, then you will set yourself apart from the majority of people your age who are heavy into being average.

People who have big goals and channel their energies to work on achieving these goals usually become open targets for ridicule. They are made fun of and put down for thinking that they can achieve **THAT!** It's the High School freshman who spoke to me after one of my talks who had a dream of going to the Atlanta Olympics in "96". His "friends" and acquaintances thought this was the silliest, **MOST** ridiculous thing they'd ever heard. It's the 6th grader who wanted to play in the "98" World Cup and who repeatedly got laughed at for dreaming so big. Or the young man who is shooting for a gold medal in the 400 IM a long way off! At the **2016 OLYMPICS!!**

It's very easy to be mediocre and average. It takes no particular energy, strength or character to fit in with the gang. But if being average and being liked is one of your priorities, you'll never become a winner! You have to dare to be different! You have to **BELIEVE** in your dream and have the **GUTS** to openly pursue it.

When Cassius Clay was growing up he told everyone who would listen

that someday he was going to be the heavyweight champion of the world! People in his home town at first thought this was very cute when Cassius was younger, but as he grew older thought that this was one of the craziest things that they had ever heard! As Mohammed Ali, Clay reached his goal and became one of the greatest boxers ever! **DESPITE WHAT ANYONE ELSE THOUGHT!**

Now you don't have to do what Ali did and tell the world that you're the greatest. The **ONLY** person that you have to convince is **YOURSELF!** This will not be easy when people all around you are telling you it can't be done. Some of these people really care about you and don't want to see you hurt or disappointed. Many others are simply uncomfortable with the fact that they aren't going for it in their lives. When they see someone else who's really striving for excellence it makes them feel inadequate. If you are pursuing your dream, you may remind them that they aren't pursuing theirs. Their answer? They "rain on your parade" so-to-speak.

When this happens, the results can be downright ugly and very uncomfortable for you. A 16 year old swimmer learned this the hard way when she started excelling on her team. Her "close friends" suddenly didn't want to have anything to do with her. They stopped inviting her to parties, wouldn't talk to her at practice and began to "punish" her for going fast and beating them. What was happening here? They were completely threatened by her success and doing everything in their power to get her to back down from it.

So if you do decide to really go for it, if you do decide to take your training to the next level, then be prepared for the nasty, social backlash that may come your way from all of the "little people" out there.

However, whatever you do, **DON'T EVER BACK DOWN!!!!**  
Don't ever trade peak performance and the pursuit of excellence for fitting in and having "friends!"

## **5 STEPS TO LEARNING TO BELIEVE IN YOURSELF**

### **#1 DON'T LISTEN TO THE EXPERTS**

Do not listen to anyone who tells you that you can't reach your goal. The **ONLY** experts that you should listen to are those who support your dream, encourage you and provide you with strategies for getting there.

In 1954 the "experts" tried to tell Roger Bannister that the human body couldn't run a mile in under 4 minutes. In the 60's they tried to tell us that we could never put a human on the moon. For **EVERY** dream, there are hundreds of "experts" waiting in the wings to explain why that dream **CAN'T** be realized, why you can't break that time or make the team! What do you think the "experts were saying about 40 year old Dara Torres going into the 2008 Olympics?

### **#2 ELIMINATE WORDS LIKE CAN'T, NEVER, AND IMPOSSIBLE**

These words are self-limiting. Rip them out of the dictionary in your mind. When you use them on yourself, you will hold yourself back. You do **NOT** really know what is possible in your life or in the pool. Make a conscious effort on a daily basis to rid yourself of this kind of self-limiting language. If you're going to use words like "can't," then add a big **YET** to the end of that sentence! "I can't do that **YET**" means

that up until now you haven't been able to, **BUT**, it's still possible in the future. Remember, the language that you use on yourself directly affects your performance and whether or not you'll achieve your goals.

### **#3 PRACTICE DOING THE IMPOSSIBLE ON A DAILY BASIS**

There are two kinds of impossibles: "Impossible" impossibles and "possible" impossibles. The impossible impossibles are things like flying, running faster than a speeding bullet, stopping a tractor trailer going 90 mph, etc. These you can't practice without serious risk to your life. However, you **CAN** practice the "possible impossibles." These are things that you **THINK** or **BELIEVE** that you can't do. On a daily basis you want to begin to challenge those limiting beliefs and move towards these tasks, **ESPECIALLY** in practice. Maybe you don't think that you can really push through the fatigue that you're feeling at a certain point in your event. Maybe you don't think you can ever develop significant upper body strength, learn to stay calm under pressure or talk in front of a group. Maybe you think that there's no way you could swim in the faster lane or lead the lane. Take one of these things that you **THINK** you can't do, and work on it **EVERYDAY!** It doesn't even have to have anything to do with swimming.

***EVERY TIME YOU CHALLENGE YOUR LIMITING BELIEFS BY MOVING  
TOWARDS THEM, YOU WILL EXPAND THEM!***

After all, this is exactly the strategy that you need to use to develop endurance in the pool. If you consistently push yourself to exhaustion moving **TOWARDS** those feelings of pain and fatigue, soon you will be surprised to find just how much endurance you've developed!



#### **#4 SURROUND YOURSELF WITH “GO-FOR-IT” PEOPLE**

Make sure that you have people around you on your “team” who totally support your dream and goals. You know what a drag (literally and figuratively) it is to have other swimmers in your lane who don’t care about personal excellence and dog it whenever possible. In fact, those are the swimmers who get angry at you because you actually **CARE!** You do **NOT** want people like that in your lane!!! Likewise, if your friends belittle you and your dreams, you just might want to think seriously about getting some new friends. Reaching a big swimming goal is hard enough as it is without having people around you throwing “garbage” into the pool to block your way. Find real friends who themselves believe in pushing their own limits and pursuing excellence. That way you’ll both be able to support each other in your mutual quests.

#### **#5 TALK TO, READ ABOUT, WATCH AND LISTEN TO PEOPLE WHO HAVE OVERCOME OBSTACLES TO MAKE IT**

You can expand your belief system by reading about or talking to other people who have done the “impossible”. They will provide you with real life examples that anything is possible. If you immerse yourself in books, DVD’S and CD’S about these kinds of people, then it will help you firm up your own beliefs that **YOU TOO CAN DO IT!!!**

### **STEP #4 CHAMPIONS TAKE RISKS - THE GOYA FACTOR**

The major difference between positive thinking and believing is **ACTION**. People who **REALLY** believe in themselves, back that belief up with action. If you want to become a champion in the pool

then you have to take risks. That's what being a peak performer is all about. You can **NEVER** reach your potential as a swimmer if you play it safe or cautious! You have to be willing to "go out on a limb" if you want to be able to taste the fruits of success and victory.

Too many swimmers spend too much time thinking and talking about what they **WILL** do. Not enough of their energy is focused on action. Talent, ability, and the best strategies in the world will **NOT** help you if you never use them. Let me explain.

Many years ago I worked with a very talented figure skater who had the physical potential to compete on a national level with the best. He had a great coach, a former Olympian who exposed him to all the physical and technical strategies he needed to make it. He came to work with me so he could learn to develop mental toughness. I taught him everything I know about the mental side of performance and provided him with skills that would help him compete successfully at the top. His coach and I covered **ALL** the bases needed to become a champion. All except one! **HIM!** He never practiced or seriously worked on the skills we taught him. He talked about his training a lot, how good he was going to get and how far he'd go, **BUT** he never consistently took serious **ACTION**.

He is a classic example of the athlete with "permanent potential". Because he failed to **GOYA (GET OFF YOUR BACKSIDE)**, he never went anywhere. You must be willing to put yourself and your skills on the line. You must be willing to take risks! It's your **ACTIONS** that will motivate you!

***DON'T WAIT TO GET MOTIVATED BEFORE YOU TAKE ACTION. TAKE ACTION AND THEN YOU'LL GET MOTIVATED!***

## **STEP #5 CHAMPIONS USE THEIR FAILURES AS STEPPING STONES TO SUCCESS**

Want to know **THE** most important secret to reaching your dreams? The one strategy in swimming and in life that will guarantee you success? The mental attitude that separates the winners from losers in and out of the pool? The answers to all three of these questions has to do with **FAILURE**, and **HOW** you respond to it.

I mentioned that winners regularly take risks. They put themselves on the line. They go for it!. One of the very **COMMON** things that will happen to you when you do this is called **FAILURE**. While you may have been told that you have to go out on a limb to get the fruit, you may not know that frequently when your butt is in that precarious position, that limb is going to break a lot! Which means, you and your butt will end up on the ground!!

Failure and setbacks are a natural and normal part of the scenery that you must pass through on the road to your success. You can't reach your goals unless you can get beyond your setbacks. Winners know this well. In fact, one of the characteristics of successful athletes is their ability to deal with failure.

Because they are willing to take more risks, champions actually fail **MORE** than most other athletes. However, it's their attitude towards their failures that enables them to get back on their feet and then rise to great heights. Champions view their failures as **OPPORTUNITIES** to learn and improve as athletes. They don't **LIKE** losing or failing. In fact, I've never met a champion who did. However, when they do

fail or suffer some other setback, the champion uses it as feedback to get stronger.

Let me show you something!



In the above diagram I've sketched out the path that you must follow to reach your goals. You start on the left and then finally make your way through hard work and persistence to your ultimate goal on the far right. However, as you go from start to finish, there's all those x's that you must cross. Some of these are small (x). Some are quite large (X). Some take time to get over while others can be gotten through quicker. **ALL** of these x's represent your **FAILURES AND SETBACKS!!!**

The **ONLY** way for you to go from where you are **NOW** to where you want to go is by **FAILING ENOUGH TIMES!**

You always have two options available to you whenever you fail:

- 1) You can mistakenly view the failure as evidence of your inadequacies and shortcomings. In this way you can emotionally use the failure as a stick to beat yourself up and make yourself feel lousy, or
- 2) You can learn from the failure by using it as feedback, as information about what you've been doing that hasn't been working and therefore as a way to improve and become a smarter, stronger, better swimmer and person.

If you take option #1 after your failures, then you'll be left continually feeling depressed, worthless and de-motivated. Setbacks and failures will be devastating and hang you up for long periods of time. Further, you'll be more likely to quit a quest long before you reach your goals with this option.

However, if you go for option #2, then you will rebound very quickly from your setbacks. Failures will not adversely affect your self-esteem, but instead, will leave you feeling even more determined and motivated to reach your goal.

#2 is the **ONLY** option for winners. You must view your setbacks as **TEMPORARY**, and always as opportunities to learn. Let's step outside of the pool for a moment. When Hall of Famer, Kareem Abdul Jabbar first played at UCLA as Lew Alcindor, the NCAA banned his best shot, the dunk! Back in the prehistoric days of college basketball, the NCAA felt that it wasn't fair for someone to have Alcindor's size advantage. This setback could have left Alcindor a weaker, embittered player. Instead, he viewed it as an opportunity to develop a more deadly offensive weapon, the "skyhook".

Here's another example.

Going into the 1988 Olympics, Mike Barrowman was the reigning American record holder in the 200m breaststroke. He was a favorite to win a medal in this his best event. Unfortunately for Mike, he finished a mega-disappointing 4th! And as you know when you finish 4th in any race at the Olympics all you get is the towel that the first place finisher used! Barrowman was crushed! A highly dedicated and competitive athlete, this was a major failure! One week later, however, Barrowman

got back in the pool, a man on a mission! For 4 years Mike busted his butt and stayed focused on the next Olympic Games in Barcelona, Spain. He claimed that not one day went by that he didn't think about this new goal, which he ended up achieving.

Compare Barrowman's story with another swimmer I met several years ago in California. He missed making the U.S. Olympic team by .02 seconds and this failure propelled him to quit swimming forever!

Every setback or failure has two sides to it. You can view it as a positive or as a negative. That's your CHOICE! YOU can learn to control YOUR attitude. This is even the case with injuries. Very often an injury will temporarily sideline you and prevent you from working out as hard as you would like. Perhaps all you can do in the pool is work on kicking, or if your knees are injured, just pulling. The injury may provide you with a wonderful opportunity to focus in on and strengthen this part of your racing. Or perhaps your injury is so extreme that you can't even be in the pool and all that you can work on are mental skills. A 3-4 week forced layoff would provide you with time to develop mental toughness or to sharpen your concentration, relaxation or mental rehearsal skills.

Understand that a baby can **ONLY** learn to walk by falling! Each fall provides the baby's muscle memory with valuable feedback as to how to stand, balance and move. Without the repeated failures of falling there could be no walking. That's why I always say that **ANYTHING REALLY WORTH DOING, IS WORTH DOING BADLY** (at first)!

Remember, there is really only one way that you can fail. Try something once or twice and then completely give up!

It is **ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL** that you change your attitude towards failing, setbacks and those disappointing meets. Mastery in swimming takes repetition, failure and then more repetition. You have to lose a lot of races before you can start to win any. If you go into the pool and you're afraid of screwing up and coming up short again, then you will physically tighten yourself up and swim with that proverbial piano on your back!. You swim your very best races when you have absolutely nothing to lose and when you are **NOT THINKING ABOUT THE OUTCOME**. This probably explains why so many swimmers consistently go faster in their off events than their best ones. In off events you don't tend to focus on the outcome or the "what if's." However, in **YOUR** events you do! You tend to put more pressure on yourself and worry about failing to make that cut, final or beat that other racer.

Understand that losing and failing are very important parts of sports and not something that you should be wasting energy trying to ward off. If you make a meet, race or getting a qualifying time so important that the thought of failing freaks you out, then you will **NOT** perform well or reach your goals!

Your focus when you compete must be on **YOUR** race, in the **NOW**, on exactly what you **WANT** to happen, **NOT** on what you are afraid will happen. Learn from your failures and then let them go. Treat them as a **PASSING** thing. **DO NOT TALK ABOUT FAILURES IN YOUR HEAD USING "PERMANENT" LANGUAGE.**

"This **ALWAYS** happens to me."

"I'm just a head case."

"I can **NEVER** perform well under pressure."

"I **CAN'T** swim breast stroke."

Permanent language will make you feel that your failures are insurmountable, an inescapable **PART** of you, and something that you'll be stuck with for life. Remember, **FAILURE IS MERELY DELAYED SUCCESS** as long as you view it in **TEMPORARY** and **SPECIFIC** terms:

“Whew, I had an awful meet **TODAY**. But next week it'll be better. I know what to do now so that I don't screw up again like today”.  
(temporary language)

“I blew that race because I got too nervous pre-race and went out much too fast. Coach told me that there are some specific techniques that she can teach me to help me better handle those high pressured situations”. (specific language)

“I got totally intimidated and tight because I was paying too much attention to beating John. Next time I'll mentally stay in **MY OWN LANE** before and during the event and not watch or think about any of the other racers”.

If you refer to your setbacks and failures using this kind of **TEMPORARY** and **SPECIFIC** language, then you'll be left feeling positive and optimistic. This is the only constructive attitude to have when you're dealing with adversity.

***FAILURE IS FEEDBACK AND FEEDBACK IS THE BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS***



# Chapter Three

## handling the pressure of competition

The foundation of mental toughness is your ability to stay calm and composed under pressure. If you can't control your level of pre-meet, pre-race and during event nervousness, then your performances will **ALWAYS** be inconsistent and you'll never reach your potential as a swimmer. All the talent, speed and endurance in the world won't help you if you get too uptight before you race. Excessive nervousness will neutralize your edge and leave you **PHYSICALLY TIGHT** and **PREMATURELY FATIGUED**. This section is designed to teach you **HOW** to read your own level of nervousness and then **WHAT** to do if you find yourself getting too uptight before or during a big meet.

### **THE CAUSES OF STRESS**

There are many things out there that can get you too uptight to perform your best. The importance of the meet, size of the crowd, size, speed, strength and reputation of your competition, the pool that you are competing in, the water temperature, your parents and what they may say or do to you if you swim poorly, your coaches or

other coaches watching and what they might think of you, the order of events, the heat or lane you're assigned to or how good your warm-up feels. You may **THINK** that these are the main reasons that you start to feel nervous, that these elements are actually **CAUSING** your stress level to jump into the red zone. However, this is **NOT** really the case! In relation to stress....

***IT'S NOT WHAT'S HAPPENING TO YOU OR AROUND YOU THAT'S  
IMPORTANT, BUT WHAT'S HAPPENING INSIDE YOU THAT  
COUNTS***

Other swimmers, coaches, meet importance or event order **DONT** make you tense. Instead, it's what you **SAY TO YOURSELF** about these things that is the **REAL** culprit in raising your anxiety to performance disrupting levels. The commentary of your "inner coach" is what really causes the stress reaction that you feel. How else can you explain the fact that two equally talented swimmers can get up on the blocks in a high pressured meet situation and both come out with very different results. One swimmer, regardless of how big the race is, consistently stays loose and goes fast, while the other swimmer usually botches the start, blows a turn or two, feels tight as a drum and consistently has a bad race. Both swimmers face the same stressors. The key difference here is **HOW** they interpret those stressors to themselves and then **HOW** they deal with them!

To put it very simply. **PEOPLE, PLACES AND SITUATIONS DON'T MAKE YOU UPTIGHT! INSTEAD, YOU MAKE YOURSELF UPTIGHT!** And the **BIGGEST** cause of choking and stress in a swimmer is when he/she tries to **CONTROL THE UNCONTROLLABLES**.

What are the uncontrollables? The uncontrollables are all those things before and during a meet that are **DIRECTLY OUT OF YOUR CONTROL**. **DIRECTLY** is the **KEY** word here. When you go into a meet or race and either before or during you're focusing on or thinking about things that you have no direct control over three things happen:

FIRST, you'll begin to get nervous. Your stress level will start to elevate and, as a result, your muscles will tighten up. Since the secret to swimming fast when it counts the most is staying loose and relaxed, tight muscles will totally compromise all of your hard work and good technique.

SECOND, you'll get flooded with self-doubts. As your stress level rises, you'll begin to question everything about your training, ability and potential in this event. As your doubts rise, your all important level of self-confidence will dramatically fall.

THIRD, and as a result of these first two, your race performance will rapidly go down the proverbial tubes!! If you're uptight with no confidence it will be impossible for you to perform the way you're capable of.

So what specifically are the things that you have **NO DIRECT CONTROL** over? The pool and meet conditions; I.e., the water temperature, condition of the blocks, the kind of walls, the chlorine level, etc.; **EVERYTHING** about **YOUR COMPETITION**; How big they are, their reputation, strength, speed, conditioning level and whether they are a nice person or a total jerk; The size of the meet; How fast your teammates swim; How your training or taper has

gone to this point; How you feel that day; How important the meet is; Who's watching; How you felt in warm-up and anything that's in the **PAST**; The time you swim, qualifying, making finals or anything in the **FUTURE**; (NOTE – You can only control what is going on in the **NOW**); Other people's expectations of you; How your parents will respond to you; The **UNEXPECTED** like the timing mechanism suddenly breaks, you get called down from the blocks and now have to wait 15 minutes before your race; Physical limitations like sickness or asthma, etc.

If you choose to focus on, or try to “control” any of these uncontrollables, then you will kill your confidence and make yourself too uptight to swim to your ability. This means that if an opponent says something to you just before the start of your race and you become distracted and upset, then you are focusing on and trying to control an uncontrollable.

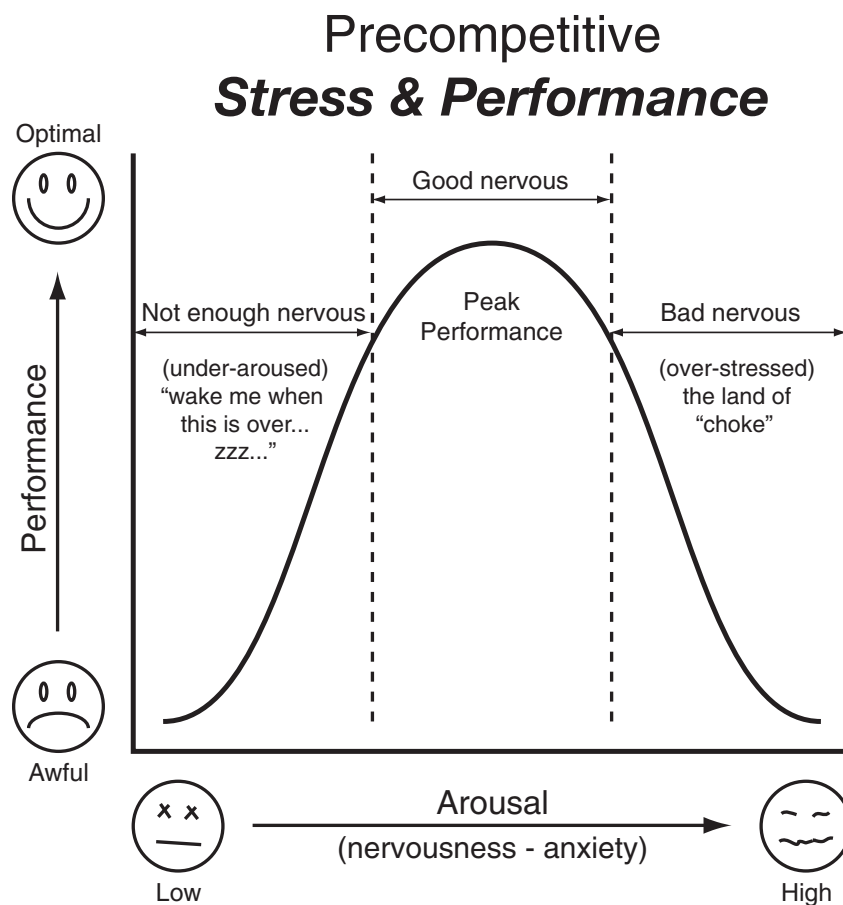
Likewise, if you think that your parents will be disappointed if you lose or fail to final, then you're wasting valuable physical and mental energy thinking about this uncontrollable. Similarly, if you bomb your first race in the meet and you keep thinking about it, then you are focusing on the **PAST**, a **HUGE** uncontrollable and it will end up bringing down your entire meet!

Mentally tough swimmers focus on the one thing that they can **ALWAYS** control in a meet or in practice, **THEMSELVES! YOU** are in **TOTAL** control of how **YOU CHOOSE** to react to all of the uncontrollables in a meet. Nothing or nobody can stress **YOU** out unless **YOU** allow it to happen!

## UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRESS AND PERFORMANCE

The graph in figure #1 shows the relationship between stress and performance. It depicts how well you perform at different levels of physiological arousal or nervousness/excitement. If you want to become a mentally tough swimmer, then it's your job to develop a **WORKING** understanding of this graph. Let me show you how:

Figure 1



The **VERTICAL AXIS** from low to high measures how well you are swimming. If you are low on the graph, then you are “stinking the place out” with an awful performance. You’re so slow that they time your races with a sundial!! If you’re high on the graph, then you’re “walking on water” so-to-speak and having a lifetime best time. You have an awesome feel of the water and you’re moving fast on top of it!!

The **HORIZONTAL AXIS** from left to right measures how nervous, stressed out or excited you are. If you are way over on the left side of the graph you’re not nervous or excited at all. You’re basically just south of comatose! As you move further and further to the right, your anxiety or excitement level progressively increases. When you are way over on the right side of the graph you are having a full blown anxiety attack and freaking out of your mind!

The graph shows that as you get nervous/excited pre-meet or pre-event, your level of performance improves. If you continue to add stress and excitement, your performance then reaches a peak. And if you continue to add stress, your races begin to disintegrate right before your eyes and head down the drain.

On the graph, I’ve marked off 3 kinds of nervousness or excitement: Good, Bad, and Not Enough Nervous/Excitement. It is important for you to understand that **EVERY SWIMMER IS NERVOUS/EXCITED BEFORE A BIG RACE**. Some degree of nervousness is important for you to get mentally and physically up to swim your best. However, you have to make sure that you are at the “right” amount of nervousness/excited for you. If you’re in “not enough” nervous pre-race, then your swims will be slow and uninspired. If you’re into “bad nervous” or feeling too much excitement before an event, then you’ll

be physically too tight to swim your best. You have to be into “good nervous” in order to go fast. How can you tell the difference?

## **READING YOUR OWN NERVOUSNESS**

Every swimmer has the performance arousal curve working for him or her. However, everyone is different. That is, every athlete responds differently to competitive pressure. What stresses one swimmer into “bad” nervousness gets a second swimmer into “good” nervous and might not get a third swimmer out of “not enough” nervous. It’s therefore critical for you as an athlete to be able to “read” your own level of nervousness and to be able to clearly tell the difference between all three. As a coach, you must be able to do this with each of the swimmers on your team. If, for example, you know that you are into “bad” nervousness before the meet or before your best event, then you can do something constructive to calm yourself down before your performance suffers. Knowing yourself is crucial! **SELF-AWARENESS IS THE KEY!!!**

There are three ways that you experience anxiety or nervousness, and therefore three ways that you can read your level of pre-meet or pre-race nervousness:

- 1) Physiologically (physical changes in your body)
- 2) Mentally (changes in your thoughts, self-talk and focus of concentration)
- 3) Behaviorally (changes in how you act)

Let's look more closely at all three:

As you begin to get nervous, **PHYSICALLY** your body immediately responds with increased heart and pulse rate, faster and shallower breathing, tighter muscles, butterflies in your stomach and/or feelings of nausea, cold hands and feet, dry mouth, increased sweating, frequent yawning and an urge to urinate.

**MENTALLY**, your thoughts have a tendency to speed up, you experience difficulty concentrating, you tend to become critical of yourself and others, you begin to entertain self-doubts and fears, and/or you find your concentration locking onto the source of your anxiety.

As you get nervous, your **BEHAVIORS** change. You may stop moving around and just sit, you may feel yourself getting physically hyper and begin to jump around. You may get quiet, stop talking and withdraw inside to your own thoughts or you may begin to talk nonstop. You may get very serious or silly and goofy. You may become hostile or angry, or you may engage in nervous habits or superstitious rituals.

All of these physical, mental and behavioral changes are neither good or bad. They are simply indicators of what happens to YOU whenever you get nervous. Your job is to figure out which of these changes are associated with good nervous, (that is, when you have great swims), bad nervous, (when you choke and completely fall apart performance-wise), and not enough nervous, (when your races are totally flat). Once you have a sense of this, then you'll be in a position to change your arousal level pre-race, if necessary, before it costs you in a bad swim.



## READING NERVOUSNESS

### EXERCISE #1 DISCOVERING “GOOD NERVOUS”

The purpose of this first exercise is to help you get to know **YOUR** pre-race signs of “good nervous,” that is, what happens physically, mentally and behaviorally when you are into “good” nervous and performing to your potential. Please note: You can **NEVER** have a great race from “not enough” or “bad” nervous. Your best swims are always a result of being in “good nervous” pre-race. By recognizing what thoughts, feelings and behaviors lead you to great swims, you can more easily identify the pre-race state that you need to achieve in order to produce your best efforts.

Sit comfortably in a quiet place where you will be undisturbed for a period of 5-15 minutes. Have a paper and pencil handy. Think back to the last time you had a great meet, where you were **REALLY** pleased with how you swam. Close your eyes and mentally take yourself back to this place, but just before it began. See, hear and feel in as much detail **NOW**, everything you did back then.

A) Examine the **PHYSICAL** sensations in your body. What were you feeling just before the meet and/or race? If you had butterflies, where were they in your body? What did your arms and legs feel like? Did you feel sick to your stomach? Did you feel tired or energized? Were you yawning a lot? How about your breathing? Take a few minutes to jot down all of the physical sensations of “good” nervous that you can remember.

B) Next, examine what was going on **MENTALLY** pre-meet and pre-event. What was the dialogue of your inner coach? What kind of self-

talk were you aware of? What were you focused on? Did you entertain self-doubts? Were you anticipating the start of the meet and/or race? Now write down what you can remember to be these mental signs of “good” nervous.

C) Finally, how did you **BEHAVE** before the meet? Did you sit quietly or jump around? Did you keep to yourself, listen to your ipod, joke with friends or talk about the meet? What kind of rituals or nervous behaviors did you engage in? Write down all the behavioral signs of good nervous.

D) Repeat steps A-C examining several other of your great races.

## **READING NERVOUSNESS**

### **EXERCISE #2 DISCOVERING “BAD NERVOUSNESS”**

Like the above exercise, the purpose of this one is to help you develop an awareness of your pre-meet/pre-race level of arousal. Specifically, this exercise will help you begin to recognize the physical, mental and behavioral signs of “bad” nervous. Becoming aware that you are slipping into bad nervousness pre-race will allow you to utilize one or more tension control techniques to bring you back to “good” nervousness and optimal performance.

Sit comfortably in a quiet place where you’ll be undisturbed for 5-15 minutes. Like the first exercise, have a pencil and paper nearby. Think back to the last time you had a particularly AWFUL meet, a time when you felt totally frustrated and disappointed in how you swam. Choose a time when your poor swim was directly related to being TOO nervous.

Perhaps you dreaded the approach of your event and wanted it to be over. Close your eyes and mentally return to this time seeing, hearing and feeling in as much detail as possible all that went on then.

A) Examine the **PHYSICAL** sensations in your body that were associated with “bad” nervousness. What did you feel in your arms or legs? Were you overly tired? Did you feel sick to your stomach? Butterflies? If so, where? Write down all the physical signs of bad nervousness.

B) What was going on **MENTALLY** before this meet or race? What were you telling yourself? What were you focusing on? If your mind was racing, what was it racing over? What expectations if any did you have that day? Were you overly focused on a cut? Were you dreading a particular event or competitor, or hoping the meet would end before it started? Write down all of the mental signs of “bad” nervousness.

C) How did you **ACT** pre-meet or pre-race? Did you hang out with teammates or stay to yourself? Were you joking around, being too serious or acting angry? Were you moving around or sitting quietly? Jot down all the behavioral signs of “bad” nervousness.

D) Repeat steps A-C examining several other races that you’d rather forget in which you choked or did poorly because of your runaway nerves.

NOTE: If you are the kind of swimmer who performs poorly because you are under-aroused or into “not enough” nervous, then repeat this exercise using steps A-D and examining meets/races where your performances suffered because of you just weren’t up enough for the events.

## READING NERVOUSNESS

### EXERCISE #3 COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Take a few minutes now just to review the differences that you've discovered between "good", "bad", and (if appropriate) "not enough" nervous. If you examined several meets in each category, then you should begin to see a pattern developing. "Bad" nervous looks, feels and sounds differently than "good" nervous. In the beginning, the differences may even seem slight or very subtle. If you are patient and look carefully at your performances in this way, soon you will be able to quickly recognize the thoughts, physical sensations and behaviors that represent all three kinds of pre-race nervousness.

A quick example. Jenny, a Division I collegiate swimmer and scholarship athlete had a super disappointing freshman year in which she was unable to even swim as fast as she had her last year in High School. It seems that before almost every one of her meets she was much too nervous to swim very well. When she and I examined her "bad nervousness" this is what we found:

**BODY**-Jenny felt heaviness in her arms and legs, an overwhelming feeling of fatigue all over and a sick feeling low in her stomach.

**MIND**-Jenny entertained thoughts like, "You've GOTTA have a good race, You haven't had one decent swim ALL year! You have to prove to coach and the team that you deserve your scholarship. But, what if I swim badly again? What will people think? God, I have to swim fast?", etc., etc."

**ACTIONS**-Jenny would go sit by herself 15 minutes before her race, cover her head with a towel so no one would bother her and then mentally rehearse the race over and over again.

After doing these things she would then be so nervous and tight that she would always have a bad swim. Only once that freshman year did she have a good swim. Before this race, therefore she was in “good nervousness.” This is what her “good nervous” looked like:

**BODY**-Jenny felt energy coursing through her arms and legs. She felt “hyper”. She also had “butterflies” but these were higher in her chest.

**MIND**-The only swim related thought that Jenny had was “this race doesn’t matter”. The rest of her thoughts and concentration was focused on the conversation she was having with friends about what they were going to do that weekend, the party they were going to and how much fun they would have.

**ACTIONS**-Jenny jumped around, laughed and joked with her friends and was completely distracted to the point that she almost missed the start of her race.

After acting, thinking and feeling this way, Jenny got up on the blocks and had a lifetime best swim. Swimmers like Jenny should NOT go off by themselves and focus on the race, think about what’s at stake and what they need to do. They should instead, completely distract themselves from the race and it’s potential outcome and stay loose.

## **COPING WITH BAD NERVOUS**

If you are too nervous before a race it will be physiologically impossible for you to swim to your potential. If you know ahead of time that you are into “bad” nervous, then what you need are some dependable ways that you can calm yourself down and get back in control. This section will present a number of relaxation strategies that, **IF PRACTICED ON A REGULAR BASIS**, will help you turn your “bad” nervous into “good” nervous.

### **COPING STRATEGY #1 - ACT AS IF YOU ARE “GOOD” NERVOUS**

One of the first things that you can do to help you stay calm under stress is to try to repeat all the signs of “good” nervous before you perform. For example, if before your very best races you went off by yourself like Jenny and focused on your race and used mental rehearsal, then be sure to do this before every one of your events. However, if sitting by yourself and concentrating on your race causes you to get too uptight, (and you know that bouncing off the walls, joking around with teammates and having non-swimming related thoughts causes you to perform well), then make sure you’re hanging around with teammates and **NOT** discussing the race before it starts. Even if you’re uptight before a meet, try repeating the self-talk and behaviors that accompany “good” nervous.

### **COPING STRATEGY #2 - SIMULATION**

The **BEST** way to learn how to handle competitive pressures is on a daily basis in **PRACTICE**. If you are used to practicing under stress, then you will perform well under pressure. This is the concept of

**STATE BOUND LEARNING.** If you can understand this concept it will help you excel when the heat of competition is turned up high.

State bound learning is easily explained by the following experiment: Psychologists took rats and put them in an inebriated state, i.e. they got them drunk. Once in this state, the rats were taught to run a maze. As long as the rats were in this drunken state, they knew the maze well. However, once the rats got sober, a different state, they could no longer figure the maze out. However, once they were returned back to the drunken state they were again easily able to remember their teachings and run the maze.

Most swimmer/athletes practice in a different mental/emotional state than exists in competitions. In practice they are relaxed and rarely pressured. In general, they don't overly focus on outcome and they don't become overly focused on who is around them. However, big meet situations present an entirely different mental/emotional state. The best coaches and swimmers in this sport intuitively understand the concept of state-bound learning. They make sure that their practices simulate as closely as possible the physical and mental stressors that are presented in meets.

If I can, let me step out of the pool and give you an example from the gym. In 1984, when gymnasts Tim Daggett and Peter Vidmar were preparing for the Olympics they made active use of simulation. For an entire year before the competition they created a scenario that they played out in practice **EVERY DAY!** To keep themselves motivated and to create the same mental emotional climate that they would face in the Olympics they pretended (in the gym) that the Gold medal in the team competition had come down to one event, bars, and that two

teams were left, the USA and China. Further, there were two gymnasts left to compete for the USA, Vidmar and Daggett. Both Americans needed to score perfect 10's in order for the USA to strike gold!

After going through their other events that day in practice, they then set the stage for their simulation. Daggett would act as the judge, announce the event and the next gymnast up, and then Vidmar would have to get up and do his routine. When Peter finished, they would then switch places. Tim told me that if either of them had a great practice, but blew this last event, they would leave feeling bummed out and frustrated. They made bars critical, **EVERY** day!

It just so happened that when the 84 Olympics rolled around, the men's team competition came down to two teams and just one event, bars. Further, it was just like Tim and Peter had been pretending, the Americans against the Chinese and Daggett and Vidmar left to decide it! Both American got up there and did exactly what they had been practicing for an entire year, they got perfect 10's!

Both Daggett and Vidmar understood that **FAMILIARITY BINDS ANXIETY**. That is, that anything that you have to confront and practice day after day will ultimately become so familiar to you that it will no longer cause you stress. It's the **UNEXPECTED** that will knock you off center and cause you to freak out. By integrating competitive elements into your practice sessions, by trying to simulate meet and race pressures as much as possible, you will best train yourself to handle the heat of competition.

This is the concept of **ETU**. i.e. **EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED**. If you can anticipate the kinds of things that would normally psych you



out, and then practice (mentally and physically) successfully handling them, you will not get knocked off center when they occur. If big crowds or comments from other swimmers have a tendency to get to you, try to practice (or imagine yourself practicing) in front of a crowd or against those kinds of opponents. If you have a tendency to stress out when you start to feel tired, practice pushing yourself towards fatigue and staying with it for as long as possible once you get there.

Let's say for example, that when certain people pass you, your tendency is to overly focus on them and, as a result, your stroke shortens and you slow down. Instead, in those situations try practicing keeping your focus of concentration on maintaining the feel of a long, smooth stroke. Every time that your focus goes to what your teammate is doing, quickly return your focus to the feel of your stroke.

There are no limits to how much you can use simulation to help you prepare for any pressured situation when the simulation is **MENTAL**. Many swimmers will pretend that certain sets that they swim in practice are really parts of big races, or they will take the simulation home with them and imagine these race situations over and over again. They will “experience” themselves confronting any stressor and successfully handling it.

Simulation is all about perfect practice. **IT'S PERFECT PRACTICE OR PRACTICE THAT BEST PREPARES YOU FOR COMPETITION, THAT MAKES PERFECT.** Just going through the motions in the pool while you're mentally out to lunch (i.e. swimming garbage yardage) is nowhere near as effective as if you make each stroke that you take important. Assign some meaning to what you are doing. Create a tough race situation in your mind's eye.

Being a space cadet in practice will **NEVER** help you get to the stars as a swimmer!

### **COPING STRATEGY #3 - PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION (PMR)**

I mentioned before that relaxation is a foundation skill in mental toughness training. It helps you handle the pressure of competition, cools your body down in between and after big meets, enables you to maintain the right focus of concentration and properly prepares you for the use of mental rehearsal. Without the ability to relax, you can never reach your potential as a swimmer.

**PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION** is a foundation skill in relaxation training. It teaches you not only **HOW** to relax, but also how to **RECOGNIZE** exactly where you put tension in your body. It's an easy skill to teach as a coach and with practice, an easy skill to learn as a swimmer. Like any of the relaxation skills that follow, mastery comes from regular practice. Coaches should plan on spending 20-25 minutes of two practices in the **BEGINNING** of the season to teach swimmers this skill in a group setting. Athletes should then take it upon themselves to practice **PMR** at night before bedtime for approximately two weeks. After this period of time you will be able to streamline the exercise and relax very quickly.

In PMR, you work your way through the muscle groupings of your body alternating contraction with relaxation. You should hold the tension in each muscle group for 10 seconds and be sure that contraction is to no more than 90% of your strength. Remember to maintain relaxation in all other muscles except the ones being tightened.

### PREPARATION:

Allow 20-25 minutes for each PMR session in an environment that is free from distractions. You may want to take the following directions and make your own relaxation cd or mp3 file. Slowly read them into a recorder, allowing 10 seconds for each contraction and 10 seconds for each release. You can even dub in relaxing music in the background. Lie comfortably on your back, feet spread about 18" apart, hands by your sides, palms up. Close your eyes.

### PROCEDURE:

1. Begin to tighten all the muscles up and down your right leg until you reach 90% tension. Pointing the toes either toward or away from your head will help you increase tension. Raising the leg one half inch off the ground also helps to tighten your leg muscles. Hold the leg tension for 10 seconds. Study the tension. Feel it.....

Repeat to yourself, "let go" as you allow the leg to relax, letting the tension flow out onto the floor. Feel the difference in your leg now... inhale slowly and deeply, filling your abdomen, pause..., and then exhale.....

2. Repeat the entire procedure for your right leg again, noting the difference between being tight in that area and loose. End by inhaling deeply and exhaling.

3. Tighten all the muscles up and down your left leg and hold the tension for 10 seconds. Study the tension as you hold it. Repeat to yourself, "let go" and let the tension slowly drain from the left leg.

Note the sensations that accompany relaxation...the heaviness, warmth, tingling, lightness or other feelings that are associated with looseness and relaxation. Inhale...pause...and exhale....

4. Repeat the entire procedure for your left leg again...then inhale...pause...and exhale.

5. Tighten your buttocks muscles to 90% tension and hold it. Become aware of the feelings. Repeat the “let go” after 10 seconds as you let the tension drain from this area. Feel the looseness here. Inhale...pause...exhale.

6. Repeat procedure for the buttocks muscles. Inhale...exhale.

7. Tighten abdominal muscles noting the sensations of tension here. Hold it...then “let go” and allow the tension to flow from this area. Feel the difference. Study it closely...inhale...then exhale.

8. Repeat procedure for the abdominal muscles. Inhale....exhale....

9. Tighten all the muscles of the chest and across the back of the shoulders by pushing your shoulder blades back and into the floor. Feel the tension, study it, now “let go” and feel the relaxation as it flows into this part of your body. Inhale    pause...exhale.

10. Repeat entire procedure for chest and shoulders. Inhale....pause...exhale.

11. Tense the muscles of both arms by slowly making a fist and increasing tension to 90%. Notice the feelings of tension up and down

the arms. “Let go” and allow the tension to drain down your arms from your shoulders to your fingertips. Inhale...pause....exhale.

12. Repeat entire procedure for both arms, becoming aware of the sensations that accompany tension and relaxation. Inhale...pause exhale.

13. Tense the muscles in your neck by pressing down with your head into the surface that you are resting on. Notice the tension in this area. Feel it, then “let go” and allow the tightness to slowly drain from your neck. Study the difference here. Inhale...pause...exhale.

14. Repeat procedure for the neck. Inhale...pause...exhale.

15. Tighten your jaw muscles by clenching your teeth together. Note the feelings of tightness in this area. Feel it, then “let go” and allow the tension to drain from your jaws. Inhale...pause...exhale.

16. Repeat entire procedure for jaw muscles. Inhale...pause...exhale.

17. Tense the muscles in your face...grimace, frown, clench your teeth. Hold the tension. Feel what that is like. “Let go” and allow all the facial muscles to relax and soften. Feel the difference. Inhale...pause...exhale.

18. Repeat procedure for face. Inhale...pause...exhale.

19. Tighten all the muscles in your body to 90% tension—Your arms, legs, buttocks, abdomen, chest, shoulders, neck, face and feel the tension. Hold it for 10 seconds and then “let go” and slowly allow your body to become totally loose and limp. Inhale, pause...exhale.

20. Repeat procedure for entire body. Inhale...pause...exhale.

21. If any areas of your body remain tense, focus on them by tightening, holding the tension, then letting go.

Understand that you must first learn the skill of relaxation in a non-stressful environment before you can depend upon it working for you when you're feeling the stress of a high level competitive meet. Once you have gotten proficient at PMR, you will then have the ability to quickly relax yourself anytime and anywhere.

## **DEVELOPING A RELAXATION CUE— TRANSFERRING YOUR SKILL TO THE POOL**

Once you have learned any technique to lower your level of stress, you can then develop a relaxation CUE. A relaxation cue is a personal symbol or reminder that you can use to help you calm yourself quickly and effectively regardless of the environment. When you are under stress pre-race, by simply focusing on that cue you will be able to get yourself back in control.

At the end of your PMR practice (or the end of any other relaxation technique), focus on the feelings of relaxation in your body. While you are feeling these sensations, allow yourself to come up with a cue or symbol that you will use to represent these relaxed feelings. Your symbol can be a word, “cool”, “calm”, “chill”, “loose” etc.; a phrase, “let go”, “I’m in charge”, “I’m calm and collected”, etc.; a color, light blue, pink, sea green, etc.; an image, a wave, beach, lake, mountain, etc.; or a kinesthetic feeling in your body. Once you’ve picked out a cue, **WHILE** you are still relaxed do the following: Inhale and focus

on the relaxation, exhale and focus on your cue....inhale and feel the relaxation, exhale and repeat that cue to yourself. End **EVERY** relaxation session with 10-12 slow breaths where you focus on your relaxation cue while you feel those relaxed sensations in your body.

### **COPING STRATEGY # 4 - AUTOGENIC TRAINING (AT)**

Certain physical sensations regularly accompany a relaxed state: heaviness or lightness in arms and legs, a feeling of warmth in the limbs, slower heart beat, slower and more even respiration, and a coolness in the forehead. Because your thoughts have a tremendous influence over your body, it is possible to control how relaxed or tense you are by what you say to yourself. **AT** is the ability to create a state of physical relaxation on cue. By repeatedly giving yourself suggestions in order, you can, with practice, control your physiological responses—including heartbeat, blood pressure, respiration and body temperature—to achieve a relaxed state under big meet pressure. In the beginning, you may need to spend 15-20 minutes per session. However, with regular practice, like with PMR, you will be able to completely relax yourself on demand in less than a minute.

#### **PREPARATION:**

Find a quiet place that's free from distractions. Sit comfortably, back straight, feet flat on the floor, arms uncrossed. You will do each of the five steps in sequence. Have a clock handy to time yourself. Read over the instructions for each step before you do it so that the phrases will be clear in your mind. Close your eyes and try to develop a **PASSIVE, LET-IT-HAPPEN** attitude as opposed to a **FORCING, MAKE-IT-HAPPEN ONE. IN FACT, THIS IS THE EXACT SAME**

**HEADSET THAT YOU WANT TO HAVE WHEN YOU SWIM YOUR BIG RACE IN THE TAPER MEET!!!!** You want to be able to relax, and let the fast swim come out rather than trying to force or muscle it out!

Initially you may not be able to achieve some or all of the desired feelings discussed here. This is quite natural and should be expected as a normal part of the learning process. Remember, if the feelings aren't there in the beginning, **DO NOT** respond by **TRYING HARDER!**

#### PROCEDURE:

1. **HEAVINESS OF THE LIMBS.** Repeat over and over for about 4 minutes, "my hands are beginning to feel very heavy...they are feeling heavier and heavier...my arms are feeling heavier and heavier...my legs and feet are feeling heavier and heavier...I can feel the heaviness moving up and down my arms and legs... heavier and heavier."

2. **WARMTH IN THE LIMBS.** Repeat over and over again for about 4 minutes, "My hands are beginning to feel warm...they are feeling warmer and warmer...the warmth is spreading up my arms...warmer and warmer...my legs and feet are feeling warmer and warmer."

3. **CARDIAC REGULATION.** Repeat over and over for 4 minutes, "My heart is becoming slower and more regular...it is becoming slower and more consistent...my heart beat is becoming very regular and very slow".

4. **BREATHING REGULATION.** Repeat over and over for 4 minutes, "My breathing is becoming slower and more regular...slower



and slower...slow and regular”

5. COOLNESS IN THE FOREHEAD. Repeat over and over for 4 minutes, “My forehead is beginning to feel cool...it is feeling cooler and cooler”, etc.

### **COPING STRATEGY #5 - BREATHING EXERCISES**

One of the first places that stress hits you physiologically as a swimmer is in your breathing. As you begin to experience that stressful situation, your breathing begins to speed up and get shallower in your chest. When you are relaxed, your breath is deep and slow in your diaphragm. With increasing stress, your respiration begins to speed up and move upward until, under extreme stress, you have a tendency to either hyperventilate or hold your breath. In fact, this is where the expression, “choking” comes from. I have seen far too many swimmers fall apart in the middle of their races because they were so uptight that they forgot to breathe properly!

Some have even been so nervous on the blocks that they stopped breathing and started the race holding their breath. Now I realize that this may sound silly, but if you’ve ever “choked” before, perhaps you can relate to what I’m saying. Too shallow breathing kills your endurance, tightens your muscles, saps your body strength and makes proper concentration impossible.

Probably the **FASTEST** way for you to get yourself or any swimmer back “up the curve” and in control is to change the rate and depth of breathing. By taking slow, diaphragmatic breaths when you’re in a tense situation, you will be able to calm yourself quickly and effectively.

If you have consistently practiced one of the following exercises, then you will be even more successful at regularly accomplishing this task.

1) **BREATH CONTROL TRAINING** Sit comfortably, feet flat on the floor, arms uncrossed in a space that is free from distractions. Allow 5 minutes practice time for this exercise. Close your eyes and shift your focus of concentration to your breathing. Inhale to a slow count of 4, pause, then exhale to a slightly faster count of 7 or 8. As you inhale, be sure that you are filling up your entire abdominal area. To insure this you may want to place one hand on your diaphragm and feel it rise and fall with your breathing. Repeat this process of inhaling to a slow 4 count and exhaling to the 8 count. Every time that you find your mind drifting, quickly and gently bring yourself back to your breathing and **INTERNAL** counting.

2) **BREATH BY 3** Preparation and practice time are the same as #1. Inhale to a slow count of three...pause to a slow count of three...exhale to a slow count of three...pause to a slow count of three. Continue this sequence for the 5 minute practice period focusing solely on your breathing and counting. It is not necessary in this exercise to deliberately deepen your breathing. Be sure that you are quick to catch yourself whenever you drift and return your focus to your breathing and counting.

3) **BREATHING MEDITATION** Preparation and practice time are the same as #1. For this exercise you simply focus your concentration on your breathing. You can keep your attention on the rise and fall of your diaphragm or on the air going into and out of your nose and mouth. Your breathing is **NOT** altered at all for this exercise. Distractions should be handled as in #1 and #2. Mentally this exercise

involves simply “watching” your breathing.

### **COPING STRATEGY #6 - MUSIC**

Many swimmers have learned to handle the pressure of big meet competitions by listening to certain kinds of music before the meet or the start of their race. Music can have a powerful effect on your level of arousal. Soft, classical music can soothe you and calm you down while fast-paced rock or rap can pump you up. You can use music by plugging yourself into your ipod or putting a tune in your head. Often music will be more effective in raising or lowering your arousal levels if you have picked it out ahead of time and have used it frequently. If you always play the same soft music in the background while you are doing any of the above relaxation techniques, that music by itself will very quickly calm you down under stress.

### **COPING STRATEGY #7 – VISUALIZATION: CREATING A SAFE PLACE**

Many swimmers use their imagination to help them manage the negative effects of stress. They mentally leave the stressful environment of the meet and “go” to a relaxing or safe place in their mind’s eye. For example, one swimmer will spend the tension filled pre-meet time “at the beach” in her mind’s eye. This is where she feels most safe and relaxed. Another swimmer will mentally go to a special “relaxation room” just before his 100 fly. In his “room,” he’s able to mentally shut the door to any distractions or attempts to psych him out. A third swimmer takes himself to his home pool which is always empty and tension free.

By mentally leaving the stressful environment and going to a **FAMILIAR** and **COMFORTABLE** place, you can effectively calm yourself down pre-meet or in between races. What's critical here is that you **REGULARLY** spend time **PRACTICING** going to these relaxing places. This is the **ONLY** way that they will be available for you when you need them.

**PREPARATION:** Find a quiet place that's free from distractions and where you will be undisturbed for 10-15 minutes. Sit or lie comfortably making sure that your arms and legs are uncrossed. Close your eyes and using your imagination and/or memory, mentally take yourself to a relaxing place. **SEE, HEAR** and **FEEL** in as much detail as possible, what it's like to be in this resource place. What familiar things can you see? Are there colors or movement that you can make out? What's the lighting like? What kinds of sounds, if any are part of this place? Are they loud or soft? Close to you or far away? What kind of feelings are you aware of in this place? Can you feel the warmth of the sun on part of your body, or maybe a gentle breeze blowing through your hair? You may even want to "construct" a door or passageway to this relaxing place so that you can close off access to everyone else.

## **PRE-MEET/PRE-RACE COPING STRATEGIES**

The above exercises will help you develop the master skill of relaxation. With sufficient practice, you will soon be able to keep yourself calm and composed regardless of the pressure of the moment. For these techniques to consistently work for you it is **ABSOLUTELY** critical that you practice them regularly, long **BEFORE** you find yourself in that stressful meet situation. Pick any two of these techniques to really develop as your own. The following **PRE-MEET** coping techniques

can also be used to help you stay calm under big meet pressure. They can be applied **WHILE** you are “under the gun” to help you stay in control.

**#1 CHANGE NEGATIVE SELF-TALK** - What you say to yourself pre-meet/pre-race will directly affect how nervous you get. If you are talking trash to yourself before or after a race, you will only stress yourself out more. Instead, make a conscious effort to interrupt the flow of negative chatter by replacing it with a more positive, inner dialogue. You have to act as your own “BEST FAN” while you are in the pool and at meets. Getting down on yourself will slow your development as a champion right down! Not to mention the fact that “crapping” on yourself will leave you feeling pretty awful!

**#2 FOCUS ON WHAT YOU WANT TO HAVE HAPPEN NOT WHAT YOU ARE AFRAID WILL HAPPEN** - Keep your practice and meet focus on exactly **WHAT** you want to do and **HOW** you want to do it!. If you focus on what you are afraid might happen, then you’ll not only distract yourself, but you’ll also stress yourself out more. Swimmers who focus on “not false starting” or worry that they might not final are unknowingly focusing on **EXACTLY** what they don’t want to have happen. Your focus should be on what you **WANT** to do (Nailing your start and swimming well enough to final), **NOT** on the negative, “what if’s”!

**#3 CONCENTRATE ON SWIMMING YOUR BEST, NOT ON YOUR TIME OR WINNING** - If you want to swim to your potential and perhaps win, you must be sure that you **DO NOT** concentrate on winning. Your competition focus of concentration should **NEVER** be on how important the race is or what’s at stake, but on what you have to

**DO** to swim well. Your focus should **ALWAYS** be on the **PROCESS** of the race, specifically the **FEEL**, and **NOT** on the **OUTCOME**. The process is what is going on at any given moment as you swim. It's a focus on the start, your rhythm, your feel, how much water you're pulling, your finish, breathing and turns, etc. If you concentrate on the second by second, moment by moment process of your race, you'll **ALWAYS** maximize your chances of having a peak performance.

**#4 CONTROL THE CONTROLLABLES** - Related to #3, be sure that you keep your focus on what you **CAN** control. If you can't stand the temperature of the water and are upset that there seems to be pieces of ice floating on the surface, forget it! You can't control that! If your opponents seem to resemble the Jolly Green Giant in speed and strength, **FORGET** them and shift your focus back to what you can control, **YOUR OWN PERFORMANCE** and what goes on in **YOUR** lane! Remember, trying to control **ANY** uncontrollable will only get you more uptight and spoil your race.

**#5 LET YOUR MISTAKES GO QUICKLY** - Dwelling on mistakes, a **HUGE** uncontrollable, will stress you out of the meet. When you have a disappointing race, let it go quickly and get yourself mentally back into the meet. If you have a bad warm-up, let it go. A bad warm up doesn't necessarily have to negatively affect your swims. If you blow a turn in the middle of a race, mentally get back quickly! Dwelling on the past and your mistakes or bad swims will **NOT** get you to swim faster. Learn from your mistakes and then quickly let them go.

**#6 TIGHTEN AND RELEASE** - This is a quick version of the PMR exercise above. If you can feel tension in your arms, legs or back before a race, a quick way to let this tension go is to deliberately tighten those

tense muscles even more, hold the tension for 10-15 seconds, and then let it go. Repeating this 2-3 times with any tight muscles will usually help you let go of the tension in them before it's too late.

**#7 STRETCH** - If you're mentally uptight before a race, physically stretch. Stretching will help you release a great deal of tension from your body and therefore will help you get back in control mentally. Many swimmers work in stretching to their pre-race rituals to help them stay calm and focused before the start. But remember, stretching will only keep you calm and relaxed pre-race if while you're stretching physically, you're simultaneously focusing mentally on the stretch.

**#8 HAVE FUN** - If you want to become the best swimmer that you are capable of becoming, then the one word that will help you do just that is FUN. You will **ALWAYS** perform your best when you're having fun. If you make a meet or race **SOOOO** important and **SOOOO** scary that you get too serious, your performance will suffer. **GUARANTEED!!!!** This is one of the main reasons that so many swimmers fall apart under the pressure of important meets. Whether you are practicing in the pool or competing at Nationals, having fun will insure that you stay loose and perform your best. Winners go into their meets knowing this.

***DON'T WAIT UNTIL YOU PERFORM WELL BEFORE YOU HAVE FUN.  
HAVE FUN FIRST AND THEN YOU'LL PERFORM WELL.***

For many swimmers, joking around or laughing with friends before the meet or race helps them stay loose. Thinking about the importance of the race and what will happen if they bomb gets them uptight. If you are this kind of swimmer, let yourself really enjoy the meet, your

teammates AND the competition! Having fun and laughing (as long as it doesn't distract you from your swims) pre-meet and pre-race will help you consistently swim your best.

## **COPING WITH “NOT ENOUGH NERVOUS”**

If you or your teammates go into a race under-aroused or not feeling enough excitement, you may be **TOO** confident, **TOO** cocky, or just don't really care about the meet, then chances are pretty good that you could be heading for a significantly mediocre swim. The **OVER**-confident swimmer is a vulnerable athlete and rarely will he/she perform to his/her potential. Bad performances in the pool will frequently happen when the stronger swimmer or team goes into the meet on the wrong side of the curve, in “not enough nervous”. Go into a race too calm, and at best your swim will be totally lifeless and uninspired, at worst you'll bomb! If you recognize that you are into “not enough nervous” before a meet/race then there are some things that you can do to get yourself back up on the curve:

NOTE: It's an unusual swimmer who struggles with the problem of not being excited enough before his/her races. More commonly, when swimmers struggle at their meets, it's because of being overly excited or too nervous rather than the opposite of that, being under-aroused. However, if you are this kind of a swimmer and you need to learn to crank your excitement level up in order to perform to your potential, then try the following strategies:

## **PSYCH-UP STRATEGIES**

#1 CHANGE YOUR SELF-TALK - It's important for you to find



a way to increase the importance of the meet or race. One way to do this is by changing the things that you say to yourself about the meet and your events. Inner comments like: “I don’t want to be here,” “Wake me when this is over,” “This race is so unimportant,” and “It doesn’t matter how I swim here” will not exactly get you excited to do your best. Instead, you need to challenge yourself: “I need a good time here”, “These are the kinds of meets that can easily get away from you mentally”, “Last year we got upset by a team just like this one”, etc. Your task here is very clear: Make yourself or your swimmers more anxious! Deliberately increase the pressure!!

**#2 CHANGE YOUR GOALS FOR THE MEET** - If the outcome of the meet is obvious before it starts, then **DON’T** have winning as a goal. Challenge yourself with other performance related individual and/or team goals. i.e. achieving certain splits; competing different events than you normally swim; getting a qualifying time; etc. Set up ahead of time a way to challenge and stretch your yourself and your performance that is totally unrelated to the actual win-lose outcome of the meet.

**#3 BUILD UP THE MENTAL IMPORTANCE OF THE MEET** - You may have your competition beat on paper. Your athletes may be the physically faster ones. There may be little to no real physical challenge for you or your teammates in this meet. If this is the case then your challenge, instead is a **MENTAL** one. These are the very hardest meets/races to get up for mentally. Performing against weaker teams makes you vulnerable to lapses in intensity and concentration. You may not respect the physical challenge presented by your competition. Respect the mental one! Go into the meet and keep your focus there.

Remember, your toughest opponent in this sport ALWAYS lies within. This is an opportunity to work on your own mental toughness!

**#4 USE SIMULATION TO CHANGE THE MEET AND INCREASE THE CHALLENGE** - One way to get yourself “up” for a lopsided meet is to view it as a rehearsal for a much bigger one. You have to use your imagination here and see this meet as a warm-up against a much tougher opponent. View every race situation that evolves as a test. Challenge yourself the way you know you will be challenged by other more talented swimmers. Keep your intensity up for every race. Imagine how stronger opponents would swim against you. “Forget” who you are actually racing against and instead “compete” against that much tougher opponent.

**#5 GET YOURSELF PHYSICALLY “UP”** - One way to increase your level of arousal is by increasing your physical movements pre-race. When you’re not up for a competition there is a tendency to get physically lethargic, to sit or lie around before you swim, to move slowly, etc. Counteract this by deliberately acting “hyper”. Stand up, jump around, get physically “hyper”. In warm-ups push yourself harder than usual. Don’t let your mental lethargy get into you physically. If you can get yourself physically up, then your level of emotional arousal will also rise.

# Chapter Four

## developing championship concentration

Your ability to **FOCUS** in on what's important and **LET GO** of everything else is absolutely essential to your reaching your potential as a swimmer. If you concentrate on the wrong things at the wrong time, then you'll never swim to your potential!

**CONCENTRATION** is one of **THE** key mental skills responsible for athletic excellence. A mentally tough swimmer is someone who knows **HOW** to concentrate and can do it under pressure. "Head cases" are those swimmers who can't control their focus of concentration when it counts and get distracted by the sound of the lights shining. Show me a swimmer who consistently falls apart at the end of a race and I'll show you someone with the wrong focus of concentration. Show me a swimmer who chokes or who is easily intimidated or psyched out and I'll show you someone whose focus of concentration **DIRECTLY** causes these problems!

**FOR EXAMPLE** If you spend time pre-race focusing on your competition, their best times, how fast, strong or talented they are,

then this **FAULTY** focus of concentration will psych you right out of the race! Like every other skill area in this workbook, championship concentration can be learned and fine tuned with sufficient and proper practice. Remember, in order to develop any skill area, your very first step is to become aware of what you are doing **NOW** that may be getting you into trouble. This is where we'll start. But first, let's find out what concentration is all about:

## **CONCENTRATION IS A TWO PART SKILL:**

#1 - YOU MUST IMMEDIATELY CATCH YOURSELF WHEN YOU ARE MENTALLY LOSING YOUR FOCUS OR DRIFTING OFF.

#2 - YOU MUST QUICKLY AND GENTLY BRING YOURSELF BACK TO THE RIGHT FOCUS.

CONCENTRATION IS A PARADOXICAL SKILL. You learn to concentrate by catching yourself when you are **NOT** concentrating and then bringing yourself back.

CONCENTRATION IS A PASSIVE, LET-IT-HAPPEN SKILL. You concentrate with "effortless effort". When you are concentrating well you are **NOT** thinking about it, you are just doing it. When you sit for two hours through a great movie, you are concentrating intently the entire time. You don't leave the theatre soaking wet with sweat and exhausted from your mental efforts to stay focused! It was easy and effortless. You can't force or make yourself concentrate anymore than you can force or make yourself fall asleep at night when you're wired for sound!

## ***THE BIGGEST MENTAL MISTAKE MADE BY SWIMMERS AND HOW YOU CAN AVOID IT!***

This one section of the workbook can make you a much better swimmer! Poor performance is **ALMOST ALWAYS** caused by faulty concentration either before or during your race. The biggest cause of choking, blocks, repetitive race problems, psych-outs and intimidation is when a swimmer violates the **HERE AND NOW RULE** for peak performance.

## **THE HERE AND NOW RULE FOR PEAK PERFORMANCE**

This rule states that:

### ***YOU WANT TO DO WHAT YOU ARE DOING MENTALLY WHILE YOU ARE DOING IT PHYSICALLY.***

Very simply, this means that while you are stretching out or warming up pre-meet, you want to be mentally focused on this rather than the imagined skill of your opponents, the last bad race you had, or the fact that you don't feel that you got enough sleep last night! This means that as you get up on the blocks to race physically, you want to be focusing in mentally too. Thinking about the last time you false started, died at the end, or failed to drop time is **NOT** doing mentally what you are doing physically!

More simply, the **HERE** and **NOW RULE** means that you want to **MENTALLY** be in the **HERE** and **NOW** as you race. This rule and concentration in general has two dimensions: **TIME** and **PLACE**

## MENTAL TIME

Whenever you perform physically, you are always in one of three mental **TIME ZONES**. You can be in the **PAST**, focused on what just happened, the last time you competed in this particular pool, an upsetting incident that took place just before the meet, how bad you felt in warm-up or how you missed three critical days of training two weeks ago. You can be in the **NOW** focused on what you are doing at that very moment. You can be in the **FUTURE**, thinking or worrying about what **WILL** happen. “What if I false start”, “What if I don’t qualify”, “What if SHE beats me **AGAIN**,” “What if I can’t hold on the last 25?” etc.

## MENTAL PLACE

Whenever you perform physically, you can either be in one of two general places **MENTALLY**: The **HERE** or what I call being in **YOUR OWN LANE**, that is focusing on you, your race, your training, and no one else. Or, you can be in the **THERE**. This means that your focus is in the wrong mental place on other swimmers, who’s watching, whether the coach or your parents might be disappointed in you, what others will think of you, etc. To perform to your potential you must discipline yourself to **STAY IN YOUR OWN LANE** both before and during your races. This means that you **DON’T** want to study the psych sheet before the meet starts, you **DON’T** want to go online and obsess about the results for other swimmers at different events, you **DON’T** want to compare yourself. Instead you want to discipline yourself to pay attention to **YOU** and what **YOU** are doing and no one else!!!

If you violate the **HERE** and **NOW** rule whenever you practice and compete you will be sabotaging yourself **BIG TIME!** You won't get as much out of practice and you'll perform poorly when it counts. Your first job is to quickly recognize when you leave the here and now and then mentally bring yourself back to a proper focus. Remember, **YOUR AWARENESS IS THE KEY!**

**THE PARADOX OF GOING FAST AND GETTING THOSE CUTS** – A paradox is a relationship between two things that is surprising in that it is exactly the opposite of what you'd expect. "The harder you try, the worse you do" is a paradox because athletes always assume that if they try real hard, then they'll actually do better. The problem is that when you try to swim fast, you always end up tightening up and muscling your swim.

A few years back I worked with a very talented club swimmer who kept missing his Olympic Trials cut by .1 or .2 seconds. He did this for an entire year!!! Before all of these frustrating races, his focus of concentration was mainly on getting his cut, and that this would be the race when he finally did that. Unfortunately, focusing on the time that you want going into, right before and during your race is a great way to insure that you won't get your cut! Why?

Your cut is in the future and it involves thinking. Going fast can only happen when you keep your focus in the now on what you are feeling in the race at that moment. Getting a specific time is a paradox because, like my swimmer, the more that you think about and focus on that time, the further away it goes from you. And, the less you focus on it pre-race and during race, and instead concentrate on the feel of your race, one stroke at a time, the closer you'll move towards getting that

cut. This is exactly what happened to my breaststroker. He finally got his Trials cut in the 100 Breaststroke when he shifted his concentration away from the outcome (the future -getting the cut) to the process (paying attention to the feel of what he was doing in the race, stroke by stroke).

So if you have a time that you are shooting for, a cut that has been eluding you, a record that you desperately want, then you have to begin to train yourself to leave that time/goal at home when you go to race and instead, shift your entire focus to the feel of your swim, one stroke at a time. By letting go of the time, it will automatically come to you.

**THE PARADOX OF BEATING OTHER PEOPLE** – The very same principle holds true for beating other people. The more you focus on an opponent and your need to beat them, the less likelihood there will be that you will come out on top. I know that in swimming, you're supposed to "race" the opponent. The problem is that for far too many swimmers, they interpret this to mean that you focus on and think about the opponent before and during your races. This couldn't be further from the truth!!!! Beating an opponent requires you to focus more on yourself and less on them. The more you focus on them, the less chance you have of beating them and the more that you focus on **YOU**, the greater chance that you have of beating them!

When you over-think about another swimmer before and during your race, you are inadvertently distracting yourself from the proper focus. What's the proper focus? On what **YOU** are doing in between your two lane lines! Your speed comes directly from inside of your lane, not from focusing on what's going on in someone else's lane! So if you really and truly want to beat that annoying teammate or pesky arch-rival, start



today to get in the habit of shifting your focus of concentration away from them and what they're doing, and towards **YOU!!!**

## **RECOGNIZING A PAST FOCUS**

It's absolutely critical that you develop an awareness of when your focus of concentration wanders from the **NOW** back into the past. If you are not aware when this happens, this faulty focus will negatively affect your swim. To help you sharpen your awareness of this "time traveling" read on:

When you use phrases on yourself like "here we go again", "I knew this was going to happen", "This **ALWAYS** happens", and "I just **CAN'T** ever seem to break that time", they all reflect a past focus. If your start is slow and you're still thinking about how stupid you were for messing it up throughout the entire race, then you are mentally in the past and that focus will be sure to drag you down even more! You've got to **LET THE PAST GO** and get back to your race **IN THE NOW**. If your first race of a big meet was terrible and as you get ready for your next event, you can't seem to rid your mind of how bad you did, then you're in the past and headed for another slow time. **LET THE PAST GO AND GET QUICKLY BACK IN THE NOW!!!** Champions do this well. Whenever they make mistakes they quickly rebound from them and refocus on the **NOW** of the situation. Don't be the kind of swimmer who feeds him/herself the past garbage of "Whenever I swim in a big meet, if my first race is bad, then the rest of the meet will be too!"

Let's say you just blew your 500m free and you **CAN'T BELIEVE HOW AWFUL YOU ARE!!!** You're getting ready for your next swim,

the 200m free and you're still mercilessly beating on yourself about the first one. **STOP!** Just imagine that as you step up to the blocks for this race you have 5 lb leg weights attached to both of your ankles and, for good measure and a bit more drag, some surgical tubing strapped to your body! Are you going to get an awesome start and swim strong and powerfully with all that stuff dragging you down? Do birds speak French? Do bears use toilets? I think **NOT!!!** On **ALL** counts!

What's my point? If you have one race on your mind and therefore weighing you down **MENTALLY**, it will have the same effect **AS IF** you were actually weighed down **PHYSICALLY** in reality! You can't swim this current event fast with any part of the **LAST** race still in your way **MENTALLY!**

## **RECOGNIZING A FUTURE FOCUS**

You know that you're mentally "time traveling" into the future when you hear yourself using phrases that begin with the "what if's", (i.e. What if I choke, what if I die, what if I false start, what if she beats me, etc.). Any thoughts about the race's outcome, your time or whether you'll medal or qualify are all **FUTURE** focused.

How you'll do in the next event, in finals or in the next meet are all **FUTURE** focused. You can't control the **FUTURE** any more than you can get the **PAST** back. They are **BOTH** uncontrollables and your focus on them will quickly take you right out of your race, **FIRST MENTALLY**, and then **PHYSICALLY!**

## **RECOGNIZING A ‘THERE’ FOCUS OR WHEN YOU LEAVE YOUR OWN LANE**

Have you ever been psyched-out or intimidated before? Who hasn't! The major cause of these stress reactions is your focus of concentration on **SOMEONE** other than yourself. Years ago I was watching two little girls finish up the last 25 yards of a 100 yard race. One little girl had a 2 body length lead going into this last lap but she was really nervous about winning so she kept glancing over into the next lane to see where her nearest competitor was. Soon her lead had shrunk to one body length, but she kept looking over. Soon she had no more than half a body length and this seemed to make her even more nervous and physically tight. It seems that the last time she looked over she saw this other little girl out-touch her to win the race!

To swim your very best, you need to train yourself to **STAY WITHIN YOURSELF**, in your own lane, **BOTH BEFORE** and **DURING** the race. You need to keep your focus on what **YOU** are doing and on **NO ONE** else!!! You need to stay **CENTERED**. Thinking about other swimmers, the crowd, your coach, or parents **WHILE** you are supposed to be warming up or racing is being in the wrong mental place. There is **NO** way another swimmer or team can intimidate or psych you out unless you **CHOOSE** to leave your own lane and pay attention to **THEM**!

## **FOR CHAMPIONSHIP CONCENTRATION CONTROL YOUR EYES AND EARS**

If you **CONTROL** what you **LOOK AT** and **LISTEN TO** before and during the race/meet, you will **ALWAYS** swim much better.

**CONTROLLING YOUR EYES** pre-meet/pre-race means: Only look at those things that keep you calm, composed and confident. If watching your opponents warm up or swim makes you anxious, control your eyes by looking somewhere else. Focus on your stretching, look at your hands, or pick a spot in front of you or anywhere in the pool to look at. Keep your visual focus **AWAY** from those things that have a tendency to get you anxious and uptight. If “studying” the psych sheet or going online and looking up the records and times of other competitors freaks you out, then **STOP DOING THAT** and find something else to visually focus on and do the nights before and minutes before your event.

**CONTROLLING YOUR EARS** pre-meet/pre-race means: Only listen to things (outside or internal) that keep you calm, composed and confident. If another swimmer is distracting or upsetting you with what he/she is saying, then tune them out by turning up the volume on your ipod or put a tune in your head or switch your focus to a positive internal dialogue. If **YOU** are picking on yourself with negative self-talk, go talk to someone else on the team, change the negative to positive, or otherwise distract yourself from that nasty chatter. A lot of swimmers plug themselves into their ipods before and during the meet to help them **CONTROL YOUR EARS**.

Don't wait until a tense situation before you start looking around for things to **LOOK** at or **LISTEN** to. **BE PREPARED!** Figure out ahead of time the things that you can use to keep your eyes away from tension producing stimuli. Do the same in relation to your auditory focus. Have a pre-meet or pre-race plan that you can use to help yourself stay focused and composed. **REMEMBER, YOU ARE IN CONTROL!!!**

USING FOCAL POINTS TO CONTROL YOUR EYES - One technique that you can use to help you stay in control during pressured meets is to develop specific focal points whenever you have to compete. Long **BEFORE** the meet starts, preferably before anyone else has even filed into the pool area, pick out 2-3 specific **FOCAL POINTS** that you can use to **LOOK AT** when things get tough later on. These focal points can be anywhere around the pool, but should be easily spotted by you later regardless of what's going on in the pool or how many people are there. i.e. a poster or mark on one of the walls, part of the bleachers, something on the ceiling, a mark or spot on the deck, in the pool, or on a particular block, a tree or near the pool landmark if you are competing outside.

When you look at these particular focal points, you can remind yourself of the positive meaning that you have attached to it. For example, your focal point can remind you that: **“YOU’VE PAID YOUR PHYSICAL DUES AND ARE READY”, “YOU BELONG AT THIS MEET AND CAN COMPETE WITH THE BEST OF THEM; “YOU’RE A MENTALLY TOUGH SWIMMER AND STAY WITHIN YOURSELF”**, etc. If you are about to race in a big championship meet and have never been in front of such a huge crowd before, you can use your focal points to help you stay calm for this competition. Pick several focal points out before the crowd arrives and you are still relatively calm. Once the pool or bleachers begin to fill and the tension/excitement builds, you can then keep yourself composed by controlling your eyes and concentrating on your focal points.

## **LETTING GO OF THE PAST - DEALING WITH DISAPPOINTMENTS AND BAD SWIMS**

You are only as good as your ability to **MENTALLY** swim in the **HERE** and **NOW**. If you are mentally in the **PAST** or **FUTURE** before or during your races, then your times will suffer, **GUARANTEED!!!** One of the hardest things for a swimmer to learn to do is to mentally let go of the **PAST**. You blow your start, mess up a turn, or have a bad time in your best event and it just eats at you! If you hang onto **ANY BAD** swim, I promise you that more will follow. Disappointments are an **IMPORTANT** part of this sport and learning. **EVERYONE** has them. **EVERYONE!!!!!!** You have to learn to **FORGIVE** yourself whenever you come up short and then **FORGET!** Here's a technique or two that you can use to help you leave your missteps and bad swims where they belong, **IN THE PAST!**

## **DEVELOPING A MISTAKE RITUAL**

The following ritual is to be learned **FOR** and used **AFTER** bad races, **NOT DURING** them! If you are a perfectionist and have no tolerance for your bad swims, you may find this technique very useful. You blow a turn or have what you consider to be an unbelievably pitiful and **INEXCUSABLE** swim and you feel really angry at yourself and super bummed. How effective will beating yourself up be at this point? **NOT VERY!!** It certainly will not inspire you on to greatness in your next race and it **DEFINITELY** will **NOT** translate into speed for you!! So what is your mental task here? To **LEAVE THE MISTAKE OR BAD RACE BEHIND AND GET YOURSELF MENTALLY BACK INTO THE MEET!** If you practice the following little ritual (you can change it in any way that you like) it will help you let go of your frustration and anger so that you won't blow the rest of your swims.

Let's say that it can start with the end of a bad race. You've just blown it and you're picking yourself up from that "speedy" finish that was electronically timed with a sundial! Great race ace! You climb out of the pool, force a fake smile and walk off the deck, fighting back tears. Let's assign a little meaning to your walking off the deck. What you're doing here (symbolically) is turning your back on that bad swim and walking away from it. (Remember, that's your task **MENTALLY!**) Next, find a **MISTAKE/BAD SWIM "WASTEBASKET"** or focal point where you can focus your concentration on. This can be something that you picked out long before the meet started (you can use the same one or have a different one for each race).

This Bad Swim waste basket or focal point will be where you want to "deposit" all of your upsets and disappointments from this meet. After every mistake or bad swim, you always have 3 mental tasks to help you leave the past in the past and get back into the meet.

1) **SWITCH YOUR FOCUS AWAY FROM THE MISTAKE OR DISAPPOINTMENT** - Usually when a swimmer messes up, they keep obsessing about the bad race and carry it around with them for the rest of the meet. This kind of focus will gradually undermine your confidence, raise your anxiety to a performance inhibiting level, tighten you up physically and distract your concentration from the task at hand. You are going to use your "bad swim wastebasket" as a distraction to look at to keep you from focusing on the mistake or bad swim in a negative way.

2) **CHANGE YOUR NEGATIVE SELF-TALK** - After you screw up there's a good chance you'll do what most swimmers do, begin to trash yourself. This does absolutely nothing for your confidence

or motivation and only tends to make you more uptight. What's important here is that you replace those negative messages with more positive ones. i.e. "Let it go", "stay in the now", "You'll do better next race/meet", etc.

3) GET CONTROL OF YOUR AROUSAL LEVEL - When you mess up and fail, you tend to get angry and frustrated with yourself. This anger and frustration immediately translates into increased heart rate, elevated respiration and tighter muscles. As we've discussed, you can't swim fast when you're tense, so it's absolutely crucial that you get control of your stress level after you screw up.

First, you want to deliberately put your focus of concentration on that "bad swim wastebasket" that you picked out before the meet started. This is your first task, to try and distract yourself from a focus on the bad swim. Next, as you keep your eyes here, you want to begin to change your negative self-talk. This is task #2, i.e. "let it go...stay calm, you're a good swimmer", etc. While you are changing this negative self-talk, you want to begin to take several, slow deep, diaphragmatic breaths to help calm yourself down. This is task #3, to get control over your physiological level of arousal.

As part of this ritual, you might even want to then mentally go through your start, turns or entire swim **EXACTLY** the way that you would have liked it to be, seeing, hearing and feeling the perfect start, turn or race. When you have finished this imagery and the ritual, you then want to imagine that you can "throw away" the mistake or bad swim and **WALK AWAY FROM IT**, leaving it in the past.



## **LETTING GO OF MISTAKES - DURING RACE - MISTAKE CUE**

Unfortunately you can't really stop in the middle of a race and make everyone in the pool wait while you go through your little mistake ritual because you just blew that last turn. However, mentally you must very quickly let your mistakes go and **IMMEDIATELY** get your focus of attention on the next stroke or turn! You have to quickly leave your mistakes behind you. One way to remind yourself of this is to **DEVELOP A MISTAKE CUE**, something that will help you let go of the mistake and its' accompanying emotions. Saying things to yourself like "let go", "cancel", "erase", "now", "focus" etc. can serve as your split second mistake ritual. If you practice **IN PRACTICE** letting go of mistakes with **ONE** of these cues, ultimately they will work for you in a race.

## **FIST SQUEEZE**

There is a physical feeling that you can recognize in your body that represents the feeling of letting go. Crumple up a piece of paper in your hand or hold some other soft object like a sock, sponge or rubber ball. Stand with your arms by your sides and the paper or object in one hand. Close your eyes and squeeze your hand as tightly as possible around that soft object. Hold the tension for 10 seconds and then say to yourself, "let go" (or the cue word or phrase that you will use to represent letting go) to yourself, and as you do, slowly allow your fingers to relax around the object until you let it fall to the floor. **REPEAT** this process several times, focusing carefully on the feelings in your arm and hand of "letting go". **NEXT**, think of something that you either messed up or that upset you on that day, either at school,

work or in the pool. As you focus on the **PAST** images of this misstep or upset, squeeze the object and imagine that you are holding onto that mistake/upset very tightly. Then, repeat your “let go” cue to yourself and as you feel those familiar physical feelings of “letting go” up and down your arm, let go of that mistake/upset. Practice the fist squeeze technique and you may be surprised to find that you can use it effectively **DURING** practice and at meets.

## **CHAMPIONSHIP CONCENTRATION – PRE-MEET AND PRE-RACE**

If you are concentrating on the **WRONG** things before a meet or race, you will be unknowingly setting yourself up for failure. As I mentioned, **RACES ARE WON AND LOST BEFORE THE START!**

Your job in these situations is to mentally stay in the **HERE** and **NOW**. But what does that really mean? How do you do that? The main way that you stay in the here and now is by **CONTROLLING YOUR EYES AND EARS**. That is, by having specific things that you **DO** or **FOCUS ON** pre-race which you use to deliberately **DISTRACT YOURSELF FROM ALL THE OTHER DISTRACTIONS** when you’re under pressure. Let me explain.

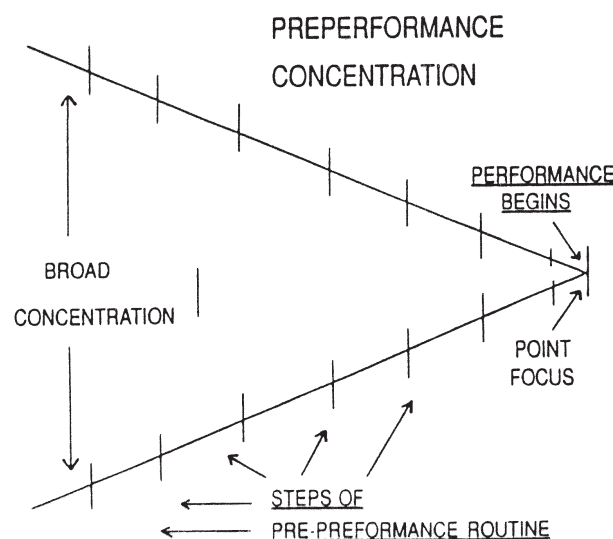
Your concentration is always limited. At any given time, for any given situation before or during a race, you can only concentrate 100%. Furthermore, while you may be able to focus on a few things at the same time, **YOU CAN REALLY ONLY FOCUS ON ONE THING WELL AT A TIME**. If you are concentrating on “garbage” (i.e. “my warm-up felt terrible”, “I feel **SOOOO** tired”, “the swimmer in lane 3 broke the world record in this event just yesterday” or “I just know I’m

going to die on the last 25.”), then you have less room in your head to focus on the things that will insure that you swim well. Therefore, it is critical that what you focus on is performance enhancing. How do you do this pre-meet/pre-race?

## USING RITUALS TO DEVELOP WINNING CONCENTRATION — PRE-MEET

Figure #2 represents your pre-meet or pre-race concentration and how it must change as the time for your race approaches. The left side of the chart represents the time before the meet or race. 15-30 minutes before the meet your concentration can be broad. You can be thinking about a lot of different things. i.e. pizza, underwater basket weaving, going on a date, etc. However, as the time of the meet's start approaches, you must begin to **NARROW** your concentration (moving left to right on the chart) until you have a one point focus as your first race starts.

Figure 2



The way that you can stay in the **HERE** and **NOW**, and progressively narrow your focus of attention in the right way is by going through a set pre-meet/pre-race ritual. Every great athlete in and out of swimming goes through the **SAME** routine before every performance.

Your ritual can include a special pre-meet meal, the night before or day of (i.e. pasta, or not), getting dressed for the meet, listening to special music, etc. or can simply start 5-10 minutes before. It may involve a set way of stretching, taking off your warm-ups in a certain way, cracking the knuckles in your fingers and toes, warming up a certain set way. It really doesn't matter **WHAT** is in your pre-meet ritual as long as these are things that **YOU** can control. Sometimes athletes develop superstitions and rituals that they can't always repeat.

For example, a swimmer always had to chew her favorite brand of sugar free gum before she competed each event. Before a big meet her little brother got into her bag, carefully unwrapped all her gum, removed the sticks and then just as carefully, rewrapped the paper so that it appeared that all the gum was still in place. Before this swimmer left for her meet, a quick inspection of her bag revealed that she was all set. When she got to the meet and went looking for her gum, she freaked out when she discovered that she had none. She became so upset that she was unable to swim the way she usually did.

Be sure that your pre-meet rituals involve things and actions that you can control and that you know you can always do, (i.e. stretching a certain way, adjusting your cap and goggles just so, cracking your knuckles, listening to favorite music, etc.) Further, it is critical that as you do the rituals you mentally stay in the **HERE** and the **NOW**. Remember, the purpose of the ritual is to help you stay centered, to

stay calm and focused. The ritual is a way that you can distract yourself from all of the pressures and distractions that surround you. If you are stretching pre-meet (as part of your ritual), but mentally you are thinking about how you totally choked last year in this very same meet, then you are **NOT** in the here and now. In this example your ritual is **NOT** serving its focusing and relaxation function. Whenever you catch this happening, remember to recognize that you are in the wrong mental place or time, and then quickly bring yourself back.

**PRE-RACE: USING RITUALS TO DEVELOP WINNING CONCENTRATION**-Usually, when any decent swimmer has an unexpectedly poor swim in competition, it's mainly a **MENTAL** thing. Specifically, the swimmer has made a concentration mistake either before or during the race, (or both). He/she has failed to stay in the **HERE** and **NOW** of the race situation. He/she has gotten distracted by the crowd, an opponent, parents or their own past ("last time I...") or future ("what if...") thoughts. Having a set pre-race ritual is a must for success here. Without a good ritual you have no way to effectively calm yourself down pre-race and narrow your concentration the way it needs to be for you to maximize your chances of a fast swim.

As a swimmer, you must have the ability to gradually narrow your concentration until you have a one point focus as the race is about to start. At this point, you must have a **NARROW EXTERNAL FOCUS** which takes in the sound of the start. Further, you must have the ability to quickly and unconsciously shift this concentration back and forth from a **NARROW INTERNAL FOCUS** as you pay attention to the internal kinesthetic (muscle feelings) of what you're doing, (the feel and the rhythm of your stroke and kick) back to a **NARROW EXTERNAL FOCUS** as you pay attention to a spot on the pool bottom, an upcoming turn or the lap number.

This is why having a set pre-race ritual is so critical for you as a swimmer. It helps you to systematically narrow your concentration and block out any distractions from an opponent or from anywhere else. Keep in mind, however, you **MUST** be in the here and now AS you go through these rituals. If you are thinking about what your parents might think of your swim as you engage in your pre-race ritual, then you are “with them” in the stands, in the wrong mental place. You must quickly recognize this and then bring yourself back to what’s going on in “your lane,” with your ritual.

## **EXERCISES TO DEVELOP WINNING CONCENTRATION**

**PREPARATION:** For all following exercises, begin by sitting comfortably in a place that’s free from distractions. After gaining proficiency in your ability to concentrate, you can progressively add distractions. Allow 5 minutes for each exercise unless otherwise indicated.

### **#1 OBJECT STARE**

Place a medal, trophy or any other object directly in front of you, pick a specific spot on the object and then in a relaxed manner, focus your attention on that spot. Study it carefully. As you keep your eyes on that spot, slowly repeat to yourself a word or phrase. That word or phrase will be your “concentration cue,” or reminder. For example, you can use the words “gold,” “now,” “smooth,” the phrases “long and strong,” “easy speed,” or “own lane.” Quickly bring your focus back to your spot each and every time that you find yourself drifting. Next, close your eyes and try to get a visual image of the object and your spot.

Continue to repeat your concentration cue to yourself as you do this. Finally, pick the medal or object up and study it with your hands. Feel the texture of the surfaces, the corners and points, the temperature of it, the feel of the raised writing if any, etc., and as you do this continue to repeat that cue to yourself. Repeat this sequence (looking, imaging and feeling) for 5 minutes.

## **#2 BLOCKING DISTRACTIONS**

Sit up close to your TV screen with the set on and no volume. Hold your thumb out against the screen and focus only on the center of your thumbnail for about 10 seconds. When you can do this without being distracted by the pictures, increase your time up to 20 seconds. When you can go a whole minute, turn the volume up and try to focus only on your thumb for 10 seconds without being distracted by the sound or pictures. Continue to increase your time until you can go 1-2 minutes without losing your focus.

## **#3 BRING YOURSELF BACK - THE HEART OF CHAMPIONSHIP CONCENTRATION**

Focus your attention on your breathing as you inhale. With each exhalation switch your focus to the number “1” (you can repeat the sound to yourself or “see” a number one in your mind’s eye). Inhale, focus on your breathing; exhale, focus on the number 1. When you first find your mind distracted or wandering, gently return to your focus in the following way: Concentrate on the feeling of the inhale. As you exhale focus now on the number “2”. With each distraction, recognize that you are drifting, bring yourself back and increase the number you focus on by one.

# Chapter Five

thinking like a winner

## DEVELOPING A POSITIVE ATTITUDE

If you want to become a champion in the pool, you have to first learn to **THINK** like one! The great swimmers have a different way of thinking than everyone else. They maintain a different attitude. They look at obstacles and problems in a way that builds their confidence and inspires their performances. Very simply, they **THINK** like winners.

How do **YOU** develop winning thinking? What if you're the kind of swimmer who's terminally negative, you think that you're a hopeless dweeb as far as your swimming goes...is there any hope for you? Do bears poop in the woods? Is President Grant buried in Grant's tomb? **YES!!**

Like every other topic in this training manual, winning thinking is a **LEARNED** skill. With regular practice and persistence even **YOU** can turn that negative attitude of yours around and start to use your head to swim faster. But first, you must remember to be patient! Anything worth learning does **NOT** happen overnight!



The heart of winning thinking is being positive. Winners know that **NOTHING GOOD COMES FROM BEING NEGATIVE**. Zip! Zero! Nada! When you are negative or down on yourself, your teammates, your coach, training or anything else about your sport, you are sapping your energy, eroding your confidence and setting yourself up for failure. When one member of your team is negative, he or she can bring the whole group down with them. Negativity goes hand in hand with failure. If you **REALLY** want to become a champion, then you have to understand that there is **ABSOLUTELY NO ROOM** in your training for a negative attitude.

Negativity will **NOT** help you come back and win a race that you are losing. Positive thinking is the stuff of comebacks! Negativity won't help you recover from a tough loss or injury. Positive thinking will get you back on track fast! Negativity will **NOT** help you successfully get through a brutal set in practice when you're tired and your body is screaming for mercy. Maintaining a positive, "can do" attitude about your ability will consistently help you do the "impossibles." Negativity won't exactly make you a popular person in the pool. A positive attitude will win friends, spur motivation on the team and help create a cohesive winning unit. When you're injured, negativity will slow down your rehabilitation and turn you into a tentative, complaining swimmer when you do return. Maintaining a positive attitude will not only help you make the best of that physical setback, but will get you back to your old racing form much quicker. Negativity will **NEVER** help you get over racing fears or repetitive performance problems. Instead, it will keep you slumping and stuck for the rest of your life! (Well, OK so I got carried away. Maybe I am exaggerating just a bit). A positive attitude is the **ONLY** way to go when you're dealing with performance fears and blocks!

***LOSERS ARE NEGATIVE, WINNERS ARE POSITIVE! YOU CHOOSE  
THE ATTITUDE, THE ATTITUDE CREATES THE RESULTS!!!***

So **HOW** can you begin to practice and develop winning thinking? Let's start by reviewing what we've previously discussed as "the uncontrollables" in swimming, the factors, situations and things that are totally out of your direct control. The uncontrollables are: Meet conditions, pool conditions, type and size of crowd, everything about your opponent, The outcome of your race, i.e. the future, (winning, losing, qualifying, making finals, etc..). Anything in the past, (i.e. how taper went, how you felt in warm up, your last event, the last time you were at this meet, etc.), your coach, how fast your teammates swim and everything about your teammates, etc. The only thing in all of these uncontrollable factors that you can learn to control is **YOUR REACTION** to all of them. This is where winning thinking comes in.

There are basically two ways you can look at any uncontrollables when it occurs. First, you can look at it negatively. You can use it to **UNDERCUT** your confidence and as an excuse for why you won't swim fast. Negative people are **ALWAYS** making excuses for their failures and they are **REALLY** good at that! Second, you can look at the uncontrollables positively. You can use them to **ENHANCE** your confidence and give yourself the competitive edge. Positive people **NEVER** stop looking for ways to get better.

Having a positive winning attitude means that when adversity looks you straight in the eyes, you smile and say "thank you very much for this wonderful opportunity"! This is the mental skill of **REFRAMING**. Reframing is a special way of viewing the uncontrollables. Reframing means, "when life gives you lemons, you make lemonade out of them!"

***WHEN OBSTACLES GET THROWN IN YOUR PATH, FIND A WAY TO USE THEM TO HELP YOU GO FASTER AND GET STRONGER.***

Years ago, one of my swimmers had a severe case of tendinitis in both of his shoulders from overworking. Because Sean was a perfectionist and incredibly driven, he frequently ignored the pain in his shoulders and tried to train through it. After a while, though his shoulders became so inflamed that he could barely pick up his arms. When Sean finally went to the doctor to get them checked out, his doctor told him that he must take at least two weeks off from training to completely rest his arms and get the inflammation down.

However, his doctor's prescription of rest didn't sit too well with Sean. He had far too many important goals that he was shooting for this particular short course season and he reasoned with himself that he just couldn't afford to take all that time off and fall way behind. So after taking just three days off, Sean was back in the pool trying to train hard again.

As expected, ignoring the doctor's advice cost him dearly. By the middle of practice he had to get out of the pool because the pain in both of his shoulders was unbearable. When the pain didn't subside three days later his mother took him back to the doctor who, of course, was none too pleased that the boy had ignored his advice.

After the results came back from the MRI, the doctor told Sean that it was critical that he not use his arms at all for at least one full month! He told him that after this time period they would reassess the problem and see if the swelling had gone down enough for him to resume normal training. Knowing who he was dealing with this time, the doctor told

Sean, “while I don’t want you using your arms at all, I will allow you to go to practice and just kick.”

At first Sean was totally bummed out by this turn of events. However. He quickly got over it and decided to follow the doctors orders. He continued to show up at practice regularly, but while everyone else was training, he was just kicking. When Sean went for his one month check-up, the news wasn’t so good. The inflammation had only gone down slightly and the doctor said once again, “I want you to take another month off from using your arms. It’s fine for you to go to practice and kick just as long as you’re not putting any strain whatsoever on those shoulders!”

Dejected, but somehow determined to make this all work for him, Sean went back to practice and continued to just kick. He resisted the urge to think about and focus on his other teammates who were now “getting way ahead of me!” Instead, he just concentrated on his kicking and nothing else! He began to think that maybe this whole thing with his shoulders was happening for a good reason. He wasn’t exactly sure what that reason was, but he was determined to keep working hard and find out.

A month later, Sean got similar, although slightly better news from the doctor. “Your shoulders are still inflamed, but it’s clear to me that the swelling has gone down just enough so that I now know we’re on the right track and we don’t have to do surgery. This is good, but I still want you staying away from using your arms in the pool. Just continue kicking for four more weeks!”

Once again Sean tried to maintain a positive attitude and refused to let himself get discouraged by what he considered to be an additional setback. He began to wonder what all of this kicking was going to do

to his speed down the road. Although he had a decent kick before the problems with his shoulders, perhaps all of this focused training on his legs would make a huge difference in his racing when that time came that he was able to finally return to normal training.

To make a long story short, it took nearly four and a half months before Sean was fully cleared by his doctor to train normally. His shoulders had finally healed! When he got back in the pool he discovered something surprising. Although his arms were weakened from the long lay off, he hadn't slowed down hardly at all! His kick had gotten so strong and powerful that it was more than making up for his lack of ability to pull. As he got back in shape, and to his delight, Sean also discovered that he had developed into a "monster kicker," the kind of swimmer he never would have been had he not injured his shoulders and had to go through that forced layoff. From that point on, his training took off and his times steadily dropped! The source of Sean's great disappointment became the main reason he developed into a stronger swimmer!

When you have setbacks and obstacles thrown in your way, it's absolutely critical that you "make lemonade with those lemons!" Things end up happening for a reason and your job is to try and maintain a positive attitude long enough to discover the silver lining in the cloud! Reframing will help you do this!

Reframing is a skill in which you practice taking the negative, potentially confidence eroding things that happen to you, and turn them into a positive. The uncontrollables affect BOTH you and everyone else in the pool. Give yourself the competitive edge by **PRACTICING** using adversity in your favor.

Reframing takes practice and may not come very naturally at first. However, every **DISADVANTAGE** has an **ADVANTAGE** in it. Every problem presents you with an opportunity. This is what reframing is all about and this is the heart of winning thinking. Start right now to train yourself to look for the positive. Being negative is easy. It takes no particular character, skills or energy and it's what losers do best. **NOTHING GOOD COMES FROM BEING NEGATIVE!** Be a winner! Make reframing an integral part of your swimming.

## EXERCISE

Take 15-20 minutes at home to do the following: Think about all the uncontrollables in practice or at meet situations that, in the past you have used negatively to undermine your confidence or provide you with an excuse to not go for it. Write each of these down. Next, think about how you could have **REFRAMED** each of these as a positive. For example, because of the intensity of practice lately you're feeling exhausted and **REALLY** want to dog it when the coach isn't looking. Instead of giving up on yourself you think: "Here's an opportunity to get stronger, a chance to put distance between myself and my opponents...most everyone in this situation will be looking for a rest now. But I am mentally and physically tougher to handle this situation than they are..."

In the beginning it may be difficult for you to reframe a negative in practice or in the middle of a meet. However, if you go through this exercise several times a week you'll soon develop this habit. One of the very best times to work on this is right **AFTER** a meet. Review what happened in your races and think about which situations you could have reframed in your favor.

# Chapter Six

## developing self-confidence

If you want to reach your potential as a swimmer and go as far as you can in this sport, then you need self-confidence to help you get there. Physical talent, strength, coordination and endurance are not enough. You have to believe in yourself and abilities. You have to develop that inner “knowing” that self-confidence is all about. It’s what you see and hear in every great swimmer. Inside they KNOW that they are good. They feel it, believe it, walk it and sometimes even talk it.

Most people think that self-confidence is something that comes from success. First you have success, then naturally your self-confidence will follow. This is NOT how it works. Yes, experiencing successes is an important part of developing self-confidence. It is difficult to feel good about yourself and believe in your abilities if you experience nothing but failure. However, I have seen too many swimmers who have had tremendous successes, yet they felt little confidence. On paper you’d think these swimmers would feel on top of the world. Instead, they claim that they are plagued by self-doubts and do not think that they are that good.

Years ago I worked with a nationally ranked swimmer who was a case in point. Much of what he had experienced in his competitive career was success. His failures were few and far between. Strangely, this swimmer didn't really believe he was that good. He didn't feel or show the kind of self-confidence that you would expect. **WHY?**

This athlete and too many like him got me thinking about how self-confidence is developed. You learn to feel good or bad about yourself depending on how you **INTERPRET** your successes and failures. An objective success does not necessarily mean that your self-confidence will rise. You can have a great meet and fantastic performances and still come away from that competition feeling like a loser. **HOW?**

If you succeed at something and afterwards explain your success away, i.e. "I was lucky", "they didn't have their best swimmers competing", "my opponent wasn't feeling good and had a bad race" etc. then you will end up robbing yourself of the good feelings that go into developing self-confidence. Swimmers who don't believe in themselves do this regularly. They downplay or minimize their good races. They never give themselves full credit for a job well done. Where others see a success in their swimming, this kind of athlete either ignores it or finds a failure. And if for some reason they feel they've done well, they do not allow themselves to hang onto those good feelings. They quickly forget them and begin to think, "so you were successful, **BUT** what about next time".

Let's say that in addition to explaining away your successes, you also had a tendency to greatly exaggerate your failures. You have a great time but for some reason your arch-rival has a peak performance and just beats you out. Your coach reassures you that your race was great! He's pleased as punch. You're **NOT**! Instead of being satisfied



with your time, you look for things that you did wrong to explain the fact that you didn't beat "so & so". Low and behold you "find" some "really important" thing that you **THINK** you did wrong. It doesn't matter that your coach disagrees with you on this one! You blow that mistake way out of proportion and really make yourself feel like crap. Then you hang onto this "failure" for days, continually reliving it and torturing yourself. How do you think that you would then end up feeling? Exactly right, just like **GARBAGE!!**

These are the things that I found going on inside the heads of swimmers and other athletes who lacked confidence. Even though they had the speed, ability and successes, they still felt badly about themselves **BECAUSE** of what they did with their successes and failures. Minimize, ignore or explain away your good performances and you'll feel crummy. Exaggerate or blow out of proportion your failures and you'll feel even worse.

If you want to start to **GROW** self-confidence inside, then you must change these inner explanations. You have to start to give credit where credit is due. You have to begin to act like your own **BEST FAN**. A good sports fan is one who believes in and supports the team **NO MATTER WHAT (NMW)**. When the team goes through a hard luck streak a good fan does not yell from the stands, "throw the bums out". They give the support that's needed. Only "**FAIR WEATHER**" fans do this. They love you when you're winning and look for another team to support when you are losing. You can not afford to be a "fair weather" fan to yourself. Not if you want to become a champion!

In an earlier part of this workbook I discussed the **GIGO** factor. **GARBAGE IN GARBAGE OUT**. Program garbage into a computer

and the computer will give you garbage back, i.e. it won't do what you would like it to. Think the wrong thoughts before a race, (garbage in) and you'll get garbage back out in terms of your performance. The **GIGO** factor works in relation to developing self-confidence. To feel good about yourself you have to "feed" yourself good stuff. If you are in the habit of explaining away your successes and highlighting your failures, (garbage in), then you will have little to no self-confidence, (garbage out). Developing self-confidence is a lot like advertising.

What sells a product on TV is the commercial. When you see young, physically fit, attractive, actors or actresses drinking a product on location in a beautiful place, it makes you want to go out and get some of that good stuff for yourself. Advertising like that leads you to believe that if you consume their product you too will get everything shown on the screen.

As a consumer you would never buy something that was advertised negatively. If you were told in a TV commercial, for example, that a soft drink rotted your teeth and gave you high blood pressure, and the actors and actresses shown on the screen were fat, ugly and grossly out of shape, it wouldn't make you want to run out and buy a case of the drink. On the contrary! Good advertising always sells a product.

As a swimmer you can use this concept to build your self-confidence. You need to learn to advertise your most important product, **YOU**, to your most important customer, **YOU**! Proving to others that you are good will **NOT** necessarily raise your confidence level. Proving it to yourself **WILL**!

## DEVELOPING CONFIDENCE - EXERCISES

### EXERCISE #1 - USING POSITIVE AFFIRMATIONS

**YOU BECOME WHAT YOU THINK ABOUT MOST OF THE TIME.** One way to begin to take control of this principle and build confidence is by using positive statements or affirmations. When you say negative things to yourself you'll feel bad. Find an area where you have little confidence and begin to change your negative self-statements. Let's say that you fall apart under pressure and regularly trash yourself as a "choker". Instead, repeat to yourself the affirmation, "I'm calm and composed under big race pressure", or "I love pressure". You do not have to believe a word of this in the beginning. All you have to do is write that affirmation down on paper and repeat it to yourself 50-60 times a day, every day for a week or two. Affirmations should always be positive, "I" statements and in the present tense.

### EXERCISE #2 - SELF ADVERTISING

Take one or more of the affirmations that you are working on and make small 3x5" signs. Write down how you want to feel as if it were already true. For example, "I control my emotions under pressure" or "As the race gets longer, I get stronger", or "I love pain and fatigue and **ALWAYS** move towards it". Make 5-6 (or more) signs for each affirmation. Next, put these signs all around your room, in your changing bag, school books and anywhere you're sure to see them. Focus on these self advertisements as frequently as possible making sure they are the last things that you see before bed and the very first things that you see when you wake up.

### **EXERCISE #3 - PRESLEEP TECHNIQUE**

Take one affirmation and work on it for at least a week in the following way: After you shut your light and are lying in bed ready to go to sleep, begin to slowly repeat your affirmation twenty times. i.e. “As the race gets longer, I get stronger!” Keep count with the fingers of both hands and be sure to get through all 20 before allowing yourself to drift off to sleep. As you repeat each affirmation, see if you can get any images to go with your words. Try to see, hear and feel in your mind’s eye the “reality” of your words.

### **EXERCISE #4 - VICTORY LOG**

Keep a journal or log of all of your successes. You can include newspaper clippings, letters, comments from coaches or anything else that represents the things you’ve done well and the obstacles that you have overcome. Be sure to **ONLY** log the positive. Keep in mind these “successes” needn’t be huge. Making the intervals in a particular tough set count as a success. So does going harder in practice in a place where you typically back down. Reread your log often, and **ESPECIALLY** when your self-confidence has been shaken.

### **EXERCISE #5 - WALL OF FAME**

Make a wall in your room a motivational guide. Take news clippings of all your successes, pictures, slogans and anything else that you can think of that will constantly remind you of **WHERE** you are going and the **FACT** that you **CAN** get there!. Be creative with this and remember. **KEEP YOUR VICTORIES AND SUCCESSES DIRECTLY IN FRONT OF YOU. LEARN FROM YOUR FAILURES AND**

**SETBACKS AND THEN FORGET THEM!!!!** You want to work on developing a long term memory for your successes and a short term memory for your failures.

***REMEMBER THIS POINT!!!***

***CHAMPIONS MAINTAIN A LONG TERM MEMORY OF THEIR SUCCESSES AND A SHORT TERM MEMORY OF THEIR FAILURES***

### **EXERCISE #6 - CONTROLLING NEGATIVE SELF-TALK**

If you listen to enough garbage about yourself, ultimately you'll begin to feel and perform like garbage. Begin to actively stop negative or self-defeating messages by going through the following four step process.

- 1) Say "stop" to yourself the instant you become aware of a negative message.
- 2) Take a slow deep breath and as you exhale imagine that you can blow that thought away.
- 3) Reframe the thought in a positive way. i.e. turn "I **ALWAYS** choke under pressure" to "I'm learning to handle the heat of competition, let it go"; "I'll never get this time/stroke" to "I can't do it **YET**, but I know that if I continue to plug away at it, I'll get it **SOON**".
- 4) Refocus your concentration back to where it belongs, on the task at hand.

# Chapter Seven

big meet preparation using mental rehearsal for peak performance

**WINNERS SEE WHAT THEY WANT TO HAVE HAPPEN**

**LOSERS SEE WHAT THEY ARE AFRAID WILL HAPPEN**

Swimming, like so many other sports is a very physical one. There's absolutely no question that unless you train your body, your physical skills, strength and endurance, you'll never become a champion. You must, **IN ADDITION**, train your mind. That's been the purpose of this workbook. To be a **CONSISTENT WINNER** you have to develop the **MIND** of a champion.

One critical area of your mental training and preparation that needs to be addressed has to do with visualization or mental rehearsal. In other words what kind of pictures do you make in your mind's eye before you race. Do you "**SEE**" yourself swimming well and going fast OR blowing your start, missing your turns and racing as if you had a piano on your back? What's that? You say that you don't make any pictures up there. Think again!

**EVERYONE** (whether they are aware of it or not) produces images in their mind in relation to an upcoming performance. If you have a big meet in three weeks and you've been thinking about it every day, then **EVERY** day you have been making images in your mind's eye. Without you knowing it, you've been mentally rehearsing for that meet and those races. This is because mental pictures **ALWAYS** accompany the thoughts we have. So what's so important about that?

What's important about the pictures that go floating around in your mind is just this: **IMAGERY PROGRAMS YOUR PERFORMANCES**. The pictures that you make in your mind's eye **DIRECTLY** affect **HOW** well you'll swim. If you are worried about messing up, **WATCH OUT**. You may be inadvertently programming yourself to do just that! In other words, to be as successful as possible in the pool you must learn to monitor and control the kinds of images that you produce in your head.

Remember having a dream so vivid that after you first awoke there was a split second or two when you weren't sure whether you were dreaming or not. Or perhaps you've had the experience of being bored in school or at a meeting and suddenly found yourself drifting off in a day dream, at the beach or in the pool. In both of these experiences your mind is able to produce such life-like images that the line between reality and fantasy gets blurry for a short time.

***MENTAL REHEARSAL IS ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL MENTAL SKILLS YOU CAN USE AS A SWIMMER TO OVERCOME SETBACKS, EFFECTIVELY HANDLE PRESSURE AND LIFT THE LEVEL OF YOUR PHYSICAL PERFORMANCE SEVERAL NOTCHES.***

**MENTAL REHEARSAL** is the systematic creation (or recreation) of images (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) in your mind's eye directly aimed at enhancing performance. Very simply, it is mental practice! It is based on the idea that if you want to perform like a champion in the **POOL**, you must **FIRST** perform like one in your mind. You must win first **MENTALLY** before you can then win in reality. When practiced correctly and mastered, the **SKILL** of mental rehearsal will make you a mentally tough swimmer and help you make the very best use of your physical talents, abilities and coaching.

The power of **MENTAL REHEARSAL** is based on the fact that images from your brain serve as blueprints for your actions and behaviors. Think about that vivid dream again. For a brief period, your body responded to that dream as if it were real, increasing your heartbeat, blood pressure, breathing and muscle tension.

In a similar way your body will respond to images that you produce whenever you mentally rehearse a race, IF those images being played in your mind are vivid enough to seem real. The way it works is as follows: The nerves that connect up to the particular muscle groups involved in the action you are imagining begin to fire, and the muscles are then stimulated to a degree just below actual movement. In this way, the body and muscles can actually be programmed to respond to situations and function in a particular way. It's as though every time the mind creates an image of the action, (doing a flip-turn or start for example), grooves are cut into a record in the brain, grooves that will be followed again later, when those moves are actually performed in the pool.

Therefore it is absolutely critical that you know what "movies" you're playing in your mind's eye. All too often athletes will feature such



nightmares as, **“DON’T FALSE START”, “THE LAST TIME I SWAM IN THIS MEET I CHOKED BIG TIME”** or **“I WILL NEVER BREAK THAT TIME”**. Understand that the accompanying imagery with these worrisome thoughts is entirely negative!

## **MENTAL REHEARSAL GUIDELINES**

If you want to really get those images working **FOR**, not **AGAINST** you follow these guidelines when you practice the exercises at the end of this section:

### **#1 ALL IMAGERY SHOULD BE PRECEDED BY RELAXATION**

- If you want your practice sessions to be as useful as possible, you must start them with a brief (5 minutes) period of relaxation. Stress makes the production of constructive imagery nearly impossible. Being relaxed will increase the vividness of your images and thus make them more effective. You can use any arousal control exercise we discussed to help you achieve this relaxed state. This means that, at least until you master the skill, your sessions should always be held in an environment that is free from distractions.

### **#2 ALL IMAGERY SHOULD BE AS VIVID OR LIFE-LIKE AS POSSIBLE**

- Try to make the images that you produce in your mind’s eye as vivid and detailed as possible. For visual images you want to try to “see” color, movement, lighting (dark or bright), shapes, etc. For sound images you want to “hear” volume (loud or soft), tones, pitch, etc. For kinesthetic or feeling images you want to “feel” yourself on the blocks ready for the start, you want to feel yourself enter the water, experience yourself moving strongly and powerfully through it, “feeling” your stroke and how much water you’re pulling, your kick

and turns, “feel” all the emotions of confidence or excitement after a great race, etc.

**#3 ARE YOU INSIDE OR OUTSIDE THE ACTION?** - There are two perspectives that you can have whenever you practice mental rehearsal. First, you can be **OUTSIDE** the action and “see, feel and hear” what you would if you were a spectator or watching yourself. Second, you can be **INSIDE** the action and “see, hear and feel” what you would if you were in the pool competing. **INTERNAL** imagery, or being inside the action is said to be most effective in enhancing overall performance. **EXTERNAL** imagery or being outside the action is said to be useful whenever you are working on learning a new stroke or correcting technique. Experiment with both perspectives, **BUT** be sure that you master the **INTERNAL** one, especially the kinesthetic or muscle feeling dimension. Many swimmers mentally rehearse by feeling themselves going through the race. If you do not yet have the skills to do this, practice trying to isolate this dimension.

**#4 HAVE AN IMAGERY GOAL IN MIND FOR EVERY SESSION** - Physical practice is **ALWAYS** more effective when you have a clear goal in mind and work towards its accomplishment. Mental practice is the same. If you have trouble staying in emotional control whenever you race, focus on this in your practice sessions. Mentally rehearse yourself staying calm and composed pre-race no matter what happens at the meet. If you have trouble with a specific part of a race, for example always seeming to die on the last 50, then practice getting stronger at this point in your mind’s eye. If you just can’t seem to get that just right feel of a good stroke or turn, focus on trying to properly “feel” them as you mentally rehearse.

**#5 HAVE A BEGINNING,MIDDLE AND END FOR YOUR SESSIONS-** If you are using mental rehearsal to prepare for an upcoming meet, then be sure that your session starts with pre-meet imagery (getting dressed, warming up, stretching, the opening minutes of the meet, getting up on the blocks for the start, etc.), has imagery from the middle of the meet, and ends with imagery of your last events and the meet's end. Use this format whenever you are doing pre-race preparation. If you swim long distance, you may want to use this format for rehearsing your race. Focus in on the start, the first few laps, the middle of the race and the last few. (OR if you **CAN** rehearse the **WHOLE** race without losing your focus by all means **DO SO!!!!**) If you are merely working on strengthening a particular skill (rebounding quickly from a mistake or bad race, staying focused, using the proper stroke or breathing technique) then this format is not necessary.

**#6 MAKE YOUR PRACTICE SESSIONS SHORT (10-15 minutes)** If you try to spend too much time mentally rehearsing, you will have difficulty concentrating and will probably bore yourself to sleep. More frequent, shorter sessions are more effective than fewer, longer ones. If you are **TOTALLY** into a mental rehearsal session, then you can choose to extend its length. However, **SHORTER** is the best rule of thumb.

**#7 BE PATIENT AND PRACTICE** - Imagery is a skill. Mastery **OF THIS SKILL** takes consistent practice. In the beginning you may find that you can't even "see", "hear" or "feel" anything in your mind's eye. This is normal. If this is the case for you, then simply just think yourself through your races and be patient! With sufficient practice you will learn to produce clearer and more life-like images. Understand that you may also not be able to **CONTROL** the images in the beginning. You may start your mental practice with an excellent start, only to totally

blow your first turn. When your pictures turn nightmarish, **DON'T FREAK!!** Learning to **CONTROL YOUR IMAGES** also comes with time and regular practice. Whenever your images come up the wrong way, use the DVD TECHNIQUE: Pretend that you are operating your very own DVD machine in your mind. If the images come up negative, then simply hit the stop button, rewind the pictures and then play them again. If they comes up negative a second or third time, do the same. Put the picture in slow motion if you have to in order to get it right. Be patient!!! The pictures will soon come around.

IMAGERY NOTE- If you continue to have difficulty mentally rehearsing a particular event, try watching video clips of yourself or someone else who has perfect stroke technique. Sit quietly and repeatedly review these images, then close your eyes and try to repeat them. Continue to alternate watching and mentally rehearsing and soon your imagery skills will improve.

CRITICAL FOR MENTAL REHEARSAL USERS - Many swimmers ask me, “When in relation to the start of my event should I use mental rehearsal?” The answer to this question varies depending upon the individual athlete. Some swimmers find that if they use mental rehearsal too close to the start of their race, it ends up making them too anxious to swim well. What this means is that you have to experiment with what is the optimal time to use imagery and when you need to stop using it. One Olympic swimmer told me that he was able to use mental rehearsal right up until an hour before his event and it worked just fine for him. However, the times he tried using imagery closer to the race’s start, it was ineffective and even distracting. For you, this might mean that you can’t do imagery the day of or night before a big race because this might be too close to the race’s start.

## MENTAL REHEARSAL EXERCISES

### #1 DEVELOPING A PEAK PERFORMANCE CUE - REPLAYING A GREAT PERFORMANCE

Think about the last time you had a **GREAT** race/meet! The more emotional the experience was for you, the better. Remember what made that race or meet so special. Close your eyes, and spend 5 minutes allowing yourself to relax. Next, travel back in time to this great performance and begin to “replay” it in your mind’s eye, seeing, hearing and feeling everything that you did back then. Go back to that same pool, see the same people who were there, hear the same sounds, smell the same smells and feel the same feelings. Do all this in as much detail as possible.

Once you’ve gone through the meet and your individual races, find the one point in that meet that really captured your “winning feelings”. Focus in on that one race or two when you really felt on top of the world, unstoppable, totally confident....a veritable **STUD!!!** Now replay this event over and over again in your mind’s eye paying close attention to all of the accompanying emotions (confidence, excitement, etc.). Next, think of a **PEAK PERFORMANCE CUE**, a symbol that you can use to remind yourself of these winning feelings. Your symbol can be a word, (“power”, smooth”, “strong”, “awesome”, “speed”), a phrase, (I’m the cat’s meow”, “no one can touch me,” “long and strong”), a color (red, black), an image, (a cat, dolphin, shark, locomotive) or a muscle movement (clenched fist).

As you review the scene where you felt your winning feelings most intensely, repeat your peak performance cue to yourself. Feel those

feelings, repeat your cue. Pair these two (peak performance imagery/feelings with your cue) at least 10 times with each practice session. If you have chosen a meet(s) or race performance that has a lot of “juice” (emotion) attached to it, soon you will find that just by using your cue pre-meet/pre-race, all of those winning emotions will come back.

**YOU HAVE TO FEEL LIKE A WINNER FIRST, BEFORE YOU CAN THEN PERFORM LIKE ONE.** Developing and using a peak performance cue can help you recapture those past winning feelings and bring them to your next meet.

## **#2 PREPARING FOR A BIG MEET - MASTERY IMAGERY**

One of the best ways to prepare yourself for an upcoming meet is by regularly “swimming” your races in your head the weeks and days leading up to it. See, feel and hear **EXACTLY** what you’d like to have happen in this meet. Focus in on the details and process of the meet and race, **NOT** just on achieving a particular time. Experience yourself performing and moving through the water **JUST** the way you’d like to. Feel strong, confident, powerful and swimming to the upper limits of your abilities. Imagine and experience the emotions that accompany all these images. Use the imagery guidelines to help you.

## **#3 HANDLING PSYCH-OUTS, OVERCOMING OBSTACLES, REBOUNDED FROM SETBACKS - COPING IMAGERY (A)**

It’s the unexpected that will easily knock you off center and spoil your racing performance. It’s the negative emotional response that can mentally take you out of a meet. Mental rehearsal can help you prepare for these so that when someone or something “pushes your

buttons” before or during the meet, you’ll respond to this intrusion like a champion.

**STEP #1** Make a list of your “hot buttons”, (the things that get you upset, angry or emotional, i.e. making mistakes, getting a bad time, another swimmer or their parent saying something to you, your lane assignment, etc.)

**STEP #2** Next to each “hot button” think of 1 or 2 **IDEAL COPING RESPONSES** (ICR), or the perfect way to respond to that hot button. For example, hanging on to a bad race if it’s the first of a meet is **NOT** an ICR. If you don’t let that bad swim go and get your head back into the meet, you’ll blow the rest of your races. Rebounding quickly, refocusing properly and even smiling and acting **AS IF** nothing happened **IS** an ICR. That kind of response will definitely keep you centered.

**STEP #3** Mentally practice being in a competitive situation when your hot buttons get pushed and respond with your ICR’s. Sufficient mental rehearsal of ICR’s will get you responding with them whenever your buttons get pushed under pressure. If you regularly prepare for the upsetting and unexpected, then when it happens you will never get knocked off center.

## **MAKING MASTERY AND COPING CDS AND MP3 FILES**

One of the best ways to enhance the effectiveness of your mental rehearsal sessions is to use your own cds or mp3 files that you can download to your ipod. You can develop your own mastery or coping

tracks and use them in preparation for a big meet/race. The **FIRST** step is writing a script in the first person describing the sights, sounds, smells, atmosphere, feelings and emotions associated with the particular performance outcome that you want. For example, you might describe winning State's, qualifying for Zones and/or competing at Nationals including all the details of the place, the people there, the opponents you faced, the exaltation, satisfaction, etc. Make that meet or race experience so vivid that you can even smell the chlorine in the pool. Select some favorite background music that you can use to help bring you into the meet experience. The dialogue and music combined should elicit strong sensory and emotional images for you.

Personally designed and narrated mastery and coping mp3 tracks are particularly powerful tools because they stimulate your own powers of visualization, often more intensely than a commercially made version. The detailed script helps structure the imagery sessions, leading you deeply into the meet experience. Replaying these imagery tracks prepares you mentally and emotionally for recreating these images in reality. Directions for creating your own cds or mp3 files are included in the following pages.

Since coping imagery involves correcting or rebounding from mistakes or failures, or controlling run-away emotions, you may want to begin working with these experiences first. **NOTE: COPING CDS SHOULD BE REPLACED BY MASTERY CDS IN THE LAST WEEK OR TWO BEFORE A BIG MEET.** You don't want the negative images from the coping CDs to interfere with your performance. So days before that big meet, switch to the mastery files and let all your energy go into visualizing strong and successful performances.



The basic sequence in this coping exercise (note: this is a 2nd strategy for coping. The 1st strategy above involved developing an Ideal Coping Response (ICR) and mentally rehearsing it) involves imagining yourself in a stressful situation and beginning to see, feel and hear things that upset you. When you feel yourself losing control, you immediately apply the “thought stopping” technique. First you say, “Stop”. Then you take one or two slow deep breaths and use key words or phrases to slow yourself down. Third you reframe the thought or emotion. For example, if the negative thought was, “what if I false start or swim poorly”, you reframe your reaction and think, “focus on what you want to have happen and stay calm”. Fourth, and finally, you refocus your attention and concentrate on the task at hand.

## **COPING CD PREPARATION**

Have a pencil and a supply of paper handy for taking notes. Anticipate a stressful situation that might occur prior to, during or following a meet.

## **PROCEDURE**

- 1) Write down a list of images - sights, sounds, smells, feelings - associated with that situation.
- 2) Write down the negative, self-defeating, inappropriate thoughts that might occur to you in this situation.
- 3) Think of things you could say to yourself that would help you stop the negative thoughts and regain control. Write these down on a separate page.

- 4) Rephrase your negative thoughts into positive, confidence- building statements. Write down these new, helpful messages.
- 5) Using your notes, create a script and record it on a machine or your computer. If you wish, choose relaxing background music to set the mood. Speaking slowly and distinctly, guide yourself through the coping experience. Remember the 5 steps for “thought stopping”:

**#1 Recognize the negative thought.**

**#2 Tell yourself, “Stop”.**

**#3 Let go of the thought with a slow deep breath.**

**#4 Rephrase the thought into a positive.**

**#5 Refocus your concentration.**

## **MASTERY CD PREPARATION**

Pick a big meet later in the competitive season that you want to mentally prepare for. Use the recording to help you practice using your mastery mental rehearsal. Have a pencil and a supply of paper handy for taking notes.

## **PROCEDURE**

- 1) Imagine an upcoming meet. Keeping it as realistic as possible, write down the details of the situation. Set the stage for the meet by describing its’ location, the trip over to it, the inside of the pool

area, the crowd, all the sounds associated with the meet, your body sensations and emotions.

2) Write down your thoughts about the meet, before, during and after each of your races. Describe your emotions and the body sensations that you experience in this peak performance.

3) Using your notes, write out a script that guides you through the meet and each race (starting either the night before or day of) and helps you experience it vividly. Keep it realistic and focus on HOW well you swim.

4) Record the script, talking very slowly to allow you the time to mentally rehearse. Use different background music that helps you relax (in the beginning) and get pumped and focused (just before and during the meet).

5) Like all imagery sessions, use relaxation exercises to prepare yourself, then turn on the mastery track to help you see and experience that perfect race performance in your mind's eye.

# Chapter Eight

the principles of peak performance-  
a coach's and swimmer's guide to premeet preparation

In **EVERY** peak performance there are certain elements that are **ALWAYS** present. These elements can serve as a **PREMEET/PRERACE** guideline for you to use to insure that you swim to the **VERY** best of your abilities. When these elements are present you will always perform well. When they are absent your swims and times will suffer. As a coach, following these guidelines will insure that you get the most from your swimmers both in practice and at meets. Violate these principles of peak performance and your athletes will continually swim far below their potential. Further, violation of these principles will pave the way for numerous performance problems and burn-out!

#1 **FUN** - In every peak performance, the swimmer is having the time of his/her life. He/she is loving what he/she is doing and does not want to see it end. If you want to swim to your potential you **HAVE** to have fun **IN** the meet. I'm **NOT** talking about the "I don't care", goof off kind of fun. I'm talking about hard work, intensity and loving the challenge. If you go into your meet/race looking forward to it, then you will maximize your chances of performing well.

Coaches who carry this attitude into big meets keep their swimmers loose enough to perform like champions. A meet or race should **NEVER** be presented as so big that your swimmers can't enjoy themselves. If you are too serious about the meet, then you'll only end up tightening your team up too much. One of the best things that you can say to a team just **BEFORE** a huge meet is, "just go out there and enjoy yourselves...this is party time...you're ready, you've paid your dues... **NOW** is the time to have **FUN**!" This is exactly the attitude that triple Gold Medalist Janet Evans had going into the 88 Olympics. **BEFORE** the races even started she was having fun! This is one of the main reasons **WHY** she swam so well!!

**#2 HIGH SELF-ESTEEM** - In peak performances the swimmer likes him/herself. He/she feels good about who he/she is and what he/she can do. Self-esteem is a critically important variable in swimming performance. You will almost always swim in direct relation to how you feel about yourself. Even talented swimmers will perform far below their physical potential if they have low self-esteem.

As a coach, your swimmers' level of self-esteem should be a major guideline for what you do or say with them. Anything that diminishes an athlete's self-esteem will hurt your cause and undermine your coaching efforts. Anything that enhances self-esteem in your swimmers will insure that you get the maximum from them in the pool. This does **NOT** mean that you can't yell, be strict or set firm limits with your athletes. This does **NOT** mean that you can't be a disciplinarian. Many good coaches in fact are quite strict! You can be strict and criticize without destroying an athlete's self-esteem.

***SELF-ESTEEM NEEDS TO BE CONSIDERED HEAVILY WHEN  
WORKING WITH THE SWIMMER IN A SLUMP.***

Too many coaches, out of their own frustrations at being unable to get a swimmer unstuck or past a certain time will inadvertently give up or in other ways assault an athlete's self-esteem. Putting an athlete down because of their struggle will definitely **NOT** inspire them to reach down and get beyond that block! On the contrary. Most swimmers who fall into slumps are already suffering from low self-esteem because of their inability to go faster and the fact that many of their friends may be outdistancing them. What they desperately need is their self-esteem **BOOSTED** not **BUSTED!!!**

#3 PROCESS NOT OUTCOME FOCUSED - In the middle of a peak performance the athlete is totally oblivious to the outcome of the performance. When you swim your best, you are **NOT** thinking about winning, losing, or what will happen if you don't get that time. Instead you are completely focused on the **HERE** and **NOW** process of the race. You are concentrating on **WHAT** you are doing **WHILE** you are doing it and **NOTHING ELSE!** In fact, quite frequently when you are **REALLY** going fast, you're **NOT** thinking at all!!!

***THE BIGGEST CAUSE OF SWIMMERS CHOKING AND PERFORMING  
FAR BELOW THEIR POTENTIAL IS CONCENTRATING ON THE  
OUTCOME OF THE MEET OR RACE***

This factor is important for coaches to keep in mind when they think about pre-meet or pre-race talks. **YOU WILL WIN MORE AND HAVE MORE SUCCESSFUL SWIMMERS WHEN YOU COACH THE PROCESS, NOT THE OUTCOME.** The more

you get your swimmers focusing on the importance of a meet, what's at stake and what will happen if they don't get their time or otherwise perform poorly, the greater chance there is that your team will tighten up and bomb. Winning and peak performances are paradoxes. You get to them by **NOT** coaching or focusing on them! Focus your athletes on what they have to do in the moment to go fast. When you do accomplish this refocusing, great times, winning and peak performances will take care of themselves.

**#4 FREE TO FAIL/MAKE MISTAKES** - In the middle of a peak performance the athlete is totally oblivious to making mistakes or failing. When mistakes happen, the athlete quickly lets them go and mentally returns to the task at hand. Swimmers who are afraid to make mistakes or fail are tentative and always swim poorly. Swim as if you have nothing to lose and let your mistakes and bad races go! Remember, concentrate on what you **WANT** to have happen, **NOT** what you are **AFRAID** will happen.

Coaches who create an atmosphere where their athletes are free to fail will produce peak performers. If your swimmers know that it is OK to fail and make mistakes, they will be more relaxed and take more risks for you. **THE VERY WORST THING A COACH CAN TEACH AN ATHLETE IS THAT MISTAKES AND FAILING ARE BAD AND A CAUSE FOR HUMILIATION.** Punish or humiliate your swimmers when they mess up or fail and you'll not only turn them into self-conscious, overly cautious underachievers, **BUT** you'll also make them lose all respect for you. Teach them to go for it! Teach them that failing/losing is a necessary stepping stone to becoming a winner!

**#5 CHALLENGE DONT THREATEN** - The athlete who recalls a past peak performance talks about rising to meet a challenge. Whether the challenge came from within or without doesn't matter. Inwardly the swimmer responds to an internal "I know I can!" Challenging yourself to go beyond your limits is one of the **BEST** ways to motivate yourself. Threatening yourself is one of the worst.

Many coaches use threats to try to motivate their athletes to peak performance. A threat entails future punishment or the loss of something important. For example, "if you don't get this time/place, then you don't belong in this pool, on this team" or "If you guys lose this meet, then you'll have to practice on Sunday!"

Threats engender fear, produce excess muscle tension and **DISTRACT** the swimmer from the task at hand. Certainly fear is a powerful motivator, and can sometimes get your athletes doing what you want them to, **BUT** you had better know **HOW** to use it. More often than not fear shuts a swimmer down rather than empowering him/her to great performances. Threats have no place in your pool nor in your pre-meet talks **UNLESS** you know for a fact that your team or swimmers are under-aroused or into "not enough nervous".

**#6 AUTOMATIC/EFFORTLESS THINKING** - When you swim your very best you are **NOT THINKING** about what you are doing, you are just doing it! You may be exerting tremendous energy and working hard, but you are performing with "effortless effort". There is an easy, automatic quality to your performance. This is what I call a "meet mentality", (once you have really learned a stroke and a solid race strategy, your best performances come from your unconscious.



That is, you do not think about the swim anymore, you just allow yourself go out there and do it automatically).

This is in sharp contrast to your worst performances where nothing comes easy and you have a tendency to **THINK TOO** much and **TRY TOO HARD** to go fast. You over-evaluate your race, criticize your mistakes, focus too much on your opponents and coach yourself far too much. This is what I call a “practice mentality”, (when you are first learning a stroke or start/turn in the pool it is important to think about what you are doing and self-consciously evaluate how you are performing. The techniques don’t come easily and so there is a tendency to force your body to do what it is supposed to).

Peak performance and **FAST** swims, however, are about putting yourself on automatic and using a let-it-happen “meet mentality”. In other words, performance time is time to **TRUST** yourself, **TRUST** your abilities and training and **TRUST** your muscle memory.

**YOU CAN’T FORCE YOURSELF TO SWIM FAST, YOU HAVE TO JUST LET IT HAPPEN!** When swimmers think too much about the importance of a race or time they get into trying too hard.

### ***TRYING TOO HARD IS THE GAME OF DIMINISHING RETURNS.***

The harder you try, the SLOWER you’ll go!

As a coach it is important for you to understand this distinction between a meet and practice mentality. You do not want your swimmers into a practice mentality in meets. You do not want them too conscious, over-

thinking about stroke technique or race strategy. You want them just responding the way they have been trained. That is, you want them in a “meet mentality”, **TRUSTING** that it is all there and just letting their strength and training come out.

This means that the less you get them to focus on pre-race the better. Too many coaches are guilty of over-coaching, of trying to cram too much information in just before the race. The **VERY** last thing you want to do with your swimmers is to put them up in their heads while they swim. To perform their best they have to be in their bodies, trusting and feeling, **NOT THINKING!!!** Give them one or two important focal points for the race and encourage them to simply **TRUST** and **LET IT HAPPEN!**

**#7 MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY RELAXED-** Without being mentally and physically relaxed you can't learn effectively nor perform to your potential. You have to be able to master the pressure of competition in order to have peak performances. If you can't handle your pre-meet or pre-race nerves, then it's absolutely critical that you invest consistent time training yourself in techniques to help you chill pre-race. The foundation of your mental toughness lies in this ability to control your levels of stress. Turn to the chapter on stress and performance for the specifics.

As a coach it is imperative that you understand the relationship between stress and performance and know what to do when your athletes are under or over-aroused pre-meet. Adding this knowledge and strategies to your coaching armamentarium will make you a more effective and much more successful teacher.

# Chapter Nine

## overcoming performance slumps/blocks

Your race performance is self-fulfilling. This means that you always get what you expect. If you go into a race really worried about your time or whether you'll qualify, then you'll generate enough tension so that you will have yet **ANOTHER** bad swim! If you seem to be stuck on one time in one event, each time that you fail to break that time, chances get even better that you'll stay stuck.

Slumps and blocks are a natural and terribly frustrating part of swimming and every other sport. They can sometimes drive coaches to distraction and swimmers into an early retirement. Unless you can learn to constructively handle those times when you do fall into a slump, you'll have a difficult time really reaching your potential as a swimmer. This chapter will briefly focus on the topic of slumps and performance blocks and what you can do to get yourself out, **OR**, if you're a coach, to help your athletes get unstuck.

### **WHERE DO THEY COME FROM????**

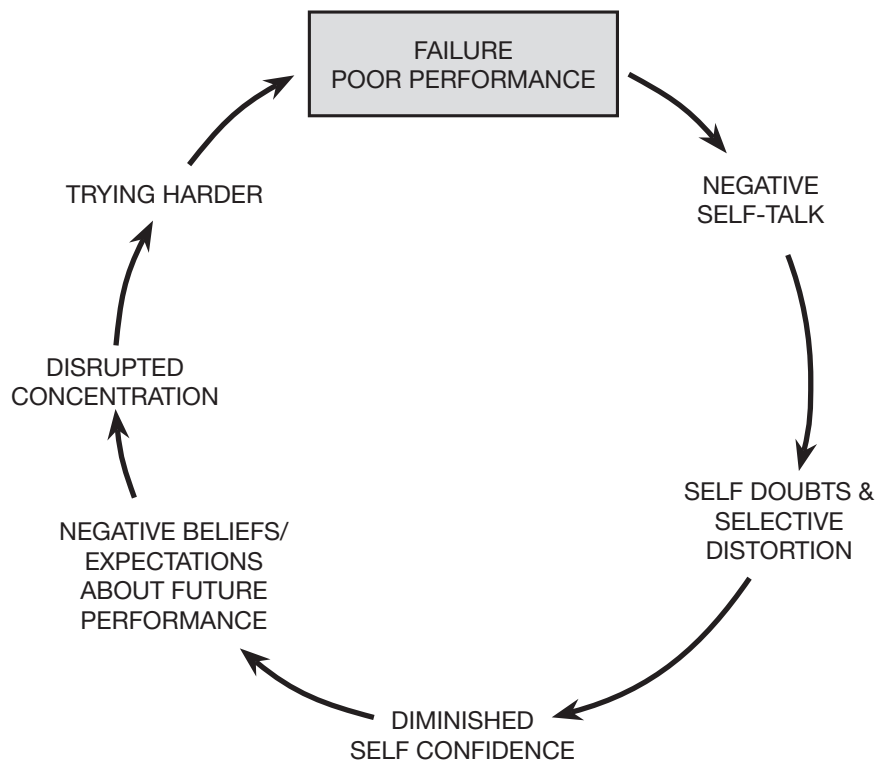
Slumps and Blocks in swimming can come from a number of places: A bad swim at a **BIG** meet; Too much pressure from coaches; **PARENTS**

who push too much; Unrealistic expectations (parent's, coach's or swimmer's); family problems; an injury; Two or more bad swims in a row; Trying too hard; faulty stroke technique; The alignment of the stars and the planets!!

Performance slumps and blocks, **IF THEY ARE UNRELATED TO PHYSICAL AND TECHNICAL FACTORS**, are almost **ALWAYS** unknowingly self-maintained by the swimmer. They are a direct result of what the swimmer says to him/herself before, during and after he/she races. Remember **GIGO** (garbage in, garbage out).

Figure 3

THE CYCLIC NATURE OF  
LOSING STREAKS/PERFORMANCE SLUMPS  
BEGINS WITH



If you tell yourself that you're going to bomb, go slow or **NEVER** get this time and, while you do so, you accompany these comforting words with failure imagery, (garbage in), what you'll get back out in terms of your performance will be another bad swim (garbage out).

The graph in figure #3 shows this cyclic, self-maintaining process of the slumping swimmer. It starts with a bad swim. This leads to negative self-talk as the swimmer begins to trash him/herself and abilities. Trash yourself enough and you'll be left having just a **FEW SELF-DOUBTS** about what you can or can not do.

This negativity is also accompanied by what I call **SELECTIVE DISTORTION**. All this means is that you develop a long term memory for all your problems and failures and a short term memory for all your successes. In fact, frequently the slumping swimmer forgets that they ever had a good race before!

Focus on just the negative and ignore your accomplishments and in no time flat you'll **DIMINISH** your **SELF-CONFIDENCE**. Low self-confidence, in turn, leads to **NEGATIVE BELIEFS**. That is, the swimmer stops believing in themselves and in their ability to **EVER** bust out of the slump. These negative beliefs then lead to **INCREASED ANXIETY** at the thought of having to challenge themselves again. Increased anxiety **DISRUPTS** the swimmer's **CONCENTRATION**. They start to focus on **ALL** the wrong things, seeing what they are afraid will happen instead of what they want to have happen.

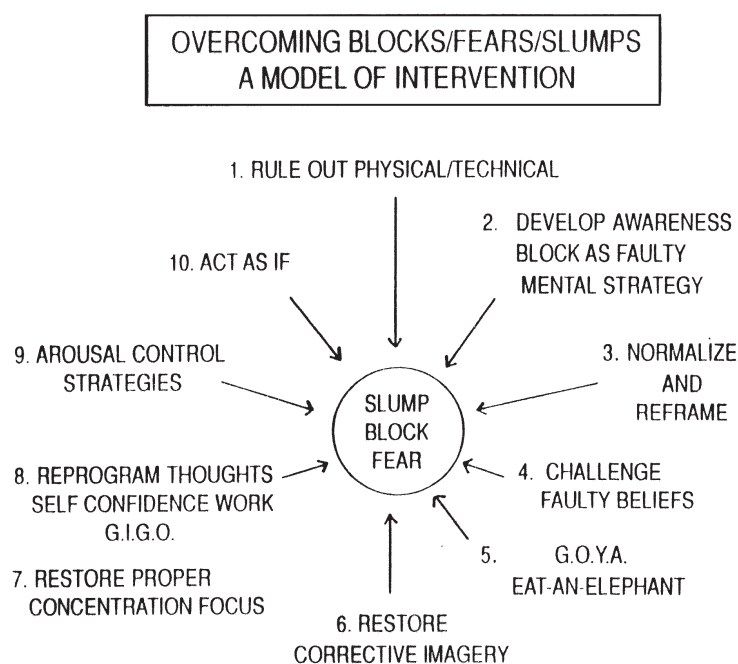
Instead of paying attention to the performance cues in the **HERE** and **NOW** that will enable you to swim loose and fast, you focus on the problems that you've been having and the possibility of their

occurring again. This disrupted focus will frequently lead to heavy duty frustration and **“TRYING HARDER”**. Any time you as a swimmer **TRY** to force yourself to go faster, your muscles will get tight and you will slow down! Then we’re back at the beginning of the song, and the slump cycle starts up all over again!

## BREAKING FREE

So how can you get yourself or one of your swimmers to finally get beyond that block? Good question! I thought you’d never ask! In figure #4 I’ve outlined a very simple model that I have used with hundreds of stuck swimmers, tennis players, gymnasts, divers, skaters, batters, and field mice. The model should provide you with general guidelines to follow in your work with any performance slump or block.

Figure 4



## OVERCOMING SLUMPS AND BLOCKS

STEP #1 RULE OUT THE PHYSICAL/TECHNICAL - Before you assume that a block is mental, you have to rule out the physical or technical reasons that might be causing it. Is there any physical reason that a swimmer is stuck in a repetitive performance block? If they consistently die at the end of their races when they are in a position to win is it **REALLY** because they are a hopeless head case and choke under pressure OR could it be because of their physical training base (endurance or lack thereof) or because of a problem with asthma??? If I lack the endurance, then I need to start training this aspect, not lying down on a couch to have my head shrunk! Be sure that what you are looking at is NOT a physical or technique problem.

STEP #1A DOES THE BLOCK SIGNAL A FAMILY PROBLEM? Sometimes a persistent block or slump is a swimmer's way of dealing with family pressures or problems. Many swimmers I've worked with have *used* (unconsciously, of course) their slump to help them deal with pushy parents, or to *tell* the coach that something at home is very wrong and as a cry for *help*. Also, as a coach you need to take an open and honest look at your own behavior in relation to the athlete. Swimmers can get stuck **BECAUSE** of the coach and how he/she deals with them.

STEP #2 DEVELOP AWARENESS OF THE BLOCK AS A FAULTY MENTAL STRATEGY - Blocks and slumps are most often SELF maintained by what the swimmer says to him/herself or thinks just before and during the race. As a coach you want to get that swimmer to teach you HOW you could have the very same performance problem that he/she has. Get them to tell you what they SAY to themselves, THINK and SEE just before the start.

**STEP #3 NORMALIZE AND REFRAME** - Performance slumps/blocks are **NORMAL!!!** To be a good swimmer you have to come to understand that over the course of your career you will have bad swims and periods where you aren't dropping time. This does **NOT** mean that something is **VERY** wrong! A bad swim or two or three does not necessarily mean that you are in a slump. What causes any slump to grow and prosper is **WHAT** you as a swimmer say to yourself **ABOUT** those bad performances. It's directly related to your mental strategies. Further, if you look at all your good swims, and then compare these to the ones you seem to be struggling with, you'll see a difference, **PRE** and **DURING** race with what you think, image and say to yourself about that swim.

**STEP #3A DISCOVER WHAT FUNCTION THE BLOCK PLAYS** - Very often, a slump, fear or block "does something" for the swimmer. It serves some kind of purpose or "positive intention", although the athlete is rarely aware of this. A slump can keep a swimmer safe and free from parental pressures to win. That is, it's the swimmer's way of saying "Back off, I can't go any faster". It can protect a swimmer from the fear of failure. Oftentimes a swimmer who's stuck will stop trying. Even though they are failing, the slump gives them an excuse to not really go for it, and thus helps them avoid **REALLY** failing had they tried. It can also "help" a swimmer (on a superficial level) get a whole lot of attention from the coaches and parents. Remember, sometimes negative attention is much better than none at all.

**STEP #4 CHALLENGE FAULTY BELIEFS** - The blocked or slumping swimmer is one who has stopped believing in him/herself. As a coach you have to help your athlete restore this belief in themselves. You have to continually challenge and confront their "I can'ts" and "I'll



never's". Unless you can restore their belief they will continue to stay stuck far longer than is necessary.

**STEP #5 EAT AN ELEPHANT** - One of the best strategies for busting a slump or getting over ANY obstacle is simple: **DO THE THING THAT YOU ARE MOST AFRAID OF OVER AND OVER AGAIN AND IT WILL NO LONGER SCARE YOU.** Fears keep swimmers and other athletes from working on skills and improving. The more an athlete avoids something, the scarier it gets! Help your swimmers **TAKE ACTION** and move towards their fears and blocks. Have your athletes approach their fears using the **EAT AN ELEPHANT** strategy, **ONE BITE AT A TIME.** Break their performance problem/block into small pieces and then have them **WORK MORE, NOT LESS.**

**STEP #6 RESTORE CORRECTIVE IMAGERY** - One of the reasons your athletes stay stuck is because they are "watching" the wrong movies in their head. Slumping swimmers usually view the wrong imagery when they mentally rehearse a race that they are having trouble with. Images program and control movements. Have them use mental rehearsal as a **BRIDGE** to get themselves unstuck and going fast again. Correct mental practice will soon lead to correct actual practice.

**STEP #7 RESTORE PROPER CONCENTRATION** - Swimmers stay stuck because they concentrate on the wrong things before and during their races. In order to swim well your focus needs to be "in your lane" on your body and what you are doing and **NOT** everywhere else. The slumping swimmer's focus is usually **IN THEIR HEAD** on their fears and everything that did (in the past) and could (in the future)

go wrong. As long as a swimmer maintains this **FAULTY** focus he/she will continue to swim poorly. Help your swimmers learn to switch concentration to the visual or kinesthetic cues necessary to swim loose and fast.

**STEP #8 REPROGRAM THOUGHTS/SELF-CONFIDENCE WORK-** The slumping swimmer maintains a lot of inner negativity. He/she is continually down on him/herself. This negativity is part of the problem. Help them work on changing their mental diet. Get them get off all that “mental junk food”, (“I stink”, “I’ll never”, “I can’t...” etc.). Do not collude with their negativity **EVER!!!**

**STEP #9 AROUSAL CONTROL STRATEGIES -** Swimmers that get stuck are usually too nervous before and during their races. There is too much anxiety floating around in their body to swim efficiently. In order to snap that slump, they must **LEARN TO RELAX**. Teach them any number of relaxation skills that they can use to lower this anxiety.

**STEP #10 ACT AS IF -** Have your swimmers **ACT AS IF** they “like the event”, “enjoy the pressure of a big meet”, “get stronger as the race gets longer.” Acting as if has to do with how the swimmer carries him/herself before and after the race. It refers to their posture. Watch a swimmer who’s struggling and you can **SEE** this in how they carry themselves. The shoulders may be hunched up or drooping, the head is usually down, facial expression usually reflects unhappiness and/or disgust and their step is usually slow and tentative. **ACTING AS IF IS WHAT I CALL A WINNER’S FALL BACK POSITION.** When a winner is feeling intimidated, they **ACT**(posture, breathing, movements) confident; When a winner is feeling anxious, they **ACT**

calm; Get your swimmers to practice acknowledging inside that they may be bummed out, intimidated or overly nervous, but **ACTING AS IF** (they were the opposite) on the outside.

Follow these 10 guidelines and soon you'll be able to take that performance slump or difficulty and put it behind you.

## **WHY DO I CONSISTENTLY SWIM FASTER IN PRACTICE THAN IN MEETS?**

## **HOW COME I ALWAYS SEEM TO DO BETTER IN MY OFF-EVENTS THAN IN MY BEST ONES?**

One of my specialties is helping swimmers who struggle with these kinds of frustrating, repetitive performance problems get unstuck. One of the biggest reasons why swimmers do go faster in practice than in meets and why they do better in off-events than their best ones can be directly traced to their pre- and during race focus of concentration. As we've discussed in this book, concentration, when directed properly, is the key to performance excellence and when misdirected, the major cause of choking, slumps and other repetitive performance problems.

So let's take a brief look at the concentration of this kind of a swimmer, the so-called "practice swimmer" who always seems to do much better in training than he/she does in meets.

**IN PRACTICE:** This swimmer goes into practice without any expectations. Usually in training they are not pressuring themselves to go a particular time or beat another specific swimmer. They are not

worried at all about the outcome. Their attitude is “this is just practice and it doesn’t really count.” Because of this attitude, they put their entire focus of concentration on what they are doing while they are doing it. In other words, their focus is **COMPLETELY IN THEIR OWN LANE, IN THE STROKE BY STROKE MOMENT, TOTALLY FOCUSED ON FEEL**. They may pay attention to their breathing pattern, how much water they are pulling, their catch, a burning sensation in their forearms that lets them know they are going fast and at the right pace, their kick or a stretch under their arm that keeps each stroke long. When you swim your best, your concentration is always on FEEL. As a result of this focus, the conscious, thinking part of your brain is very quiet. When you swim your best you are not thinking much at all. As another result of this focus on feel, your body stays loose and relaxed. As we’ve discussed, staying loose and relaxed is one of the key secrets to swimming your best when it counts the most.

**IN MEETS/RACES:** An interesting thing happens the instant this swimmer approaches a meet and his/her race. Suddenly their focus completely shifts. They bring all of their expectations and goals into their race. They begin to concentrate on the outcome, on their time, cut or a place that they need to get. They begin to over-focus on the competition and whether they will be able to beat them or not. Because of this concentration shift, they start thinking too much. This thinking goes on both before and during their races. This faulty focus and over-thinking generate nervousness in the swimmer, which then tightens their muscles and makes it impossible to swim to your potential. Furthermore, thinking during a race completely distracts the swimmer from feel, which is what you need to be concentrating on in order to go fast.

This is exactly the same thing that happens when you look at someone who goes so much faster in their off-events than in their best ones. In their off events, like practice, their focus is on feel, what they are doing in the moment and not at all on outcome because, to them, the outcome doesn't matter since this is an unimportant event. However, when they get to their best events, they start putting pressure on themselves because this is "MY" event and I'm expected to go fast! These expectations generate tremendous nervousness and physical tension and once again, the swimmer performs badly in the race.

**BUSTING FREE:** If what I've just described fits you to a tee, if you consistently go faster in practice than meets or faster in your off events than your best ones, then you need to learn to better control your focus of concentration both before and during your races. The good news here is very simple! **YOU ALREADY KNOW HOW TO SWIM FAST - MENTALLY!** If you can do it in practice, you can do it in races. The issue is that you have to begin to use the same mental strategies that you employ for practice or your off-events in the big meets and your best events. Turning things around first starts with this awareness. Take a close look at how you approach practice mentally. Where is your concentration when you swim fast? What are you focusing on in the water? Are you thinking about time? Are you preoccupied with those around you? Next, closely examine some of those really frustrating swims. What are you focusing on before and during them. What kind of outcome focus do you have? Are you carrying expectations into your races? How much are you concentrating on other swimmers? If you look carefully enough at your mental approach to practice and meets, you will soon see two, very different mental strategies. Knowing the wrong mental strategy can actually help you sound the alarm so that you can change your focus before it's too late.

# Chapter Ten

speed = pain and fatigue

DO YOU REALLY WANT TO BECOME A CHAMPION IN THE POOL?? If your answer is “yes,” then there’s one thing that you must learn to do right now. **CHANGE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH PAIN & FATIGUE IN THE POOL**

Throughout this workbook I’ve talked about the need for reframing pain and fatigue. Champions have learned how to deal with the daily discomfort in the pool in a way that empowers them. They know that to **REALLY** go fast when it counts, to really take your training to the next level, you have to consistently work on going fast **EVERY** day in practice.

This means that you must learn to train yourself to **MOVE TOWARDS** the feelings that **MOST** people move away from! No one in their right mind likes to be in pain. So most of us have learned to go the other way when pain rears its’ ugly little head. However, as a swimmer, when you see that ugly little head smiling at you in practice, you must turn and greet it like a long lost friend! You must **LEARN** to get excited and look forward to the **OPPORTUNITY** that the pain and fatigue of oxygen debt provide you with.

***THERE'S ABSOLUTELY NO QUESTION THAT THE VERY BEST  
ENDURANCE SPORTS ATHLETES ARE THE ONES WHO HAVE  
LEARNED TO DEAL WITH PAIN AND FATIGUE THE BEST!***

It's **HOW** you approach these uncomfortable feelings **MENTALLY** and **PHYSICALLY** in practice that will ultimately determine how much you **REALLY** get out of each practice session and therefore, how far you go in this sport.

**PAIN EQUALS SPEED** - When you are feeling those awful feelings in your body, when your brain is screaming for mercy and pleading with you to back down, **REMIN**d yourself that right now, you're **GOING FAST**. Pain is a signal for you to **STEP ON THE GAS**. Tell yourself at this point to **RELAX** and **STRETCH IT OUT!!!** Keep yourself right up against those uncomfortable feelings and you'll get faster. Tell yourself that **YOU** are **MENTALLY** tougher than your opponents to handle pain and fatigue and then **ACT THIS WAY IN PRACTICE....EVERY DAY!!!**

What this means is that you have to get in the habit of practicing four words that will ultimately make you a champion:

**GET COMFORTABLE, BEING  
UNCOMFORTABLE**

When you are feeling uncomfortable, when your arms and legs are feeling like lead and you desperately want to back down, you have to keep yourself close to the pain. Get comfortable being uncomfortable means that you have to regularly practice stepping outside of your comfort zone. This is how you will grow as a swimmer and as a

person. By staying with or getting comfortable with the discomfort, you end up expanding your comfort zone and the things that you can do. In other words, each time that you push your envelope of what you think you can do, pain and fatigue-wise, that envelope of possibility gets bigger.

Far too many swimmers develop an adversarial relationship with pain and fatigue. They dread its appearance, they fight with it when it happens and they regularly go out of their way to avoid it. Unfortunately, when you take this approach, when you shy away from or fight with the discomfort of hard training, you rob yourself of the opportunity to grow as an athlete.

Here's the interesting thing about the pain and fatigue that you regularly experience in practice and races. **IT'S ALL IN YOUR MIND!!!!** What I mean by this is a critical point:

## **YOU GET TIRED AND QUIT MENTALLY LONG BEFORE YOUR BODY GIVES OUT!**

That's right!! Your mind tends to play tricks on you when you get tired, tricking you into believing that you can't go any harder or any further. This is not true. It's nothing more than an illusion. You can always do more than you think you can. **ALWAYS!!!!** The key issue here is understanding this fact and then knowing the best ways to handle pain and fatigue.

The big mistake made by swimmers here which causes them to give up on themselves and back away from the pain and fatigue is a concentration one. The tired swimmer allows his/her focus to shift from their stroke



and what they are doing to thinking about and concentrating on the feelings of pain and tiredness in their body. **HUGE MISTAKE!!!** When you focus on how tired you feel and how much it hurts, those feelings get tremendously magnified!

Focusing on how much you hurt or how heavy your arms and legs feel will only make those physical sensations that much more intense. The other problem here is that while you focus on evaluating how badly you're feeling, you inadvertently end up distracting yourself from where your focus should be: On the **FEEL** of what you're doing, one stroke at a time. By **THINKING** about **HOW YOU FEEL** instead of paying attention to feeling your pace, keeping long and smooth, how much water you're pulling, etc., your body will tighten up and slow down even more.

The other key concentration mistake that swimmers make here that kills their ability to effectively manage the pain and fatigue of oxygen debt is that they allow their concentration to shift into the future, on how much worse they'll feel or on how impossible it will be to keep going given the way that they're currently feeling. It's this future focus when you're hurting that really does you in as an endurance sport athlete.

Let me explain:

The very best strategy for managing the pain and fatigue of oxygen debt is controlling your focus of concentration. If you can effectively control your focus, then you can consistently go beyond what you think your limits are. Controlling your focus of concentration means that you have to discipline yourself to stay in the **NOW** as you swim.

Another way to understand this is by using the “eat an elephant strategy” that we discussed in Chapter Two. The eat an elephant strategy is housed in the riddle, “how do you eat an elephant?” Answer: You eat an elephant **ONE BITE AT A TIME!** What does this mean and what does it have to do with handling pain and fatigue?

“Eating elephants” means that when you have a big, scary obstacle in front of you, or an imposing goal or daunting task, the very best way to effectively get through it is by chunking that task or obstacle down into very small pieces and focusing and working on just one small piece at a time. The problem for most swimmers is when they get tired, they tend to think about how big and imposing the task is before them. They have so much more to go and it’s going to be nearly impossible to do it. When you’re tired and you think about how badly you’re feeling and how much more is left, that’s like trying to take that entire elephant and swallowing it whole. Result: You’ll get a **CRUSHING** case of indigestion!

Instead, you want to use your concentration to chunk down what you’re working on right now so that you focus on just one small bite at a time. When you’re tired this means that you want to make sure you focus on just one stroke at a time and making sure that your stroke stays long and smooth. Swimmers who get tired tend to stop focusing on their stroke and it begins to break down. Your job through the pain and fatigue is to focus on the feel of one stroke at a time, being sure that the stroke stays intact.

This is the very same mental strategy used by world class open water swimmers. These are those interesting folks who swim around Manhattan, cross the Great Lakes or swim across the English Channel.

How to do they survive swimming for 20 to 35 hours, non-stop? Karen Burton, a 3 time World Champion Open Water swimmer said it best. She explained that you have to understand that at some point during your swim you will start to really suffer. The important thing when you feel this badly is to not allow yourself to assume that you will feel like this and worse the rest of the swim. You have to know that it will pass and instead, direct your focus back onto the small piece that you're doing right now.

To handle pain and fatigue like a world champion you have to break your swim into pieces and then, when you're hurting, keep your focus on one small piece at a time in the **NOW**. You must discipline yourself to stay away from how badly you feel. Instead, you want to keep your concentration on this stroke, one stroke at a time. By controlling your focus in this way you will pass through the discomfort and consistently go beyond your limits.

Let me give you an example a coach friend shared with me: He had a very strong swimmer on his team who had an interesting problem with the 500 free. For an entire year, whenever he swam that event, this athlete always had trouble breathing right around the 350 mark of the race. As a consequence, this swimmer, let's call him Jake, would begin to panic and slow down. There was no logical reason for Jake to be struggling here since he didn't have asthma or any other kind of physical problems that would be contributing to this. The more it happened, the more Jake would worry pre-race that it would happen again. Soon he would approach this race with dread, focused completely on the 350 mark. As a result, Jake hadn't dropped time in over a year.

To help him get beyond this, Jake's coach tried something ingenious. In practice he taught Jake a training sequence called a Fartlech, which is so many long hard strokes followed by so many more relaxed strokes of recovery. The sequence Jake's coach used was 12 hard strokes followed by 9 of recovery. In order to effectively execute this Fartlech sequence, Jake needed to keep his entire focus of concentration on the feel of what he was doing, one stroke at a time. His coach had him practice this for several weeks.

The next time he was about to swim the 500 in a meet, Jake's coach gave him the following instructions. "I want you to forget about the race, time and everything that's happened this year. Instead, all I want you to do is when you get to the 300 yard marker, I want you to finish the race with that Fartlech sequence that we've been working on."

In order for Jake to do this correctly he had to completely shift his focus away from the breathing problem, the time and everything that had gone wrong all season long to the feel of each long hard stroke followed by the feel of each long relaxed stroke of recovery. In this first race, Jake had no problem at all breathing and dropped 3.5 seconds! The coach gave him the very same instructions the next meet when he swam the 500 and once again, Jake dropped almost 3 more seconds and had no problem at all breathing throughout the race!

For the rest of that season, the breathing was no longer an issue and at the taper meet, Jake took off another 4 seconds on his 500 time! What his coach had done was completely shifted his concentration away from the elephant, the 500 and the breathing problem, and put it on making sure he executed the Fartlech sequence correctly, one stroke at a time.

Stay in the NOW to master pain and fatigue!

Please understand that the **ONLY** pain that I am referring to here is the pain and fatigue of hard training and oxygen debt. This is the only kind of pain that you push through. I am **NOT** referring to **ANYTHING** that resembles the pain of injury or impending injury. **DO NOT EVER PUSH THROUGH THIS KIND OF PAIN.** Pushing through the pain of injury will get you into hot water and cause chronic physical problems for you!! Instead, get yourself out of the pool and go see a reputable doctor As Soon As Possible.

# Chapter Eleven

## a championship race plan

What I'd like to do in this final chapter is share with you my "recipe" for peak performance in the pool, a way for you to swim your best when it counts the most. This **CHAMPIONSHIP RACE PLAN** is a series of little goals that will help you execute mentally, and, as a result, perform to your physical capabilities.

Far too many swimmers go into their big meets and races carrying the wrong goals. What does this mean? They are overly focused on the time that they need to get, a cut that they desperately want or a specific swimmer or two who they really want to beat. These "outcome goals" are the wrong things to bring into a big meet because they make your meet and races too important. They create a sense of urgency inside of you that will distract you from the task at hand and drive your nervousness way up into the red zone. Your "outcome goals" (specific times, cuts, records, places, or swimmers who you want to beat) have a single purpose. They are to motivate you to work hard in practice. **IN PRACTICE!!!!** They give you a reason to continuously push yourself outside of your comfort zone while you train.

However, when you bring your outcome goals or expectations into a big meet with you, they totally and completely backfire. They put far too much pressure on you for you to stay loose and relaxed enough to perform your best. Bringing your time or place goals into races

with you is a **HUGE MENTAL MISTAKE!!!!** Instead, you want to have different goals to focus on when you compete under pressure. You want goals that you can control and that will keep you loose and relaxed. That's what the goals are of this **CHAMPIONSHIP RACE PLAN**.

I mentioned above that this race plan is like a recipe. A recipe is a set of specific directions that you follow to make something tasty and appealing. When you follow it closely and include **ALL** of the ingredients, what you end up with looks, tastes and feels exactly like you wanted it to. When you omit certain, important ingredients, then what you end up with will look ugly and leave a nasty taste in your mouth!

You'll notice that each goal of the Championship Race Plan is **MEASURABLE**. That is, you will be able to tell, after the race, how well you did or did not execute that particular goal. The goals are always framed in a **POSITIVE** manner. That is, they tell you what to do, **NOT** what **NOT** to do! Lastly, each of these steps/goals of the race plan is **CONTROLLABLE**. That is, you have total and complete control over being able to execute this goal.

Each of these goals and the race plan as a whole gives you something constructive and performance enhancing to focus on **BOTH BEFORE AND DURING YOUR EVENTS** to help distract you from your outcome goals. I would never tell you to go into a race and "don't think about your time!" or "Don't focus on beating Matt or Diane." What I would do is have you execute the goal that says "Stay focused on **YOU**, Stay in **YOUR OWN LANE!**"

## CHAMPIONSHIP RACE PLAN

#1) STAY CALM, RELAXED AND LOOSE – Swimming fast under pressure is all about you staying loose and relaxed. This does not mean that you can't have butterflies coursing around your belly. What it does mean is that you have to be excited about the swim but loose. This ingredient is the most important one because staying loose is the secret to swimming fast when it counts the most. The key question here is **HOW** do you stay calm and loose under pressure? What are some specific things that you can do to help you stay in "Good Nervous?" Go to Chapter III for specific strategies that you can use to keep yourself loose. In addition, consider these as well: Stretch pre-race making sure that as you do, you keep your focus on the feel of the stretching; Listen to music; Talk with friends about things that have nothing to do with swimming; laugh and joke around;

#2 STAY IN THE NOW - One of the things that generates out of control nerves at these big meets is an outcome or future focus. To counteract that, work on keeping your concentration in the **NOW**, before and during your races. Staying in the **NOW** will keep you loose and confident. Take that big meet one event at a time mentally, prelims before finals. Take that big race, one stroke at a time.

#3 RECOGNIZE WHEN YOU "TIME TRAVEL" AND QUICKLY & GENTLY RETURN YOUR FOCUS TO THE NOW – Staying in the NOW is far easier said than done. Things will happen that will distract you and send your focus off into the future or back into the past. This is **NORMAL** and won't hurt you as long as you quickly become aware that your focus has left the **NOW** and then quickly, bring yourself back to it. Keep in mind it doesn't really matter how



many times your focus “time travels.” What **REALLY** matters is that you bring yourself back to the **NOW, EACH AND EVERY TIME!**

**#4 FOCUS ON FEEL** – Swimming fast is all about keeping your concentration on the feel of what you’re doing, one stroke at a time. This goal is mainly for during races. You want to have specific things that you shift your concentration to during your races that help you go fast. You figure out these particular focal points in practice, long before the big meet. It could be your pace, how much water you’re pulling, the feeling and positioning of your head, your breathing pattern, a burning sensation in your forearms, etc. What you focus on varies swimmer to swimmer and oftentimes event by event.

**#5 STAY IN YOUR OWN LANE** – Before and during your races you want to make sure that you keep your concentration on **YOU** and what you are doing in between your two lane lines. You will not go fast and have a chance at beating other swimmers by focusing on them! Instead, you must discipline yourself to stay focused on yourself before and during your races.

**#6 RECOGNIZE WHEN YOUR FOCUS DRIFTS TO OTHERS AND QUICKLY BRING YOURSELF BACK** – Like staying in the **NOW**, keeping your concentration on **YOU** and not focusing on other swimmers is a whole lot easier said than done. You will find your focus drifting to others before and during the event. That’s normal! When it happens though, you have to quickly catch yourself and return your focus back to **YOU** and what **YOU** are doing. This means you don’t want to study the heat sheet ahead of time, nor go online to check out others’ results. It also means that you need to **STOP** comparing yourself. **FOCUS ON YOU!!!!** The only thing that really matters is

what's going on between your two lane lines!

**#7 KEEP TRACK OF THE “UNCONTROLLABLES”** - Focusing on things that you can't directly control before and during your meet, before and during your race will make you nervous, tighten you up, kill your confidence and make it impossible for you to swim to your potential. When you go to these high pressured meets you must maintain an awareness of the Ucs. You must know what they are and when you find yourself entertaining them, your job is to quickly return your focus to what you're doing in the moment that you **CAN CONTROL!** The Ucs are mental traps and they're lying in wait for you and everyone else at that big meet. Your job is to know what those traps are and use that awareness to help you avoid them.

**#8 TRUST AND LET IT HAPPEN** – Once you get to that big meet, the time that you want and that great race is already inside of you. If you've done the training, then the fast swim is inside just waiting to come out. How do you get it out? You have to relax, trust yourself, trust your training and let the fast swim come out. You don't need to force or muscle the swim out. You don't need to try extra hard to get the fast swim out. Swimming fast is a let-it-happen proposition. Put yourself on automatic and let the swim come to you!

**#9 USE LAST MINUTE NEGATIVE THINKING AND SELF-DOUBTS AS A NEUTRAL SIGNAL** (like someone ringing a bell) **TO RELAX AND REFOCUS** – Understand that last minute self-doubts and negative thinking are a natural and normal occurrence for **ALL** swimmers. When they happen in your head, stay calm and relaxed. Try not to engage them. They are nothing more than brain wave activity. They do not predict the future and they aren't the voice

of god talking to you. The key here is your reaction. When last minute doubts and negativity pop up, notice them, accept them and then quickly refocus on whatever you're doing in the moment. You can still have the race of your life after being flooded with all of these doubts **AS LONG AS YOU STAY CALM AND REFOCUS YOURSELF!**

#10 DON'T THINK, JUST (FEEL) SWIM – This is related to #8. Swimming fast happens when you're focused on feel during the race and you're not thinking. Thinking slows you down because it distracts you from feel. Try to avoid the running dialogue in your head when you race. Instead, replace it by redirecting your concentration to what you are **DOING** in the water at that moment.

#11 FORGIVE YOURSELF FOR YOUR BAD SWIMS AND LEAVE THEM IN THE PAST – Beating yourself up for a bad swim won't inspire you to become a better swimmer. It won't motivate you to work harder. Everyone fails. It's normal and part of the process of getting better in anything! When you have a disappointing race, learn what you did wrong and then let it go. Deal with your failures after the meet, not during it. Hanging onto your bad swims and then taking them into your next race is like trying to swim that next race with an additional 30 pounds strapped to your back! It will weigh you down!!!

#12 HAVE FUN – You have to have fun **FIRST** before you can go fast. Change your headset and get into enjoying the meet, the challenge and the competition. **FUN** equals **SPEED**. You have to love what you're doing. If it's not fun, it will be impossible for you to have a good race. So do things before and during the meet that would make it fun for you. Talk to friends, laugh and joke around, smile and enjoy yourself. Don't make the meet so serious. Big race time should be party time!

USING THE CHAMPIONSHIP RACE PLAN – Take an index card and write these goals on it. Put it in your room in a spot where you will be sure to frequently see it the weeks and days leading up to that big meet. When you go to the meet, take the race plan with you and remind yourself that your primary job is to execute mentally, NOT to get a specific time or beat certain other swimmers. If you execute mentally, then you will increase the chances that you'll achieve all of your outcome goals!!!!

# Conclusion

There is a mental toughness myth that exists in many sports. This myth claims that you are either born with a “good head” or not. That is, that there is very little that you can do about improving your ability to handle pressure, deal with fear or control your emotions because this is just how you are. This myth means that if you are a head case now, you will **ALWAYS** be a head case. This myth, like most myths, is false.

With patience, a little hard work and consistent practice you can train yourself to develop the mental toughness of a champion. Mental toughness can be learned and YOU can do it! This workbook provides you with all of the strategies that you need to become a mentally tough swimmer.

Remember, if you have a dream to go as far as possible in this sport, you have to train your mind as well as your body. Great swimmers do not leave the mental side of their performance to chance. Remember what Mark Spitz said:

***BECOMING A CHAMPION IN PRACTICE IS 95% PHYSICAL AND 5% MENTAL. HOWEVER, ONCE IT'S RACE TIME THE PERCENTAGES FLIP FLOP. BECOMING A CHAMPION THEN IS 95% MENTAL AND 5% PHYSICAL!***

Start right now to train yourself to systematically think and act like a champion! Use this workbook as a tool. Mental training like physical

training is an **ON GOING PROCESS**. You have to continually work at all aspects of your sport to establish and maintain the competitive advantage.

How many of the exercises and ideas in this book worked for you is really **NOT** important. What **IS** important is finding those strategies that fit you as an individual and **USING** them. Some of these you may have developed on your own without any conscious awareness. Others you can take an active role in developing.

If I can help you with any part of your mental training remember to **PLEASE FEEL FREE TO CALL OR WRITE**. Remember my specialty is working with swimmers at all levels who struggle with specific performance problems. I do this one on one work nationally and even internationally over Skype. My goal is to provide clear, helpful information, and I would be happy to help you with any issues or problems that come up for you in the course of your training.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH

Dr. Alan Goldberg

*Amherst, Massachusetts May, 2010*

Competitive Advantage

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# Appendix

## HELP YOUR SWIMMERS FINALLY GET UNSTUCK!!

*Do you have a swimmer who's head always seem to get in their way?*

*Is a "practice" swimmer driving you and him/herself to distraction with how much time they add at meets?*

*Do you have a swimmer who has hit a mental time wall and can't seem to get beyond it?*

Dear Coach,

If your answer to any of these questions is YES, then I CAN HELP! As an expert in the field of applied sport psychology I specialize in helping swimmer's GET UNSTUCK and back on track.

***I THINK THE INDIVIDUAL SWIMMERS THAT ALAN HAS WORKED WITH ON MY TEAM HAVE TRULY BENEFITED FROM HIS EXTENSIVE KNOWLEDGE OF THE SPORT AND HIS ABILITY TO SKILLFULLY GET TO THE HEART OF EACH OF THEIR INDIVIDUAL SITUATIONS. FURTHERMORE MY TALKS WITH ALAN OVER THE YEARS HAVE HELPED ME BE MORE DIRECTIVE WITH A NUMBER OF MY SWIMMERS.***

***MIKE PARRATTO, SEACOAST SWIMMING, DOVER, NH***

I work individually with swimmers at EVERY age and level from around the world helping them to better handle competitive pressures, overcome performance blocks and GET MENTALLY READY FOR THAT BIG MEET.

***ALAN HAD AN IMMEDIATE IMPACT ON KAYLA. SHE HAD TROUBLE HANDLING BIG MEETS AND WAS GETTING PRESSURE FROM HOME. DR. G NOT ONLY HELPED KAYLA BUT HER PARENTS AS WELL. KAYLA WENT INTO HER NEXT JO 'S SEVERAL MONTHS LATER AND SWAM OUT OF HER MIND! SHE HANDLED MEET PRESSURE LIKE SHE NEVER HANDLED IT BEFORE.***

***TEN YEAR OLD YVONNE USED TO GET PHYSICALLY SICK BEFORE EVERY ONE OF HER RACES. SINCE TALKING WITH ALAN OVER A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME SHE'S NOW EXCITED ABOUT THE OPPORTUNITY TO SWIM AND ALWAYS SWIMS WELL UNDER PRESSURE. NOT ONLY DOES SHE LOOK FORWARD TO THE BIG RACES, BUT SHE NO LONGER GETS SICK PRIOR TO THE DELIGHT OF HER PARENTS.***

### ***SHERWOOD WATTS, SARASOTA YMCA SHARKS***

My one on one CONSULTING SERVICE involves me talking with each swimmer over Skype once a week for approximately an hour. In this work I will help your swimmer get unstuck and teach them the tools to keep themselves on the FAST track. While I am doing this I will keep in close touch with you so that I can coordinate my work with your coaching.

***ALAN'S PHONE SERVICE IS LIKE HAVING YOUR VERY OWN TEAM SPORT PSYCHOLOGIST ON CALL. HIS INDIVIDUAL WORK HAS BEEN INVALUABLE TO A NUMBER OF MY SWIMMERS. TWO IN PARTICULAR WERE HAVING SELF-IMAGE PROBLEMS THAT WERE AFFECTING THEIR RACING. THEY BOTH LACKED CONFIDENCE AND A BELIEF IN***



***THEMSELVES. DR. G'S WORK WITH THEM GREATLY IMPROVED THEIR SELF-ESTEEM  
AND THIS HAS BEEN DIRECTLY REFLECTED BOTH IN AND OUT OF THE POOL.***

***ANDY WEDMAN, VACAVILLE SWIM CLUB, CA***

So whether you have a swimmer who always falls apart at the big races, goes faster in practice than in meets, can't breathe midway through a race, has trouble handling parental pressure, is always caught up with how fast EVERYONE else is or who just has you stumped, CALL today and I might be able to help.

For further information you can reach me at (413) 549-1085. I look forward to hearing from you.

## **HERE'S WHAT OTHER SWIMMERS AND THEIR PARENTS ARE SAYING ABOUT DR. GOLDBERG'S PHONE CONSULTATION SERVICE**

Before consulting with Dr Goldberg, I experienced nervousness at race time, was unable to attack my races, and backed away when I reached the "pain zone". Dr Goldberg taught me to really concentrate and trust my training. He helped me narrow my focus at race time and go for it. I was able to use his strategies, resulting in life-time best performances at the Conference championships. Thanks, Dr. G for helping me increase my self confidence and improve my mental attitude. I no longer hold myself back by setting limits for myself. Racing became fun again and I realized what I had been missing.

*College freshman, New York*

Swimmers work too hard not to have the techniques available to them to calm their nerves. Our son was having problems going from prelims to finals. He'd swim faster in the morning than at night when it really counted. As much as I would tell him to relax - he needed the ability to be able to put my words into play. Dr. Goldberg taught him techniques that he could use before he swam and the results were exceptionally positive. Now my son's swimming fast when it counts the most.

*Mother & Swim Coach of 16 year old, Pennsylvania*

The state swim meet my senior year in high school was the last time I had dropped time in my events in two years. I was beginning to think that I had gotten as fast as I was going to get. After Dr Goldberg taught me how to be mentally tough, I dropped a lot more time than I had ever expected!

*College Sophomore, Illinois*

My daughter swam well over the weekend at Championships, but most importantly, looked like she was enjoying herself and not overwhelmed by mental doubt. I haven't seen her this relaxed in two years! Your counseling helped her a great deal and we're very grateful! Thank you for the time you spent with her.

*Mother of 17 year old, Kentucky*

Two years ago I could see no other alternative but to quit swimming, the sport I loved for over ten years. A close friend suggested consulting Dr. Goldberg. Since then, I speak with Dr. Goldberg long distant

confronting my long term slump. Dr. Goldberg guides me through strategies to manage “uncontrollables” - athletic, social, and academic. The result: A Junior National time! Thank you for my dream, Dr Goldberg.

*16 year old, California*

Before I talked with Dr. G I hadn't gone fast in the big meets in over three years! I always picked the important ones to fall apart in. After 4 sessions Dr. G helped me get mentally tough, stay calm under pressure, and believe in myself. We had our shave and taper meet, and FINALLY I went fast, getting all lifetime bests in my events.

*19 year old, Maryland*

Dr G I just wanted you to know I am no longer falling apart in the middle of my races the way I used to! As a matter of fact I'm now swimming stronger in the second half and getting me best times! Your techniques really work! Thanks!

*17 year old, Virginia*

Consultations with Dr G have changed our daughter's life athletically, academically, and socially. At age 13 she 'hit the wall' in swimming, times slowing and self confidence plummeting. Her passion for swimming only exacerbated her misery. Today, she is achieving Junior National caliber swimming and is graduating early from High School with an "A" average. Thank you, Dr. G.

*Parents of 16 year old, California*

About two years ago, I called you for some help with my swimming and my head. I was thinking too much before and during my races. After our session, I went to my Region meet in Ft. Lauderdale and swam out of my mind. Since then, I've gained more power over my mental abilities and have steadily improved. I just wanted to take the time to thank you for helping me out.

*15 year old, New York*

I don't know how to begin to thank you. I had been trying for my junior cut in the mile for two years and the really frustrating thing is that I always seemed to swim closer to it in practice than I did at the meets when it counted. Thanks to you and your mental strategies I was finally able to qualify.

*16 year old, Massachusetts*

# Dr. Alan Goldberg

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SPORTS PERFORMANCE CONSULTANT

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