



Building A Mental Toolbox

4:

CONCENTRATION

Our year-round, multi-level aquatic programs emphasize
Personal Achievement, Team Unity & Competitive Excellence

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Coaches Guide



How do you teach concentration? How can you tell a kid to “think,” “concentrate” or “focus” and know that he is actually improving his concentration skill? We have provided several grab ‘em exercises and strategies to help you do just that.

Grab ‘em

Older Athletes

At the end of the chapter we have included a concentration grid. This grid is a fun and easy way to demonstrate to your swimmers the power of concentration. The grid is 10 x 10 with numbers ranging from 00 to 99. This is a timed task; usually coaches allow about 1 minute for each trial. Begin with the sheets turned over. Have your swimmers break into pairs - - one does the exercise and the other is the “distracter”. Explain to your swimmers that they are supposed to start with 00, put an X in that box when they find it and then move on to 01, 02, 03... The distracter tries to divert the attention of their partner by talking or yelling at them. At the end of the minute have your swimmers tally the number of boxes they have checked off. Before discussing the exercise, have them switch roles.

When you have finished working with the grid exercise ask some follow-up questions: how did your partner impact your performance? At your best, how were you focused? What happened when you got distracted? Then, make the application to the pool. Discuss how distractions impact performance and emphasize the need for effective concentration.

Younger Athletes

Prepare a tray with 10 to 20 different items on it such as toothpick, paper clip, pencil, stopwatch, goggles, swim cap, heat winner ribbon, etc. Give the athletes 1-minute to study the items on the tray and during this time play some loud music or a tape of swim meet sounds. At the end of the minute instruct the athletes to write down as many things as they can remember.

Follow up with questions similar to the first grab ‘em exercise.

Teaching Concentration

- Ask the swimmers to define concentration and have them explain why it is important.
- Talk about controlling the controllables. Ask your swimmers to list things they can and can’t control in both swimming practice and competition. Use this as a lead in to figuring out where to direct their attention.
- Depending on the ages of the swimmers present the four attentional styles and have your swimmers identify their strengths and weaknesses.
- Cover some of the common concentration problems along with skills to help prevent these problems.
- Use some of the exercises to help athletes become aware of their own concentration practices.

Exercises to Develop Concentration Skills

Several exercises have been included to help you hone your concentration skills. Below is a brief description of these exercises.

Exercise 1a and 1b can be used with both the older and younger swimmers. It asks the swimmers to determine where their attention is focused in many different situations. Once attentional style is determined the athletes can then work to improve their concentration.

Exercise 2 includes several ways to practice focusing under pressure situations. These exercises are designed for the older age group but may be modified for younger swimmers if need be.

Exercise 3, 3a and 3b are included to help athletes establish a refocusing routine. Exercise 3 takes the athletes through creating a refocusing routine. Exercises 3a and 3b can be used as supplementary refocusing sheets, adding some more structure to the way athletes refocus and plan for the inevitable breaks in concentration.

Finally at the end of the chapter a concentration grid is included to use in the Grab 'em exercises.

Concentration Exercise 1a: Identifying your Concentration Tendencies in Practice

After practice, do your best to recall how you were focused/ what you were attending to in the following practice situations.

| |
|-------------------------|
| Day 1 |
| During warm-ups |
| During technique drills |
| Last interval of a set |
| During Drylands |
| Middle of a kick set |
| Day 2 |
| During warm-ups |
| During technique drills |
| Last interval of a set |
| During Drylands |
| Middle of a kick set |
| Day 3 |
| During warm-ups |
| During technique drills |
| Last interval of a set |
| During Drylands |
| Middle of a kick set |

After completing the 3rd day, go back and assess how the focus impacted your performance (positive, neutral, or negative). In cases where the impact was neutral or negative, identify how you would prefer to focus in those situations.

Concentration Exercise 1b: Where Am I Focusing?

Use this exercise to help identify your tendencies related to attentional style.

During repeat 100's:

During stroke drills in practice:

While standing on the blocks:

Coming off a turn in a race:

When you get DQed:

When you are leading a race:

When your goggles fall off:

When you have a great race/set:

Which attentional style(s) do most of your answers fit into? Which attentional style(s) do you need to work on?

Concentration Exercise 2: Focusing Under Pressure

Below are several ideas for ways to practice focusing under pressure.

1. Change of Focus Drill. Select a period of time (anywhere from 30 seconds to 2 minutes) during which you direct your focus to only one aspect of a performance or skill. Change focus during the following time interval.

For example, you might switch your focus among the following three areas:

1. Kicking - how do my legs feel?
2. Rotation – how is my body rotation?
3. Breathing - am I breathing easily?

In the space below, note some areas that you could practice switching your focus:

2. Simulation Training. Recreate a competitive situation in practice. Simulated competition experiences enable you to become so familiar with competing stimuli that you are no longer distracted by these stimuli.

3. Distraction Drills. Practice following your performance routine despite verbal and visual distractions deliberately performed by your teammates, coaches, or others. For example, during a “hero” swim, have your teammates yell distracting comments and verbally taunt you. During warm up, switch back and forth between allowing your mind to wander for 50m then bringing your thoughts and focus back to swimming for the next 50m.

4. Quality Practice. This workout design is short and intense. You must be ready as soon as practice begins and warm-up ends. You have only one opportunity to swim a given distance from a standing start. Over time, your ability to focus intensely while performing well will increase.

Concentration Exercise 3: Establishing a Refocus Routine

- 1. Recognize distractions.** Identify the factors in swimming which are likely to distract your attention or draw your focus away from crucial elements of performance.
- 2. Select your focus.** Identify the factors in your performance, which require your concentration. Where **should** your focus be?
- 3. Prepare to concentrate.** Concentration requires a passive, relaxed mindset. It is therefore helpful to begin to recognize and reduce stress and anxiety. Too much stress destroys attentional focus. While it may be unrealistic to keep your environment stress-free, pay attention to the stress you **can** control or limit versus that which is out of your control and therefore not worth focusing on.
- 4. Create concentration cues.** Use attentional words, images, or actions as reminders to concentrate. Called “cues,” these words, images, or actions should be simple, positive and personally meaningful.
- 5. Create your own refocusing routines.** Anticipate possible distracters and decide how you will respond to them. These responses are your refocusing routines. Practice your refocusing routines until they are effective and instinctive. If you plan what you will do between events or competition days you will find you can bring your concentration under control. Refocusing routines reduces uncertainty and decrease susceptibility to distractions. See Chapter 7 on Mental Preparation, which will give you additional refocusing strategies.

During your training sessions over the next week, make a mental note of the distractions that interfere with your concentration. Record this information in the graph on the next page. Do this immediately after practice or during a break, when the experience is still fresh in your memory.

Concentration Exercise 3: Refocus Form A

| Distractions | Coping response to minimize negative impact | Attentional cue |
|-------------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| Comments by spectators or opponents | Centering breath, followed by positive affirmation | "Focus on my race" |
| Poor morning swim | Focus on specific aspects of upcoming race | "Another opportunity" |
| Negative thoughts and self-doubts | Immediately use thought-stopping technique, replace with positive, productive affirmation | Visualize big red stop sign |
| | | |

Concentration Exercise 3: Refocus Form B

Use the situations provided below or supply your own as you anticipate and plan for the unexpected. (Adapted from Orlick, 1986)

Refocusing Plan

If my heat is delayed, I will...

If there is a false start, I will...

If I am in lane 1 (and never swim well in lane 1), I will...

If I have a bad warm-up, I will...

If I swim poorly in prelims, I will...

Other possibilities...

Concentration

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| 38 | 28 | 51 | 09 | 71 | 16 | 72 | 82 | 63 | 04 |
| 10 | 32 | 44 | 62 | 21 | 97 | 18 | 40 | 90 | 52 |
| 25 | 85 | 57 | 46 | 66 | 35 | 78 | 96 | 11 | 69 |
| 74 | 03 | 75 | 93 | 00 | 56 | 22 | 67 | 49 | 20 |
| 43 | 13 | 23 | 33 | 79 | 95 | 76 | 05 | 59 | 45 |
| 65 | 86 | 50 | 19 | 41 | 07 | 37 | 83 | 29 | 61 |
| 58 | 02 | 34 | 77 | 27 | 55 | 92 | 48 | 01 | 89 |
| 15 | 47 | 73 | 87 | 39 | 68 | 12 | 53 | 84 | 70 |
| 24 | 64 | 81 | 06 | 91 | 60 | 88 | 30 | 98 | 14 |
| 99 | 31 | 42 | 94 | 17 | 54 | 80 | 26 | 36 | 08 |