



Building A Mental Toolbox

8:

MENTAL PREPARATION

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

PO Box 13064 Burton WA 98013 . info@vashonaquaticclub.org . www.vashonaquaticclub.org

MENTAL PREPARATION

Putting it All Together

I'm not the type of person who swims well when I'm pumped. I don't listen to a lot of music and jump around and bang my head on wall or things like that. It doesn't work for me. The thing I do is try to keep myself really still. I just try to bottle up my energy, feel it building. Then, I just focus on keeping my thoughts together - - thoughts on technically what I'm going to do in the race . . . I just imagine it going perfectly, imagining how it's going to feel when it goes perfectly.

1996 Olympic Swimmer



Competition provides athletes with the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities; to challenge themselves as to how fast and how well they can swim. To compete is one of the reasons swimmers train hard on a daily basis. When standing on the blocks waiting for the gun to go off, it all boils down to what one's body can do, right? WRONG!! Let me provide two examples to illustrate why performance relates to more than just physical capabilities:

Example A: Jacob spent 20 minutes stretching then got in the water for an easy warm up followed by pace work. He is now adjusting his goggles waiting to be called up to the blocks. He has reminded himself of his hard work in training so his confidence is high. His focus is on exploding off the blocks, maintaining his stroke rate, and holding his streamline on turns. He is in lane 1 but doesn't care because all he is thinking about is HIS race and what he needs to do to have a great race.

Example B: Hunter spent 20 minutes stretching then got in the water for an easy warm up followed by pace work. He is now adjusting his goggles waiting to be called up to the blocks. He trained hard all season but questions whether he did enough to prepare himself. He is in lane 1 but is worried about swimming well from there because he needs to keep an eye on Dylan, who is in lane 5. Dylan beat him last month and he doesn't want it to happen again. He is so anxious about winning that he can't seem to remember HOW he is supposed to swim.

In comparing Jacob and Hunter, it seems that both are physically prepared to race. They have trained hard all season and have readied their bodies to race by going through their physical warm up. Are both going to race well? NO WAY! While Jacob is both physically and mentally prepared to race, Hunter has not taken control of his

mental preparation. Put another way . . . when a swimmer steps up on the block to race both her body and mind are with her. When I last checked, we hadn't figured out a way to disconnect the mind from the body. Because of this, athletes better make sure both their body and mind are prepared to race. In this chapter, we'll discuss steps athletes can take to ensure their mind is working for them and not against them in competitive endeavors.

"Nothing can stop the man with the right mental attitude from achieving his goal; nothing on earth can help the man with the wrong mental attitude."

Thomas Jefferson, 3rd US President

Convinced yet?

The discussion and examples above should convince athletes of the importance of competition mental preparation. But, for those who are still not sold on the value of mental preparation, read on as some research findings related to characteristics of elite athletes and elite swimmers are described.

- Just like scientists have identified physical, physiological or technical "profiles" of elite athletes, similar work has been done related to identifying *psychological* profiles of elite performers. Their results have identified numerous psychological skills and characteristics related to success. These include **having a well developed competitive routine**, high levels of motivation and commitment, coping skills, self confidence and arousal management skills.
- After the 1996 Olympics, researchers tried to identify the factors that had a positive and negative impact on performance at the Games. One of the findings that distinguished those athletes that performed well from those that did not perform well was the **development and adherence to physical and mental preparation plans**. Successful athletes had a pre-competition routine that they stuck to!
- In 1998, ten athletes from the US World Championships Swim Team were interviewed to uncover how they approach/ deal with the mental aspect of swimming. In particular, each athlete was asked to describe how he/ she got ready to race. Interestingly, even though the athletes prepared for their races differently, **all of the athletes had a routine or plan to get mentally ready to race**. Here is what one of these athletes had to say:

"I swim in the lane that I'm going to be racing in and that kind of helps me. Especially during warm ups, you know, I look up in the stands and kind of picture what it's going to be like with people in it . . . And just kind of getting a good feel on my surroundings and what it's going to be like during that race. And think about the people that are going to be in that heat with me and what lanes they're going to be in and who I think I'm going to have to worry the most about. And really concentrating on my stroke and making sure I feel loose . . . make sure I feel strong and that everything's kind of together. Make sure my suit's fine, my cap and goggles are fine, and you know, there are so many little things."

Pretty compelling support, huh? Competition mental preparation seems to be a critical factor related to success. While some swimmers “sort of” have a way to get them in the mindset to compete, the preparation routine tends not to be used consistently. Just like the other psychological skills in your toolbox, your mental preparation routine must be developed systematically and purposefully, practiced, refined and used consistently in order for it to be effective.

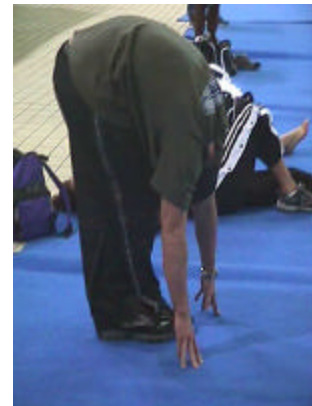


Understanding Mental Preparation Routines

To prepare physically to race, most athletes have a standard warm-up they go through that typically includes stretching, easy swimming, stroke drills, and pace work. Athletes have individualized their warm up to optimally prepare their body to race fast; they do what is best for them and not necessarily what their teammates are doing. A similar approach should be taken regarding mental preparation in that an athlete should have specific thoughts, words, images, and feelings leading up to a race to optimally prepare the mind for fast racing. This mental routine often occurs in conjunction with physical preparation so as the athlete is warming up his body he is also warming up his mind.

Benefits of Developing and Using a Mental Preparation Routine

Now that everyone is convinced of the importance of mental preparation, it is probably critical to identify the benefits of developing and consistently using a mental preparation routine. Doing so will enhance commitment when athletes are asked to change their behavior or to dedicate time to mental preparation. Some benefits include:



Attain an Ideal State or “Zone”. The primary benefit or purpose of a mental preparation plan is to get the athlete in a “mental state” that seems to relate to success performance (for that individual).

High self-confidence. Success breeds confidence! When an athlete is able to see and feel past and future successes as part of her mental preparation, confidence is not far behind. Imaging a successful upcoming race is the “dress rehearsal” to the real deal - - visualizing a great performance enhances the athletes belief that they can really do it.

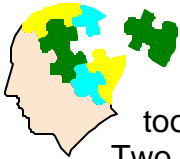
Control of Mental Energy. As was discussed in an earlier chapter, it is critical to manage mental energy so the athlete is not too flat or too manic. During preparation, athletes can listen to certain songs on their Walkman[®] to get jazzed about racing or image a relaxing scene to slow their racing thoughts. Such strategies can be a purposeful part of a mental routine to manage mental energy.

Effective Focus. A mental preparation routine can help the swimmer focus on important aspects of her performance. Technical cues (“explode off the blocks” “hold your streamline”) or images (“torpedo”) can be integrated into preparation to direct attention where it needs to be (as opposed to having one’s focus on unproductive or negative things).

Comfort in Structure. A mental routine can be a ‘security blanket’--something to turn to in the stressful moments leading up to the competition. It is a mental routine they can use whether they are swimming in a dual meet or at Olympic Trials; to bring consistency to their preparation and their performance. To a degree, a mental preparation routine can help take the “environment” out of the performance (for athletes who tend to be negatively effected by competitive environments).

Engage the Mind. The mind is a valuable commodity. And, when purposefully recruited and engaged, the athlete has the additional support of positive emotions, feelings, and thoughts. Athletes should make wise use of all the resources at their disposal.

Putting the pieces together



Now is the time to put all the pieces together. It’s like a puzzle. We have supplied all the mental tools that the athlete needs to excel. Choose the tools wisely and put them together in the form of a mental preparation plan. Two steps need to be taken by the athlete to complete the puzzle:

First, the athlete needs to figure out the desired results. That is, how does she want to think and feel prior to racing? What “mindset” seems to relate to successful swimming for the athlete? Does she want to be very confident, nervous, relaxed, happy, a little worried, controlled, high energy, etc? At the end of the chapter are exercises that can help athletes determine the mindset that may be best for them (Exercises 1, 2, and 3).

Second, the athlete needs to determine how she is going to get into this mental state. What tools is she going to use to attain the ideal mindset? Following is an example to bring this to life. As part of an interview, a World Championship Team athlete was asked to describe in detail how she prepares herself for races. She discussed specific things she does, thinks, and says to herself prior to races. Then, she noted that “I need to be nervous before I race” (**awareness of an Ideal state/ desired end result of preparation**). Great! The next question, of course, was how do you get nervous? “Simple, I stare at my competitors in the ready room” (**this is part of the process she uses to attain her desired state**). She also identified other mental tools she uses to get herself mentally ready to compete.

Following are some mental tools that may be useful in helping athletes attain their desired “mindset”:

Goals: While outcome is certainly important, the immediate focus and goal should be directed toward what the athlete needs to do. Remember, effective goals can help motivate and direct attention. Let's make sure the goal is directing and motivating appropriately (Chapter 1).

Self-talk: Before the competition, internal talk should be positive, motivating and instructive. Cue words can be included that tell the athlete what to do to perform well and help build confidence (Chapter 3).

Mental imagery: Imagery is often used to rehearse the competition and competition strategy; to prepare the athlete for the challenge ahead. It can also be used to "take the athlete away" from the stressful environment. (Chapter 2).

Performance Cues/ Concentration: Eyes and ears should to be directed to the task ahead. Concentration strategies can be used to ensure an appropriate focus (Chapter 4).

Relaxation and Activation: As discussed in Chapter 7, it is critical for the athlete to manage physical and mental energy. Athletes should have at their disposal a variety of strategies to attain an effective energy level.

