SWIMMING

with the

Competitive Edge

MENTAL TOUGHNESS TRAINING GUIDE

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TRACK #1

INTRODUCTION - THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MENTAL SIDE

SO HOW TOUGH ARE YOU?

*Testing your current level of mental toughness.*

So let’s begin in the beginning with exactly where you are at mentally. Are you a mental toughness giant, or a 98 lb. mental toughness weakling? Let’s find out. Take this very simple, mental toughness questionnaire to determine exactly where your mental strengths and weaknesses lie. After taking this test before you start your mental training, I would then recommend that you retake the same questionnaire after you have finished practicing and working with all the skills and strategies in this program.

HANDLING PRESSURE

(true/false answers)

1. I often dread swimming in larger meets

2. I think about my opponent’s size, times or reputation before I swim

3. Water temperature, pool conditions, crowd size and specific opponents usually affect my race performance

4. I look forward to the bigger races
5. The tougher the competition, the happier I am
6. I am inwardly calm and composed before my races
7. I worry a lot about others beating me
8. I frequently swim better in practice than I do in meets
9. I have the ability to calm myself when I’m too nervous
10. I get physically sick before certain races/meets
11. My pre-race self-talk is mostly negative and full of doubts
12. I have trouble trusting my taper and training when it comes time to put it all on the line
13. I swim better against slower opponents
14. Some people on my team would call me a “head case”
15. I pretend that I am racing certain opponents in practice
16. More often than not I’m too nervous to swim to my potential
17. I seem to always lose to swimmers that I know I’m faster than
18. I frequently get sick or injured right before bigger meets
19. I’d much rather practice than compete
20. “Choking” under pressure is a close friend of mine
21. I tend to swim faster in my off events than my best ones
22. I can never seem to make my taper pay off
CONCENTRATION

23. I am easily distracted

24. I often focus on other swimmers before the start of my races

25. I often think about past poor performances before I race

26. Once the race starts I tend to think about or look at others

27. I think too much when I swim

28. I have the ability to block out negatives before the start of my races

29. I usually only focus on one or two things when I race

30. I tend to look around at my opponents as I come into the wall

31. I worry a lot about letting others down

32. I can easily lock my focus on my stroke or kick while I swim

33. My mind has a tendency to drift too much before races

34. I focus a lot on my splits and final time before and during the race

35. If I have a bad warm up I can’t swim fast

36. I mentally jump ahead of myself during my races

37. I have certain times that I can never seem to break

38. I tend to get bothered by what others say or do before the race

39. When I lose my focus I can quickly bring it back

40. When I race I mostly don’t think
HANDLING ADVERSITY (MENTAL REBOUNDING)

41. I can’t seem to shake the disappointment of a bad race

42. I have certain meets each year where I always perform poorly

43. If my first race is bad, the rest of the meet is bad

44. I usually believe that a bad warm-up will negatively affect my race

45. If I miss a wall or make a mistake, I think about it the rest of the race

46. Disappointments and failures motivate me to work harder

47. I have the ability to quickly let go of my mistakes

48. When I get DQ’ed, I can’t stop thinking about it

49. When unfair things happen to me they stick to me like glue

50. I believe that I learn much more from my failures than successes

51. Injuries make me want to pack it up and quit

52. If I’m stuck on a certain time for long, I get discouraged

53. Disappointments make me feel like I’ll never succeed

54. With all my failures I often question why I keep swimming

55. I deliberately use the memory of bad races to push myself harder in practice on a daily basis

56. When the going gets tough, I tend to quit

57. After a failure I look for what I can do better next time
58. When bad things happen, I always think, “why me?”

59. I tend to give up in future races if I have already lost to a certain opponent more than 3-4 times

60. When I fail, there are usually correctable reasons for it.

WINNING ATTITUDE

61. I tend to see the glass of milk as always “half full”

62. I believe that I can do anything that I set my mind to

63. I build my successes on my failures

64. Other’s negativity always seems to get to me

65. When I swim poorly, I tend to make excuses

66. I hate swimming in certain pools and certain lanes

67. The more of my teammates I can get to go fast, the better I feel

68. I love being pushed by my coach

69. It really annoys me when my teammates are on my heels in practice

70. I like to pace myself through a long practice so I don’t get too tired

71. It really bothers me when teammates cut corners

72. My coach would call me a whiner

73. When I swim poorly at the taper meet it’s usually the coach’s fault

74. “Can’t” and “never” aren’t words in my vocabulary
75. If I can’t win, there’s no point in trying

76. I have an easy time finding things to complain about

77. I am a positive person

78. I tend to get threatened by other’s success

79. I live, “when the going gets tough, the tough get going”

80. If you don’t have anything good to say, don’t say anything

**SCORING**

Score one point for each answer that matches the answer on the scoring key. If your answer doesn’t match, you assign a value of zero.
CONCENTRATION:
23) F
24) F
25) F
26) F
27) F
28) T
29) T
30) F
31) F
32) T
33) F
34) F
35) F
36) F
37) F
38) F
39) T
40) T

HANDLING ADVERSITY:
41) F
42) F
43) F
44) F
45) F
46) T
47) T
48) F
49) F
50) T
51) F
52) F
53) F
54) F
55) T
56) F
57) T
58) F
59) F
60) T

WINNING ATTITUDE:
61) T
62) T
63) T
64) F
65) F
66) F
67) T
68) T
69) F
70) F
71) T
72) F
73) F
74) T
75) F
76) F
77) T
78) F
79) T
80) T
SCORING - MENTAL TOUGHNESS QUESTIONNAIRE

There are a total of 80 possible points that you can get. If you answer honestly and score between 74-80 you are mentally tough as nails and should be conducting your own mental toughness workshops. If you score between 65-73 you are pretty solid mentally. Scores between 55-64 indicate just average mental strengths. Scores below 55 indicate that your head is seriously getting in the way of you swimming faster. Besides your overall score, check your scoring for each individual category for specific training suggestions for improvement. For example, scoring 16 or less in the “handling pressure” category points out that one of your significant areas of weakness rests in your inability to stay calm under competitive pressure. Therefore, it is critical that you direct some of your mental training into this area. Similarly, if you score a 12 out of a possible 18 points for Concentration, you need to work on strengthening your concentration muscles.

Homework: Take the Mental Toughness Test and then, using the Scoring Key and Interpretation section, evaluate your score. Remember, the ONLY purpose of this score is to give you a mental toughness baseline of your current strengths and weaknesses. The important purpose of lower scores is to identify specific areas where you need more work to strengthen your mental muscles. Low scores in a training area, for example, “Concentration,” mean that you want to spend more time on this particular topic while working with the CDs.

KEY POINTS

• You can’t become a champion without training your mind as well as your body.

• Good stroke mechanics and a strong training base will not help you if you get too nervous pre-race, focus on the wrong things before or during your race, don’t believe in yourself or make other mental mistakes!

• Swimmers who go faster in practice than in their meets, faster in off-events than their best ones and/or who choke under pressure do so because of problems with their “mental technique!”
• Making mental mistakes before or during a race will hurt you just as much as making physical/technical ones with your stroke mechanics during your races!

• Anyone, including YOU can learn to develop mental toughness with consistent training!

**TRACK #2**

**DEVELOPING THE MOTIVATION OF A CHAMPION**

![Diagram showing La La Land (Mediocre), Champion’s Zone (Excellent), and Daily Choice Points]

Post this diagram on your bedroom wall or somewhere you will be able to easily see it EVERY day!

**KEY POINTS**

1. You can’t become a champion without motivation!

2. Motivation comes from having a Big Enough WHY – a goal or an emotionally compelling reason for you to train.
3. Your BIG WHY should ONLY belong to YOU! You do not want to swim to make others happy or proud. You do not want to swim for parents or coaches.

4. Your BIG WHY will help you continually take the right road in practice, it will answer the question, “Why should I work hard, suffer, sacrifice and push myself?”

5. It is important to bring your goals, your BIG WHY with you whenever you train.

6. It is just as critical to NEVER bring your goals with you whenever you compete or when you are swimming to get a certain time!!!!

7. When the going gets tough in practice, you want to ask yourself, “How is what I’m doing right now, today going to help me get to my goal/dream?”

8. If you are not sure why you swim, then spend some time to honestly figure this out!

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!!!

9. NEVER, EVER Bring your goals to meets with you!!!! They are a training tool for practice ONLY!!

10. 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.

HOMEWORK

“What road was I on today” Every day after practice for at least two weeks or more, you want to look at your posted diagram of “The Road” and ask yourself this question: “What road did I take today in practice?” Of the two hours or so...
of practice, what percentage did I take the left road, to La La Land, and what percentage did I go down the RIGHT road to the CHAMPION’S ZONE? So, for example, if you spent 70% of your time down the right road and 30% down the left, it gives you something concrete and specific to improve upon tomorrow in your next practice, shooting for an 80%/20% split.

Identify your BIG WHY for swimming. Take some time and figure out WHY you are doing this and WHO you’re doing it for. Remember, you need a Big WHY to help motivate you on a daily basis in practice to take the RIGHT fork!

TRACK #3

HARD WORK – THE STUFF OF CHAMPIONS

KEY POINTS

Winners take responsibility for their swimming. They don’t make excuses. They don’t cut corners and they don’t look to blame others. They practice, “IF IT IS TO BE, IT IS UP TO ME!” (Put that phrase up on your wall to continually remind yourself what your quest is really about!)

GET COMFORTABLE BEING UNCOMFORTABLE = Your ticket to success in and out of the pool. You want to regularly practice pushing yourself outside of your comfort zone. (Post this phrase on your bedroom wall)
HOMEWORK

1. List at least 5 for each, the things that I do in practice that are in my comfort zone, that are easy and I like to do:

2. List at least 5 of each, the things that make me physically and/or emotionally uncomfortable in practice that I tend to avoid doing even though they’d help me get better and stronger as a swimmer.

3. Make a commitment to begin regularly practicing stepping outside your comfort zone by doing those things in “#2” that you identified which stretch you.

Working hard on a daily basis is the GREAT EQUALIZER and is the only way for you to get to your goals.

TRACK #4

REST IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF TRAINING

KEY POINTS

Understand that rest is an important and integral part of your training. You have to take regular breaks from your training where you do things that are totally unrelated to swimming.

Trust your own body and learn the differences between the pain and fatigue of hard training and that of impending injury.

Always push yourself through the pain and fatigue of oxygen debt. Never push yourself through the pain of an impending injury. Instead, listen to your body and get help.
Pain of injury is your body’s way of saying, “Pay close attention here! There’s something wrong!”

Backing down from the pain of injury, not pushing through it and instead taking care of yourself does NOT make you weak! What makes you weak is when you don’t listen to and trust your body! Anyone who tells you that strength and toughness is measured by how well you can override your body’s pain-from-injury signals is living in prehistoric times!!

HOMEWORK: BE SURE TO TAKE TIME REGULARLY TO “SHARPEN YOUR AXE!”

TRACK #5

LEARNING TO BELIEVE IN YOURSELF

KEY POINTS

You’re always limited most by what you believe is possible!

Performance is always self-fulfilling: That is, you will always get what you expect/believe. This is why, “IF YOU THINK YOU CAN OR YOU THINK YOU CAN’T, YOU’RE ABSOLUTELY RIGHT!”

Believing in yourself will make you more persistent in the face of failures and setbacks and because you keep trying, you will ultimately be successful.

Not believing in yourself will undermine your resolve when adversity hits and make you vulnerable to quitting way before you’re successful.

Believing in yourself and going for it will often times open you up to criticism
and scape-goating behavior from teammates. Teammates who turn on you for being successful are NOT friends and NOT good teammates! NEVER, EVER abandon your successful efforts just to be accepted by the “IN crowd!” If your success makes others uncomfortable, then GOOD FOR YOU!!!!

You show the most respect for your teammates and give them the VERY best opportunities to excel themselves by getting as good as YOU possibly can!

**HOMEWORK: TO BUILD SELF-BELIEF**

1. Don’t listen to the “experts.” The people who want to rain on your parade and who want to be “helpful” by telling you why you can’t reach your dreams are NOT on your side. Make a point to tune these “naysayers” out on a daily basis!

2. Surround yourself with like-minded, GO-FOR-IT people. Have people on your “team” who support your dream and believe in YOU!

3. On a daily basis, eliminate words like “can’t,” “never” and “impossible!” Tear them out of the dictionary in your mind and do not let them EVER pass between your lips. REMEMBER, SUCCESS COMES IN CANS, not can’ts!

4. Practice doing the “impossible” every day. Challenge yourself in every practice EVERY DAY by doing at least two or three things that you think you “can’t” do! (i.e. lead your lane, train in a faster lane, etc.)
KEY POINTS

Remember, nothing good comes from negativity! NOTHING!!! EVER!!!! It kills your motivation, sabotages your performances and leads to low self-confidence!

Performance is always self-fulfilling, which means that you will ALWAYS get what you expect. Expect a bad outcome and it will be waiting for you. Expect a good one, and that will be there for you instead.

Races are won and lost before the start because of the relationship between your mind, your body and how you end up performing. What you think, goes directly into your body and makes physiological changes, and these changes, in turn, affect how fast you swim!

Negative thoughts make you anxious, tighten your muscles, speed up your breathing and make it shallower and lead to cold hands and feet. These physiological changes ALWAYS lead to slower swims! Why? Tight muscles shorten your strokes, throw your rhythm off, hurt more when you begin feeling the pain and fatigue of oxygen debt and are terribly inefficient. Therefore, when you’re muscles are tight, you will fatigue prematurely! Shallower, faster breathing will mean that you’re taking too many breaths during your race and this kind of breathing will prematurely tire you out. You will swim as if you’re in terrible shape! Cold hands and feet will interfere with that all important feel of the water. Swimming fast is ALL ABOUT FEEL and cold hands will kill your feel!

Remember, the secret to swimming fast is you have to be physically loose. Negative thinking before or during a race interferes with this!
HOMEWORK

1. For one to two weeks keep a NEGATIVITY JOURNAL. Record everything negative that you think or say over the course of a day, both in and out of the pool, related or totally unrelated to your swimming. If it’s negative, you should jot it down. Do NOT try to be positive here. Simply begin to keep track of the typical negative crap that you feed yourself. This awareness will form the very first step in you beginning to turn things around to the positive!

2. In practice, and over the course of a practice just KEEP COUNT OF THE NEGATIVE THINGS THAT YOU THINK. You don’t need to remember the specifics, just assign a number to every negative thing that pops up and keep adding a number with each new negativity that passes through your mind. Do this for at least two weeks. Just the process of recognizing and counting your practice-related negative thoughts will help you begin to reduce them. Keep in mind that any comparison type thoughts like, “She’s more popular than I am!”, “He’s such a better flyer than I am” and “I’ll never be that good!” are ALWAYS negative!

3. Practice REFRAMING or using the LEMONADE STRATEGY: That is, the concept that when life gives you lemons, you make lemonade! Every day, think of at least 5 negative things that happened in practice and then try to REFRAME THEM. That is, find the positive in whatever happened in the pool that you explained to yourself was negative. For example, Little Jane kept swimming up your butt in practice and you wanted to rip her head off. The REFRAME is that Jane is giving me the opportunity to go faster and get better by pushing me more. Or, the coach just took you through what you considered to be a totally worthless set, given the events that you swim. The REFRAME is that these kinds of practices give me an opportunity to work on better maintaining my focus and improving my mental toughness...Or you just choked at a big meet and were far too nervous to swim to your ability. The REFRAME is now I really know what I need to work on to improve and become a mentally tougher swimmer. I have to put more time into staying calm in the clutch and learning to better control my pre-race focus of concentration!
Self-confidence is not something that you can get just by telling yourself to “be confident!” It is the end product of the following factors:

1. HOW YOU EXPLAIN YOUR FAILURES TO YOURSELF – If you explain your failures to yourself by using PERMANENT LANGUAGE like, “always”, “never”, “here we go again,” “whenever I do this, this always happens,” “I Can’t!” “This is impossible!” then you will be left feeling discouraged, demotivated and less confident. However, when you explain your failures using TEMPORARY LANGUAGE, i.e. “I had a bad meet today” “My IM time wasn’t very good because of my breaststroke split” or “I can’t do it YET!” you are left feeling hopeful and motivated to keep going.

If you explain your failures to yourself by using GLOBAL or general terms you will be left feeling discouraged, hopeless and badly about yourself. “I suck!” “I can’t swim!” “I am a head case” and “I am not a very good athlete” are all GLOBAL self-explanations that don’t provide you with any useful information to help you correct your problems. Using SPECIFIC language to explain your failures to yourself, on the other hand, provides you with exactly what you need to do turn the failure into a success. For example, “I swam really badly today because my turns were all off” steers you in the direction of your turns for better, faster swims.

2. HOW YOU EXPLAIN YOUR SUCCESSES TO YOURSELF – Confident athletes take OWNERSHIP and RESPONSIBILITY for their success. “I’ve been working my butt off and it paid off today!” “Ever since I figured out the correct breathing pattern I’ve been doing much better!” “This was a great meet for me because I had fun and kept myself calm!” Less confident athletes, on the other hand, EXPLAIN THEIR SUCCESSES AWAY AS A RESULT OF EXTERNAL FACTORS. For example, “I was just lucky!” “It was the suit that made me go fast!” “This win
didn’t mean that much because I had no competition!” or “Everyone went fast today. This was just a fast pool!” All undermine the good feelings that normally come from a good swim.

3. Confident athletes have a LONG TERM MEMORY FOR THEIR SUCCESSES and a SHORT TERM MEMORY FOR THEIR FAILURES. Less confident athletes have a LONG TERM MEMORY FOR THEIR FAILURES and a SHORT TERM MEMORY FOR THEIR SUCCESSES!

4. COMPARISON IS A LOSING GAME! Athletes who are in the habit of comparing themselves always suffer from very low self-confidence. Keep your focus on YOU. STAY IN YOUR OWN LANE!! Measure yourself against yourself and not against anyone else!

5. BUILD CONFIDENCE BY “POSITIVE ADVERTISING.” You have to learn to advertise your most important product, YOU, to your most important customer, YOU!! Use AFFIRMATIONS TO HELP YOU SYSTEMATICALLY BUILD SELF-CONFIDENCE. Affirmations are positive, personal statements about how you want to feel in the future, written as if they were true right now! Make your affirmations short, positive and reflective about how you want to feel or do, NOT of what you don’t want to feel or do! Write your affirmations down on 3 X 5 cards and put these “advertisements” all over your room, in your locker at school, in your notebooks, in your changing bag, etc. Remember, you don’t have to believe an affirmation in the beginning.

HOMEWORK

1. Use the PRE-SLEEP TECHNIQUE to program in specific affirmations. Pick one affirmation and use that every night as instructed in the audio portion. Repeat it slowly, 20 times to yourself while lying in bed with the lights off, trying to imagine that affirmation being real and happening in that moment. Do this every night for at least one to two weeks before going on to another affirmations.
2. KEEP A VICTORY LOG: Keep a daily journal and log in it at least 5 - 10 small “victories” you achieve every day. They can be swimming related or not. You can include newspaper clippings, things coaches or teachers have said to you, or anything else that represents something you did well or an obstacle or fear that you moved towards and/or overcame. Your victories can be very small like pushing yourself in a set at the point where you usually back down or making the decision today to train in a faster lane. Only log the positive and don’t evaluate or judge the quality of the “victories” that you’re writing down. Reread your log often and especially when you’re feeling down about yourself!

3. MAKE A WALL OF FAME IN YOUR ROOM: Surround yourself in your room (pick one wall) with evidence of the things that reflect your commitment to excellence and hard work. This can include the poster of an Olympic swimmer who you admire, pictures of friends and teammates who support you, newspaper clippings, motivational slogans, trophies and medals, etc. These things should reflect the journey that you’re on and should support the belief that you can get there! You always want to keep your victories and accomplishments close to you, in plain view!
TRACK #8

USING YOUR BRAIN TO GO FAST

HUMAN BRAIN

FRONT BRAIN
- conscious
- uses words/sentences
- analytical
- judgmental
- extremely slow

MID-BRAIN

EMOTIONS

KNOWING

HIND BRAIN
- unconscious
- images & muscle memory
- coordinates the whole
- non-judgmental
- instantaneous
KEY POINTS

Awareness is the key to developing mental toughness! If you are aware that you’re making a mental mistake, and you know what you should be doing mentally instead, then you’re half way to being able to self-correct!

The brain is broken down into three parts: FRONT; MID; and HIND brain. Each part of the brain controls different functioning for you, both in and out of the pool.

The Front Brain controls THINKING, The Mid-Brain controls your EMOTIONS, and the Hind Brain controls KNOWING, or all the things that you’ve done over and over again through the years.

The Front Brain processes information consciously, using words and breaking things into their component pieces. Your Front Brain is judgmental. Your Front Brain is INCREDIBLY SLOW in its’ processing!

Your Hind Brain processes information unconsciously, using images and muscle memory and coordinating all of the component pieces into a whole. Your Hind brain is non-judgmental and processes information INSTANTANEOUSLY!

Your Front Brain is a SWIMMING IDIOT! You can NEVER go fast by thinking yourself through a swim!

Your Hind Brain is an OLYMPIAN! Going fast is all about trusting your muscle memory and letting the fast swim come out!

It’s fine to be in your Front brain sometimes at practice or after meets when you’re analyzing what worked and what didn’t! It’s also fine to be in your thinking Front brain when you are learning something new!
HOMEWORK

Review 2 or 3 disappointing races, times when you swam way below your capabilities. What part of the brain were you in both before and during these races? What evidence do you have for that? Look at the listing of Front Brain processing to answer this: (i.e. thinking specific things during the race, “I’m so tired! I have to go faster!”; being judgmental during the race (“you’re going so slow! You suck!”) or being analytical, i.e. specifically coaching yourself through the stroke or turns.

Now do the same for 2-3 really great races. What part of the brain were you in both before and during the race? What evidence do you have to support this? Look at the listing of Hind brain processing to answer this. i.e. “I can’t remember anything I was thinking!” “The whole race FELT great!”, etc.

TRACK #9

THE CONCENTRATION DIFFERENCES BETWEEN 
GOOD AND BAD SWIMS

CONCENTRATION

CHOKING/BAD PERFORMANCE
“in your head”
over thinking
performance focus: thoughts
tight muscles
expectations
trying too hard
the brake pedal

PEAK PERFORMANCE
“in the experience”
very little thinking
performance focus: feel
loose muscles
no expectations
trust & let it happen
the gas pedal
KEY POINTS

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN YOUR BEST AND WORST PERFORMANCES LIES IN YOUR CONCENTRATION BOTH BEFORE AND DURING YOUR RACES.

If you’re over-thinking before and during your race, you will always swim slowly!

Thinking during your race distracts your focus from FEEL and tightens your muscles.

The secret to swimming fast when it counts the most is: You have to BE LOOSE!!

Taking your goals & expectations into your event will ALWAYS weigh you down!

Expectations make your race too important and lead to trying too hard or muscling your swim, or a sense of swimming scared!

Remember, your goals and expectations are training tools for practice only, to motivate you to work hard and make the right decisions!

To swim your best, your race focus must be on the FEEL of what you’re doing!

Swimmers always go faster in off events than their best ones because they go into their off events WITHOUT expectations!!!!

TRUST AND LET IT HAPPEN for fast swims

When you go into a race with expectations, you will always be greeted at the end by DISAPPOINTMENT and FRUSTRATION!

When you go into a race without expectations, you will always be greeted at the end by PLEASANT SURPRISE!
HOMEWORK

1. Spend some consistent time in practice trying to explore the difference between LEFT & RIGHT column focusing. In other words, try to become aware whenever you’re FOCUS is in the LEFT column, over-thinking, putting pressure on yourself, carrying expectations. Also, notice those times when you are swimming far looser in the RIGHT column, just focusing on FEEL and not worried at all about time or place. Your awareness of these two are critical to you learning how to ultimately control your concentration both before and during your swims!!!!

2. Explore swimming with a FEEL FOCUS. What do you tend to be focusing on when you go fast? What are you aware of in your body when you’re really moving? Take some time in practice every day to figure out the different things that you tend to pay attention to when you go fast. If you can’t figure it out, ask your coach for help. There may be one or two technical things that your coach sees you doing whenever you swim your fastest. You can then focus on FEELING yourself doing them in practice. With a little bit of work, you can learn to develop FEEL FOCUS POINTS which will serve as the “gas pedal” whenever you race.

TRACK #10

DEVELOPING CHAMPIONSHIP CONCENTRATION

KEY POINTS

Concentration is a foundation skill in mental toughness. What you focus on determines your self-confidence, your ability to stay calm under pressure, how well you bounce back from bad races, your motivation level and your ability to handle adversity.
When you swim your best and swim your worst, you are ALWAYS doing a good job of concentrating. The key difference is on WHAT are you focusing?!!

Concentration is the ability to focus in on what’s important and let go of everything else!

You can only concentrate on ONE THING WELL at a time so you’d better make sure that the one thing you’re focusing really well on is WHAT’S IMPORTANT!

Concentration is a two part skill: First, you must recognize the instant your focus drifts from what’s important; Second, you must quickly and gently bring your focus back to what’s important.

What’s important?

1. Keeping your focus in the NOW vs. the PAST or the FUTURE

2. Keeping your focus IN YOUR OWN LANE, on what YOU are doing

A break in concentration won’t hurt you as a swimmer. What will hurt you is a break in concentration that you don’t catch right away!

Going fast can only happen when you keep your focus on FEEL, in your OWN LANE!

Every stroke you take where your focus is on someone else is a slow stroke.

Every stroke you take where your focus is in the PAST or the FUTURE is a slow stroke!

**HOMEWORK**

Concentration training at home:

PART 1: Take a trophy or medal and place the object 4 -5 feet away from you. Pick a spot on the object where you gently place your visual focus. Sit comfortably, feet flat on the floor and while your eyes are on your spot, put the rest
of your focus as you inhale normally on the feeling of the air coming in. As you exhale, repeat a word quietly to yourself. This word will be what’s called a “CONCENTRATION CUE” or reminder. You can use a word like NOW, YOU, GOLD, or even a phrase like LONG & STRONG or OWN LANE. So you’ll inhale comfortably, feeling the breath come in and as you exhale, and feel the breath go out, you’ll hear that word in your head. If you find that you get distracted by things going on around you or from inside of your head, no problem! Recognize that you drifted and quickly and gently bring your focus back to your breathing and your concentration cue. Do this first part of the exercise for 2 MINUTES IN A ROOM WITH NO DISTRACTIONS!!! No music, noise, phones, computers, etc.

PART 2: When you’re done with the two minutes, take your object and put it on top of and in the middle of a TV set. Sit far enough back so that when you see your spot, you also end up seeing the entire screen. Now turn the TV on, lower volume than usual and be sure to put it on a channel that you would never watch. Then, for two more minutes repeat the very same exercise and every time you get distracted by either the picture or the sound, recognize that you’ve drifted and quickly bring your focus back to your object and concentration cue!

Concentration training at practice in the pool:

STAY IN YOUR OWN LANE: Take the warm-up or part of a set and practice STAYING IN YOUR OWN LANE, just focusing on your stroke and what you’re doing. Pick a focal point out in advance that you can place your concentration on. This can be something in your stroke, your breathing pattern, kick, pace, how much water you’re pulling, etc. Every time that your focus drifts from that focal point to what other swimmers are doing or what the coaches might be thinking about you, then quickly bring your focus back to your lane and that specific focal point. Do this on a daily basis in practice for 3-5 minutes at a time so you develop the awareness of when your concentration leaves your lane and goes somewhere else.

STAY IN THE NOW: Very similar to the last exercise only this time you want to keep your focus in the NOW, on whatever is happening in that moment. Pick a part of a set to do this and make a point during that set to keep your focus in the now and to recognize the instant your concentration “time travels” back to the past or jumps ahead to the future and quickly return it to the NOW! Again, do this specifically for 3-5 minute segments throughout practice.
KEY POINTS

Controlling your pre-race focus of concentration will help you stay calm and loose before your races.

You do this by developing a set pre-race ritual, the steps of which you can use to focus on as you go through them to help distract you from all of the distractions.

The purpose of a pre-race ritual is to, #1 Help you stay calm pre-race because the FAMILIAR relaxes you and, #2 To keep your focus away from nervous-generating distractions.

By CONTROLLING YOUR EYES AND EARS before and during your race, you will increase the chances that you will consistently perform to your potential.

CONTROLLING YOUR EYES means that what you VISUALLY focus on before and during the race should only be things that keep you calm, confident and ready to swim your best.

CONTROLLING YOUR EARS means that you only want to listen to those things (both internal and external) that keep you calm and confident.

You control your eyes and ears by having pre-set FOCAL POINTS that you either LOOK AT, LISTEN TO or FEEL before AND during your races. You use these focal points to put your concentration on so you can distract yourself from the stress generating distractions.

Pre-race rituals only work when you DO THEM WITH AWARENESS. That is, as you go through your ritual PHYSICALLY, (i.e. stretching), your MENTAL focus is completely on what you are doing! (focusing on the feel of the stretch, looking
at the muscles that you are stretching and imagining that you can breathe into that muscle group).

**HOMEWORK**

1. Write down all of the steps to your pre-race ritual, the little things that you consistently do right before you swim that you can begin to use as a way to keep yourself calm and confident and to control your eyes and ears. If you do not have a set ritual, then take this time to develop one. Remember to keep it simple and to make sure that you choose things in your ritual that you can always be sure will be there, (i.e. the blocks, your cap & goggles, stretching a certain way, breathing, etc.). That is, you ONLY want things in your ritual that you can CONTROL!!

2. Take some time to literally practice going through your pre-race ritual, using each step of the ritual as an anchor for you to put your focus of concentration on.

3. Practice STRETCHING WITH AWARENESS – Take some time to go through your stretching routine but to do it where your full attention is on the feel of the stretch and where you coordinate your breathing with the stretching. That is, every muscle group you stretch, you want to inhale slowly into and then exhale slowly, imagining as you do, that you can let go of any excess tension.
TRACK #12

USING THE PAIN AND FATIGUE OF OXYGEN DEBT TO GO FAST

KEY POINTS

If you want to take your swimming to the next level, then you need to learn how to MENTALLY HANDLE the pain and fatigue of oxygen debt!

Swimmers get tired and quit MENTALLY long before their bodies PHYSICALLY give in. Simply put, you can always do more than you think you can. You do NOT know what your physical limits are!

The best way to deal with physical discomfort is to switch your focus AWAY from the feelings of discomfort and AWAY FROM THINKING ABOUT IT to the FEEL OF WHAT YOU ARE DOING in the water.

STAY IN THE NOW to master the pain and fatigue of oxygen debt. Mentally going into the FUTURE will only make the pain worse and slow you way down.

Use the EAT AN ELEPHANT strategy to master really difficult practices and sets, and to push yourself beyond your limits and get more out of your practices!

If it’s difficult, chunk it down into bite sized pieces. REMEMBER:

INCH BY INCH IT WILL BE A CINCH, BUT YARD BY YARD, IT WILL BE HARD!!!

HOMEWORK

Practice, in practice working with the pain and fatigue of oxygen debt. When you get tired, or when you are facing a very difficult set, work on EATING THE ELEPHANT. That is, chunk down what you are doing into manageable pieces and focus on each piece, one at a time in the NOW. To do this you have to pick something in the NOW, that you do each stroke, that you can use as a focal point to lock your concentration on. It can be your stroke, how much water
you’re pulling, the feel of your head position, your kick, breathing pattern, pace etc. Whenever your focus strays away from FEEL to THINKING, (about how much you hurt, how much you will hurt, etc.) quickly return your focus to that particular FEEL focal point. This means that you should hunt for those places in practice where you tend to back down and instead, try implementing this strategy. Regular practice of meeting pain and fatigue in this way will dramatically help you take your swimming to the next level!

**TRACK #13**

**THE BIGGEST CAUSE OF CHOKING AND HOW TO AVOID IT**

**KEY POINTS**

The biggest cause of choking, runaway nerves and poor performance is focusing on the UCs (THE UNCONTROLLABLES)

An UNCONTROLLABLE is anything that you don’t have DIRECT control over!

Focusing on the UCs will make you nervous, tighten your muscles, undermine your self-confidence and cause you to swim way slower than your ability!
The UCs are: your time, anything in the future, everything about your opponent, how fast your teammates swim, the pool conditions, anything in the past, how big the meet is, who’s watching, other people’s expectations, your coach, your parents, the starter & stroke and turn judges, how you feel that day, what’s going on in your academic, personal or social life.

The UCs are a mental trap and the only way to avoid it is by knowing it’s there. You must learn to become aware of the UCs!

Whenever you find your focus drifting to anything that is uncontrollable, you want to recognize this and quickly return your focus back to what you can control!

You can ALWAYS learn to control how YOU react to the uncontrollables!

**HOMEWORK**

Make a list of all of the uncontrollables that have bothered you in the past. Remember, to find them, just think about past disappointing/bad races and think back to what you were focusing on both before and during them. Put that list up in your room in a very visible place so that you will see it every time you come in your room. The purpose of this is to become exquisitely aware of all of your UCs so that should you find yourself focusing on them, you can easily and quickly bring your focus back! Both at practice and meets, try to be aware of when you are getting upset/nervous and what you’re focusing on at the time. Get in the habit, when this happens, of asking yourself the following question: “WHAT DO I HAVE CONTROL OF RIGHT NOW?”
TRACK #14

HANDLING PRESSURE – STEP 1:
LEARNING TO “READ” YOUR NERVOUSNESS

KEY POINTS

The secret to swimming fast when it counts the most is you have to be loose and calm. Simply telling yourself to “calm down!”, “Don’t be nervous!” or “Relax” will NOT help you calm down!

Your pre-race nervousness is NOT the enemy! You have to be a little nervous and excited to swim your best!

Precompetitive

Stress & Performance

Optimal

Awful

Not enough nervous
(under-aroused)
“wake me when this is over... zzz...”

Peak Performance

Good nervous

Bad nervous
(over-stressed)
the land of “choke”

Arousal

(nervousness - anxiety)

Low

High
Good nervous is when you are excited for the race, looking forward to it, having fun, experiencing butterflies, etc.

As you get more nervous before the start of a race, your performance level increases, as you continue to add stress and nerves, your performance reaches a peak.

As you continue to add nervousness, your racing performance starts to go down the tubes!

Bad nervous is when you are over-amped, scared, worried about the outcome, dreading the event and NOT having fun!

Not Enough nervous is when you truly don’t care, are bored, over confident or would rather be doing something else.

You can NEVER swim fast when you’re in BAD nervous.

You can ONLY swim to your potential when you are in GOOD nervousness.

Swimmers who are in NOT ENOUGH nervous pre-race will swim flat and uninspired.

It is critical that you learn to “READ” your level of pre-race nervousness. Awareness of this will enable you to make critical corrections before you swim.

You “read” your personal level of nervousness three different ways: In your BODY with how you FEEL; In your MIND with what you THINK about and FOCUS on; BEHAVIORALLY with how you ACT pre-race.

**HOMEWORK**

READING GOOD NERVOUS: Review 2-3 additional great races and try to figure out what the Physical, Mental and Behavioral signs of Good nervous were before each of these events. Jot down your answers. For example, How did you feel physically before the race? Were you excited? Did you have butterflies in your stomach? What did your arms and legs feel like? What were you thinking
about and focusing on before the event? Were you thinking about the race, focusing on what you had to do to swim fast, talking with friends about non-swimming related stuff? How did you Act pre-race? Did you jump around? Laugh and joke with friends? Sit quietly and listen to music?

READING BAD NERVOUS: Do the very same thing for 2-3 additional bad swims to try to discover the Physical, Mental and Behavioral signs of Bad nervous. When you’re done, again jot down your answers.

COMPARE & CONTRAST: Next, examine the difference between your signs of GOOD and BAD nervous. Remember, these signs will then serve as pre-race indicators to you of what level of nervousness you’re in and whether you need to take concrete steps to change your physiological arousal level by using arousal control techniques.

TRACK #15

HANDLING PRESSURE – STEP 2:
GETTING UP AND CALMING DOWN TECHNIQUES

HOMEWORK

Practice “visiting” your Resource Room either on your own or with the help of Track 15 every night before you go to bed for 10-15 minutes. Regular practice of this technique before bed, when you are relatively calm and relaxed will help you integrate this technique into your mental toughness toolbox. That way, when you’re under pressure, the technique will work well for you!

If you find yourself swimming poorly because you are in NOT ENOUGH NERVOUS try the following strategies, (but ONLY if you’re not nervous enough!)
1. Change the kind of music you are listening to. Make it much more upbeat and louder.

2. Physically get yourself UP! Start moving around. Do NOT sit or lie around if you’re in Not Enough Nervous. Jump around, get your heart rate up, do a harder warm-up!

3. Change your self-talk and focus on the importance of the event. Think about what’s at stake, the time you want to get or who you want to beat. Create more of a sense of inner urgency with the way that you “talk” to yourself!

4. Change your goals for the race. Make your goals more challenging. If winning an event is a no-brainer, then challenge yourself with making more difficult splits or getting a certain time or lapping the opposition.

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**TRACK #16**

**HANDLING PRESSURE – STEP 3:**

**CALMING DOWN AND GETTING BACK IN CONTROL TECHNIQUES**

**KEY POINTS**

Whenever doing any relaxation techniques, allow your thoughts to come and go....when they pop up, simply notice them and quickly return your focus to your breathing or whatever you need to be focusing on to accomplish the relaxation.

Learning to control your breathing under stress is the fastest way to physiologically calm yourself down.
The secret to developing any relaxation technique that will consistently work for you is practice, practice and more practice. Be sure that you practice and learn these skills in a non-pressured environment!

**ADDITIONAL RELAXATION EXERCISES:**

*BREATH BY THREE:* Sit or lie comfortably, close your eyes and shift your focus of concentration to your breathing. Inhale to a comfortable count of THREE... Pause to a comfortable count of THREE... and then Exhale to a comfortable count of THREE. Be sure that your count is relaxed and doesn’t strain your breath in any way. Also, do not be concerned here about filling up your diaphragm completely. All you want to do is inhale to that three count. Continue to repeat this inhale to three, pause to three, exhale to three and pause to three sequence for 5 to 8 minutes.

*BREATHING MEDITATION:* Sit or lie comfortably, close your eyes and shift your entire focus of concentration to your breath. You will keep your breathing completely relaxed and even for this exercise and all you want to focus on is the feel of your breath coming in and the feel of your breath going out. Regardless of how shallow or deep your breath is, this will be your target, the feel of the inhalation and exhalation. When distracting thoughts pop up, simply notice the distraction and quickly return your focus back to the NORMAL breath. Allow 5-8 minutes per time to practice this technique.

**HOMEWORK**

Try each relaxation technique mentioned on this track and in the study guide daily for at least one week. After that you will have decided that you like one or two more than the others. Once you’ve found one or two relaxation techniques that work for you, you then want to spend regular practice time working on them so that they become effortless and automatic for you! PRACTICE IS THE KEY!!
TRACK #17

STAYING CALM THE NIGHT BEFORE THAT BIG MEET

KEY POINTS

Understand that even if you have trouble sleeping the night before that big race, you can still have the swim of your life. A lot of swimmers completely freak out the night before because they have trouble sleeping and continue to tell themselves things like, “Oh My GOD! If I don’t sleep I won’t be able to swim well tomorrow. I HAVE TO get to sleep!!!” Not only will this wire you for sound and make you even more awake and anxious, but it will completely tire you out! The key issue here is that you stay calm and relaxed the night before. Even if your mind is active, you can still swim fast the next day as long as you keep your body loose and relaxed through the night. This exercise and some of the others in this program will help you do just that!

HOMEWORK

Practice this “night before” relaxation exercise every night for 10-20 minutes before bed. You will find that with sufficient practice, you will be able to streamline the relaxation so that soon, you can relax every part of your body just by focusing on it and without having to tighten and release the muscles.
TRACK #18

HANDLING LAST MINUTE NEGATIVE THINKING
AND SELF-DOUBTS

KEY POINTS

Last minute negative thinking and self-doubts are NORMAL!! Even the best athletes in the world will sometimes get flooded by last minute negativity and doubts.

DON’T ALWAYS BELIEVE WHAT YOU THINK!!!! Your thoughts and doubts do NOT predict the future. They are an ARTIFICIAL construction of reality!!! They are NOT real! They are nothing more than brain wave activity!!

Too much emphasis is placed on the belief that you need to go into your performances with positive thinking going on. In actuality, when you perform your best, there is very little thinking going on! Instead, the athlete is focusing on FEEL and the task at hand!

You handle last minute negative thoughts by calmly allowing them to be there and quickly refocusing your attention on what you are doing in the moment. Do NOT fight with your negative thoughts! Do NOT try to push them away. Do NOT try to make them positive!!!! The more you try NOT to think something, the more you think it! Instead, simply let your thoughts be and refocus on what you’re doing right before or during your race. Arguing with or engaging your negatives will only get you more into your THINKING, Front Brain and you can NEVER swim well when you’re in your Front Brain. You can only swim like a champion when you are focusing on FEEL, NOT THINKING!!

When negative thoughts hit you before your event, try to respond to them non-chalantly (i.e., “whatever!”) with HUMOR. For example, “Thanks for sharing!” or “Hey thanks, That was really helpful...You know, I’m kind of busy right now, but let’s chat after my race!”
Try naming your negative thoughts after some “lovable idiot” character out of a sitcom or after someone you know who means well but who isn’t really bright when it comes to your sport. When you hear negative thoughts and doubts popping up in your mind, imagine that they’re coming from this trying-to-be-helpful, but terribly misguided individual!

**HOMEWORK**

Practice, in practice on a daily basis allowing your negative thoughts to be there without engaging them and instead, immediately shifting your focus to FEEL! So if you’re stretching pre-workout and you get some doubts in your head, refocus your concentration on the feel of your stretch and on breathing into the muscle group that you are currently stretching! If the thoughts pop up during a set, then immediately shift your focus to the FEEL of your stroke, your breathing pattern, how much water you’re pulling, your pace, feeling long and smooth, or anything else like that!
KEY POINTS

Learning to handle your failures and disappointments is the one critical element that will help you reach your dreams. It’s ULTIMATELY more important than natural talent, having tremendous coaching opportunities, or being blessed with the perfect body for your sport!

The only way that you can grow and improve as an athlete and as a person is by making mistakes and failing. Why? Because every time that you come up short, you are provided with valuable information about what you did that didn’t work and therefore what you need to do differently next time to have a better outcome.

A baby learning to walk is the perfect metaphor of the value and importance of failing your way to success. Babies learn to walk by falling ENOUGH times. Each time a baby falls it’s body is gaining valuable learnings about balance, timing, coordination, etc. Without falling, the baby could never master this basic skill!

Failing, losing, falling into a slump, hitting a plateau are NOT the REAL problem for you! The REAL problem is how you handle these frustrations and disappointments. The real problem is how you REACT to them!

When you “fall down”, you want to SHAKE IT OFF AND STEP UP!!

The road to your success is ALWAYS littered with failures, setbacks, disappointments, injuries, illness, handicaps, slumps, times of great doubt and low confidence. Expect that they will be there. Every time that you have a setback, you are actually getting closer to your dreams rather than further away from them!
Get to know the feelings of failure: FRUSTRATION, CONFUSION, HOPELESSNESS, ANGER, DEPRESSION, SELF-DOUBTS, LOW CONFIDENCE, SADNESS, etc. These feelings actually point you in the right direction. When you begin to experience them, they tell you that you are going in the RIGHT direction!

FAILURE IS FEEDBACK AND FEEDBACK IS THE BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS!!
HOMEWORK

1. Spend some time researching the histories of one or more athletes that you know, have read about or would like to learn more about and what failures and adversities they experienced in their lives and how they handled them. This is an important assignment! Most athletes look at the really great ones and have no clue about what hardships these individuals had to overcome to get to the high level that they are right now!

2. Think of times in your life where you had major disappointments or failures, (either in or out of the sport). Explore what improvements and positives came about after that failure and what you learned from the setback that made you much better.

TRACK #20

SEEING YOUR WAY TO PEAK PERFORMANCE

KEY POINTS

IMAGERY/MENTAL REHEARSAL GUIDELINES:

1. Your imagery sessions should ALWAYS be started with a brief period of relaxation. The relaxation makes your images more vivid and lifelike and therefore much more effective. Trying to do mental rehearsal when you’re anxious will NOT work.

2. Try to make your imagery as vivid and life-like as possible. That is, you want to SEE, HEAR, FEEL and even SMELL what you would if you were actually there. Remember, visualization is NOT just about seeing pictures! It’s about recreating experience in ALL of the senses! The more
senses you use, i.e. the more vivid your images, the more effective your practice sessions will be!

3. There are always two different perspectives you can have for your mental practice: You can be IN the action and see, hear and feel what you would as if you were actually in the action or you can be OUTSIDE the action and see yourself as if you were a spectator. The most powerful imagery involves trying to FEEL what you would in the race from INSIDE the action, even if visually your are watching yourself from the OUTSIDE! The combination of the two is just fine!

4. Try to have a specific imagery goal for each of your practice sessions. So if you tend to get too nervous pre-race at your big meets, mentally practice staying calm right before and during your swims. If you tend to tighten up and die at certain points in the race, mentally practice staying long and loose and powerful through those same points. If seeing certain opponents tends to psych you out, mentally practice staying calm, composed and focused with them in the next lane!

5. Have a beginning, middle and end for each of your mental rehearsal sessions. For example, if you’re preparing for an upcoming meet, start with pre-meet imagery of getting dressed, warming up, stretching, getting behind the blocks. Then go to the start and early part of your swim. Have a scene from the middle of the race and then end with imagery of the last 25, finishing strong, touching, looking up at your time, celebrating, etc. If you’re events are shorter, up until and even including a 200 or more, then you can do imagery that involves the entire race. If you’re a distance swimmer, then you want to be sure to take pieces from each part of the race and NOT the entire race.

6. I say this because the most effective imagery sessions are relatively short, 10-15 minutes or so including the few minutes for relaxation. Often times when swimmers go longer in their mental rehearsal, they tend to get bored and lose focus. If you’re a distance swimmer and you’re able to concentrate the entire time of your race, then go for it! Otherwise, take the important pieces from the beginning, middle and end of the race!

7. Be patient with yourself. Learning how to use imagery effectively takes consistent practice. In the beginning you may not be able to see, feel or hear
anything. Not to worry! Just keep practicing and sooner or later you’ll start getting that experience working for you! Understand that you will also learn to better control your mental rehearsal images with practice. Sometimes, in the beginning, an athlete tries to have positive imagery only to find that their imagery is negative. Consistent practice will help you learn to have more positive, performance enhancing images!

8. The timing of when you use imagery and when you stop using it pre-race are critical and very much of an individual thing. For example, a lot of swimmers can not use imagery the day of their meet because it makes them too nervous. Some swimmers can use imagery right up until an hour before their start, but if they try to use it any closer to race time than that, they get too nervous. Still other swimmers find that they have to stop their mental practice a day or two before the race. Experiment to find that just right time period for you.

**HOMEWORK**

1. Spend 10-15 minutes every night or every other night mentally practicing for an upcoming race using the exercise on the CDs as a guide.

2. **DEVELOPING A PEAK PERFORMANCE CUE - REPLAYING A PAST 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.

**TRACK #21**

SWIMMING FAST WHEN IT COUNTS THE MOST:

USING A CHAMPIONSHIP RACE PLAN

**KEY POINTS**

Far too many swimmers go into their big meets and races carrying the wrong goals. 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. 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!!!!!

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.

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. Go to tracks 14 – 17 for specific calming strategies.
2. **STAY IN THE NOW:** One of the things that generates out of control nerves at the 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 length at a time and each length, 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:** 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 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: 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 engaging the running dialogue in your head when you race. Instead, redirect 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!!
TRACK #22

CONCLUSION:

BUSTING THROUGH PERSISTENT PERFORMANCE BLOCKS

KEY POINTS

Performance problems that don’t respond to conscious mental toughness techniques that help you relax, concentrate, stay positive, manage last minute doubts, etc. are unconsciously driven by the accumulation of past traumatic (upsetting physical or emotional) events.

Past upsetting experiences leave us feeling unsafe inside and sends our nervous system into the “red zone,” prepared for this danger and automatically triggering our instinctive, self-protective responses.

The most powerful reflex in the human body is the survival reflex and will easily trump trained performance reflexes.

When the elf-protective responses of fight/flight are blocked or not available, athletes automatically click into the freeze or immobility response.

Many repetitive performance problems which don’t respond to conscious mental toughness strategies are a result of the athlete getting stuck in freeze!

Freeze feels like: you can’t get your body to do what it knows how to do; you’re stuck; slowed down; can’t feel things; or blank out and forget what you’re doing!

Unless you work on lowering your nervous system’s “red zone” response, you can’t get yourself unstuck!

The language of the nervous system is FELT SENSE or what you notice feeling inside.
When you are activated (nervous, frustrated, angry, etc.) you want to train yourself to follow the felt sense of the activation and it will naturally release because WHAT GOES UP, MUST COME DOWN!

When you are activated and you follow the thinking and images, your level of activation will spiral out of control!

HOMEWORK

Do the mindfulness exercise for 15 minutes a day where you track or follow your experience, letting thoughts, images and emotions be, and returning to what you can notice in your body. This exercise will train you to STAY IN THE NOW, FOCUS ON YOU AND THE FEEL IN YOUR BODY, and, critically important, HELP YOU HANDLE NEGATIVE THINKING AND DOUBTS!!
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