Swimming in Focus

Swan Hills Swimming Club

Swimming fast is based on four key performance elements:

- **PHYSICAL** – fitness, speed, endurance, strength, power etc
- **TECHNICAL** – technique, skills, dives, starts, turns and finishes
- **TACTICAL** – pacing, strategies, racing skills
- **MENTAL** – relaxation, self belief, attitude, focus etc.

Of these four factors, the mental side has the potential to make the biggest impact on overall performance because it has significant influence on the effectiveness of the other three!

Even physical training needs a significant mental component to be effective.

Imagine two swimmers are working on their speed development.

One swimmer stands lazily on the blocks, yawning and not really interested.

The other, stands relaxed but thinking about “exploding” off the blocks and controlling their breathing. They are thinking about making sure their streamline position will be long and strong and tight. They are imagining how they will start accelerating their feet to top speed as they explode the surface and start their break out stroke.

Which one of these swimmers will get the most benefit from their speed development training????? If you said “the second swimmer”…………….good work.

The influence of your mind on the performance of your body can never be over emphasised.

What are the essential mental skills for swimming?

1. **Relaxation**

   Speed, endurance, technique……….it all depends on staying relaxed. Tension leads to tightness and tight muscles can’t move fast. Tight muscles fatigue quickly. Tight muscles resist movement. Loose, relaxed muscles embrace movement – that’s what they are made to do – to move.
The Mental Side of the Lane Cont’d...

2. Self belief

Anything is possible. The motivation gurus say this over and over and over in books, on television and on CDs. Why? Because it’s true. Anything is possible.

But it’s only possible if you believe it is.

Think of it in reverse.

Can you imagine Michael Phelps or Ian Thorpe standing on the blocks thinking:

“I can’t do this. There is no way I can win this race. I can’t break the world record. I am hopeless” …….of course not. No one can achieve anything thinking negatively.

Self belief comes from confidence.

Confidence comes from knowing.

Knowing you can comes from preparing to the best of your ability – every day, in every workout.

Preparing to the best of your ability means you can stand behind the blocks and say:

“I can do this. I work at this every day. I have not missed a workout for ten weeks. I have been working on my turns and I feel fast”.

Starting with “I can” leads to “I will” – the belief in yourself and the confidence it brings. Pretty soon “I will” becomes………..”I did”.

Try this simple six word MANTRA…..I can, I will, I did.

3. Resilience

One of the most common mental challenges swimmers face is to develop resilience – the ability to deal with difficult moments and disappointments and come out smiling.

Swimmers will aim to swim a PB time, miss it by one tenth of a second and then start “beating up on themselves”, i.e. “I am a loser”, “I am useless” etc etc and other similar negative talk.

This is pointless, destructive and does nothing more than make you feel even worse.

You are not one swim.
You are not a bad person because of a single performance.
You are a person who has trained hard, given their best and for some reason you did not achieve your goals on a particular day.

However, achieving or not achieving your goals is not a reflection on you as a person – it is a reflection on your preparation and it gives you clear direction on what you need to improve next time.

Use disappointments to drive you and to motivate you to work harder at training and the daily focus on attention to detail in your preparation.
The Mental Side of the Lane Cont’d...

4. Keeping positive

Negatives – negative thoughts, negative people, negative attitudes….do not achieve anything.

- You can win wearing a hand me down swim suit.
- You can win if your goggles come off at the dive.
- You can win if you swallow a mouth full of water with ten metres to go.
- You can win if you get to the pool late and have missed your warm up.

People can win and have won regardless of the things that go wrong. But……negative people can not win….even if everything goes right.

No matter how well you plan, something can and usually will go wrong. In fact, at big meets you can almost guarantee something will go wrong.

However YOU CHOOSE how something going wrong will affect your performance.

For example:

What happened? “I SLIPPED ON THE BLOCKS AT THE START”

Your choice:

NEGATIVE – I slipped on the blocks. I was so angry. My race was over. What a waste of time. All that training for nothing.

Your choice:

POSITIVE – I slipped on the blocks. If I work my legs a little harder I can make up the time over the first 25. I have to be patient. No hurry – then I will work it home harder and finish over the top of them.

Same scenario….different approach….different result.

Win or lose……you choose!

5. Toughness under pressure and fatigue

Swimming fast hurts. There is no getting around this.

However, knowing this and learning how to deal with it are two completely different things.

So what is being mentally tough? Every one talks about it – but what is it?

In swimming it is staying relaxed and concentrating on breathing, technique and skills under pressure and fatigue.

Why is this important?

Because whilst you can’t control pain – you can control your breathing and focus in your technique and skills.

The key to mental toughness is control! By focusing on your breathing, your technique and your skills you have more control over the moment – and when you are in control things like pain, fear and fatigue don’t seem quite so tough.
The Mental Side of the Lane Cont’d...

6. Focus on what matters

When you go to a meet and aim to swim fast there are lots of distractions. The trick is in finding a way of being able to focus on what matters and “screen” out all the other stuff.

Develop a critical focus question. A critical focus question is a neat way of helping you decide what is important and what is not.

Example:

Critical focus question: Will this help me swim fast today?

So if you are in warm up and someone says “Hey let’s go and get a soda” – you ask yourself your critical focus question – “Will this help me swim fast today”. If the answer is Yes – then do it. If the answer is No – avoid it – eliminate the distraction and go back to doing the things that matter.

All things are important in their own way but learn to focus on what matters.

Train your body – train your brain:

There are no limits to what you can achieve when they work together.