

Mind of a Champion: Building Your Own Mental Toughness Toolbox **By Alan Goldberg//Special Contributor**

On the first Tuesday of each month, Dr. Alan Goldberg will cover a different aspect of mental training and help you put more tools in your mental toughness tool box. Today he talks about the importance of training your mind as well as your body, and offers some tips for staying calm pre-race.

Why do you need to train your mind as well as your body?

Want to go as far as possible in this sport and turn those big swimming dreams of yours into an exciting reality? Then you need to get serious about developing and strengthening your mental muscles on a regular basis. Far too many swimmers only work on the physical side of their sport. They do what they need to in the pool and during dry-land, but then go to their big meets and hope they'll swim fast!

Unfortunately, when you leave the mental side of your racing to chance, you'll struggle with the following:

- Do you go faster in your off events than your best ones?
- Do you get too nervous and tight before you compete?
- Does your mind race out of control and rob you of your self-confidence?
- Do you regularly outwork and beat other swimmers in practice and then lose to them in meets?
- Can you swim really fast times at the end of a grueling practice and not even come close to those when you race?

While hard work and physical training is a critical **MUST DO** for you to become a champion, once you get to that all important meet, swimming to your potential depends almost entirely upon what's going on between your ears, what I call your "mental technique."

- Do you have the ability to focus on what's important and let go of everything else?
- Are you able to handle the last-minute negative thinking and self-doubts so common to big races?
- Can you stay calm and composed under pressure and are you able to avoid getting intimidated?
- Do you know how to quickly rebound from bad races and disappointments?

You can't just train physically and hope you'll swim fast when it counts the most!

In high-pressured situations, hope just won't cut it. Instead, you have to have the confidence and composure to **KNOW** that you'll do your best. The only way to gain this confidence is by having a complete mental toughness toolbox. You have to know how to handle all of the mental challenges that await you both in practice and at meets. Having mastery over the mental side of your sport is always what separates the best swimmers from all the rest.

STAYING CALM & COMPOSED UNDER PRESSURE THE FIRST MENTAL TOOL EVERY SERIOUS SWIMMER NEEDS IN THEIR TOOL BOX

The secret to swimming fast when it really counts is having the ability to calm yourself down the night before and day of your **BIG** meet whenever you get too nervous. If you get over-amped as a swimmer – either too excited or too nervous – then your muscles will tighten and your breathing will get faster and shallower. Tight muscles and faster, shallower breathing will shorten your stroke, kill your endurance and ensure you swim poorly.

What You Can Do to Stay Calm Pre-Race:

Slow & Deepen Your Breathing

- The first place nervousness hits you is in your breath, so deliberately focus on inhaling to a slow count of four, holding your breath in to that same count of four, then exhaling to a four count and then pausing to that count before you begin the process over again. Practice this breathing technique every night before bed. It's important that as you practice this, your breathing should stay relaxed and effortless.

Switch Your Concentration from Thinking to What You're Doing

- Your pre-race focus should be in your body on what you're **DOING**, and not in your head on what you are **THINKING**. Go through your pre-race ritual, and while you do, concentrate on the feeling of it, one step at

a time. As you stretch behind the blocks, be sure to feel the stretch in your body. If you get distracted by thoughts, quickly return your focus to the feeling of the stretch.

Allow Your Negative Thoughts to Come and Go

- Many swimmers under pressure are flooded by negative thoughts and try to combat this onslaught with “positive thinking” or telling themselves to “STOP” thinking. This strategy rarely works and tends to make you feel even more nervous. Understand that negative thinking is normal and won't affect the outcome of your race as long as you immediately let it go. Negative thinking is like quicksand. The more you listen to, fight with and/or follow it, the more you get sucked under. Practice letting your negative thoughts come and go by noticing them without judgment and then refocusing your attention on the music you may be listening to, your stretching or whatever else you're doing behind the blocks.

Stay In Your Own Lane

- Focusing on other swimmers will kill your confidence and make you uptight. Don't compare yourself. Don't allow yourself to focus on the size, speed or strength of your opponents. Stay away from “studying” the heat sheet. Your concentration needs to remain totally on YOU. Whenever you do notice that your focus drifts to others, quickly return it to YOU, as often as you need to. Keep in mind that this happens to all swimmers and what's important here is to immediately bring yourself back without getting frustrated with yourself.

Leave Your Goal Times at Home

- Your goals are a motivational tool for PRACTICE ONLY. Bringing them into races will only get you too uptight to swim fast. While it is normal to want a fast time, thinking about this pre-race represents a BIG mental mistake. To stay calm, you need to keep your concentration in the NOW, on what you are doing. This means that the instant you mentally jump ahead to the future and start to think, “I need to break 2:00 minutes” or “qualify for Nationals” you want to quickly return your attention to what you are physically doing in the moment.

Have FUN

- In order to stay calm pre-race, you have to let yourself enjoy the challenge of the moment, the butterflies, excitement and even the doubts. If you get too serious about the importance of this race, your nervousness will crowd out your enjoyment. If you've forgotten what it feels like to have fun at a meet, then you need to remember WHY YOU are swimming. Too many swimmers wait until they swim fast before they'll allow themselves to have fun. This is backwards! You have to have FUN first before you can then swim fast!

Handling pressure like a champion is NOT a chance thing! You need to work on it to get good at it. Use these tips to help yourself stay calm and composed when the heat of competition is turned up high!