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The World Swimming Coaches Association

NEWSLETTER

Pre-Competition Warm Up for Swimming

By Alex Clarke – VIS Physical Preparation, ASCTA

The pre-competition warm up is common in many different sports and has long been implemented based on theoretical and traditional beliefs. However, there are many physiological benefits which need to be considered. Firstly there is an increase in tissue and muscle temperature.

This is due to the friction that takes place within the sliding filaments during a muscle contraction combined with the dilation of intramuscular blood vessels.

This increase in temperature also results in nerve impulses traveling more rapidly, improving the rate of muscle contraction and reaction time (Hendrick, 1992). Additionally, increased blood flow and circulation to the working muscles allows for increased oxygen delivery to muscle cells.

Another benefit of warming up is that it prepares the muscles and joints to function through their full range of motion, which decreases stiffness and may assist with injury prevention. A properly conducted warm up also has psychological benefits as it may decrease stress and anxiety for a maximal effort.

Pre-competition static stretching has long been thought as a way of reducing muscle and tendon injury. However research to the contrary is evident, and has indicated that static stretching can produce a significant decrement (of approximately 5-30%) in strength and power production of the stretched muscle group (Young and Behm, 2002). This performance decrement may be due to neural inhibition and increased muscle-tendon compliance which leads to a reduced rate of force transmission from the muscle to the skeletal system (Young and Behm, 2002). Instead of static stretching, a warm up progressing from activities involving gross motor patterns to those involving swimming specific movements is recommended (Zentz, Fees, Mehdi & Decker, 1998).

Sample General Warm Up

- Body Blade in streamline position 2 x 40 sec
- Leg Swings 2 x 12 each side
- Stationary Hurdles 2 x 12 each side
- Bent Over Toe Touches 2 x 12 each side
- Bent Knee Lower Rotations 2 x 10
- Back Extensions 2 x 8

Sample Specific Warm Up

- Stretch Cords (Free) 2 x 40 sec
- Streamline Kick 2 x 20 sec
- MB Seated Rotational Throws 2 x 4 each side
- Start Simulations / Box Jumps 3 x 4
- SA MB Throw Downs 3 x 4

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ASCTA 13th Oceania Swimming Professionals Convention and Trade Expo
May 2-9, 2006 - Sofitel Hotel, Broadbeach (Gold Coast), Queensland AUSTRALIA

ASCA World Clinic
September 6-10, 2006 - Washington, DC USA

2nd WSCA-Europe Coaching Clinic
September 29 - October 1, 2006 - The Nottingham Belfry, Nottingham, England UK

General Warm Up

A general warm up is one in which the athlete performs non-specific sub maximal exercises to increase body temperature and joint range of motion required for swimming. General warm up activities may include leg and arm swings, skipping, stretch cords and band exercises. It is recommended these exercises include rest periods and last around 5-10 minutes (Thomas, 2000). It is important that warm up times are monitored, as too long a warm up will result in fatigue and too short a warm up may not elicit a beneficial physiological response. Warm ups should also be rehearsed during smaller competitions and be a reflection of normal pre-training routines. Introducing unfamiliar movements on the day of a major competition may result in a significant performance decrement.

Specific Warm Up

It is the immediate pre-race warm up that may have the greatest impact on performance; therefore, the optimal short duration, pre-race warm up should be identified (Mitchell and Huston, 1993). A specific warm up involves exercises or activities, which simulate swimming specific movements. These exercises often increase in intensity until efforts become greater than or equal to the intensity experienced in competition. The aim is to achieve or recruit the specific muscle fibers and neural pathways required to achieve optimal neuromuscular performance (Young and Behm, 2002). Exercises may include light stroke specific movements with bands of stretch cords and progress to something more explosive such as a single arm medicine ball throw down, which will mimic the freestyle pull-through phase. In addition, it is important to include exercises which will further activate the central nervous system, such as those where the athlete has to react to a stimulus like a voice command during a start simulation.

Set by the coaches, the pool warm up often follows the general and specific warm ups and is based on event discipline, distance and events already completed. However, the order of the last two categories is open to debate. Some coaches will want their athletes completing explosive dryland exercises prior to competing, where as others will want the final part of the warm up to take place in the pool performing stroke specific actions. Further to this, it is important to take into consideration time spent in the marshaling area and other pre-race routines and the impact this has on subsequent performance.

Individual factors are also important when considering a warm up program, with race distance being an important influence. For example, a 50m sprint freestyler will require a different warm up to that of an 800m swimmer. Intensity and duration of the warm up will also need to be adjusted to the individual athlete's training age, dryland / gym experience and training load. ♦

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2006 ASCTA 13th Oceania Swimming Professionals Convention and Trade Expo

Sofitel Hotel, Broadbeach (Gold Coast), Queensland AUSTRALIA

- May 2-6 Coaching Stream and Silver Licence Course
- May 6-7 Teaching Stream and Club Coaching Stream
- May 8-9 'Swim Australia' Conference for Swim Schools
- Other features or events: May 3rd – Swimmer with a Disability Course (full day)
- May 4th – Coaching Adult Swimmers (half-day stream)
- May 4th – ASCTA's Annual General Meeting
- May 6th – ASCTA Awards Dinner ('coach of the year' honours)

In addition we are planning to be involved with an 'Open Water' coaches clinic in conjunction with the FINA Oceania Championships, 7-12 July, in Cairns, Queensland AUSTRALIA. More information on this international coaches clinic will be forthcoming.

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British Swimming, Sports Psychology, and Olympic Medals: Is it all in the Mind?!?

David Fletcher

This article is the original script for a presentation given at the British Swimming National Team Accreditation Workshop, Birmingham, UK on the 9th January 2005. Please note that the actual presentation was shortened due to time constraints.

"The British Olympic swimming team came to the Games physically well prepared but mentally the bogeymen were all about us. We have a lot of work to do physically but mentally we have a very, very long way to go. I need a good psychologist" Bill Sweetenham, British Swimming's National Performance Director

Good afternoon everyone... and congratulations on being selected as British Swimming's coaching elite. I've been looking forward to joining you here today and it's a pleasure to be able to share some of my thoughts on swimming psychology.

Before I begin, I should acknowledge the inspiration behind the title of my presentation. It actually came to me after some bar-room banter with one of the coaches present here today. This individual happens to be very receptive to sport psych, but on this occasion he was trying to wind me up by saying that my chosen profession was, "all in the mind". Of course, it's a provocative double-entendre. Sport psychology *is* all in the mind; "psyche" being the Latin word for "mind". But his wry grin suggested that what he really meant was – well, how can I put it? – that it's just a load of rubbish all in the mind of psychologists! His tongue was firmly in cheek; but, let's be honest, psychology still has some way to go to convince the British swimming community of its benefits. I hope this presentation will contribute to achieving this.

I've thought hard over the festive season about what I could say to you all today. First of all, I'd like to say that I'm here to talk with you... and to you... but certainly not at you. There are already some coaches in the room who are very adept at preparing swimmers mentally for competition. In fact, I must admit that this could have been a rather intimidating task. Not the presentation part – that's not an issue. But this magnificent setting at the Belfry in Birmingham and the impressive track record of some of the coaches present. Nevertheless, I wouldn't have come if I wasn't very confident that I had something significant to say and meaningful to contribute. In truth, I must also admit that I entered into this engagement with some pre-conceived notions about British Swimming and the reputation of certain coaches. However, I also realised that, in all likelihood, some of *you* may be bringing with you some pre-conceived notions about *me*, some assumptions about what I do, opinions about academia and psychology, and whether I'd have any idea about what really goes on in the real world of elite swimming. So let's make it our common mission this afternoon to cast aside all our pre-conceived notions about each other. It's simple, but it's true: you can't judge a book by its cover. And what's more, let's

focus on our shared passion of helping British swimmers fulfil their potential and win Olympic medals.

"Psychologist" is such a label, perhaps even something of a cliché... For those of you who haven't worked with a sport psychologist, the word might conjure up images of the psychiatrist's couch, men in white coats, and psychoanalysis. Maybe you're thinking about certain "problem" athletes that you coach, obsessive behaviour and childhood experiences, or hypnosis, meditation and psych-up techniques. You may even be sitting there questioning the need for a "swim shrink" and why I've been invited today.

Well, I could tell you a lot about how I came to be here today. How my passion for swimming all started for me as I sat on my parent's living room floor watching Adrian Moorhouse power his way to victory at the 1988 Olympic Games. Or going to my first county championship and being mesmerised by the sheer poetry of Austin Shortman's freestyle technique. Or screaming at the TV as if it would somehow help Paul Palmer clinch his Olympic silver medal. I could even describe the exhilaration of racing against Mark Foster when he broke the 50m fly world record in the 1998 World Cup. Or two years later the sense of disappointment when the British swimming team returned empty handed from the Sydney Olympic Games. These are just some of the events that give you an insight in how I have personally come to be here today.

But what I really want to talk to you about is how sport psychology can make a difference in British Swimming... a *big* difference. First of all, let's take a look at what some well-respected coaches have said about the importance of psychology in World and Olympic level swimming. It seems appropriate to begin with our **National Performance Director, Bill Sweetenham: "A coach has to have an open mind and sound technical knowledge. But psychology is the hidden X factor. It's how you develop strong athletes"**. Moving on to arguably the most successful swimming coach in history (who sadly passed away a year ago this week), **James 'Doc' Counsilman: "Most swimmers at the elite level are very equal from a physiological standpoint, so the swimmer who has it together mentally in the big meets is going to outperform the other competitors"**. Despite these observations, it's only in the past decade or so that the top swimming nations have begun to incorporate systematic and structured psychological support into their training programmes.

Sport psychology is actually not that different to other areas of coaching science. No one would question that Alexander

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Popov is biomechanically more efficient than your average club swimmer, or that Inge De Bruijn is physiologically stronger than when she was younger. Even the layperson can easily see that Olympic swimmers have done – and are indeed doing – something different than the rest of us. Hence, we logically conclude that to improve swimming performance we need to understand and work on aspects of stroke technique and physical fitness. But when it comes to the psychological characteristics of elite performance, we often make a clanging exception. Although most would acknowledge that Gary Hall Jr. and Pieter van den Hoogenband must be mentally tough to do what it took to win their Olympic titles, how many approach psychological preparation with the same care and attention as technical and fitness aspects? It seems to me that, as simple it may sound, one of the reasons is because we can't easily see the end result. It's not difficult to see and admire the fluency of Popov's stroke or the power of De Bruijn's physique but, unfortunately, we can't directly see into the minds of Hall Jr. and van den Hoogenband. This makes life a bit more difficult because, (a) it's often not that obvious that Olympic medallists think and behave in different ways to their peers, and (b) it's natural to be more inclined to work on other factors which are more easily observable and, therefore, appear somehow more credible.

There are some people who feel uncomfortable with the idea that psychologists evaluate weaknesses or problems in mental functioning. But, again, this type of approach is adopted throughout coaching science with technical and fitness flaws being continually monitored. And besides, this is only part of a psychologist's work, most of which is proactive rather than reactive anyway. In just the same way that swimmers who work with a coach to get fitter don't have to be physically unhealthy, athletes who work with a psychologist to develop useful skills are not necessarily mentally unstable. In fact, the majority are often well-adjusted and -balanced individuals who are simply seeking to enhance their performance and gain the competitive edge. Here's what **Stephen Parry, Olympic bronze medallist**, said after winning his medal: **"In sport one thing I've learned is that it's all about your mental state"**. For **Mark Tewkesbury, Olympic champion**, it came down to this: **"As you sit in the ready room alone with your thoughts before your race, whether that be the local swim meet or before your Olympic event, let them be the right ones!"** All too often a swimmer and coach put in years – maybe even decades – of hard work only for "Olympic phobia" to strike and ensure that performances fail to reach their potential.

So, sport psychology is basically about leaving no stone unturned and completing all aspects of preparation: the technical, the physical, the nutritional, the tactical, and the mental. This is just what **British Swimming** is getting at in their policy document, **A Vision of Swimming: The Next Ten Years: "We remain focused on the achievement of success at Olympic and Paralympic level by providing a comprehensive sport science and medicine programme and ensuring that those with the ability to succeed at the highest level will receive the support they need to win gold medals"**. To win World and Olympic titles in the 21st century swimmers must train their mind as thoroughly as they train their bodies. Indeed, the top swimming nations have been quick to catch onto this. For example, in 1992, Clark Perry was appointed the Sport Psychologist for the Australian National

Swimming Team and, in 1997, Suzanne Tuffey Riewald was appointed Director of Sport Psychology for USA Swimming. Their remit was to develop and manage psychological support, with a particular focus on what it takes to win medals at the elite level. Clark is probably best known for, but certainly not limited to, his team building and race preparation strategies, and Suzie for her work on how to motivate and develop youth swimmers. Here's what **Sarah Ryan, Olympic champion**, said about Clark's impact on her performance: **"I saw Clark today and he put a different spin on things. He helped settle me down and it worked. He's a gem"**.

So what are the qualities to look for in a swimming psychologist working at World and Olympic level? Here are some that I think are particularly important:

- Excellent educational and communication skills with coaches (and also able to listen to and learn from them...)
- A sound academic background in sport psychology (but not necessarily have a PhD in it...)
- Be able to inspire and encourage others (but not necessarily be a "motivational speaker"...))
- A total commitment and dedication to competitive swimming (but still be able to draw on and use techniques from other sports and domains...)
- Knowledge of the culture and language of elite swimming (and have at least some experience of coaching and/or swimming...)
- Be able to integrate into the team and blend into the background (and not prove a distraction or create more problems than they solve...)
- Appreciate the organisational issues and politics of swimming (but not necessarily be actively involved in them...)
- Be practical, innovative, and able to "think outside the box" (but also to "know what's in the box"...))

Let's consider for a minute "what's in the box"... Since 1999, a great deal of my consultancy work with elite swimmers and coaches has been driven by the model shown in Figure 1. The Optimum Swimming Performance Model has been particularly helpful in facilitating high performance coaches' understanding of elite swimming psychology. It has a strong intuitive appeal but is based on sound theory and research findings. The basic premise being that it's critical to know the demands of the Olympic environment in order to appreciate the resources or mental toughness required by a swimmer. The world of elite sport imposes many environmental demands upon swimmers. These demands are only met when the swimmer has the personal resources to manage and cope with them. The interface between demands and resources will cause the swimmer to respond in different ways to training and competition. If the swimmer has the resources to deal with the demands, then their technical, physical, nutritional and tactical skills will be executed more effectively. If the swimmer lacks the resources then their responses will cause negative short and long term effects on performance. Ultimately, it is this psychological process that will determine how successful British swimmers are in winning Olympic medals.

So what are the environmental demands encountered by elite swimmers and when do these demands occur? To identify the demands, one must first analyse the nature and characteristics of the sport. It is particularly important to focus on lifestyle, training, pre-competition, during competition, and post-competition settings. Unfortunately, time constraints preclude a detailed sport analysis of competitive

swimming, but perhaps **Bill Sweetenham** summarised the demands of the Olympic environment best:

"The facts are: the biggest event in the world is an unrelenting, unforgiving environment where any flaws in your preparation are exposed in the spotlight of the Olympic flame like never in any other event. If you haven't prepared for that second day in the village, when all the doubts come pounding down around your head and throat, if you haven't been invincible in your preparation, if it hasn't been above what you're prepared to do in the Olympic race, failure is guaranteed. It's not like any other event. It is not a stepping-stone. It is the end of the line. It is the only competition in the world. Everything else is a pretender. There is no other area where moral, physical or mental weakness will be exposed like they are in the Olympic environment"

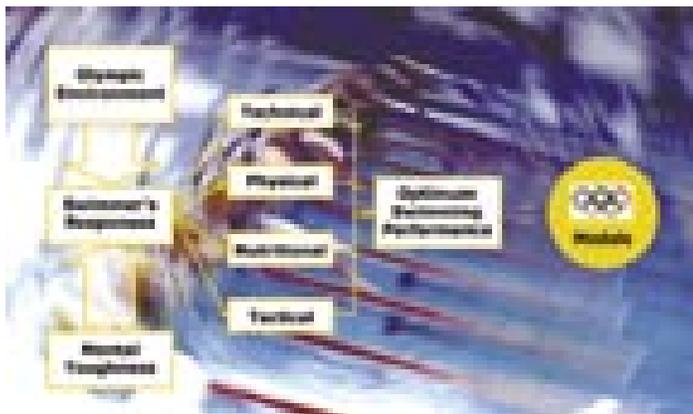


Figure 1. The Optimum Swimming Performance Model (Copyright © 1999 by David Fletcher).

Turning to the personal resources, these are more often collectively referred to as "mental toughness". Mental toughness can be thought of as a swimmer's propensity to manage the environmental demands, ranging from an absolute resilience to extreme vulnerability. It is made up of many different psychological traits, characteristics and skills, but some of the most commonly mentioned by elite swimmers include: relaxation, imagery, goal-setting and self-talk. Here's what some Olympic medallists have said about the importance of these mental skills:

"The greatest secret of swimming fast is relaxation at top speed" Peter John "Johnny" Weissmuller, Olympic champion

"My visualisation has been refined more and more as the years go on. That is what really got me the world record and Olympic medals. I see myself swimming the race before the race really happens, and I try to be on the splits. I concentrate on attaining the splits I have set out to do. About 15 minutes before the race I always visualise the race in my mind and "see" how it will go. You are really swimming the race. You are visualising it from behind the block. In my mind, I go up and down the pool, rehearsing all parts of the race, visualising how I actually feel in the water" Alex Bauman, Olympic champion

"In 1972 Mark Spitz won seven gold medals, breaking seven world records. I was at home watching him

on my living room floor. And I said to myself at that time, "wouldn't it be nice to be able to win a gold medal, to be able to be a world champion in Olympic competition". So right then I had this dream of being an Olympic champion. But right about then it became a goal. That dream-to-goal transition is the biggest thing I learned prior to Olympic competition – how important it is to set a goal. Certainly, motivation is important. A lot of kids have motivation. "Gee, I'd love to be great...". My personal best time in the 100 back was 59.5. Roland Matthes, winning the same event for the second consecutive Olympics (1972), went 56.3. I extrapolated this, you know, three Olympic performances and I figured in 1976, 55.5 would have been the order of the day. That's what I figured I would have to do. So I'm four seconds off the shortest backstroke event on the Olympic program. It's the equivalent of dropping four seconds in the 440 yard dash. It's a substantial chunk. But because it's a goal, now I can decisively figure out how I can attack that. I have four years to do it in. I'm watching TV in 1972. I've got four years to train. So it's only one second a year. That's still a substantial chunk. Swimmers train ten or eleven months a year so it's about a tenth of a second a month, giving time off for missed workouts. And you figure we train six days a week so it's only about 1/300th of a second a day. We train from six to eight in the morning and four to six at night so it's really only about 1/1200th of a second every hour. Do you know how short a 1200th of a second is? Look at my hand and blink when I snap, would you please? Okay, from the time when your eyelids started to close to the time they touched, five 1200th of a second elapsed. For me to stand on the pool deck and say, "during the next 60 minutes I'm going to improve that much," that's a believable dream. I can believe in myself. I can't believe that I'm going to drop four seconds by the next Olympics. But I can believe I can get that much faster. Couldn't you? Sure. So all of a sudden I'm moving" John Naber, Olympic champion

"You have to believe that it's going to happen. You can't doubt your abilities by saying, "Oh, I'm going to wake up tomorrow and I'm going to feel totally bad, since I felt bad today and yesterday". You can't go about it like that. You have to say, "Okay, tomorrow I'm going to feel good. I didn't feel good today. That's that. We will see what happens tomorrow" Janel Jorgensen, Olympic silver medallist

Swimmers react to the elite sport environment with a wide range of psychological, physiological and behavioural responses. How they respond will determine whether they find themselves in a positive or negative psychological state. This state will affect technical, physical, nutritional and tactical preparedness for competition. This will in turn have a positive or negative effect on performance. Consider, for example, the importance of motivation, self-confidence and coping with adversity in the following quotes:

"The biggest confidence I have is in my will power, my ability to race. I haven't met anybody who wants to race more than I do. One competitor and team-mate of mine, one the best compliments he ever gave me was during this one workout. I was just dead tired

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and he knew it, so he was trying to take advantage of it and we just killed each other. It was at the end of the sets and we were racing. He gets done and he can't believe I'm doing this, and he said, "man, you are the best damn competitor I've ever seen" Mike Barrowman, Olympic champion

"I have come to realise talent and a high work ethic will get you only so far. There are other people with a similar amount of talent who probably train just as hard producing comparable training times. Yet when I race them I know now I can beat them. It comes back to self-belief. The best way to gain self-belief is to be the best prepared that you possibly can, which will give you more confidence" Susie O'Neil, Olympic champion.

"I coped with stress by playing cards, getting totally involved in a book, or retreating to a quiet place on my own" Shane Gould, Olympic champion

"It's not the end of the world. My dog will still lick my face whether I win or lose" Matt Biondi, Olympic champion

So what does all this mean for swimming coaches working at the elite level? Well, put simply, they must ensure that their swimmers have the resources of mental toughness to meet the demands of the Olympic environment. Here's what **Bill Sweetenham** was reported as saying after the Athens Olympic Games: **"National Performance Director Bill Sweetenham claimed Britain's swimmers had 'Olympic phobia' after they ended the Games with just two medals. But while Sweetenham insisted the swimmers were as well prepared as possible, he conceded they had failed to cope with the mental demands of an Olympics. "The team was physically as well prepared as any other team, but we had Olympic phobia constantly present in our preparations", said the Australian"**. Let's use some simple examples to illustrate. The environmental demands of an Olympic race mean that most swimmers prefer to wear goggles when competing. To do so, they must have the mental skill to remember to take a pair of goggles to the starting block. No problems so far I hope... But if the goggle strap snaps as they're putting them on, this imposes yet further demands the swimmer. Does this individual have the presence of mind to carry a spare pair of goggles to the race? If not, their lack of even the simplest psychological skills will undo years of hard work. Turning to another example, everyone knows about the rigorous physical demands of elite swimming and the importance of correct nutrition and hydration. Consequently, many coaches rightly encourage their swimmers to consume carbohydrate and electrolyte drinks to supplement their diets. But consider the swimmer who does not have the necessary skills in terms of consistently putting aside the time to make up the drinks, choosing a flavour that they like, carrying the drink with them, and remembering to actually consume the drink. These are all the simplest of mental skills but without just one of them swimmers will fall dramatically short in terms of their nutritional preparation. One of the most demanding situations that Olympic swimmers face is the "ready room". In order to prepare swimmers for this experience British Swimming must ensure that all national level meets employ the use of a ready room. This room should be as threatening as possible with intimidating marshals, video

cameras (real or dummy), cramped conditions, seating arranged so that swimmers have to face each other, and a loud speaker projecting the announcer's voice. The demands imposed on the swimmers should be as specific as possible to those encountered in World and Olympic competition. But, arguably more importantly, coaches and swimmers need to have, or acquire, the resources to manage and cope with these demands. Personally, I see it a bit like a "good cop/bad cop routine" with performance directors and administrators creating a highly demanding environment, and coaches and psychologists helping swimmers develop the necessary psychological skills to excel in it.

This leads me on to "what's outside the box"... For convenience, I've split this into six main areas that I feel British Swimming could benefit from: *Elite Coaching Psychology*; *Smart Track Psych*; *Organisational Issues and Politics*; *Mental Toughness Training Programmes*; *Butterflies Flying in Formation*; and *Anchor and Trigger Techniques*.

Elite Coaching Psychology. Arguably one of the biggest areas for improvement in British Swimming is elite coach education and development. I believe the psychologist should generally seek to work through coaches first and directly with the swimmers second. The reason for this is because it empowers coaches while maintaining and enhancing their special bond with the swimmers. There currently exists an urgent need in Britain to implement interactive workshops in specialist high performance and coach education centres. These sessions should be highly practical involving case study and problem solving discussions, combined with contingency planning and "what if?" scenarios. The psychologist should not only facilitate these sessions with his or her knowledge of human behaviour, but also draw upon other skills from areas such as information technology, speed reading, memory retention, voice projection, visual scanning, emotional intelligence, lifestyle management, reflective practice, assertiveness and communication, and intuitive and critical thinking. To maximise effectiveness, the consultant should also attempt to adapt knowledge gleaned from business managers, performing artists, public speakers, and emergency and armed service personnel. In addition, a bibliographic database needs to be compiled listing every swimming psychology-related publication, ranging from text books to biographical accounts, and research papers to magazine articles. Such a resource would allow the coach to further develop his or her understanding at their own pace and in areas identified as most urgent. Also, consider the findings of scientific research papers such as: "Psychological Characteristics and Their Development in Olympic Champions", "What Is This Thing Called Mental Toughness? An Investigation of Elite Sport Performers", and "Factors Affecting British Swimmers' Performances at the 2004 Olympic Games". Interactive workshops can help ensure that high performance coaches understand the practical value of this type of work.

Some of the best psychological support work is done during informal conversations that occur at camps and competitions. "Coffee room seminars" have the advantage of providing a greater insight into coaches' backgrounds, philosophies, and outlooks and how they interact with their swimmers. It is in this setting that a psychologist can individualise and tailor their advice to meet the coach's specific needs. It may be, for example, that issues arise in the course of a discussion that the coach does not have the time or expertise to address in detail. In this instance,

the psychologist could spend time designing a specific intervention strategy and compiling a brief information pack from the database. Another part of his or her work could involve travelling to home programmes to assist in regional-level mental preparation, team building, maintaining communications lines, and enhancing social support. Indeed, while Britain's climate puts the nation at a disadvantage compared to the likes of America and Australia, our geographical size is one area which we can exploit by using travelling specialists. Finally, a psychologist can also act as a non-threatening soundboard for a coach, particularly if he or she has an understanding of the biomechanical and physiological aspects of swimming. The consultant can also teach other support staff (e.g., physiologists, masseurs, physiotherapists) the basics of performance psychology to help them more effectively communicate with swimmers. Counselling techniques and rational emotive therapy are likely to be useful skills for personnel working in these positions.

Smart Track Psych. If British Swimming is to improve its Olympic medal tally, it is critical that we identify and educate talent during their most formative years. In order to compete with the likes of football and David Beckham, we need to seriously re-evaluate how we are "selling the dream" to swimmers just starting out in the sport. We can learn a great deal from marketing, advertising, public relations, film production, and trend creation specialists to help attract and retain swimmers. Club noticeboards and newsletters need to clearly spell out the benefits of swimming to parents and keep the positive aspects of our sport in the forefront of swimmers' minds. Developmental clubs should also consider investing in a mini library of swimming-related books, covering basic introductions to swimming psychology for children and parents, and the biographies and autobiographies of elite swimmers. Collectively, these strategies will allow youth swimmers to model the actions and behaviours of Olympic medallists, thus fast tracking them in many areas of psychological development. It's also worth mentioning that "Doc" Counsilman was well-known for his use of ritual, ceremony and tradition to foster devotion and team spirit among his training group. The psychological power of cognitive-behavioural indoctrination is clearly evident in its application by extreme pious groups. In our sport, the healthy and acceptable application of that same power can be harnessed by informed coaches to help keep their swimmers focused on competitive goals.

The bulk of psychological support for youth swimmers should focus on those with the potential to compete for places at the next Olympic Games. While it is clearly important to provide support at senior camps and competitions, we cannot afford to focus our entire attention on last minute mental preparation. Such an approach is tantamount to leaving all the water-based training sessions to the taper period, and essentially leaves the psychologist "fire-fighting" by trying to resolve deep-seated issues. Indeed, the long-term periodisation of mental training remains arguably the biggest priority for British youth swimming. Planning should complement other aspects of the programme, with quadrennial, annual and seasonal cycles being systematically implemented. The real strength of these techniques lies in a multidisciplinary approach, where biomechanists and physiologists assist in identifying the key areas that need to be worked on. To illustrate, during the early stages of the season I tend to tailor imagery to helping improve technical aspects of the sport. For example, swish techniques involve

the swimmer sitting in front of two large television screens and watching footage of him or herself swimming on one of the screens. Then, on the other screen, the swimmer watches footage of an appropriate role model demonstrating the desired technical outcome. The performer then tries to watch both videos at the same time. This process is then repeated but rather than watching the screens, the swimmer uses imagery to mentally rehearse, firstly, his or her stroke and, secondly, the role model's technique. Finally, the two images are "swished" in the mind with the aim of the swimmer eventually having a clear image of the desired stroke technique. As the season progresses, the emphasis tends to shift to using video footage of the competition venue to help practice more race specific techniques. Swimmers proficient in imagery skills are encouraged to feel the different sensations of movement patterns and racing strategies, and then combine this with stroke counting and physically recording their splits for each "race". As the competitive event approaches, the imagery techniques become more focused on the correct execution of key mental and technical stages of the race. Incidentally, just as a brief aside, in my experience individual medley swimmers appear to particularly benefit from these techniques, possibly because of the kinaesthetic and pacing benefits they get from mentally practicing changing strokes.

Coaches also need to pay careful attention to the type of goals their swimmers are setting. Swimmers who continually compare their performance to others and are only interested in winning races, are at an extremely high risk of motivational difficulties. Everything's fine if they keep beating the opposition but the moment they begin getting touched out problems occur. These swimmers should be encouraged to focus more on improving their own personal performance and gaining enjoyment from other aspects of the sport. This is not to say that being highly competitive is a bad thing – clearly, you won't win an Olympic gold medal if you don't want to beat people! – only that it's dangerous if that's all swimmers are focused on. When a swimmer demonstrates that they have a healthy balance between improving their performance and beating others, the coach should then encourage him or her to switch this focus depending on the situation. For example, Olympic medallists tend to think about their opponents to help motivate them get out of bed for early morning training, but prior to racing they focus their attention on the organisational, technical and tactical factors which they can control and will affect their performance. On a slightly different but related note, coaches should encourage youth swimmers to take responsibility for their success and failure. Interestingly, when elite swimmers don't perform as well as they hoped, they tend to put it down to poor pacing or feel for the water (things that fluctuate quite easily). However, when they perform well, they tend to attribute it to their superior ability and skill level (things that don't fluctuate as easily). It's thought that this bias is self-serving in that it helps elite swimmers protect their self-esteem and motivation to compete. If we are to foster these attributes and skills in youth swimmers, then coaches, parents and role models must carefully monitor the motivational climate that they create through their language and behaviour. Finally, for those wishing to gain a greater insight into the psychology of youth swimming they would be well-advised to consult material by leading swimming psychologists, Keith Bell and John Hogg. To help support clubs and coaches, British Swimming should incorporate systematic and long-term

continued on page 8 >>>

psychological services throughout its World Class Performance Plans and Swim 21 Schemes.

Organisational Issues and Politics. Clearly, a swimming psychologist needs a good awareness of the organisational issues and politics associated with elite sport. A major part of his or her role is to identify and reduce coaches' unwanted distractions so they can spend more productive time on the pool deck. Indeed, USA Swimming recently commissioned a number of research studies which showed that stress and burnout are significant issues facing swimming coaches and that psychologists can help prevent exhaustion and maintain coaching engagement. A psychologist can also advise performance directors and administrators on how and when to impose organisational demands on swimmers. An important consideration here is to ensure that such demands are imposed in a progressive and specific manner. There is no point in making the swimmers' environment as demanding as possible if, (a) these demands are not relevant or appropriate to World and Olympic competition, and (b) the coaches and swimmers are not taught to manage and cope with these demands. Another possible area of support is assisting in media training for both coaches and swimmers. Olympic medallists are generally very capable of handling the world's media and often display a rather deft appreciation of psychology during their interviews. They tend to stay focused on their agenda rather than being swayed into the hype that may surround them. This is often demonstrated by deflecting leading questions that, from a psychological perspective, may otherwise be a distraction and cause unwanted pressure. This is particularly evident when they are being interviewed about the reasons why they swim (i.e., achievement motivation) and how they cope with stress (i.e., anxiety management).

Mental Toughness Training Programmes. **Bill Sweetenham** has been reported as saying that enhancing the mental toughness of British swimmers is the most important factor in improving our nation's Olympic prospects:

"The tough-talking coach has made nine recommendations to help the British squad improve before the next Olympics in Beijing in 2008. The most important area for the team to work on is what Sweetenham calls "big meet psychology development". It was that lack of mental toughness which most hindered the British team in Athens. "This is the biggest area of improvement for British swimming. We need complete technical knowledge. It's not what you do, it's how you do it"

For elite swimmers, I envisage a mental toughness training programme specifically geared toward the period between a major meet trial and championship. This programme would be a shorter-term periodisation of advanced mental skills and tailored to address the specific needs of the swimmer. The programme would incorporate many different techniques, including aspects of hardiness training, pain tolerance techniques, meet simulation training, sport intelligence development, and confidence protection mechanisms. Hardiness training is employed to ensure that the swimmer is committed to the challenge of stepping up a performance level and "controlling the controllables" within their daily lives. Pain tolerance techniques involve the use of relaxation strategies, such as rhythmical mantras and breathing, to induce a trance-like state. This approach

has already been used with some success by psychologists and is actually a more civilized version of a natural survival technique. To elaborate, prey often fall into a cataleptic state when they are caught, but not killed, by a predator. It is not uncommon for wildebeest to keel over motionless with glazed eyes as a pride of lions proceed to devour it. The main reason they fall into this state is because theta brain rhythms dominate and the animal suffers less pain. Indeed, from a human perspective, it has long been recognised that Hindus, Fakirs, Yogis, and others can induce themselves into altered states of consciousness by using mesmeric techniques to eliminate pain and perform unusual physical feats.

Simulation training is employed to recreate as many aspects of the competitive environment as possible. This strategy normally takes two forms: (a) using time trials and race pace/lactate tolerance sets to simulate the competition demands and schedule, and (b) using imagery to mentally rehearse the actual meet and races. Here's what **Michael Phelps, Olympic champion**, had to say about such techniques:

"Well before the Olympic trials I was doing a lot of relaxing exercises and visualization. And I think that helped me to get a feel of what it was gonna be like when I got there. I knew that I had done everything that I could to get ready for the meet, both physically and mentally"

Developing sporting intelligence involves teaching swimmers the difference between what's important in their preparation for competition and what's not. A major part of this development is ensuring that swimmers know when to do key things and when to step away from the sport. Confidence protection mechanisms are used to help swimmers manage and cope with the demands of actually competing. Since we know that most of the world's best swimmers get anxious before they race, the focus here is on using their self-belief to combat and tackle these nerves. The emphasis is on reminding the swimmer about previous performance accomplishments they've had during both training and competition. Video footage, audio tapes, and training diary entries are all used here. This is further reinforced by teaching swimmers to adopt specific postures and breathing patterns that help create a confident mind-set. For example, standing up straight, pulling back the shoulders, breathing in fresh air, and looking directly forward. Speaking in a positive tone of voice and surrounding oneself with positive people are also important here.

Butterflies Flying in Formation. Before an important race, most swimmers' natural instinct is to perceive any mental worries or physical nerves as negative and detrimental to performance. Many coaches' immediate reaction to this is to advise them to "try not to worry about it" and "stay relaxed". However, rather than just relaxing, most Olympic medallists have learnt that anxiety can actually have a positive and beneficial effect on performance. **Olympic basketball coach, Jack Donohoe**, perhaps summed it up best when he said: **"It's not a case of getting rid of the butterflies, it's a question of getting them to fly in formation"**. Indeed, consider for a moment a rather extreme illustration of how anxiety can positively affect human performance: Many cases have been reported involving panic-stricken mothers who have performed incredible

physical feats in order to save their baby's endangered life. Returning to the swimming environment, **Rowdy Gaines, Olympic champion**, has described what it felt like to have the butterflies flying in formation before his final:

"I went into the race more excited than nervous, which was the feeling I'd had the first three or four years of my career. During those years, I'd felt excited. But for the two years prior to the Olympics, I'd felt more nervous. I'd think, "I can't wait to get this over with". At the Olympics, I still had that feeling but I also thought, "This is really neat. This is great. There are 18,000 people here, and they're all cheering for us – for the Americans". It's hard to describe the feeling you get from competing in an Olympics in your country"

Hence, the whole idea is not necessarily to reduce or eliminate anxiety but to handle pre-race pressure and turn it into something positive. Olympic medallists often don't even realise they're doing it, but they commonly use a combination of the psychological skills I mentioned earlier (i.e., relaxation, imagery, goal-setting and self-talk) to help them control their thoughts and feelings. Not surprisingly, teaching swimmers how to do this is a major part of a psychologist's work:

"My work includes helping the athletes effectively deal with stress by using pressure or anxiety in a positive way. That is, as a way of exciting or energising as opposed to allowing it to bring you down or interfere with a performance. We work to turn the pressure of a major competition into something positive. As such, anxiety or arousal control is very important" Clark Perry

In view of these comments, it's probably no coincidence that Ian Thorpe, Olympic champion, often speaks in media interviews about the importance of turning negatives into positives. When asked about the weight of his nation's expectations at the Sydney Olympic Games, and then world expectations at the Athens Olympic Games, Ian repeatedly responds by saying that he perceives any attention on him as positive support rather than negative pressure.

Anchor and Trigger Techniques. What I've just described is a thinking (i.e., cognitive) approach to handling stress and anxiety. But an alternative, or complementary, strategy is to attempt to bypass mental processing and simply resort to a stimulus-response (i.e., behavioural) approach. Remember Dr. Pavlov who demonstrated that a ringing bell repeatedly anchored with food will eventually trigger salivation in dogs, even if presented without food? A great deal of human behaviour consists of unconscious programmed reactions which are based on a simple stimulus-response mechanism. For example, when many people get angry or anxious they immediately reach for a cigarette. They may not want to but they don't even think about it because the pattern is so deeply ingrained. At a more sinister level, Adolf Hitler had a genius for anchoring. At the height of his power, he linked specific states of mind to the swastika, marching troops, and mass rallies. He put people in intense states and while he had them there he anchored their emotions to verbal and physical triggers, namely "Heil Hitler!" combined with the Nazi salute. However, not all anchors are negative, many are pleasant. Take, for example, when

you hear a song which takes you back years to a wonderful summer. Or the stars and stripes pin badges that American politicians attach to their lapel in an attempt to associate themselves with the patriotic emotions linked with the national flag. The implication for coaches and swimmers is that they should become conscious of this process and use anchors and triggers to automatically engage powerful and resourceful states.

This approach has proved popular with a number of American swimmers for accessing their ideal performance states. For example, Michael O'Brien, Olympic champion, reported using anchor and trigger techniques to great effect for his final. As part of his mental preparation, he linked the emotions he felt when he was most successful to several automatic triggers, namely the sound of the starting gun and the sight of the black line on the bottom of the pool. This was combined with listening to a particular song before the race which was associated with his most positive psychological state. Don't confuse this with the common practice of using music to energise or psych-up a performer. What we are talking about here is using a very deliberate anchor to engage a specific state of mind.

In my experience, these techniques are most effective if a swimmer anchors when they are totally immersed in their most powerful and resourceful emotions. To enhance the stimulus-response bond, it's best to anchor to unique stimuli perceived via different senses (e.g., visual, auditory, kinaesthetic). In addition, when attempting to access the positive state, it's important that the trigger is an exact replication of the specific anchor. If the anchor-trigger link is strong enough, then swimmers are more likely to experience a "flow" state resulting in a peak performance.

Finally, I'd like to leave you with the following thoughts. Swimming psychology is *not* a quick-fix solution to all your coaching problems. In just the same way that modifications to the training programme rarely result in overnight performance changes, the adoption of sport psychology techniques will not provide you with an instant "magic pill" to solve everything. It takes years of hard work within a systematic and structured psychological support programme to reap the rewards.

This programme needs to be implemented over a minimum of a four year Olympic cycle and occur not only at camps and competitions, but throughout the World Class Performance Plans and Swim 21 Schemes. What's more, if you're personally passionate and serious about achieving Olympic success you cannot afford to worry about failing. Nor can you worry about what others think. Sometimes you'll try things and they won't work the first time. But you want to be able to look back on your career and know you did everything possible to help swimmers reach their potential. And, remember, British Swimming hasn't had an Olympic champion for over 15 years. If you're going to be the one to make it happen, you're going to have to dare to be different.

So, now we've come to the end of my presentation. I hope it was like Amanda Beard's dress should be: long enough to cover the subject, but short enough to keep you interested! Thank you to Jodi and Jamie for inviting me. And thanks everyone for listening and best of luck in your work. ♦

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Mutual Admiration Society

Daily Attention to Team Building

Written by Allan Kopel: coachkopie@hotmail.com

It is human nature to gravitate towards activities and groups that provide us with feelings of success, fulfillment, fun and validation. Truly special TEAMS provide that. Ask adults what they remember and perhaps miss the most about TEAMS they were on when they were younger. The most consistent recollection is the fun, friendship and a real sense of togetherness. They may have worked very hard, and they may have had disappointment and frustration along the way. Close knit TEAMS are often very dedicated and committed to excellence. A commitment to excellence requires hard work and usually involves moments of frustration and disappointment. Teams that are dedicated to excellence usually form a special bond. Their diligent efforts help build togetherness, trust and mutual respect. Great TEAMS not only practice, train and compete well physically, but they verbalize expectations, applaud success and they praise solid efforts and deeds that contribute to THE TEAM.

The purpose of this article is to suggest that you have the power and should seize opportunities to practice being the very best, most united and mutually supportive TEAM you can possibly be. Do not wait for "the big game", the championship meet or the end of season tournament to do your best or to "BE A TEAM". Seize moments every day to support, encourage, challenge and praise your TEAM MATES. You will feel good and YOUR TEAM will gain strength from this. The result will be a collection of people who care about each other, who invest in each other, who gain strength and confidence and who, on balance, have fun training, competing and BEING A TEAM.

Words and gestures that convey respect and admiration have a positive impact on people. Respect and admiration must be earned, but words and gestures that convey respect and admiration do not have to be reserved only for amazing or "heroic" acts. In baseball terms, it is usually lots of singles rather than home runs that make teams special. In life as in sports, lots of singles (modest successes) add up to give us strength and confidence. A great training set, an excellent skills session, perfect attendance, or leading a cheer may be routine on great TEAMS. We should expect these things to

***"There is nothing
so rewarding as to
make people realize
they are worthwhile
in this world."
(Bob Anderson,
English Poet)***

happen. They should not however be minimized or under-appreciated. All of those positive efforts and good deeds deserve recognition. Just think if you are a team in which every day people have great sets in practice, work hard to refine skills and lead cheers? Before long you would be doing really well and looking forward to the fun and excitement of the next practice session, game or meet. Recognizing and reinforcing even modest successes and good deeds and gestures builds intra-team unity, confidence, respect and appreciation. Quality performances or good deeds may carry their own reward. Never assume however that friends and teammates know that their successes or good efforts are recognized and appreciated. Take time to say thank you or good job. Words of praise, respect and support can be brief and said quietly between teammates. Public recognition can be fun, but personal, perhaps private words of praise or thank you among friends and teammates are very powerful and meaningful. We tend to value the support and opinions of those we respect and are close to. Never underestimate your ability to be a good teammate. Modest gestures of praise or appreciation that few may notice can have a powerful and positive impact on people. Your words of respect and admiration will boost your teammate's self image and their sense of "the possible". As you give praise and respect to others, they will give it to you also. This does not mean giving compliments or conveying respect arbitrarily. For words of respect, praise or admiration to have meaning they must be honest and sincere. A simple yet effective process to raise confidence, mutual appreciation and team unity is to form a Mutual Admiration Society. Honest, sincere words of respect and praise are catalysts that bond and build trust. As individuals learn to trust and believe in the team, they become active contributors to the team's fun and success. Nurture group chemistry and camaraderie. Support, challenge, compliment and encourage each other to believe and to excel. ♦

***"The power of words,
of great thoughts
to quicken and
motivate one's life is
immeasurable."
(Roberto Assagioli)***

Retirement of Duncan Laing New Zealand

Posted at 5:55am on 6 Mar 2006

Laing to call it quits after Games.

The elder statesman of New Zealand swimming, Duncan Laing has decided to retire from coaching after almost fifty years of being poolside.

Laing has been in the coaching game for 50 years – 40 years of which have been at Dunedin's Moana Pool and his last international meeting will be next week's Commonwealth Games in Melbourne.

Laing had many successful swimmers but his best was double Olympic champion Danyon Loader who won the 200 and 400 freestyle titles in Atlanta in 1996.

Duncan Laing took up coaching in the late fifties after captaining the NZ surf lifesaving team.

Duncan Laing says he still hopes to continue running the odd training camp and from time to time will help out his son who coaches in Matamata. ♦

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Philippines Set to Join WSCA

PHILIPPINES: The Philippine Amateur Swimming Association (PASA) has announced that the Philippines will formally become a member of the World Swimming Coaches Association. The country's membership is one of the items to be addressed by the WSCA Board of Directors at its meeting in Shanghai, China at the beginning of April.

PASA acts to improve coaches

The Philippine Amateur Swimming Association (PASA) takes another big step towards its goal of improving the ranks of local swim coaches and instructors as the Philippines formally becomes a member country of the World Swimming Coaches Association (WSCA).

"This is a long overdue move for PASA; in fact we are already the 71st member of this group that represents the coaching sector to FINA, swimming's international federation. PASA has to abide with international standards in swimming and being a member of the WSCA is one of the steps we need to take," said PASA president Mark Joseph who is flying to Shanghai, China for the official membership signing and acceptance of the country by the WSCA.

Shanghai is the venue for the World Short Course Swimming Championship slated early April with local swimmers Ronald Quiriba and Ken Uy participating in the competition.

PASA will also start its education and certification program for all local coaches and swim instructors with six levels of certification to be completed by the participants for accreditation by both PASA and FINA.

"We are aiming to develop a core of professional swimming coaches who have undergone the proper training in the different aspects of coaching," explained Joseph, whose NSA amassed 9 gold medals in the SEA Games held in the country late last year.

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