



**GOLDMINDS**  
BY WAYNE GOLDSMITH

# MENTAL TOUGHNESS

*What is it? Where is it? And how can I get some?*



[PHOTO BY MATT RUBEL OF RUBEL PHOTOGRAPHY]

**M**ental toughness is one of those things that everyone seems to want to talk about...but no one is quite sure exactly what it is. It's a bit like money: lots of people want to get it...they wish they had a lot of it...but they don't know where to find it.

Mental toughness is a skill—and like all other swimming skills, it can be learned and mastered.

The first challenge with mental toughness is to determine what it is.

There's a lot of research that attempts to describe and define mental toughness, to identify its key elements and to suggest ways of measuring it.

However, in my experience, the best way to help swimmers and coaches develop mental toughness is to work with them and try to find out what it is they're trying to achieve—what it is they mean by the term, mental toughness.

For some swimmers, it can be their capacity to perform at big meets. For others, it's the ability to remain calm, cool and composed in the days before a big meet. Still, for others, it can be as specific as their ability to face and overcome the physical challenges of racing—such as pain and fatigue.

So, before we can talk about mental toughness, let's try to figure out what it is.

## REAL-LIFE STORY

*I was once working with a team of elite athletes. One of the coaches asked me to help the athletes become more mentally tough.*

*I asked the coach, "Sure. But, first, tell me exactly what do you mean by 'mentally tough'?"*

*He replied, "Athletes who are mentally tough can perform in competition—no matter what's happening to them or taking place around them."*

*I said, "Then that's what we need to teach them to do: to be able to perform to their potential regardless of the challenges of the competitive environment."*

## THE WOODEN BOARD CONCEPT

Imagine for a moment that you've been asked to walk along a wooden board that's 20 feet long and four feet wide.

Could you do it? Yes! Of course you could.

Now imagine I placed that same wooden board on a platform suspended 10 miles above the ground.

Can you still walk along the board? Yes! Of course you can...or, uh, wait a minute—10 miles up in the air?

The board hasn't changed. It's still 20 feet long and four feet wide. The task is the same: one foot in front of the other—the simple task of walking.

However, in your mind, the task has become more challenging, more difficult, more demanding and more than a little frightening because of the changed environment. What was simple and straightforward is now daunting and terrifying.

So, what does this have to do with swimming fast at meets and mental toughness?

*Everything!*

## PERFORMANCE PRACTICE IS THE KEY TO MENTAL TOUGHNESS

There's one very simple reason why so many swimmers fail to perform to their potential in big meets: preparation—or, rather, a lack of what we call "performance practice" in their preparation.

**Practice does not make perfect.** Lots of swimmers swim thousands and thousands of laps in practice, but they don't perform in big meets.

**Perfect practice does not make perfect either.** In every pool, on every team, in every city all over the world, there are swimmers who train very well, who can execute their skills practices perfectly and who can swim with technical excellence in training...but who do not win when it matters.

Why?

It's not about swimming brilliantly in practice. It's about preparing to swim to your potential in competition situations regardless of the challenges of the competitive environment.

It's relatively easy to learn to swim fast in practice.

Show up for practice and train regularly...train the best you can consistently...work hard on your technique and skills every day...eat well...get plenty of rest—it isn't rocket science.

Swimming fast is not the real issue: it's swimming fast in the competitive environment. It's about preparing—and expecting—to WIN...when it really matters.

Performance practice is the key.

## WHAT IS PERFORMANCE PRACTICE?

Performance practice is creating training situations and preparation environments that prepare swimmers physically, mentally, technically, strategically, environmentally and managerially to overcome every competitive situation they are likely to face in their target meet.

## REAL-LIFE STORY

*One of the challenges of taking inexperienced swimmers to important competitions is dealing with stress and strain of warm-ups. In their home pool, the swimmers may train in a lane with only four or five other swimmers. But when they go to their city or state or national championship meet, they have to face the reality of warming up in extremely crowded lanes and not get the opportunity to do their usual pre-planned warm-up routine.*

*A team I was working with was taking a large group of inexperienced swimmers to their first-ever state championship meet. The coach, who had taken teams to this meet previously, understood the championship environment and came up with a performance practice solution.*

*Every day for the three weeks leading into the state championships, the entire team of 44 swimmers would warm up in the one lane in their home pool.*

*The first time they tried it, it was chaos! Swimmers were colliding, pushing off the wrong way, bumping into each other's feet and generally struggling to deal with the overly crowded lane scenario. Some of the swimmers were feeling frustrated, angry and generally annoyed with having to swim in the simulated race-day situation.*

*However, over the next few days, the swimmers learned to manage their emotions and eventually mastered warming up in the crowded lane.*

*When it came to meet day, and the team was faced with the challenge of warming up with limited lane space, they did so calmly and confidently and without any stress or anxiety.*

*The coach had prepared them to perform in the environment they encountered at their target meet, and they raced brilliantly.*

## HOW DO YOU DEVELOP A PERFORMANCE PRACTICE PLAN?

The best thing about the concept of performance practice is that it makes learning and improving mental toughness simple, easy and practical.

Instead of trying to learn mental toughness through some sort of mental skills program or by listening to sports psychology "gurus" talk about mental toughness, you can become mentally tough by developing a pre-meet plan that systematically helps you to prepare for the most likely meet-day obstacles.

For example: imagine you are planning to swim the 100 freestyle in 1 minute 10 seconds at your target meet. Simply aiming to swim the time is not enough—you need to prepare to swim the time in the environment in which the meet will be conducted.

The first step is to identify the most likely challenges you'll experience at the meet (**see the "Performance Practice Plan" chart on page 40**). Then, once you've identified the challenges, it's a matter of developing a minimum of two strategies to practice in training that will help you overcome those challenges.

The "Performance Practice Plan" is a simple, yet powerful way to ensure your training prepares you to swim the time you want to swim in the situation and in the environment you need to swim it. ❖

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## SUMMARY

**1.** Mental toughness is an essential element in swimming success. However, it is a little different than what most people believe it is. Mental toughness has nothing to do with aggression or fighting or intimidating your opponents—that's old thinking and dumb thinking! Mental toughness is your ability to do your "job" in race conditions—i.e., to swim fast—and to perform at your best, regardless of the situation or challenge you face.

**2.** As with most things, it all comes down to preparation. There's practice...and there's perfect practice. But most important of all, there is performance practice: the practice you do that is at the same level of demand—or an even greater level of demand—than the race or the meet you are targeting. Mental toughness comes down to you willingly seeking opportunities in practice that are "tougher" than those you will experience at your targeted meet.

**3.** Mental toughness is not about how fit you are or how tall you are or how strong you are. It's a skill you can learn—regardless of your size and strength—that can help you perform to your potential when it really matters.

## PERFORMANCE PRACTICE PLAN

Performance Practice Plan Area	Meet Challenge	Strategy 1	Strategy 2
<b>Physical</b>	Having to race in a heats-and-finals format—i.e., swim fast twice in the same day.	During the month leading into the meet, swim time trials morning and night at least four times each week.	In the qualifying meet, try to swim at maximum speed in heats and in finals so you learn to swim fast twice in one day.
<b>Mental</b>	Increased expectations of the swimmer, coach and parents of performing under pressure.	Focus on your own race and try to control and manage the things you can control.	Discuss your expectations of the meet with your coach and family at least two weeks before the meet.
<b>Technical</b>	Racing fast demands high-quality starts, turns and finishes.	Include 20 minutes of race-pace starts (i.e., first 15 meters), turns (i.e., flags to wall and back to flags) and finishes (i.e., final 5 meters) in all practice sessions.	Have your coach time your starts, turns and finishes during training, at your qualifying meets and other competitions leading into the target meet.
<b>Strategic</b>	Performing in meets demands a range of pacing and racing skills to match every possible race scenario.	Practice swimming at your target race pace three different ways: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fast first 50 / controlled second 50</li> <li>• Even pace both 50s</li> <li>• Controlled first 50 / negative-split second 50.</li> </ul>	Practice a wide range of racing strategies and breathing tactics in training and in minor competitions as you prepare to race at your target meet. For example, can you breathe easily to either side? Can you turn equally well to either side?
<b>Environmental</b>	The meet is going to be held in an outdoor pool when you train in an indoor pool.	Find a local outdoor pool and make plans to hold some practices in the outdoor environment in the month leading into your target meet.	Find a local lake, dam, river or other natural-water course, and learn to swim fast in outdoor conditions.
<b>Self-Management</b>	You've got your own bedroom at home. When you go to the meet, you'll be sharing a small room with three other swimmers.	Take your own pillow with you to the meet along with some ear plugs and eye shades so that you can make your sleeping environment feel like home and ensure it is also quiet and dark.	Leave a television on in your bedroom at home at night and learn to sleep in light and noisy conditions before you go to the meet.