



Chapter 2: Teaching and Communication

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Part 1: Creating a Positive Learning Environment

Topic Questions:

1. What are Thorndike's Three Laws of Learning and how can they be applied to the practice environment?
2. How does the environment at the pool affect learning?
3. What is the importance of explanation, demonstration, appropriate vocabulary and a common teaching language?
4. Does practice make perfect?

A coach's effectiveness in teaching the swimmers is dependent upon whether the coach presents the information in a meaningful and appealing way. Effectiveness is also influenced by whether or not the coach provides an environment in which swimmers can concentrate and learn.

Thorndike's Three Laws of Learning

- **The Law of Readiness**

The Law of Readiness says that athletes will learn best when the environmental and personal factors are conducive to learning. Environmental factors include the physical environment which is discussed below. Personal factors include the coach and the athletes. Coaches should present skills positively and enthusiastically while athletes must be able to both understand the terminology and focus on the coach.

- **The Law of Exercise**

The Law of Exercise says that learning occurs by repeating the skills over and over again. It is important to note that learning occurs at both the conscience and sub-conscience level. The good coach promotes both methods of learning. At the conscious level the athlete repeats the skill by thinking through the motions. The coach teaches key words or short two to three word phrases to the athlete. For example, the coach says, "After you push of the wall you 'streamline, kick, swim. Now, say the words... OK, ready go." And then, with the words in mind, the athlete performs the skill. The goal is to move from the conscious level to automatic level. This only happens after many repeats at the conscious level.

Learning at the sub-conscience level is also valuable but has limitations. This is also called trial and error learning and is promoted by the coach giving the athlete time to explore a new skill without excessive instruction. This works best with experienced swimmers who have a good feeling for what their bodies are doing in the water. Young swimmers, when left to learn on their own, often develop bad habits which are difficult to fix later on.

- **The Law of Effect**

The Law of Effect simply says that if the athletes have positive experiences they will be eager to come back for more. This applies to correcting an individual as well as how the coach ends the workout. In teaching swimmers, remember that if they are having difficulty learning a specific skill they may feel inadequate and "not normal." Therefore, the next time the coach wants to teach that skill they may be hesitant and negative. With developing swimmers always end on a positive note so that they look forward to returning.

Environmental Factors

The coach has control over some, but certainly not all, of the environmental factors that affect the education process.

Environmental factors include:

- Time of day
- Length of practice session
- Grouping/arrangement of swimmers
- Water and air temperature
- Spectators
- Noise
- Lighting
- Visual distractions
- Equipment available



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The keys are:

- Manipulate and use those factors that are controllable
- Take advantage of those factors that cannot be controlled
- Minimize the effect of those factors that hinder education

The coach may not be able to control when the team has practice, for example, but can control the amount of time during each practice that skills are taught. Also, the coach may have only partial control over other people at the pool such as spectators and other swimmers who create distractions. However, the coach does have control over how the swimmers are arranged so they can see and hear clearly and therefore minimize the effect of other distractions.

Learning Styles and the Learning Environment

The coach should be sure to teach to all learning styles, including visual learners, kinesthetic learners and verbal learners. Consider the environmental factors outlined above and then explain (for the verbal learners,) demonstrate (for the visual learners) and have swimmers try the skill or do an activity (for the kinesthetic learners).

A coach may want to use verbal or visual teaching methods with children who are uncomfortable being touched. Take care to never put yourself in a position where questions of appropriateness can be asked.

It's also worth noting that there can be gender differences associated with learning. Young boys may appear not to pay attention, but when they swim in a meet, it shows that they have listened very well. They may not have the same attention cues as girls in that they may not stand still and listen or focus their attention directly on the coach. Be alert to this and don't jump to the conclusion that the boys are not paying attention.

Communicating on the Appropriate Level: Vocabulary and Delivery

As a teacher, speak clearly and at a pace the swimmers can follow. The swimmers will have difficulty understanding if the coach is tongue-tied, mumbles, and speaks too loudly, too slowly or too fast. Additionally, maintain eye contact with the swimmers, use words they can understand and sometimes introduce them to new terms. The coach's ability to demonstrate can be useful. However, if the coach chooses to demonstrate in the pool, the coach must also consider how to maintain control of the group during the demonstration.

When choosing an athlete to demonstrate a skill, choose one able to perform the skill well, even if it means borrowing an athlete from a more advanced group. When using an athlete to demonstrate a skill it is critically important to draw the attention of the students to one aspect of the demonstration because the swimmers will not be able to process everything at once. For example, "Let's watch Scott's entry. Can you tell me where his hands go in the water?"

Principles for Effective Demonstrations and Explanations

Proper explanations introduce the topic to be taught, explain how to perform and provide reasons why the topic is important. Proper demonstrations show how to perform. In reality, explanations must complement demonstrations and demonstrations must complement explanations. Learning will be less than optimal if the coach fails to explain while demonstrating or fails to demonstrate adequately what is being explained.

To present positively means to first present what to do rather than what not to do. This applies when teaching skills for the first time and when providing feedback to correct skills later. Swimmers need to be told what to do and how to correct their skills rather than be presented with what not to do. Also, over time, repetition of negative statements could lead swimmers to think only about what not to do rather than what to do. Presenting why not to do something may be helpful after swimmers understand and have developed a feel for skills, but it is not an effective method for initial teaching.



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Principles for Effective Demonstrations

1. Present in a safe, non-threatening environment
2. Present in and out of the water
3. Present clearly for all to see
4. Present from many angles: front, rear, side, top and bottom
5. Include active participation
6. Present positively
7. Accompany with effective explanations

Principles for Effective Explanations

1. Focus on one topic at a time
2. Present at a level appropriate to the swimmers
3. Be concise
4. Direct attention to key cues: arms, legs, body and feet
5. Be specific and clear
6. Present positively
7. Accompany with effective demonstrations

The swimmers should be both motivated to learn and paying attention. If they are not interested and not paying attention, they will not learn. Understand that young, less mature swimmers usually have shorter attention spans than older athletes. Adjust the amount of time and level of presentation for different groups depending on age and level. For example, a ten minute technical explanation of a skill will probably not be effective for 10 and unders. Be enthusiastic and provide examples to which swimmers can relate. The examples provided and the vocabulary used should match the knowledge base, experience and vocabulary of the swimmers. Additionally, the physical skills of the swimmers to practice what is demonstrated will affect how well they reinforce what is presented. Quite simply, present information at a level appropriate for the swimmers. Young people with learning disabilities such as hearing and vision impairments may need special attention.

Practice Makes Perfect?

The idea that practice makes perfect is one aspect of skill acquisition that has been misunderstood. A more accurate statement is that practice makes habit. Skills that have been learned very well can be thought of as habits that are performed naturally, at will, almost without thinking. Perfect skills are the result of practicing as perfectly as possible. If the skill is proving too difficult for the swimmer to master, move on to something else and come back to this step later. If skills are practiced incorrectly, then practice has only developed incorrect habits. Thus, only perfect practice leads to perfect skills. This is why it is crucial to emphasize and teach proper stroke technique swimmers at an early age.



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Part 2: Keys to Effective Communication

Topic Questions:

1. How do words, mannerisms and emotions convey a message?
2. What are the characteristics of authoritarian and passive coaching styles?
3. How and when should the coach provide feedback to the swimmers?
4. What are some of the keys to effective communication?

Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

Verbal and nonverbal communication includes words, gestures and body language. People learn the meanings of gestures and expressions as symbols of communication, just as they learn the meanings of words. The swimmers will learn the meanings of the gestures the coach uses and react accordingly. Therefore, the coach should be deliberate in deciding the words and gestures to be used. A coach can improve verbal and nonverbal communication by carefully choosing and monitoring words and gestures. Remember that words and actions also reflect our underlying values or orientation. Derogatory nicknames and sarcastic expressions can be humorous, but they have an underlying negative orientation. Remember that a certain amount of truth is conveyed with every joke. Communicating with a negative orientation can be detrimental to the development of the swimmers' self-image and to earning trust and credibility from the swimmers. Communicating positively with statements such as, "I would prefer you not do that because..." provides information the swimmers need and enhances the coach's rapport with them.

Content and Emotion

Every message conveys both content and emotion. Think of both what is said and how it is said. Consider emotion as a continuum from highly excited to very subdued. On the surface, the highly excited person would seem to be the most expressive. After all, he is jumping, screaming and waving. No matter how hard he tries, he cannot hide his feelings. But a subdued, stoic, rock of a person also expresses emotion. By being quiet and unchanging, such people may appear cold, distant, aloof or tough. Be aware that emotions and actions are part of the learning environment created. Athletes are very astute at detecting and reacting to their coach's emotional states. Coaches are often less astute at detecting athletes' emotional states. Self-evaluation and paying attention to the mannerisms of others are important communication skills.

Coaching and Communication Styles

Not everyone can or should coach using the same style because each one of us is unique. Additionally, the specific setting or environment can affect the coach's style from practice to practice and from season to season. Consider coaching behavior along a continuum from very authoritarian to very passive. Coaching style should be a dynamic process along a continuum, always striving to be interactive, but shifting toward authoritarian or passive as needed.

In some situations the coach may need to be more of an authoritarian, telling the swimmers exactly what to do with little input from them. This does not mean being negative, yelling at swimmers and barking orders like a drill sergeant, it simply means being the authority in control of the situation. Such an authoritarian style is particularly useful when teaching new skills, following safety procedures and leading practices that are beyond the knowledge of the swimmers. As a general rule, a coach should be more of an authoritarian with younger swimmers, showing and explaining to them how to do things. As the swimmers mature and become more competent, the coach can give them responsibility for those things they have demonstrated they can do without help. Never let swimmers take responsibility for something they have not previously done with supervision.

Some situations are best handled with a more passive coaching style. Being passive means letting the athletes take control or have more freedom, while the coach observes and guides them loosely. Coaching behavior that is more passive works well for experienced, highly competitive swimmers who know what they need to do, but need a coach to provide the right amount of guidance.

Coaches tend to use a particular coaching style depending upon both their personalities and their perceived competence. Generally, the more knowledgeable and skilled coaches are, the more they feel comfortable being interactive. Coaches who are less knowledgeable and skilled tend to be either more authoritarian or more passive. They may avoid interacting with others and hide weaknesses by taking absolute control or, conversely, taking no control.



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Communication is a reflection of coaching style. The more the coach tends to be authoritarian, by directing athletes without their input, the more the coach limits communication. Be willing to listen when they have questions or question them to elicit input. Similarly, a coach also limits communication with extreme passivity. However, this style can work with older, more experienced swimmers. Communication will simply need to be highly specific and highly relevant.

Providing Feedback

Because skills are reinforced when practiced, the sooner an error is corrected the sooner the swimmers will progress in their skills. When correcting errors, follow these principles:

- Correct the error as soon as possible.
- Demonstrate and explain how to correct the error positively. (Explain what “to do,” not “what not to do.”)
- Have the swimmer demonstrate the corrected skill.
- Shape the athlete’s behavior by verbally rewarding the athlete for “close approximations” of the final desired outcome.

Be judicious about correcting the error as soon as possible. Shouting at swimmers during a start from the blocks will only disrupt their concentration. However, waiting until an entire practice phase is complete or until the practice is over may be too late to provide meaningful feedback. The swimmers may not remember the error and the coach may forget to comment. Be sure to reinforce by watching the swimmer carefully a few times to be sure he or she indeed performs correctly. It may be necessary to provide more feedback in several different ways before the problem is corrected.

Finally, don’t fall into the practice of the “silent scream.” This occurs when the coach watches the swimmers continually do something incorrectly. On the outside, the coach appears calm and composed, but on the inside the coach is screaming silently, “why do they do that when I have told them 1,000 times what I expect?” Stop the group or the swimmer and make the correction, even if it has been made multiple times previously.

Effective Communication Guidelines

Here are five guidelines that will help the coach communicate more effectively:

1. Communicate according to the emotional state and intellectual level of the person. Communicate at a level each person can understand.
2. Provide clear and precise instructions. Eliminate unnecessary words and phrases. Adding many “uh’s,” “uhm’s,” and “OK’s can be distracting.
3. Provide information appropriate for the situation. Handle situations immediately, and then get on with the activity.
4. Control emotions. Monitor, choose words and mannerisms carefully and show emotions purposefully.
5. Comment on actions and situations without demeaning the person. Young people can interpret positive or negative comments about a situation as positive or negative comments about themselves. Swimmers need to know that their behavior is or is not appropriate; teach them without making personal judgments about them.



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Part 3: Teaching Methods

Topic Questions:

1. What is the value of a common teaching language across all groups within a team?
2. What are the effective aspects of demonstration, explanation, repetition and feedback that coaches should employ when teaching skills?
3. How can a coach organize the swimmers to teach skills?

Teaching the skills of swimming involves implementation of a common teaching language and employment of demonstration, explanation, repetition and feedback. Coaches need a big “toolbox” of ideas for teaching and each coach must find his/her own methods to best teach, organize and communicate with the swimmers.

Teaching Language

It is crucial that the coach use age and skill appropriate vocabulary and concepts. Very young swimmers do not need long explanations of the mechanics behind the skills. Older swimmers may be more receptive to understanding the reasons why they need to make technical adjustments. Progressively advanced explanation compliments progressive skill development. Teach one skill at a time and allow swimmers to master the skill before adding additional elements.

A common teaching language of drills and key words should be employed across all levels. Developing and implementing the common teaching language is a responsibility of the head coach. Teach vocabulary, teach the initial core concepts and teach the basics. Use the same vocabulary for swimmers of all ages and stages of development. Swimmers in one group should use the same language as the swimmers in the next group. This eliminates the confusion of changing from one group to another; the swimmer does not have to learn a whole new language. Use the same terms whether instructing a novice or national swimmer.

Demonstration

Showing the swimmers how to do something is vitally important. Many young people are visual learners and seeing a demonstration or picture of what to do is their best method of learning.

- Use a live demonstration when possible.
 - Use an older athlete or more accomplished athlete on your team.
 - Demonstration by the coach, but only if the coach does the skill well.
 - Use one of the swimmers in the group who has already mastered the skill
- Use videotape or DVD
 - Purchase video tapes or DVDs from ASCA or USA Swimming
 - DVDs can be shown on a laptop computer or TV on the pool deck
 - Homemade videos of accomplished swimmers
- Use still photos
 - Pictures from magazines such as Swimming World or Splash Magazine
 - Photos compiled into a scrapbook

No matter what methods are used for demonstration, try to emphasize the correct way of accomplishing the skill. Show “what to do” rather than “what not to do.”

Explanation

People need word pictures to give them something to plant in their minds to replay when they need to remind themselves.

- Keep instruction short and to the point.
- Be consistent in your instructions and the vocabulary used.
- Use appropriate language for the audience.
- Similes and metaphors may be useful. (“Put your pinky fingers in at 11 o’clock and 1 o’clock.”)

Give athletes key words (example: “fingers down, elbow up”) or questions and answers to remember for each activity. Repeat the questions and answers while teaching the skill and be consistent in always using the same key words.

Example: Coach says: “Your head is...”

Swimmers respond, in unison: “...in line with the spine.”



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Repetition

Presentation of skills through explanation and demonstration is only the beginning of skill acquisition. Learning continues as swimmers practice and refine their skills. Athletes learn by doing. It is important that they do the skills correctly. Otherwise they are just practicing and repeating mistakes. Repetition is simply the repeating/practicing of correct actions. This can be done in a variety of methods:

- Part method: Break down each skill into its component parts and practice each repetitively and independently. (Example: Breaststroke kick or pull by itself.)
- Part-whole-part method: After repeating part of the skill, incorporate it into the whole skill; repeat some more, and isolate it again. (Example: Breaststroke kick-then breaststroke swim-then breaststroke kick again.)
- Whole-part-whole method: Start with the whole skill; isolate a part to concentrate on, and then go back to the whole. (Example: Whole breaststroke, then work on the pull, then whole stroke again.)
- Practice the whole skill at race speed

Feedback

Just doing a lot of repetition is not enough. The coach must give meaningful feedback to the athletes. Feedback can be positive (“You got your hands out nice and wide! Good!”) or negative (“You didn’t get your hands wide enough!”). You can deliver a negative message in a positive manner (“You’re trying hard, but you still need to pull wider!”) or a positive message in a negative manner. (“Well, you finally got your hands out where they belong!”). Positive feedback is not intrinsically more effective than a negative feedback, but most people prefer to hear things phrased in a positive manner. To come across as a positive, supportive coach, phrase most comments positively. Feedback should also be specific. Instead of “good swim” say “I liked the way you kept your hands out wide for the whole 100. That is just the way I’ve asked you to do it in practice. Nice job.” If there are negative comments that need to be made, sandwich the negative between two positive comments or give three or four positives followed by the negative. Don’t avoid the constructive criticism; just be sure to include multiple positive comments.

Organization

- One-on-one method: With a group of no more than 12, explain and demonstrate the skill. Use only a small area of the pool, perhaps 10 yards or less. Have each swimmer try the skill, one at a time for a short distance. Give feedback, then have the swimmer try the skill again. Repeat the process for each swimmer.
- Group method: Explain and demonstrate the skill. Be very specific. For example, don’t work on “breaststroke.” Instead, work on “head position during the stretch.” Divide the group into heats, give instruction and send off the heat. Give feedback to individuals or to the entire heat. Use no more than 4 heats and very short swims.

When working with a larger group using the group method described above there is sometimes a tendency to try to see every stroke fault and make every correction. By trying to see everything, the coach may not be seeing some things clearly enough to be effective. Focus on just two or three swimmers in each heat and give constructive feedback and correction. Then the next time that heat swims, focus on two or three different swimmers.



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Part 4: Motivation as a Key to Learning

Topic Questions:

1. How can a coach encourage achievement motivation?
2. What is the value of positive reinforcers?
3. Why are extrinsic motivators such as trophies of less long term value than intrinsic motivators?

The intensity of a person's actions generally indicates the intensity or degree of arousal the person feels. Arousal is the intensity of motivation. Consider arousal along a continuum from deep sleep to extreme excitation. The more motivated a person is, the more the person becomes aroused both psychologically and physically. The relationship between motivational level and performance is affected by:

- A person's achievement motive
- The relative importance of reinforcers (i.e. rewards and punishments)

The young people on a swim team will be motivated primarily by the desire to have fun, succeed, excel, feel competent, be accepted by others and feel worthy or important.

Achievement Motive

Psychologically, the arousal leads to increased nervousness, narrowing of attention and anxiety. Motivation then falls into two categories:

- Motive to achieve or succeed
- Motive to avoid failure

The coach must demonstrate respect and appreciation for both effort and positive results. If the coach shows respect and appreciation for effort only, then the 'winner' may feel less appreciated than the person who "tried hard." If the coach only shows appreciation for results, the less talented or skilled athlete is similarly devalued.

Also associated with motivation is anxiety or fear of an impending situation. Fear can be generated through not feeling safe, not feeling accepted or not feeling worthy. Remember, the motivation of swimmers is directly related to fulfilling their needs. For example, if a swimmer feels physically ready to swim a 200 meter butterfly, the motive to achieve will be greater than the motive to avoid failure. However, if the swimmer feels unprepared to successfully swim the event or fears the potentially negative evaluation of parents, coach or peers, the motive to avoid failure will be greater than the motive to succeed. The result will be less than optimal performance. The swimmer will not perform his or her best because he or she will be afraid to risk all-out performance and will settle instead for mediocre performance.

Reinforcement and Reward

Motivation is affected by how a person is reinforced. Positive reinforcers serve to increase motivation and performance of a targeted behavior. Praise works better than punishment, acceptance works better than rejection. However, rewards such as trophies and praise do not automatically create increased motivation. The ultimate increase or decrease in behavior determines whether a reinforcer has been positive. Did the reinforcer garner the desired result? For example, receiving medals and trophies for winning races may initially motivate a young swimmer to train harder and improve. However, at some point, these awards lose their appeal. Consequently, the swimmer may not train as hard, nor perform as well just to win a trophy.

Extrinsic versus Intrinsic

Extrinsic rewards are those that come from the outside such as medal and trophies. They should perhaps be viewed as recognition of the effort involved in achievement, and as a step in the road to developing intrinsic motivation and appreciation of personal effort and achievements. Intrinsic motivation refers to basic, essential motivation not tied to consequences or outside influences.

Swimming performance is not always directly related to the amount of reinforcement provided. One reason for this is that each person is unique and responds to reinforcement differently. A reinforcer that greatly motivates one person may have minimal effect on another person. A second reason is that the quality of performance cannot be duplicated at will even if sufficiently motivated. A swimmer will not swim a personal best in each race. However, swimmers can attempt to do their best if properly motivated and reinforced. The best reinforcers are those that increase the swimmer's intrinsic motivation.



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The desire to work hard, perform well and cooperate meets his or her personal need for enjoyment and satisfaction. As swimmers mature, the role of the coach is to guide the swimmer toward becoming intrinsically motivated. Help set the swimmer's personal goals and provide encouragement and praise to recognize achievement. Trophies and milkshakes should be secondary rewards, rather than primary rewards. Similarly, punishments, such as extra sets or extra exercise may positively motivate (i.e. bring the desired results) for a while. But fear of punishment is the same kind of motivator as fear of failure. The result is typically less than optimal performance.



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Part 5: Goal Setting as a Teaching Tool

Topic Questions:

1. Why is it important for swimmers to set goals?
2. Why should swimmers be encouraged to set both process and performance goals?
3. What are some of the important principles of goal setting?
4. What is the connection between individual and team goals?
5. How can the coach facilitate individual goal setting?
6. How can the coach facilitate team goal setting?

The Value of Goal Setting

Systematic goal setting provides the athlete with many benefits. An awareness of the numerous benefits of goal setting is likely to increase the chances that the athlete will set goals consistently. Goal setting accomplishes the following:

- **Provides direction.** Well-developed goals remind athletes where they want to go and how they are going to get there.
- **Enhances motivation.** Two-a-day practices can be physically and mentally draining; reminding themselves of their goals reinforces for athletes why they are there and what they are trying to accomplish in each training session. This promotes motivation and training intensity.
- **Builds confidence.** Reaching short-term goals can build athletes' confidence not only in their abilities, but also in the path they have chosen to reach their long-term goal.
- **Provides feedback.** Short-term goals that are evaluated regularly provide athletes with feedback on how they are doing in progressing toward their long-term goals and help in determining if goals need to be modified.

Process versus Outcome Goals

Because athletes tend to focus exclusively on physical factors and performance outcome when setting goals, coaches should make a conscious effort to help swimmers set goals that address the variety of factors that relate to athletic performance (physical, technical, psychological, nutrition, lifestyle, etc.) These goals should focus on the process of performance as opposed to solely on performance outcome. One of a coach's objectives should be to provide a positive environment in which the athletes are training, competing and working towards their goals; emphasize to athletes the importance of enjoying the process of swimming and placing the process above winning.

Principles of Goal Setting

For goal setting to be effective, athletes need to be aware of and adhere to the following principles:

- **Set short-term and long-term goals.** Most athletes have long-term or dream goals but often fail to establish short-term goals that serve as stepping stones to long-term goals. Long-term goals alone provide no feedback or specific direction.
- **Set outcome and process goals.** Most athletes set outcome goals (e.g., win the race, qualify for the state meet), but process goals that focus on what the athletes need to do to perform well (e.g., maintain consistent stroke rate, streamline out of turns) are equally crucial. Unlike outcome goals, process goals are in the swimmer's control and allow the swimmer to experience success regardless of the overall outcome.
- **Be specific when setting goals.** Because broad goals do not offer much guidance, focus on making goals as specific as possible (e.g., "put in a minimum of 8,000 meters in two-a-day practices six days a week" versus "train everyday").
- **Goals are most beneficial when they are realistic and challenging.** Coaches can play a big role in helping athletes identify realistic and challenging goals. Goals that are too easy or too difficult will not provide many benefits to the athlete.
- **Goals, especially training goals, must be evaluated regularly.** Evaluating goals provides feedback and confidence because progress can be noted. Weekly goals should be evaluated weekly, while seasonal goals should be evaluated at the conclusion of the season.

Individual and Team Goals

Because of individual differences, athletes will probably develop different goal-setting strategies. What is important is that they develop and use a system that works for them; it needs to be a system to which they will adhere that also incorporates the basic principles of effective goal setting. Through adherence to systematic goal setting, athletes can



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tolerate setbacks or barriers because they have a clear focus on long-term goals and confidence in their ability to reach these goals. Obviously athlete goals will be individualized, but they should also fit within established team goals. Setting goals implies that the swimmers should progress from their present state or ability to a targeted state or ability. The goals the coach and swimmers set should correspond to the seasonal plan the coach develops for the team or training group.

Facilitating Individual Goal Setting

Here is a brief and simple process for facilitating goal setting for swimmers who have the cognitive ability to set goals, usually starting at about age 12 or 13. Younger swimmers generally do not have the cognitive ability to do meaningful goal setting.

1. Meet with the swimmer individually to listen to his or her hopes and dreams
2. Ask the swimmer to identify one to three events to set specific goals
3. Review current best times
4. Negotiate a specific goal time and target date for each chosen event
5. Write down these times
6. Figure out and write the specific splits needed to meet each goal time
7. List several process goals needed to achieve each goal time. These might be times to hold on practice sets or skills that must be maintained during practice.
8. Ask the swimmer to list what he or she needs from the coach to accomplish the goals
9. Ask the swimmer to write his or her process and outcome goals and post them where the swimmer will see them often
10. Look for and recognize workout performances that can be related to process and outcome goals
11. Review process goals regularly with the swimmer

Facilitating Team Goal Setting

Team goals are vitally important to the growth of a program. Goals can be set for competition, team size, workout performance and even social activities. In setting competition team goals it is best to involve the team thereby making the goals “team goals” and not just the coach’s goals for the team. Here is a brief process for setting team goals for a high school aged team.

1. The coach:
 - a. Reviews past results
 - b. Looks at current roster
 - c. Looks at strengths and weaknesses
 - d. Predicts improvements
 - e. Sets a goal, for example: Top 3 at Sectionals.
2. The coach then considers what it will take to achieve that goal. For example: What does it take to be top 3?
 - a. How many points?
 - b. How many scoring relays?
 - c. How many finalists?
 - d. What events are strongest for the team?
 - e. What events need the most work to improve? (This is also a great basis for creating a season training plan.)
3. Next, the coach holds a team meeting and asks, “What should our team goal for this season be?”
 - a. By asking the right questions and giving enough information, the coach can get the team to come up with team goals that very closely match his or her goals except that now they are TEAM goals.
 - b. The coach can then put some swimmers in charge of recording both the process (workout) goals and the outcome goals, making copies, and distributing to the entire team.



Part 6: Developing Mental Skills

Topic Questions:

1. Why should a coach teach mental skills to athletes?
2. How can imagery and self-talk improve athlete performance?
3. When can arousal be a benefit and when is it detrimental to performance?
4. What skills does an athlete need in order to effectively concentrate?
5. What is the connection between self-talk and self-image?

Mental Preparation for Competition

Just as athletes need to prepare themselves to compete physically, they also need to prepare themselves mentally for competition. Lack of mental preparation can have a negative impact on performance. Skills such as imagery and visualization, self-talk, concentration and arousal control help the athlete to optimally prepare his or her mind to train and compete. Teaching mental skills to athletes can be just as important as the physical skills the coach teaches.

Imagery and Visualization

Imagery involves creating or recreating an event or a scene in one's mind. For example, an athlete can use imagery to create a perfect swim performance, or he or she can call to mind a past successful performance. Imagery involves all the senses. When athletes are using imagery they should try to not only see but also to hear, feel and smell all that is going on in the imagined situation. For maximal benefits, the image needs to be as close to reality as possible. Research shows that imagery, if used purposefully, is a skill that enhances performance. But if the imagery becomes negative it can be a detriment to performance.

Make athletes aware of the numerous ways that imagery can be used to help performance. Having this understanding will enable them to obtain the maximal benefits from imagery and will also enhance their motivation to practice and use imagery. Specifically, athletes can use imagery to do the following:

- To see and feel success. Athletes can use imagery to see and feel themselves achieving goals and performing as they are capable of doing. Imagery also helps enhance self-confidence.
- To motivate. Images of past and future competitions can be called upon to maintain persistence and intensity level while training and competing. This type of imaging provides an incentive for continued hard work.
- To manage arousal. Athletes can use imagery to increase or decrease arousal. For example, athletes can visualize a peaceful, relaxing scene to decrease arousal whereas motivating images can be used to increase arousal as needed.
- To learn skills and techniques. Athletes can use imagery as an additional form of practice to help them master a skill. For example, athletes can visualize themselves doing a perfect flip turn prior to actual execution.
- To refocus. During practice and competition, many distractions and situations arise that prevent an optimal focus. Athletes can refocus themselves by using specific images to achieve the focus needed for optimal performance.
- To prepare for competition. Athletes can use imagery to familiarize themselves with the competitive environment and to rehearse their performance or key elements of their performance. In addition, they can use imagery to prepare for various situations that may arise so they can develop strategies to cope with these stressors. If the situation does arise they will have rehearsed it in their minds and will know how to deal with it.

Imagery is best learned and practiced in a quiet environment when the athlete is relaxed. It may be beneficial, therefore, to first discuss simple relaxation skills so that athletes learn how to relax their minds and bodies prior to learning how to use imagery. It is helpful to develop imagery skills by initially using non-threatening, non-stressful images. For example, direct athletes to imagine being on a beach: encourage them to see, smell, hear and feel the scene. The athlete can then progress to visualizing swimming skills and, finally, to imaging competitive situations. With a little forethought, imagery training can be easily incorporated into physical training instead of making it a separate component of preparation. For example, coaches can direct athletes to visualize the technique they are working on prior to executing the drills, to imagine hard repeats to help prepare them for the challenge, or to visualize upcoming competitions to enhance practice motivation.

Athletes need to work on the following two components of imagery: control and vividness. Teach athletes to control their imagery (for example, seeing and feeling a perfect start as opposed to visualizing the slow start that has plagued them in



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past races) and to make their images clear, vivid, and as close to reality as possible (for example, smell the chlorine, hear their parents in the stands, and feel the muscle fatigue in the last 50 meters). With continued practice athletes can manipulate images to see and feel the perfect race and see and feel themselves responding to any adverse situations. They should be able to incorporate performance cues into their visualization to create a vivid image of how they want to perform.

Self-Talk

Self-talk includes all the purposeful and random thoughts that run through the athlete's mind, the continual chatter of things said silently and out loud. Self-talk can be positive. Athletes can direct their self-talk toward what they want to do and where they want to focus. Self-talk can motivate, and, if developed purposefully, it can serve numerous other beneficial functions. Unfortunately, self-talk can also be negative and damaging to performance (GIGO, or "garbage in, garbage out"). In fact, when left untrained, self-talk often becomes negative and critical. Therefore, the athlete must learn to manage his or her internal dialogue to keep it beneficial to performance.

As with other mental skills, the first step is awareness. Athletes need to become aware of their inner voices—what they tend to say to themselves silently and out loud and how this affects performance. Keep in mind that what may be negative and damaging to one athlete may be motivational and beneficial to another athlete.

Once aware of their self-talk and its affect on performance, athletes need to develop strategies to manage negative self-talk. One common technique used by athletes is "thought stopping," which entails the following:

- Identify negative thoughts and the situations in which they typically occur.
- Practice stopping the thoughts or "parking" the thoughts.

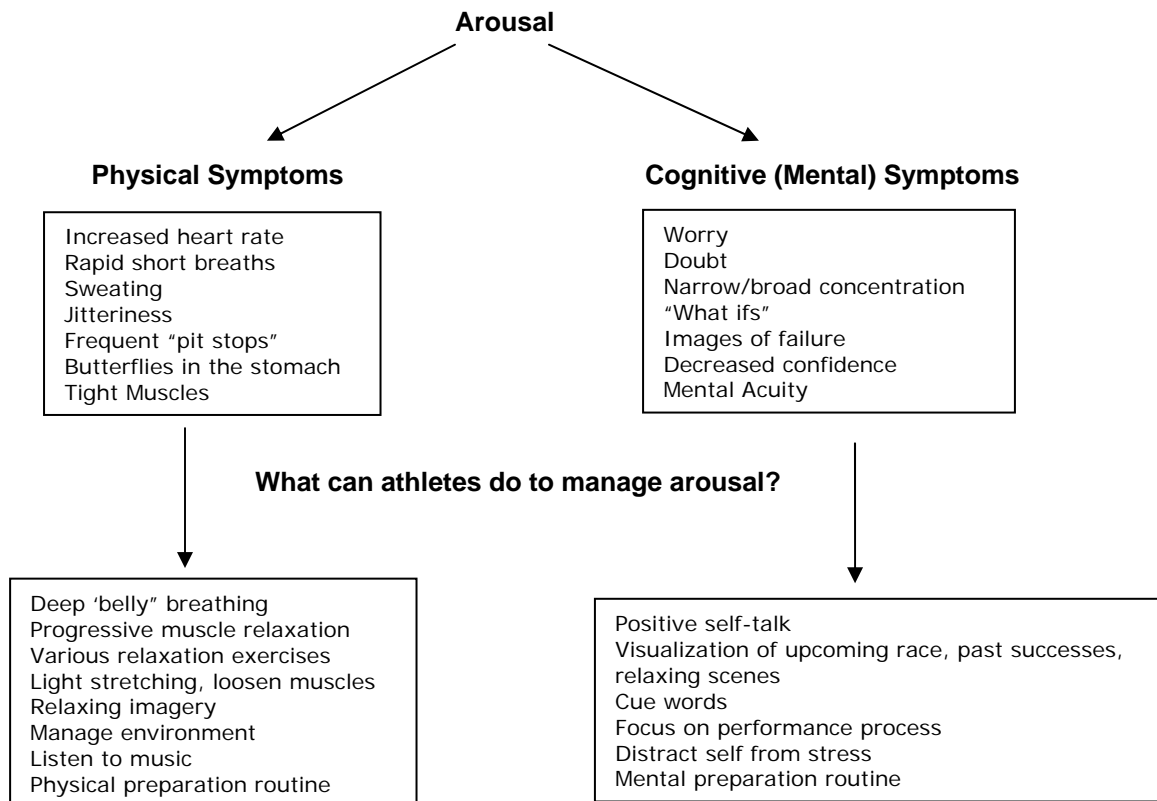
Replace the negative thoughts with positive thoughts, cue words, or images. Identify positive replacement thoughts in advance. The keys to thought stopping are being aware of common negative talk; stopping the thought; and filling the void with positive, productive thoughts.

Another technique for managing negative self-talk is for athletes to identify, in advance, what they want to say or reinforce to themselves at critical points in practice and competition. Then, instead of waiting anxiously for negative thoughts to occur, the athlete automatically uses the preplanned positive self-talk. For example, an athlete who typically has defeating thoughts in the middle segment of the 1,500-meter race can develop a plan to automatically say to him- or herself, "relax, take it easy" or "smooth stroke," during this part of the race, regardless of how he or she is feeling.

Although it may appear that positive self-talk is most important during competition, it is equally important during practice and, therefore, must be monitored and practiced during training. Concentrating on positive self-talk in practice allows for quality training and provides an opportunity to practice this important skill. Athletes must accept that they will experience doubts and fears. They can overcome these doubts by continually reinforcing positive, productive thoughts not just prior to competition but also on a daily basis so that positive self-talk becomes habitual. In preparation for competitions, the athlete can mentally rehearse the cue words or self-talk he or she will use throughout the race. When needed during the race, athletes can trust their training by quieting their negative self-talk and letting their bodies perform.

Arousal Control

Arousal can be best understood as having both a somatic (physical) and a cognitive (mental) component. This means that arousal has a physical effect on the athlete such as increased heart rate, increased muscle activation, increased sweating, high adrenaline, and so on. Arousal also has an effect on the athlete's cognitive functioning (self-talk, concentration, images). Although these two components are often discussed separately, it should be noted that they are inextricably linked such that change in one typically affects the other.

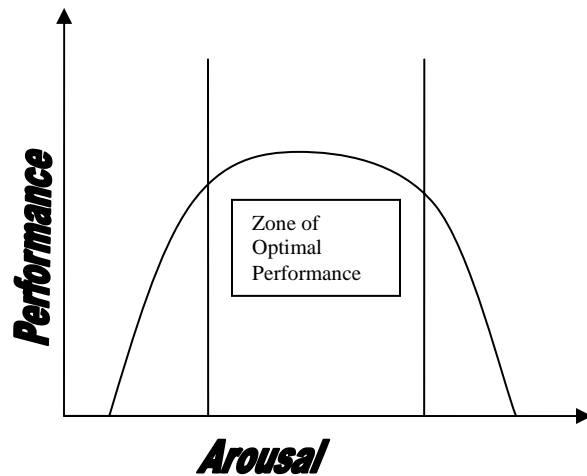


An emphasis on fun and enjoyment (both in practice and competition) goes a long way towards preventing over-arousal. Keeping the emphasis on fun can help alleviate the pressure the athlete feels to perform well and the expectations he or she perceives from others.

It has been found that prior to competition athletes have a specific level of arousal at which they tend to perform their best (called the *individual zone of optimal functioning* or *IZOF*). The level of arousal related to best performances is highly individualized; meaning the athletes on the swim team will vary greatly in terms of their optimal arousal.

Here are the steps athletes need to take to manage arousal:

- Be aware of the optimal arousal level and the factors that increase and decrease arousal.
- Be prepared by developing strategies to increase and decrease arousal as needed.
- Practice using arousal management skills in a variety of situations.



The Inverted “U” Theory of Arousal

Athletes need to develop an awareness of the arousal level at which they tend to perform best. They should be aware of how they need to feel physically and mentally to practice and perform well. This awareness can be achieved by evaluating past races to identify trends in how they tend to think and feel prior to good performances versus poor performances. Athletes do not necessarily want to rid themselves of increases in physical and mental functioning. Instead, they need to know the level of arousal that is best for them and specific strategies to enable them to attain the appropriate level.

To appropriately manage arousal, it is important to differentiate between things athletes can control and things they cannot control. Athlete must learn to control and manage their reaction to a situation or event that is out of their control (an uncontrollable, or UC.) As shown on the previous page, athletes can employ a variety of strategies to manage their arousal and attain the appropriate arousal level.

Athletes should prepare themselves with an arsenal of strategies to both increase and decrease their physical and mental arousal to attain a level that will be beneficial to performance. Having such an arsenal can provide athletes with a sense of control over their preparation and performance.

Concentration

Concentration can be understood as the ability to focus attention on relevant cues and to disregard irrelevant cues. Certainly, this is not an easy task prior to competition as the athlete is typically bombarded with potentially distracting stimuli, both internally and externally. Many skills are involved in effective concentration, but the primary skills involve knowing the following:

- **Where to Focus**

It is not enough for a coach to simply tell the athlete to concentrate; the athlete may have no idea what to do. Athletes need to understand where they should focus their attention. A review of workouts and meet performances can help identify beneficial concentration. It is helpful for athletes to think in terms of what their eyes and ears are doing. All athletes need to manage what they are seeing (internally and externally) and what they are hearing (internally and externally). Remind the athletes to focus on the “controllables” of performance (technique, stroke rate) as opposed to the “uncontrollables” (competitors’ performance, loud fans).

- **How to Attain the Appropriate Focus**

Once athletes are aware of where they should focus, they can use cue words, images and focal points to bring



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about the desired focus. Cue words and images can be technique reminders, positive affirmations, motivating slogans and so forth. What matters most is that the cue or image is meaningful to the athlete (For example, putting on a cap is the cue to rehearse the upcoming performance; the image of a leopard connotes an aggressive, fast start).

- **How to Shift Focus**

Athletes should be aware of when it is appropriate and beneficial to shift focus. They should develop cue words, images, and focal points to help them make the shift. For example, coming out of a turn, the athlete may need to assess the field then return to a focus on stroke and pace. Incorporating these focusing cues into pre-race routines is extremely beneficial. Athletes should rehearse how they will focus during various segments of the race.

- **How to Refocus When Distracted**

The first step in learning to refocus is being aware of a faulty or inappropriate focus. Next, just as when trying to focus appropriately, the athlete can use triggers, cues and focal points to re-attain the desired focus. Distractions will occur so it is crucial to regard these as part of competition; swimmers need to let it go, and get back to the desired focus.

In preparation for competition it is helpful for the athlete to develop a pre-race routine to attain the appropriate focus. Part of this preparation should be to develop and rehearse race focus points. With practice, the athlete should be able to manage his or her concentration (control eyes and ears) and attain a focus appropriate for the demands of the situation.

Self-Image

The nature of athletics and competition dictates that athletes will not always succeed. Failure is a part of the competitive experience. Athletes need to understand that failure offers learning experiences from which they can grow and that help them go on to achieve greater things. Athletes not only learn through mistakes and failures but also through coach feedback. Present this feedback as a critique of the athlete's skills and not as a critique of the athlete as a person. Athletes need to accept this criticism and learn from it. Effective, sensitive communication is crucial to ensure the message is properly sent and properly received.

Athletes should become their own best friends. Instead of relying on others to boost their self-confidence and self-esteem, they must take on that responsibility for themselves. This is accomplished, in part, by monitoring self-talk and keeping it positive and productive. Have the athletes ask themselves, "Would I allow my friends to talk to me the way I talk to myself?" It is important for athletes to have an understanding that the influence of self-talk extends beyond performance. Self-talk also has an impact on how athletes perceive and feel about themselves. It is crucial, therefore, for athletes to be supportive, encouraging, and positive in their daily internal dialogue and images.

As noted earlier, success and failure are a part of the competitive experience (and a part of life). With the help of others, athletes must separate performance outcome from how they feel about themselves. Whether the athlete has a good day or a bad day in training or competition should have no impact on the athlete's self-perception. Athletes should feel they are worthy regardless of their performance. How others (coach, teammates, and parents) interact with athletes after good and poor performances will have an impact on how athletes feel about themselves. Coaches and athletes should communicate this influence to all individuals involved with the athlete. The process of striving for personal success helps instill in athletes a sense of competence and confidence in themselves as athletes and as human beings. The skills athletes developed in their athletic development will serve in other endeavors as well.

Mental Preparation for Competition

Athletes must recognize the importance of developing a pre-competition routine to get their bodies and minds ready to race. A first step is for athletes to be aware of their individual zone of optimal functioning—how they need to think and feel to perform at their best. Next, athletes must develop a mental routine to help attain this optimal pre-competition state. Skills such as imagery, self-talk, concentration, and arousal control (discussed in the preceding sections) help the athlete to optimally prepare his or her mind to race. A solid mental preparation routine also enables the athlete to manage potential distractions and unexpected events. With mental preparation athletes are able when necessary to "stay in their own lanes" and let their bodies do the jobs they are trained to do.