

Try This Pre-Race Ritual to Stay Calm and Confident for Big Swims

by Dr. Alan Goldberg



THE PROBLEM: One key mental understanding you need to grasp if you'd consistently like to swim your best when it counts the most is the fact that ***“races are always won or lost before the start!”*** That is, what you focus on the time leading up to your swims, including your warm-up and time behind the blocks will either make or break your race.

For example, if you allow your pre-race focus to go to the wrong things (anything related to outcome, cuts you need, who you're swimming against or what people may think of you if you perform poorly), then you'll get nervous, physically tighten up, lose your confidence and end up disappointed!.

Learning to control your pre-race concentration is absolutely KEY to your swimming loose and fast under pressure!

The heart of staying calm and composed pre-event, in the state that I call “good nervous,” (you're excited about the swim and have a few butterflies floating around in your belly), comes from learning to use a set pre-race ritual in order to distract yourself from all of the distractions that could potentially get you too nervous to swim your best. ***In fact, out of control, pre-race nerves are one of the biggest causes of choking in this sport and are almost always driven by your concentration mistakes behind the blocks.***

As I've discussed in other posts, your pre-performance ritual helps provide you with very specific things that you can focus on that will help take your mind off all the things that could potentially sabotage your race. For example, if I am completely focused on my stretching ritual behind the blocks and the feel of each stretch, then that will help me take my focus away from all of the last minute negative thoughts and doubts which are so common to racing under big meet pressure.

What I'd like to suggest you add to your pre-race ritual is a little physical technique you can use behind the blocks when you notice your nervous system starting to rev up into the “red zone.” The following technique will help you battle those last-minute nerves, so that you're able to stay confident and in control right before you get up on the blocks.

Here's how it works:

If you notice you're starting to get too anxious when you get behind the blocks, first take a mental note about how nervous you are on a scale of zero to ten. (Zero being that you're totally chill and 10 being that you're freaking out). Shift your concentration to making a fist with either hand. Bring the tension in that hand and up and down your arm to about 90% of your strength and ***be sure that you place all your attention on the feeling of tension up and down your arm.*** Hold the tension for about 5 seconds and then deliberately and slowly allow that tension to diminish as you loosen your hand and arm. As you do this, ***be sure you keep your focus entirely on the feelings of your wrist and arm loosening up.*** Focus on this loosening up for about 5 seconds.

Next, repeat this same process, tightening your wrist and arm for 5 seconds, and then loosening for that same amount of time, focusing closely on the ***FEEL*** of first the tension and

then the looseness in your hand and arm. Then check in with yourself to see if your nervousness “score,” (0 – 10) has changed in any way. Whether it's come down a bit or stayed the same, if you have time, repeat this same process for one or two more cycles of tightening and loosening, being sure that all of your concentration is on the feel of what you're doing and NOT on any thoughts that may be bopping around between your ears.

Don't worry if you notice these kinds of thoughts. They're perfectly normal. Just be sure that when they do pop up and try to get your attention, you immediately direct all your focus back to the feel of what you're doing.

By deliberately tightening and loosening your fist whenever you're anxious pre-race, you'll find that with enough practice, you'll get quite skilled at calming your nervous system down right before you get up on the blocks! However, keep in mind that to enable this technique to really work for you, you must practice it regularly on your own, long before you get to that meet. Sufficient practice will enable this skill to get into your “muscle memory” and thus be much more effective when it's race time and you're feeling nervous!