



Home / Tips & Training / *Mental Training*

[BACK](#)

## D IS FOR DEDICATION

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BY AIMEE C. KIMBALL, PhD//Special Correspondent

For many swimmers, their sport is more than just a hobby. It's more than just something they do to get fresh air, meet people and get some exercise. There is nothing wrong if you swim just for fun, but if you treat sport as hobby, it's hard for you to expect to swim your best. Anyone looking to perform to their potential needs to be dedicated to their sport. This article is for team leaders and individuals who want to take their performance and the performance of those around them to the next level.

### Get on the Same Page

Athletes participate in sport for many different reasons. While individuals' rationale for competing might differ, in order to be successful the whole team needs to be working towards the same goals. The first way to develop more committed athletes is to make sure they are all on the same page with what the team is trying to accomplish. Open and honest communication about team goals and about each individual's contribution to the team's mission is essential. At the start of each season, the team should discuss the answers to the following questions:

1. What do we strive to accomplish? How do we accomplish this?
2. What drives us to be better? How does our motivation help us to reach our goals?
3. What do you enjoy about swimming? How can we find balance between your enjoyment and what the team is trying to accomplish?

From this discussion, you can create a team motto and before each practice huddle as a team and say your motto to remind the team what they are working towards and what everyone has committed to. When members of a team have a shared goal, they will begin to demonstrate a greater dedication to their sport and team.

### Relationships Are Key

Once everyone is on the same page and knows what is expected of them, it is important to interact with team members in a way that enhances their commitment to these goals. Leaders need to do more than just be role models, it is also essential that they demonstrate their respect for, interest in, and care for their teammates. Team leaders can use the following suggestions to help build a strong sense of mutual trust and support amongst teammates, which will ultimately improve dedication to each other:

1. Ask for input and constructive advice and be willing to listen
2. Get to know individuals outside of sport
3. Remove hierarchies. All members are equally important
4. Encourage support for everyone's success. Compete but cooperate

### Dedication Starts with Motivation

Ultimately individual dedication hinges on individual motivation. The athletes who often demonstrate the most dedication are those who love the sport and work to see themselves improve. Getting athletes to focus on becoming their best can be difficult, but when leaders build a culture emphasizing pride in effort and daily improvement, team members become more dedicated to what they do in both practice and competition. By having athletes state goals for each practice and by rewarding the process of achieving those goals, athletes will take to heart the importance of individual improvement. This increases their sense of intrinsic motivation which will then enhance their dedication to the team.

### Know Your Purpose

Another important aspect of dedication is sense of purpose. Athletes want to know that they are contributing something to their team. For athletes whose talent may not be as great as their effort, it can be hard to feel like they are important to those around them. Thus, team leaders need to be cognizant of each swimmer's strengths and make a point of consistently acknowledging and thanking them for their contributions. Whether it's their physical ability or their support of teammates, individuals want to know what they contribute is meaningful, and when they discover their purpose they will further dedicate themselves to bettering the team through their identified strengths.

### What if I Won't Dedicate 100%?

Knowing how to be fully dedicated to something is a very important life skill to have. If you don't ever learn what it means to give 100%, how will you know if you can be successful outside of swimming? There are many reasons why athletes do not fully commit to their sport, some are completely understandable (involvement in other activities) while others need to be overcome (laziness, don't want to make the sacrifices). Some athletes are at a stage where they just swim for fun rather than the competition, so giving 100% to swimming isn't important to them. Whatever your current reason for not being fully dedicated, make sure you are still maximizing your commitment level given varying priorities. What I mean is, if you sign up for a swim team, know what is required and maintain that commitment. If you are not willing to put forth the effort that the team requires, there might be a better team for you because you are likely to end up unhappy if you are on a highly-competitive team but you aren't a highly competitive person. If you find a team that matches your motivation, you will most likely enjoy the sport more and be able to match your dedication level to that of your teammates. I caution you not to sell yourself short though. Some people don't want to be on a competitive team because they don't believe the "extreme" swimmers can have any fun. However, the majority of people who give 100% love the sport and find most of it enjoyable. They find the fun in knowing they are getting better, pride in the hard work they put in and excitement in beating someone new or in getting a PR in a race.

### Levels of Dedication

- *No Dedication*: Showing up at practice when I feel like it.
- *Minimum Dedication*: Showing up to mandatory practices.
- *Moderate Dedication*: Working hard at mandatory practices and some optional practices.
- *High Dedication*: Working hard at all available practices and doing a little bit extra outside of the pool
- *Total Dedication*: Working hard at all available practices and doing everything you can outside of the pool (mental training, nutrition, strength/flexibility training...)

If right now you are moderately dedicated to your sport but really want to become a better swimmer, you do not have to totally dedicate yourself to swimming and make your life revolve around it. In order to see some improvement, you just have to do a little bit more than you are now. Maybe you don't have time for extra training, but you may be able to read the latest articles in *Splash* magazine or watch an instructional video on YouTube. To become the best swimmer you can be and to truly reach your potential, you do need higher levels of dedication, which include out-of-pool activities. Ultimately, you have to choose your own dedication level, which should be based on your ultimate goals and willingness to make sacrifices. Olympic dreams require more than moderate dedication, while participating on a high school team may not. It's up to you whether you want to see how good you can be, but your potential in the pool can only be met through consistent dedication. Dedicating yourself to a sport is about working to accomplish something and putting in the effort necessary to meet the challenge. It is much more disappointing to finish a race with a less-than-ideal time and think to yourself, "If only I did a little more" than to finish and say "I gave it all I had."

### Dedication Decoded

Someone once told me that "*Dedication is when you are bent over, drenched in sweat, just about to pass out, and then you smile.*" I think there's some truth in the idea that dedication is about pushing your limits and still enjoying the process. If you can get yourself and your team to do that, you know they have the dedication necessary to succeed.

### Make it Great!

#### About Aimee C. Kimball, PhD:

Dr. Aimee C. Kimball is the Director of Mental Training at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's Center for Sports Medicine. She received a PhD from the University of Tennessee where she specialized in sport psychology. She is an Association of Applied Sport Psychology Certified Consultant, and is a member of the American Psychological Association, the United States Olympic Committee's Sport Psychology Registry, the USA Swimming Sports Medicine Network, and the NCAA Speakers Bureau. As a Mental Training Consultant, Dr. Kimball has worked with professional, collegiate, high school, recreational, and youth athletes in a variety of sports, including assisting the Pittsburgh Steelers in analyzing potential draft picks and the Pittsburgh Penguins in developing their players. She has been a featured speaker at conferences across the nation and has appeared in numerous media outlets across the country. Currently, Dr. Kimball works with athletes, coaches, corporate leaders, and other performers to assist them in achieving success in sport and life. (412-432-3777; [kimballac@upmc.edu](mailto:kimballac@upmc.edu))

[BACK](#)