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SWIMMING FAST UNDER PRESSURE: CONTROLLING YOUR RACE FOCUS

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BY DR. ALAN GOLDBERG//COMPETITIVEDGE.COM

WHY DO SOME SWIMMERS GO SLOWER IN RACES THAN THEY DO IN PRACTICE?

The secret to swimming fast when it counts the most is to maintain control of your concentration during your **entire** race. Far too many swimmers allow their race concentration to drift away from what they are **DOING** during the race and go to **THINKING** about how they feel, how fast they may or may not be going or where their competitors are. **Every stroke you take during a race where your focus in on THOUGHTS is a slow, inefficient stroke.** Contrast that to what happens when these same swimmers practice, and you will see an entirely different focus of concentration. In training, these athletes focus on the **FEEL** of what they are doing, one stroke at a time and have little to no thinking going on! **Consistently swimming fast under pressure is all about learning to keep your race focus on this kind of FEEL!**

WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN TO FOCUS ON FEEL?

Every swimmer is different and focusing on feel varies depending upon the individual athlete and the stroke that they're swimming.

- One breaststroker I worked with knew he was going fast because he could feel a burning sensation in his arms with each stroke. Whenever he wanted to go fast, he would shift his concentration to feeling this burn.
- A flyer I worked with would concentrate on the feeling of pressing down the water with her chest just the right amount, and whenever she did that, her stroke was fast and efficient.
- A freestyler learned that he would go fast whenever he could feel his stroke be long and smooth. Using this, he trained himself to concentrate on the feeling of the stretch under his arm with each stroke he took.

Having a race focus on feel is what I call the “gas pedal,” because whenever you concentrate on feel, you’ll always go fast!

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO FOCUS ON “THINKING” AS YOU RACE?

Many swimmers unknowingly allow their concentration to be preoccupied with thoughts while they race.

- If someone passes you and you hear in your head, “I can’t let her do that! I’ve got to pick it up or she’ll beat me! I need to go faster,” then your focus for those strokes has left your body and “feel,” and gone into your head to thoughts.
- If you turn into the last 50 of a 200 and you notice that your arms and legs are starting to feel heavy and you hear, “Oh no! I’m getting tired! I’m really hurting and starting to slow down,” then your concentration has shifted to thinking.
- If in the middle of your race, you notice a teammate whom you regularly outswim in practice starting to pull away from you and you think, “Here we go again! How is this possible? I always work harder than him, why does this always happen to me,” your race focus is now focused on thinking.

Having a race focus on thoughts as you swim is what I call the “brake pedal,” because it will always slow you down!

HOW DO I DETERMINE WHAT SPECIFIC “FEEL” FOCUS I SHOULD USE?

You can work with your coach to have him/her help you figure out what specific focus you should use for your races.

- Your “feel” focus may vary throughout a swim and be directly related to your race strategy, where you take it out at one pace, build in the middle and then push it even harder the last 50.
- Your focus may be one specific thing your coach wants you to do to keep your stroke mechanically correct.
- You may also want to try experimenting in practice by noticing what you’re feeling in your body whenever you’re going fast.

Keep in mind that focusing on “feel” does not involve telling yourself, “I feel good,” or “I feel bad.” That’s thinking about how you feel!

WHAT DO I DO IF I CAN’T STOP MYSELF FROM THINKING WHENEVER I SWIM?

Keep in mind that thinking is absolutely normal and everyone does it. Furthermore, you can’t really stop yourself from thinking. The instant you tell yourself, “don’t think,” you are thinking!

- You want to become aware the instant your focus drifts towards thinking, and then quickly return your focus to the “feel” of what you’re doing.
- If more thoughts bubble up 30 seconds later, no worries. Quickly return your focus to feel.

- Stay aware throughout practice, and every time thinking pops up, let it be, but immediately "change the channel" and switch your focus back to feel!"

This is how you practice swimming fast under pressure. In practice, deliberately make a point of having a "feel focus." Whenever you train, spend a good part of your set concentrating on the feel of what you're doing, in your body and whenever thoughts intrude, quickly bring yourself back to feel. In this way, you will train yourself to immediately notice when you've lost your focus and gotten distracted by thinking, and then instinctively bring yourself back to where it needs to be, on the FEEL of what you're doing!

As a sports psychology consultant, Dr. Alan Goldberg works with swimmers at every level. A presenter at the Olympic Training Center, swim coaches clinics and clubs around the country, Dr. G specializes in helping swimmers struggling with performance problems, get unstuck and swim fast when it counts the most. He works over Skype, providing one-on-one consultation with swimmers and other athletes around the world. Dr. G has written over 35 mental toughness training programs and books. In addition, he is a regular contributor to Splash Magazine.



For more FREE mental toughness tips and swim articles, go to Dr. Goldberg's website, www.competitivedge.com and click on "choose your sport" and then "swimming." You can also visit him on Facebook, follow him on Twitter and sign up for his free, monthly mental toughness newsletter.

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Questions? I hope you'll feel free to contact Dr. Goldberg at Goldberg@competitivedge.com or call directly (413) 549-1085.

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