

Staying in Control Behind the Blocks

By Dr. Alan Goldberg

Races are won and lost before the start!

So many swimmers lose their races before they even get in the pool. This is because they allow themselves to get far too nervous leading up to their event, and especially the time they spend behind the blocks. They may be upset about a previous event, worried about the outcome of this one or overly focused on and intimidated by a rival swimmer. By the time they get up on the blocks for the start, their stress level is well into the RED ZONE and they are much too uptight to swim the way they do in practice, long and strong. As a consequence, somewhere in the middle of the race the proverbial piano drops on their back, their arms and legs feel like lead and they slow way down.

What's the real problem here?

First you have to understand that last minute nervousness and out of control excitement is pretty normal. A lot of swimmers feel this way pre-race, yet they still manage to have great swims. Know that by themselves, these last second jitters won't knock you off center. In fact, often they can actually help get you UP for a fast swim. What WILL get you into trouble however, is YOUR RESPONSE to this pre-race nervousness. The key here is how you handle the flood of last minute doubts and negativity and the feeling of those man-eating butterflies swirling around inside your stomach.

What can you do about it?

The mental skill I'd like to introduce to you to help you learn to tame this unsettling adrenaline upsurge is a physical strategy called ACTING AS IF. Acting as if is based upon the principle that IF YOU ACT THE WAY YOU WANT TO BECOME, then soon YOU'LL BECOME THE WAY YOU ACT! With the proper practice, you can use ACTING AS IF as a bridge between how you FEEL RIGHT NOW and how you WANT TO FEEL IN THE FUTURE.

What is acting as if?

Acting as if is what I call a "WINNER'S FALLBACK POSITION." When a winner is feeling scared and intimidated, he/she ACTS AS IF they're calm and in control. They do this PHYSICALLY by keeping a calm expression on their face, breathing slowly and deeply, keeping their head up, shoulders relaxed and physically moving as if they felt relaxed, slow and even! In this way you physically PRETEND to be relaxed. Keep in mind that with acting as if, it doesn't really matter how nervous you may be feeling on the INSIDE. What matters is that on the OUTSIDE you ACT CALM and show the world that you're in control and everything is fine.

Understand that acting as if has absolutely NOTHING to do with positive self-talk!

You do not have to try to "be positive," either verbally with those around you or in your head. Instead you simply acknowledge that you're scared, intimidated or not feeling confident on the inside, BUT on the outside you deliberately act the exact opposite.

How does acting as if work?

Your EMOTIONS or how you feel on the INSIDE are ALWAYS determined by how you act on the OUTSIDE. Most people think that, I smile because I feel happy, when the truth is really the opposite! You feel happy BECAUSE you're smiling! So if you're feeling angry and frustrated inside about your last event, you might probably show this on the outside in your facial expression and tightness in your jaw, your head and shoulders would be down, you might drag your feet as you walk across the deck and you might express your displeasure outwardly in your language and voice tone. However, this kind of outward behavior would only serve to reinforce and strengthen these frustrated feelings on the inside!

But what if you felt this way on the inside, but instead, deliberately acted relaxed and even, kept a neutral expression on your face, made sure that your jaw muscles were relaxed and your head was up, and that you walked with a spring in your step? This kind of physical behavior would soon start you feeling emotionally more

upbeat, calmer and in control. Why? Because our “motions” or outward behaviors always determine our emotions or inner feelings!

Acting as if should be in every swimmer's mental toughness toolbox

- If you're behind the blocks and feeling really nervous, shaky and intimidated, what you want to show everyone watching is a swimmer who appears to be calm and confident.
- Keep your head up, shoulders relaxed, and don't allow yourself to engage in nervous behaviors/movements.
- Talk calmly, move deliberately and seemingly in control.

When you “act as if,” you are telling a lie with your body. On the inside you're feeling one way but on the outside, you're pretending to be another. Acting as if is the only acceptable lie you should ever tell, and as an athlete, this is an important one to master.