



How's your **HEAD** **GAME?**

The Olympic Trials are the last stop before the Games, and once again, the meet will mark the place where some dreams begin and others end. Anything can happen. Up-and-comers fight with amazing guts to earn an Olympic berth, while even seasoned veterans, displaying unshakable confidence, can be plagued by cruel fate and devastating failure.

If there was ever a swim meet more demanding of mental stamina, the Olympic Trials has got to be it.

The brutal process allows a zero margin for error. One-hundredth of a second can separate an Olympian from a swimmer going home. So how do Olympic hopefuls keep it together when everything is on the line? What is it that gives the go-to guy strength he didn't know he had? And how will these talented athletes stay mentally charged during this seven-day pressure cooker?

Whether you're an elite swimmer facing Olympic Trial demons or you're out

for your very first swim meet, follow this advice for improving your mental strategies for peak performance.

Ditch the Outcome Mindset

Going into a big meet such as the Trials, the obvious goal is to make the Olympic Team. But the fact of the matter is, you can't bring those goals to Trials with you, says sports psychologist Alan Goldberg, PhD. Thinking to yourself, 'I want to qualify,' is a huge mistake because you can't control the outcome. And the moment you concentrate on the wrong thing, you'll raise stress levels, lower your confidence and tighten up.

"Don't see it as 'tomorrow is the big-man competition that separates the men from the boys,' or you'll just increase the pressure. The outcome is a mental mistake that can cost you dearly," says Goldberg. Instead, focus on what you can control, such as race strategy, and staying calm and relaxed.

Getting psyched out by heavy-hitters

By Bonnie Moss
Special Splash Correspondent

is another common mistake. Intimidating opponents are irrelevant, says Goldberg. The real competition is in between your two lane lines.

"You're going to go faster focusing on your own race than you will if you try to beat someone," he said.

Relax!

It sounds basic, but staying calm and focused is not easy for everyone. Goldberg suggests using a pre-race ritual to relax. Rituals are important because they're familiar and comforting. Do what is normal – eat the same foods, stretch the same way, swim the same warm-up, etc.

Another tip is to control what your eyes see and ears hear. Don't look around at the competition, or think negatively while stretching. You'll tighten up, defeating the purpose. Try a popular stretching technique – progressive muscle relaxation – concentrating on each muscle group from head to toe. Stretch each group, hold for 10 seconds, then slowly release.

And don't forget to breathe. "If you can control your breathing, you can control anything," says Goldberg. He suggests inhaling slowly for four seconds, holding for two, then slowly exhaling for four. When you master this technique, incorporate mental imagery into your breathing pattern. Imagine the crowd, TV cameras, noise, even the chlorine smell. Picture yourself staying calm and swimming a perfect race.

Whether your techniques include personal rituals, stretching and breathing patterns, mental imagery, or divine intervention and prayer, start practicing now. Don't wait until a big meet to try something new. Remember, familiarity tames anxiety.

Break it Down

With any race, many swimmers will create unnecessary work, stress and self-induced pressure. "Simply do what needs to be done, and no more," says sports psychologist Jim Bauman, PhD. He breaks down the mental process into four simple steps: simplify, believe to win, execute and know your engine, and stay healthy.

First, simplify your life in and out of swimming. Every week should become easier as you approach the big meet. Bauman suggests using a training calendar to help you say no to things that take away from pool time. Plan your training, as well as your recovery and travel days, so that your calendar becomes your secretary and lets you focus on the task at hand.

Second, you must believe. Develop a genuine expectation of success. How closely can you match your goal time to what you can do on any given day? Define what needs to be done to connect those points, and do it. It's not about hoping, but about expecting it from yourself and believing it will happen.

Next, execute a plan. If you swim multiple events at your upcoming meet, have a pre-race, race and post-race plan in order to stay focused for each event. Build in a warm-up, warm-down, rest and recovery. Refuel and regroup your mental state. Execute your plan and think of it as, "Event 1 is Job 1. My job is to swim the 50 free as fast as I can."

Also, be in tune with your engine. Bauman suggests comparing your body to a car. What is your tachometer read-

ing before, during and after a race? Recognize when your engine is idling too low or when the needle is in the red, burning up too much energy. Know how many RPMs your engine will run at most efficiently. The grade in your fuel tank can also make or break a performance. Is it topped off with proper nutrition, hydration and rest? More importantly, what's in your reserve tank? When warning lights start to flash, and you go into oxygen debt, how will your engine respond? Knowing this can make the difference between you going into overdrive, and your competitor looking for a gas station.

Finally, stay healthy. Limit your exposure to crowds and new environments. Save the extra energy that you get from a good taper. You've heard the motto: "If you can walk, don't run. If you can drive, don't walk. If you can sit, don't drive. If you can sleep, don't sit. Above all, rest when it's time to rest, and go fast when it's time to go fast!"

Keep Quiet

How many times have you heard that the race is 90 percent mental? Not true, says Bauman. Your race should really be 80 to 90 percent physical, technical and tactical, and only 10 to 20 percent mental. "Anything more, you'll be in trouble," says Bauman. "It should be a physical effort, while mentally going along for the ride."

Think back to a disappointing race. You can probably recall what you were thinking and describe it using lots of "feeling" words (felt good, strong and loose).

Now recall your best race. What were you thinking about? Possibly nothing, if you were on auto-pilot. You stopped thinking and just let it happen. Bauman suggests that the best race swum is mentally quiet because all the effort goes into being technically and tactically proficient. You can think – which can make you nervous and steal precious energy from the body – or you can perform. Stay mentally quiet and just let it happen automatically. Says Bauman, "Don't try to do it. Just do it."

TAMING the Butterflies

If you've tried everything and just can't control your nervous energy, sports psychologist Jim Bauman suggests switching gears. Dig deep and face what you're fearing. Many athletes have a fear of failure, but they don't fight it. Instead, they embrace the incredible experience of racing and enjoy doing what it takes for them to compete. If anxiety is welcomed, it can be a positive and addictive tool. Most champions do anything to feel it. Veterans overcome obstacles and train all over again because they can't get enough of it. The thrill of the race is why swimmers compete and why Olympic heroes come back begging for more.

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