THEY CONQUERED THE POOL

LESSONS IN EXCELLENCE FROM THE BEST SWIMMERS ON THE PLANET

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Questions?

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A big thank you to my swim parents, J.P. and Lucie, who cajoled me out of bed on those dark, cold early mornings, drove me to practice, spent weekends away at meets and competitions all over North America, suffered outsized grocery bills, gave me perspective after bad swims, and encouraged me the opportunity to pursue my dreams in the pool.

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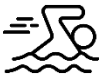


Welcome to *They Conquered the Pool*. This book is complementary to the mental training workbook *Conquer the Pool: The Swimmer's Ultimate Guide to a High-Performance Mindset*.

While *Conquer the Pool* is designed to help you formulate a plan to improve your mental skills, and by extension, your swimming in the pool, this book is all about getting motivated and inspired. To stoke your motivational embers into a raging bonfire.

How?

By highlighting how the chlorinated champions of our sport overcame setbacks, set audacious goals, and the mindsets they use to achieve unparalleled excellence.

From reading their stories and reading (or swimming) along with them as they pursue the pinnacle of the sport, you'll learn lessons for your own swimming.

You'll learn from Michael Phelps' ability to prospect everything for motivation to fuel the pursuit of difficult goals. Wins, losses, slights; Phelps used it all to motivate himself.

You will pick up Katie Ledecky's laser focus and unrelenting work ethic to build a performance that leaves nothing to chance on race day. Day in and day out, Ledecky crafts gold medal winning performances in training.

You might discover that focusing on just one or two simple details during practice, and executing them relentlessly and consistently, can cultivate excellence. The growth is slow initially, but accelerates over time, much like compound interest, ultimately leading to world-record-breaking results, as seen in the case of Mary T. Meagher.

You'll learn the value of competition and how it can push you to swim faster than you ever thought imaginable, as happened to Jason Lezak, helping you to see the value and benefit of letting your competitive instincts shine more frequently in the pool.

And you'll see how adversity and setbacks are often confidence and high-performance results in disguise, as was the case for Summer Sanders,

Tom Dolan, Amanda Beard, Sarah Sjostrom, and others, giving you a surge in confidence and motivation knowing that failing and adversity are not fatal.

Each story contains the peaks and valleys of the best swimmers on the planet, but we will not just stop there.

Beyond the times and medals, each story includes further discussion to help you apply the lessons for yourself in the pool. Key takeaways to summarize the lesson. And questions and challenges to encourage further reflection. Like a good warm-down, we'll also throw in motivational quotes to close out each chapter.

Reading about greatness is one thing; applying it to your own swimming is where the chlorinated goodness happens. The stories in this book will show you how to apply the timeless principles of excellence so that you too can achieve at the highest level, whatever your aspirations in the water may be.

Personalize your journey using the inspiration and stories of our sport's titans.

In the pages ahead, you will read stories and discussions from a selection of the best swimmers to ever dive into the water. Phelps. Ledecky. Dressel. Franklin. Sjostrom. And others.

It is tempting to try and copy-paste the preparation, training, and mindset of elite swimmers. But as you read the stories and discussions in this book, you'll see that there is no perfect or cookie-cutter way to excellence.

When reading the essays, put your thinking swim cap on and ask yourself: How is this advice and inspiration applicable to me? How can I apply these lessons to my specific situation to maximize my odds of success? What can I learn from the greats to "shortcut" my way to victory?

The essays that follow are not just about winning gold medals, breaking world records, or performing Herculean feats of excellence in the pool. They are a strong reminder of the transformative power of a strong mindset. The stories highlight the mindsets and mental frameworks that have propelled swimmers to the peak of their potential.

Each essay is a reminder that true excellence in the pool starts with what is happening between your goggle straps and under your swim cap.

Learn from the best. See how they do it. Find ways to apply it to your own swimming. Use their experiences for motivation.

By conquering your mindset, you will conquer the pool.

Let's dive in.

Chapter 1

Michael Phelps – Everything is Motivation

It's several months before the US Olympic Trials for the Athens 2004 Games, and Michael Phelps is getting all sorts of attention. Which should not be surprising.

Since his first Olympics in 2000, when he placed fifth in the 200m butterfly at the age of just 15 years, Phelps has been tearing up the pool. And the record books.

During the years between Olympics, he signed a sponsorship deal with Speedo that included a clause that will pay him out a cool million dollars if he wins seven gold medals at a single Olympic Games. He has broken eleven world records. Racked up five gold medals at World Championships.

The expectations for Olympic Trials, and the Athens Olympics later that summer, are high.

Naturally, with this type of success, along with it comes a specific type of naysayer.

Case in point:

With US Trials around the corner, Phelps, eighteen years old, attends a charity dinner in his hometown Baltimore, with his longtime coach, Bob Bowman. A local swim mom is in attendance, the mom of one of Phelps' teammates at the North Baltimore Aquatic Club.

She approaches and pipes up: "Michael, is it true? You're thinking of swimming the 100m butterfly at Trials? Why? You'll have no shot of winning that at the Olympics."

Before Phelps can offer up a retort, his coach smartly whisks him away. As coach and swimmer sit for dinner, Bowman can see that his swimmer is stewing over the comment.

"Let it go," says Bowman. "She has no clue."

Later that summer in Athens, Phelps steps up onto the block for the Olympic final of the 100m butterfly. In lane three, his American teammate, Ian Crocker, who holds the world record in the event. Crocker explodes to a quick lead off the start. At 50m, Crocker turns under his own world record pace,

with Phelps in fifth. Nothing but clear water between Crocker and gold. With 25m to go, Phelps is a full body length behind.

Why? You'll have no shot of winning that at the Olympics.

Phelps begins the charge. With 15m to go, Phelps is at Crocker's waist, breathing every stroke, accelerating.

No shot.

The lead continues to narrow. On the final stroke of the race, Phelps surges past Crocker to win gold in a time of 51.25, besting Crocker by just four-one-hundredths of a second and setting a new Olympic record.

Later, Phelps is warming down. It's been a busy week already for him. The 100m butterfly final was the 17th race of his Olympic program, and the following day he'd be swimming the heats of the 4x100 medley relay with his American teammates to shoot for an eighth Olympic medal.

Bowman tracks him down in the warm-down tank to congratulate the swimmer on a seventh Olympic medal and make plans for dinner.

But Phelps has something else on his mind.

"Remember that fundraiser we went to a couple of months ago?" says Phelps.

"Yesss…." Bowman says slowly, knowing what is coming.

"Remember how [that swim mom] told me I could never win the 100m butterfly and I shouldn't even enter it?" Phelps begins to grin. "Well, what's up now?"

DISCUSSION

Motivation is the most frequent topic in the emails I receive from swimmers, swim parents, and coaches. They ask how to build it, keep it, and ignite it on demand. One thing I notice is that there is a common belief that motivation can only be developed from positive moments in the pool.

For instance, swimmers believe they need a good workout to feel motivated to justify continuing to work hard in the pool. This creates an obvious "chicken and egg" dilemma: which comes first, the good workout or the motivation?

The truth is it doesn't matter. Adopting an "everything is motivation" mindset frees you from the mental gymnastics of wondering why you don't feel perfectly motivated daily before practice. Good practice or bad practice, fast race or slow race, it's all fuel and motivation.

Swimmers that rely exclusively on positive moments in the pool to sustain motivation will find motivation to be unpredictable. While breakthroughs and personal bests are essential as they provide feedback on the work you are doing in the pool, something negative will inevitably happen in or outside the pool. You might not achieve a best time, lose to a competitor, have a bad workout, get injured, or face criticism.

In the case of Phelps, that one comment at a random fundraiser wasn't the only thing that fueled him to success in Athens. But it was added to the mix. Along with his goal times, intrinsic desire to excel, and the competition around him, Phelps took that moment and used it to his advantage. For when he needed it on a morning when he was tired and exhausted from training, or at the long of a demanding main set, or any other time during his preparation when he needed an accelerant for his energy and focus.

Elite-minded swimmers use it all. They take the motivational fuel from breakthroughs and moments of personal excellence *and* the moments when they stumble or when external voices pipe up with criticism.

Swimmers often struggle to support the white-hot energy and motivation after setting a big goal. But by using everything as fuel, the successes, slights, triumphs, and losses, they ensure motivation burns bright long after the excitement of a new goal fades or the first sign of adversity hits.

"I could be motivated not just by winning. By improving my strokes. Hitting split times. Setting records, doing best times," said Phelps. "There were any number of things I could do to get better. Winning never gets old, but there was a way to win that showed I was getting better and could get better still."

CHALLENGE

- This week, there will be moments that test you. Will you use them as kindling to stoke your motivational fire?
- Think back to the times when you felt most motivated to work your tail off in the pool and excel. What was it about those moments that lit a fire under you?

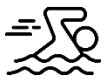
KEY TAKEAWAY

There is an abundance of motivation available to you. Whether you swim well or swim terribly, everything can be used to fuel your journey in the pool.

"Anything that comes along, he turns it into motivation. There's not one stimulus that he can't use to help him be a better swimmer."
– **Bob Bowman**

Chapter 2

Katie Ledecky – Train to Get Your Hand on the Wall First



On August 9, 2016, the finalists for the 200m freestyle got up onto the blocks at the Rio Olympics. In lane five, American Katie Ledecky. She is about to face the toughest and hardest race of her schedule.

Ledecky would be facing off against Sarah Sjostrom of Sweden in four, world record holder Federica Pellegrini of Italy in three and Emma McKeon of Australia in lane seven.

Five of the fastest ten performers of all time in the event were on the blocks.

Although Ledecky was the world record holder in the 400 and 800m freestyles, the 200 was basically her "off" event.

"The 200 free is such a more stressful event for me than the 400 or 800," said Ledecky. "Just because I can't really settle into my rhythm. It's one mistake and you're done."

There was no guarantee of gold.

Sjostrom was in top form, already having won gold and setting a new world record in the 100m butterfly. There was also Pellegrini, whose best time of 1:52.98 was the fastest in history.

There was nothing certain about the outcome. But there was one thing for sure—Ledecky had rehearsed the gold medal finish she would need in practice a million times.

Setting some greasy goals

In the fall of 2013, Katie Ledecky and her coach at Nation's Capital, Bruce Gemmell, sat down and hashed out goals for the Rio Olympics, three years on.

Things had gone well—really well—at Worlds the previous summer in Barcelona. Ledecky had posted the second fastest time ever in the 400 free

and broke world records in the 800 and 1500m freestyles—the latter by over six seconds—on her way to winning four gold medals.

Although the world and American records understandably got all the attention, Ledecky's lead-off swim on the 4x200m freestyle relay had been a personal best time of 1:56.32—and good enough for 7th fastest in the world that year.

Which got the coach and swimmer thinking: Could they take a shot at the 200-400-800 freestyle sweep in Rio?

Ledecky and Gemmell hammered out goal times. The plan was to beat the world record in the 400m freestyle and swimming a casual 8:05 in the 800m freestyle—a time that was eight seconds faster than her swim in Barcelona.

Pretty big goals.

And yup—gold in the 200m freestyle.

Nobody had done the 200-400-800 freestyle sweep since Debbie Meyer in 1968 at the Mexico City Olympics.

But if there was anybody who was more than happy to take a rip at it, it was Katie Ledecky and her legendary work ethic.

Building the race you want starts in practice

As Rio neared, Ledecky continued to slash and cut at her world records.

In the 1500, she took a total of eleven seconds off her PB/WR. In the 800, by January of 2016 she was "already" swimming an 8:06—just one second off her goal time for Rio. In 2014, she beat the world record for the first time in the 400, and did it again two weeks later, dipping into the 3:58s.

The 200 freestyle was coming along nicely, too—by the time Worlds came around in 2015, Ledecky found herself at the top of the podium in the event, out-touching Italy's Pellegrini by 0.16 for the gold.

Ledecky was putting plenty of distance between herself and the competition in the longer races, but she knew that the 200 in Rio would be close. Gold would come down to who got their finger tips to the wall first.

And so, Ledecky worked on getting her fingers to the wall in practice.

During sets she would finish reps the same way she planned to close out the final 15m of the 200 freestyle: her feet picking up to a thunderous churn, her stroke tempo picking up, putting her head down and sprinting for the wall.

Gemmell would watch from the pool deck as she conditioned herself to finish in a flurry. Over and over, she would charge at the wall, building up an inventory of "perfect" finishes.

Willing herself through the pain so that when it came down to it, when her legs are gassed and her lungs are on fire, she would be able to rely on the finish she'd practice a million and a half times.

"She's going to get her hand to the wall first."

Ledecky took it out quick in the final. She's got one gear—*go*—and the plan was to take it out fast and bring it back faster.

On the third 50 she had the lead, with Sarah Sjostrom on her shoulder. At 175m, it looks like Sjostrom just might reel in Ledecky.

But nope.

Ledecky did the exact same thing she'd done in training.

"When Sarah pulled up even, I thought, I've seen Katie finish that race more than a thousand times," said Gemmell. "She's going to get her hand to the wall first."

Ledecky's arms kept rolling, her kick kept spitting up white water, and she barreled into the wall to win gold in a time of 1:53.73, Sjostrom second in 1:54.08.

Ledecky would complete the golden 200-400-800 freestyle, plus a 4x200m freestyle relay gold and a silver in the 4x100m freestyle relay.

DISCUSSION

Watching the performances of elite swimmers it's easy to think that it's all talent, or that's it all easy. Those championship performances are built by hand in practice. Daily. Over and over again.

Nothing glamorous about it—just relentless, disciplined practice. By finishing at a full clip over and over in practice Ledecky didn't need to think about what to do, or how she was feeling in the water, or what the competition was doing. She simply relied on what she had done in practice.

The benefits of being able to auto-pilot better competition habits in practice are obvious: less overthinking, less second-guessing, and the confidence to know that your best performance will show up for you on race day.

"No wonder she can do that in the pressure cooker at Rio," says Gemmell. "She knew exactly what she was doing in practice, over and over again."

When you head to the pool today, make the decision to train the way you want to compete.

The way you finish each lap on a full, lunging stroke with your head down. Attack the walls. Swim with race pace technique. Be competitive with yourself and your teammates. Increase the pressure.

Each day you go to the pool, you are carving out a performance. Make sure it's the same one you want to show up on race day with.

CHALLENGE

- What can you do at practice today that will prepare you for the difficulties of competition?
- Are there habits you can install into your training that will help you get your hand on the wall first on race day?

KEY TAKEAWAY

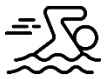
The pressure of competition and other swimmers pose a big challenge. Preparing yourself to thrive under the stress of competition can be honed in practice. Go to practice today and train to win on race day.

"Her strength is not in any physical attribute. It's not even in any particular technique. It's her overwhelming desire to do what she needs to do to get better."

– Bruce Gemmell

Chapter 3

Mary T. Meagher – Success is Ordinary



At the age of 13, Mary T. Meagher decided that she was going to break a world record.

While her teammates were daydreaming about Junior Olympics, State cuts, or wanting to qualify for nationals, Meagher had made the decision to take a run at the world record in the 200m butterfly.

But she knew that she would have to ramp things up in training in order to make this dream happen.

Meagher decided on two specific things: First, she would show up to swim practice every day, on time. And second, every turn, during every practice, would be done to the best of her ability.

A year later, Meagher would break the first of her world records.

In 1981, a couple years after throwing herself into excellence with just those two little decisions, Mary T. Meagher broke the world record in the 200-meter butterfly for the fifth time, swimming an eye-popping 2:05.96 in Brown Deer, Wisconsin.

In the span of two years, Meagher shaved over four seconds off the world record in the 200m butterfly.

Her record would stand for nearly two decades.

Success is ordinary

The way you swim in the water is influenced by dozens of things outside of genetics and talent.

The final product of your swimming, the nail you hammer on race day, is the product of countless skills and habits developed slowly, intermittently and fitfully over your career.

It's almost impossible to count the number of ways that you improve over the years. You improve the entry on your dive, shaving half a second. You spend a couple months really working to improve your dolphin kick, giving

you another burst of improvement. You clean up your diet, giving you more energy and better practices, which give you another level-up.

This is how excellence happens.

By mastering the details. By nailing the seemingly trivial things.

But instead, most of us focus on working harder (which is kind of a meaningless sentiment when not directed at specific aspects of our swimming).

Or we spend our time and energy wishing that we were more talented.

But for a quick second, just imagine how many more improvements are lurking around the corner if you tightened up your body position, turned a little faster, got more sleep each night, ate a little bit better, or made your streamline a little more streamline-y?

When viewed this way, excellence looks a little boring, doesn't it? It certainly lacks the stratospheric breakout story that we come to expect when describing successful swimmers.

When researcher Danny Chambliss asked Meagher what the biggest misconception was about elite swimmers, Meagher replied, "People don't know how ordinary success is."

DISCUSSION

Mary T.'s decisions to hammer a couple details look border-line meaningless on the outside. But when something is done really well consistently over time it produces excellence. And more powerfully, this excellence spills out into other areas of your swimming.

When Meagher became determined to make it to practice on time every single day, it gave "her the sense that every minute of practice time counted." This meant getting to the pool, which often required her mom to perform feats of heavy-footed driving across Louisville, Kentucky from school to practice.

Each practice started to take on a heightened sense of importance. By performing each turn in the pool as quickly and as technically perfectly as possible, Meagher created a standard for her swimming that would soon infect the rest of her training.

While most swimmers tend to float like manatees in and out of the walls, performing turns that are on the cusp of getting them disqualified in competition, Meagher charged in, touched perfectly, and charged out.

Faster turns also meant faster breakouts, and the confidence to know that her turns would a strong point for her, something she could rely on during days and races where she wasn't feeling her best in the water.

The first decision to execute awesome turns led to a cascading series of benefits. Faster turns made for faster breakouts, faster breakouts meant faster average speed per length, and so on.

Master a couple of "small things" and watch your motivation and confidence skyrocket

The competence and mastery you get from getting good at what most swimmers will consider trivial or insignificant forms the basis of the chasm that will separate you from them over time.

The cycle is powerful as it is simple.

You get good at one thing, your motivation and confidence surge, leading to better swimming. As you master one thing, your newfound confidence encourages you to master the more difficult things ahead.

The pattern repeats itself over time, steadily forging you into a crazy-fast swimmer:

On the surface (ha—swimming pun!), these details look boring and border-line meaningless. Taken individually and when done once or intermittently they don't really impact performance.

Showing up on time to practice? Doing every turn like a chlorinated monster? Pfft—anyone can do that.

And yet how often do you? How often do your teammates? How often does the competition?

"There is nothing extraordinary or superhuman in any one of those actions; only the fact that they are done consistently and correctly, and all together, produce excellence," said Chambliss.

CHALLENGE

- What are 1-2 simple things you control that you can do every day that will have compound returns on your swimming this season?

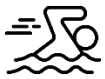
KEY TAKEAWAY

Swimmers often underestimate the power of small "boring" details, done exceedingly well, consistently over time.

“I just took it one step at a time.”
– Mary T. Meagher

Chapter 4

Alex Popov – Excellence, Stroke by Stroke



On the final night of competition at the 2003 World Aquatic Championships in Barcelona, Alexander Popov mounted the blocks for what would be his final major championship win.

The 31-year-old Russian sprinter had already done it all in the sport.

He'd won back-to-back Olympic gold medals in the 50 and 100m freestyles in 1992 and 1996, the only swimmer to accomplish the feat. He broke the world records in both events while repeatedly swatting away up-and-comers to the sprint events for well over a decade.

When Popov dove in on July 26, 2003, and exploded to the surface on his way to gold in the 50m freestyle, he did so with his trademark precision and grace. Champion swimmers make the sport look easy—and Popov's somehow made it look even easier.

He took just 31 strokes—in a brief, no cap and from an old-school start—to smash the world record in the 50m freestyle in 2000 in a time of 21.64.

Popov's efficiency was developed with a relentless focus on technique in training.

Under the watchful eye of his longtime coach Gennadi Touretski, Popov would regularly swim 5,000m straight freestyle. Touretski avoided doing drills in practice, placing an emphasis on swimming "slow" but with excellent form and target stroke rates at all times.

"The only way to win is non-stop perfection," said Touretski.

The reality is that Popov's stroke didn't change from training to competition. The same effortless looking technique he used on race day was the same balanced, high-elbow catch that he brought to practice every day.

There was no distinction. There wasn't practice swimming or competition swimming.

There was only one stroke.

The effect of all those meters with perfect technique in practice was that by the time Popov got up on the block, he didn't need to think about what he

wanted to do. He didn't need to worry about his stroke collapsing, or choking, or planning how he wanted to feel in the water.

It was just a matter of diving into the water and letting his body do what it had done a million times in training.

Popov's habitual technical excellence was such that he could regularly swim at world-record setting pace in training. Literally.

Story goes that at a pre-Olympic training camp in Colorado Springs Popov got up on the blocks for a surprise "get up" 50m effort.

The coaches in attendance—including USC's Dave Salo, who later talked about the occurrence, clocked Popov on a stopwatch at a time that was 0.10 seconds below the existing world record.

Popov trained the way he raced. And he raced the way he trained. How many swimmers can say the same?

DISCUSSION

There is often a disconnect between the way swimmers train and the way that they compete.

The technique they use in practice is different from the one they use in competition. The way they attack (or don't) the walls in training doesn't match up with the turns they need to be successful in competition. The streamlines a swimmer does during the main set doesn't reflect what kind of streamlines they want to use on race day.

Even the mindset they have is different: in practice they are loose and unfocused. In competition they try to get super focused and mega serious.

It's one of the reasons that swimmers choke under the bright lights: the experience of competing is so different from what they experience in training that it is overwhelming.

The competition experience is so totally and utterly new that they cannot help but feel overwhelmed. It's no wonder that many of the swimmers I talk to complain about overthinking when they get to the big meet.

This is a default reaction when we are face to face with an unpredictable, foreign and pressure-packed environment. We second doubt our preparation because it doesn't line up with what we want to do in competition.

Training how you want to race puts all of your technical elements of your swimming—the way you attack the walls, the breathing patterns you use,

the manner in which you explode through your breakout—and puts it on auto-pilot.

When you step up on the block you shouldn't have to think about your stroke. You shouldn't have to imagine what your breakout is going to feel like. You don't need to wonder if you will nail those turns or not.

Those habits have long ago been ingrained and the tracks laid down. All you need to do at this point is clear your mind and swim, your body and your training habits will take care of the rest.

Practice isn't separate from competition. Practice *is* competition.

CHALLENGE

- What are some ways you can increase the transfer between what you are doing in training and what you hope to do in competition?

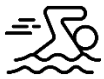
KEY TAKEAWAY

Training is where you create the performance you will unleash on race day. Be intentional with your yardage and meters, and excellence will be second-nature under pressure.

"We don't rise to the level of our expectations;
we fall to the level of our training."
– Archilochus

Chapter 5

Jason Lezak – Compete!



When Jason Lezak dove into the water on August 11, 2008, for the final leg of the men's 4x100m freestyle relay at the Beijing Olympics, it was inconceivable that he and the Americans could win.

Personal best times and common sense dictated that it simply wasn't possible.

As Lezak surfaced from his breakout he was nearly a body length behind the team from France, who came into the race as a lock for gold. France had their ace, Alain Bernard, the world record holder in the 100m freestyle, as their anchor, his massive arms hurling him across the surface, a rooster tail of water behind him.

With a lead.

A *big* lead.

But then somehow, someway, the impossible happened.

"We're going to smash them."

Let's step back for a moment and set the table of that fateful race:

The French team, being anchored by Bernard, had qualified fastest. They were the undisputed favorites to win. And not just win but dominate. On paper, when best times were compared, it wasn't even close.

Bernard did a good job of verbalizing what was generally expected to happen: "The Americans? We're going to smash them. That's what we came here for."

For nine consecutive Olympiads the 4x100m freestyle relay had been owned by the Americans. But over the past 8 years their dominance had wilted away.

At the Sydney Games in 2000 they lost to the hometown Australians. At the Athens Olympics in 2004 the Americans placed third behind South Africa and the Netherlands.

After going undefeated in the event for 36 years suddenly American invincibility in the relays had been shattered.

And of course, there was Michael Phelps, who would swim the lead-off leg for the US. Phelps was the headliner of the Games. His quest to break Mark Spitz's record of seven gold medals at a single Olympics was on the line. No relay gold, no hope to beat Spitz's record haul. Simple as that.

The Americans were in lane five, the French in lane four, and in lane seven, South Africa. They had the same four swimmers who'd stunned the world to win gold and break the world record four years earlier in Athens. Over in lane three was Australia, who had a stacked line-up of sprinters. In all, a dozen world record holders filled the final.

It goes without saying that the atmosphere was thick in the Water Cube.

And as the first wave of swimmers dove in, things unfolded as expected.

Phelps had a dazzling opening leg, breaking the American record in the 100m free. Eamon Sullivan of Australia would dip under the world record on his opening leg, giving the Australians an early lead.

On the third leg, France's Fred Bousquet, who had recorded the fastest split in history during prelims with a 46.6, took the French out to a comfortable lead. The United States were half a body length behind as Bousquet charged for the wall.

Standing on the blocks, Bernard and Lezak, who at the age of 32 was the oldest male swimmer on the American team in Beijing. As the anchors dove in, a resigned Rowdy Gaines, commentating for the NBC broadcast, had this to say about the Americans chances of winning: "I just don't think they can do it."

Bernard's lead increased over the first 50m. The gold medal was sewn up, and the world record line wasn't even in the same zip code anymore. The Americans had put forth a valiant effort, but the power of the French was too much to overcome.

But then the magic started to happen.

Lezak hammered the turn, and when he popped out of his breakout he was suddenly on Bernard's hip, eyes locked on the Frenchman. As they passed 75m, Bernard, who had looked unstoppable, was beginning to tighten up. The piano was beginning to fall on his shoulders.

Stroke by stroke, Lezak reeled in Bernard. At the 85m mark, where Lezak had been expecting to fade, he felt a final surge of adrenaline blast through his arms and legs. "I'd never felt it before," he said.

By the time they reached the flags, with just five metres to go, they were in lock-step, with both swimmers hurling their arms at the wall with one final gasp of effort…

USA, gold.

By just eight one hundredths of a second.

Lezak's split?

An other-worldly 46.06.

Easily the fastest split in history.

To the feet Lezak's first 50 was done in 21.50—which would have placed him fourth in the final of the 50m freestyle later that week.

The time was 1.3 seconds faster than he'd ever swum in a relay, and almost two seconds faster than his flat start time.

How did Lezak do it?

By his own admission he wasn't full of confidence prior or even during the race.

"I had plenty of negative thoughts during the race," Lezak said later. "I really didn't think I'd be able to catch him."

So how did Lezak pull off the impossible?

By competing.

DISCUSSION

We've all experienced that surge of adrenaline that comes from competing at our absolute best: The surreal sensation of when our preparation aligns perfectly with the pressure of the moment.

The time that Lezak dropped that day in Beijing was simply absurd.

Did the drafting factor into it? Sure. Did the excitement of the moment play a role? You know it. Did playing the role of underdog help him throw down a "pressure-free" effort? You betcha.

But a lesser competitor would have seen the predicament—going into the anchor leg a half-body length behind the world record holder in the event—and swam for silver. A swimmer who wasn't a competitor would have seen that things weren't going his way and given up.

Instead, Lezak competed his brains off from beginning to end, not saving anything for the finish, swimming a time that wasn't even the same neighborhood as his personal best time.

Now that's competing.

Healthy vs Unhealthy Competition

The word "competitive" is often viewed negatively. The thought of competing at our best is sometimes avoided because we don't want to appear greedy or narcissistic.

The negative stereotypes around competition make sense–we've all seen what kind of ugliness unhealthy competition brings out of people:

- The swimmer who won't shake hands after a race;
- The parent who berates their 11-year old for losing;
- The swimmer who nauseatingly competes at everything all of the time (warm-up, ahem);
- The teammate who is only in it for themselves.

Fortunately, bad behavior like this naturally leads to isolation. Nobody wants to play with the kid who throws a fit and takes their ball home every time they lose. And no one wants to hang out with the swimmer who is constantly competing with things that don't matter, whether it's who finishes their meal first or a board game between sessions at a swim meet.

These kinds of actions might get some short-term results and attention, but it's not a viable long-term strategy for success.

Ultimately, competition in itself isn't bad.

It's how we use it and frame that makes all the difference. (Just like other "negative" emotions or states including anxiety, perfectionism and anger.)

Healthy competition includes a respect for the rules of the sport, respect for your opponents, and a relentless desire to perform at your best.

Healthy competitors have a fierce competitive fire while in the pool, but they don't get bent out of shape if they don't beat you at a video game.

While they want to win, healthy competitors chase personal excellence above rank, generally understanding that maximizing their own performance will be its own reward.

Unhealthy competition is the swimmer who refuses to understand that losing and failure is part of the sport. It's the swimmer who has to win at everything, all of the time. They sprint the warm-up to "win" even though no one else is competing with them. Long after the meet is over, they are still comparing how they did to other swimmers.

Their desire to improve starts with seeing others fail compared to looking at how they can maximize their own performance.

At the end of the day competition is a tool. It's a vessel for you to get the best of yourself. Use it to elevate your effort, your focus and push your limits.

CHALLENGES

- What are some ways you can compete in training? With your teammates? With your perceived limitations and best times?
- Think back on moments where the heat and energy of competition pushed you to further heights than you thought possible.

KEY TAKEAWAY

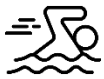
Competition is energy to help you perform your best. Seek it out to maximize your potential.

"I love competition. I always have. That's my idea of fun, to compete against your teammates, to compete in races, to compete against yourself."

– Ryan Lochte

Chapter 6

Nelson Diebel – The Power of High Expectations



Nelson Diebel had made up his mind. The 21-year-old breaststroker had clambered up a *fantastic* looking water slide and was going to hurl himself down it.

Down on the pool deck was his coach, Chris Martin. Yelling at him that he couldn't do it. The Olympics were a couple weeks away.

Get down, you are going to hurt yourself.

No!

Like a child taunting a parent, Diebel stays at the top of the water slide for around 15 minutes as coach and athlete argue back and forth.

"Not so close to the Olympics," Martin recalls later. "It wasn't worth the chance. He got mad. He climbed to the top of the slide and wouldn't come down. He just sat there. We yelled at each other."

Diebel, Martin reminded him, had a history of getting himself injured.

A few years earlier he'd obliterated both of his wrists jumping off a railing at the Peddie Pool. His feet were wet and slipped on take-off, missing the pool. The tiled pool deck, however? Oh yeah, he nailed that, using his wrists to buttress a face-first impact. Five plus hours of surgery and five pins later Diebel was the owner of two casts that he would wear for the next eight weeks.

Eventually, Diebel climbs down.

"We argued some more," Diebel says. "Then we were all right. I told Chris I was going to make all of this worth it. I told everyone I was going to win. If you do, it's just confidence. If you don't, I guess it's arrogance."

An unstoppable force meeting an immovable object

As a kid Diebel had been a "geeky goody-goody." That all changed as a 12-year-old when his parents divorced. Whether it's drugs, petty theft, or getting thrown out of school for fighting, Diebel looks for trouble and has no difficulty landing right in the middle of it.

By the time he is 16 years old, he is sitting in the admissions office of the Peddie School in Hightstown, New Jersey. It's last chance time. His mother, Marge, is on her last nerve. To grease his acceptance Diebel has fibbed on the application, writing "swimming" as one of his interests.

"Probably one of the largest lies I have ever told in my life," he said. His age group swimming career had been casual at best. He typically skipped swim practice to go find for some good old-fashioned shenanigans to get himself into.

The head coach at Peddie is brought in. Chris Martin, 6'2" and 240 pounds stares back at him. If there is one word to describe Martin and his coaching style, it's intensity.

"The first thing I want you to know is that I am a tyrant!" says Martin.

Diebel shifts in his seat.

"The second thing is, if there's going to be any fighting, it's going to be with me!"

The verbal avalanche continues for ten minutes. Diebel's mother quietly looks at the ceiling, her prayers answered.

Terrifying, is how Diebel would remember it.

Channeling the rage

Over the following six years, the built-like-a-linebacker coach and the rebel-without-a-clue swimmer battle. A constant clash of egos, with coach and swimmer sparring, yelling and frustrating one another.

"This has not always been a pleasure," Martin admits later. "I've come pretty close to telling him to get lost several times. Last Christmas, when he wasn't doing the training or something else I wanted, I said, 'This isn't worth it.' Nelson told me he would make it worth it."

Despite the acrimony, things are improving for Diebel. He has a gift for breaststroke, which matches his personality and outlook.

"In general, there are breaststrokers and non-breaststrokers," said Diebel. "They say we're different, sort of off in our own little world."

With Diebel's rage being funneled into the pool–"He was the angriest kid I've ever seen," Martin recalls—the improvement rolls in like the tide.

The fury, the rebelliousness, and the idleness are channeled into energy, with Diebel working hard in the water and the classroom.

Two years later, Diebel qualifies for the 1988 US Olympic Trials and finals in both breaststroke events. He sees for the first time that he can really

go somewhere with the sport. Martin tells him that he can be on the team going to the 1992 Olympics.

Although his life is straightening out, the rebel aesthetic sticks. The leather jacket, brass knuckles, and silver rings littering his fingers.

Oh, and the earrings.

By 1992, Diebel has a line of earrings down his left ear. Over the years Martin has used them as bargaining chips.

Diebel can get the first earring if he makes the honor roll. The second earring? Win the 200m breaststroke at nationals. The third? Well, win the 100m and 200m breaststroke at nationals, which Diebel does in 1990.

With the Olympics on the horizon in 1992, Diebel is battling chronic shoulder pain. He has to cut down on training heading into US Trials. His stronger race—the 200—suffers as a result of the diminished training. But he is sharper for the 100, breaking the American record in a time 1:01.40 and booking himself a ticket to Barcelona.

Diebel heads for the Olympics as "a contender, but not one of the favorites," according to Bob Costas of NBC Sports.

But don't tell Diebel that.

"I would be unhappy if I don't get the gold," he says simply.

Rebel with a medal

The 100m breaststroke is on the first day of swimming events at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. Diebel qualifies third fastest coming out of prelims, putting him in lane three.

Assigned to one of the gutter lanes is Hungarian Norbert Rózsa, having snuck into the final with the eighth fastest time in the morning. Rózsa has broken the world record three times in the event over the past year and despite the less-than-awesome lane is the favorite to win.

The finalists are paraded out, and it's vintage Diebel. He has a USA flag bandana on his head. Earrings glittering in the sun. When each swimmer has his name and country announced, Diebel is off laying in the shade.

As the race gets underway Diebel is aware of the swimmers around him. To bottle his energy and swim his race. He knows to expect to be at the hip of one of the swimmers in the next lane at the first 50.

The guy likes to go out like a rocket–don't let it mess with you.

Diebel turns third at the halfway mark. Out in lane eight Rózsa is leading the charge, but by 75m it is anyone's race, eight heads bobbing and lunging in a straight line across the pool.

With ten meters remaining Diebel surges, charging for the wall, his shaved head and mirrored goggles bouncing under the Spanish sun.

He reaches for the touchpad on a full stroke and spins to see the scoreboard. There are a couple moments as Diebel works out that he's actually won.

Gold. Olympic record. A clenched fist shoots for the sky. Soon followed by another.

"I went in with the attitude that I could win, and that I would win."

DISCUSSION

High expectations are a tricky thing. We usually have them for ourselves in terms of what we think we are capable of, but rarely do we match this with action. Although we are reasonably sure we could do big things, we resist. We lean towards self-doubt.

When someone else tells us what we are capable of being better—and how we are falling short—we get our back up. We get defensive. Our ego tells us that we are doing well enough, that we are perfect, and that we are being unfairly attacked.

But when someone expects better of us it's because they know that we are capable of more. They believe in us. There is no greater compliment.

The high expectations our coaches, parents and teammates have of us should push us to believe in ourselves too.

"Chris is 100 percent of the reason I am here," Diebel says. "I was so down on myself when I got to Peddie. He was harsh on me, but it was obvious he believed in me and my swimming. That finally made me believe in myself."

Martin's expectations of Diebel helped the rambunctious 16-year-old shift his focus and energy. High expectations require high effort, and this helped steer Diebel away from the stuff that had been getting him into trouble.

While we don't all want or need a "tyrant" in our lives to push us towards excellence, it's worth taking stock of the people you do decide to surround yourself with.

Do they have high expectations of you? Do they think you are capable of bigger and better things? Are they helping or pushing you to bring out the best in yourself?

It can be tempting to shy away from people who have high expectations of you because you worry about disappointing them. Or we avoid them because they shine a light on the way we are actually behaving (not as great as we perhaps would like) and the ways in which we are short-changing ourselves, which bruises our ego.

Don't fear the high expectations. They are there for a reason. Because you are worthy of them.

"You're going to make this hard all the way to the end," Martin said once Diebel climbed down from the water slide.

Diebel smiles that trouble-maker smile.

"It will be worth it."

CHALLENGE

- Are you underselling yourself? For example, could you give a better effort, more consistently in training?
- Who are the people in your life who hold you to a higher standard?

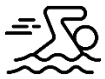
KEY TAKEAWAY

High expectations promote growth, motivation, and overall success in the water. Set high standards and match them with your work ethic at the pool.

"You have to expect things of yourself before you can do them."
– Michael Jordan

Chapter 7

Tom Dolan – Adversity is Confidence in Disguise



Tom Dolan is two years ahead of schedule. The lanky 18-year-old has been showing signs of greatness, and his coaches, including Jon Urbanchek at Michigan, expect big things for the IM and freestyle specialist in two years at the Atlanta Olympics.

But apparently Dolan doesn't feel like waiting.

The year is 1994, the pool is the Foro Italico in Rome, and the meet is the FINA World Championships.

Dolan is laying waste to the world's best swimmers in the 400m individual medley. After a prelims swim that didn't feel too great, Dolan is charging for the finish in the final. When he hits the touch pad, he's set a new world record, formerly belonging to one of the greatest swimmers of all time, Hungary's Tamás Darnyi.

"My aim with Tom was to get him ready for 1996," says the late Urbanchek. "The Atlanta Olympics were my goal, and I thought he could be the number one IMer by then. He beat me by almost two years. I thought the road would be longer, but it took a lot less time."

By the time they get to the Atlanta Olympics, Dolan is one of the top swimmers on the planet, having also scorched the NCAA record books. In Atlanta, the "string bean"—he is six foot six and weighs 180 pounds with just 3% body fat—delivers a gold medal in the 400m individual medley.

Four years later, at the Sydney Olympics, Dolan delivers a 400IM that flirts with perfection. He surges out to a no-one-else-is-in-the-picture lead during the backstroke and never looks back, repeating as Olympic champion and smashing his own world record.

He is asked if he'd finally achieved his goal of the "perfect race."

"It was pretty close," Dolan says, smiling.

Dolan's career on the world stage was legendary. Clutch swims and big celebrations.

What made it all the more remarkable was that behind the goatee, earrings and Olympic titles was someone who simply struggled to breathe most days at the pool.

Tom Dolan had loads of natural talent. He benefited from the low-drag profile of his body, which was built like an eel. He had the long wingspan, big hands, and size fourteen feet that sailed him efficiently through the water.

He had the relentless work ethic and a competitive fire forged from countless yards and meters.

But Dolan also had something else.

A partially blocked trachea—windpipe—giving him access to only about 20 percent of the air an average person can gulp down. Like breathing through a straw.

Making matters worse, Dolan also suffers from exercise-induced asthma. Limited by the type of medications because most were on the banned substances list, he carried around an inhaler and used Breathe-right nasal strips to keep air flowing.

Oh, and he also trained and competes in chlorinated pools, and well, we all know how the air can be in there from time to time.

Combined, it made the simple act of breathing a very real concern when Dolan was at swim practice.

"It can really get bad in our workouts," said Dolan. "There will be a real tightness in my chest, and I won't be able to get a lot of air."

Over the span of six months, he is sent to the hospital twice after hyperventilating and collapsing at the pool.

Note: Doctors cleared him to swim after a full round of tests. His father and coach often reminded Dolan to watch out for certain signs and sensations to protect himself in the water. "Hey, it's great to have the fire and desire, but I also want him to have a little common sense," said his father, Bill.

But despite the perceived limitations, Dolan views the asthma, the smaller windpipe, the suffering and the agony as tools sharpening him into a better and more prepared swimmer.

By the time Dolan gets behind the blocks he knows the competition can't possibly make him hurt any more than training and trying to breathe has.

"I know I've gone through more than anyone else in the world has to get there. I'd rather not have asthma, but it has made me tougher, made me

stronger," said Dolan. "My coach says it actually helps me in meets because it increases my ability to withstand stress."

"He has an incredible tolerance for pain," says Urbanchek. "So, he does suffer, but there is a good side."

DISCUSSION

We tend to look at disadvantages or adversity as weaknesses. Because we don't have the best facilities, the best coaches, or the most talent, we settle for giving less than our best. We never go all in on our goals because we feel like we are starting from a position of inferiority/disadvantage.

We aren't tall enough. Started too late in the sport. Not talented enough. The coach doesn't give me enough attention. I'm the slowest swimmer in the group. It's not fair.

It's not hard for each of us to find a reason to not be successful. We all have one. Some, like Dolan, had a couple. When we start searching for reasons we can't be successful we drain attention and resources on maximizing the things we do have.

Dolan took his "weaknesses" and flipped them on their head. By virtue of his perspective, they turned into things that would boost his confidence and sense of preparation.

He also refused to waste energy and effort on trying to change things that can't be changed. "Stressing over [the asthma] won't make it better. So, I just have to deal with it," said Dolan.

Adversity is a weapon. It can fuel you. Motivate you. Be the chip on your shoulder every day in practice when you are putting in the laps.

A harder path gives you the confidence to know that whatever is thrown at you, you can manage it. A more difficult journey steels you for high-pressure moments.

Don't fear adversity. It can be just the thing that gives you the confidence to take on the world.

CHALLENGES

- What are some perceived limitations or forms of adversity you've experienced that actually made you stronger?

- Can you take the disadvantages in your swimming and make them a point of pride?

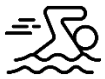
KEY TAKEAWAY

Swimmers often fixate on the things they don't have when comparing themselves to the competition. Elite-minded swimmers focus on what they do have and maximize their attention on the things they control.

"I never worry about who's around me in the pool. I know if I do what I can do, nobody is going to be next to me at the end."
– Tom Dolan

Chapter 8

Ryan Murphy – Routines for Excellence



The American men have long dominated the backstroke events on the Olympic stage.

Leading up to the Rio Olympics in 2016, the American men had won the 100m and 200m backstroke at every Olympics dating back to 1996, with legends like Jeff Rouse, Lenny Krayzelburg, Aaron Piersol, Ryan Lochte, Tyler Clary and Matt Grevers taking turns collecting gold.

At the 2016 Rio Olympics, the mantle was about to be passed to University of California standout Ryan Murphy.

There was only one problem.

His race-day preparations for the final of the 100m backstroke had been disrupted by an unannounced drug test. Two drug testers had shown up at his room, banging on the door until Murphy, wiping the sleep out of his eyes, opened the door in his compression shorts. Instead of taking his planned rest, he was being led all over the Olympic village hours before his race.

"We wandered the village as they made one wrong turn after another. My stress level was rising. Why now? Why today?" Murphy reflected after the Rio Games.

By the time they made it to the drug testing center, Murphy was irritated, frustrated.

The day had been set-up to follow his usual routine. A routine that he'd leaned on for "as long as I can remember, one that works me."

He was going to get some shut-eye and rest up in his room. Eat a peanut butter and jam sandwich. Head over to the aquatic center with plenty of time to spare so that he could go through his usual stretch and warm-up routine.

His day had been carefully choreographed to optimize for peak performance, and now he was standing at the testing facility, feeling like things were getting away from him. In that moment, his coach, Dave Durden, sent him a timely text:

Ryan, don't worry about your plan right now. We can adjust. Just take care of one thing at a time.

The drug test is taken, Murphy leaves, and heads to the aquatic center for the final of the 100m backstroke. He has qualified fastest, giving him lane four.

Murphy launches himself off the start and transitions into his powerful underwaters. Those powerful dolphin kicks give him an early edge that he doesn't give up. Murphy accelerates into the finish to take gold in a time of 51.97. His time is just a sliver over Aaron Piersol's super-suit world record of 51.94.

On the final night of competition, after Murphy had also clinched the 200m backstroke title, fully cementing the continuation of the American backstroke legacy, he would have another chance at gold and the world record by leading off the Americans' 4x100m medley relay.

Murphy didn't mess around, taking off to a massive body length advantage. When he throws his arm back and surges into the finish, he has done so in a new world record of 51.85.

As a young boy Murphy had written a letter to his parents.

"I hope my swimming life continues and I become an Olympian when I grow up. I hope I will break the world records. I want to be the best swimmer in the world. THE END!!"

The plan had worked out, even if it hadn't been exactly as planned.

DISCUSSION

As we approach the big meet, we are following a series of plans that have been carefully laid out in front of us.

The periodization plan takes us through the different cycles and phases of training. We hit the volume hard during the holiday training camp. Ease off and sharpen our speed in the weeks leading up to competition. The strength training plan we follow in the gym is designed purposefully. The technique work we do is targeted for our individual needs. Our nutrition is centered around what we need to perform well and stay healthy.

Each step of the way, we are following carefully detailed plans, steadily building the confidence and resolve to be successful in competition.

By the time we get to the meet, we are unfurling another plan: our race day routines and rituals. These plans are particularly important, as they are designed to safeguard us from getting too anxious and stressed in the

pressure-cooker environment of a swim meet. We depend on these plans to give us a measure of stability and control in the emotional turbulence of competition.

But plans are not guaranteed.

They aren't immune to the hiccups of the environment, whether it's the warm-up ending ten minutes early, the warm-up pool over-flowing with swimmers, or there being no warm-up pool at all.

Our best intentions and plans are rarely immune to a bad swim, losing our best race, or having a couple people jolt you from your pre-race rest so that you can go pee in a cup.

For Ryan Murphy, this included getting his Z's, eating his PB&J, and heading to the pool early.

But as Murphy learned that day, no matter how intricately and detailed our plans, they are always at risk of being thwarted by the environment and life.

Does that mean we should abandon our plans altogether? No, not at all. Plans serve a purpose. Despite the ability to have them railroaded at the last moment, they give you a sense of stillness that keeps your mind calm and clear on race day.

But where we screw up with our plans is making them too rigid, dependent on others, or viewing them as critical for our success.

When planning for success in the water, don't plan for perfect conditions, have basic contingencies for the important stuff, keep things simple, be process-oriented, and take things one at a time.

CHALLENGE

- Looking at your race day routine, how controllable is it? Can you simplify it to reduce the number of things that can go wrong?
- How well are you preparing your response for when things don't go your way?

KEY TAKEAWAY

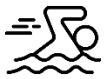
Even our best-laid plans are not immune to disruptions and surprise. Prepare yourself so that you control your *reaction* when things go sideways, as they almost invariably well.

“Unpredictable stuff is going to happen. It just is. And you need to be ready to deal with it … even though you don’t know what it is yet.”

– Ryan Murphy

Chapter 9

Laszlo Cseh – Embrace Rivalries



For a moment imagine you are one of the fastest butterflyers and medley specialists on the planet.

Breathe it in.

The speed.

The awesomeness.

The skill, the years of ruthless dedication to your sport, the mental energy and effort needed to become efficient and conditioned enough to swim the 200m butterfly and the 400m individual medley at a world-class level.

You are so fast, in fact, that it's possible that you are going to win Olympic gold in not only one, but a bunch of individual events.

The only problem?

Your rise collides with the reign of the greatest swimmer in the history of the sport.

This unfortunate reality leaves you the perpetual runner-up:

A bronze in Athens in 2004…

Three individual silver medals at the Beijing Olympics in 2008…

Out of six events (including three relays) at the London Olympics in 2012, another bronze…

And then at your fourth Olympics, another silver medal at Rio in 2016.

In fact, it isn't until 2017—twelve years after his last Worlds gold medal— when he out-touches Chad le Clos of South Africa in the 200m butterfly, that Hungary's Lazslo Cseh shakes the curse of silver and bronze.

Phelps vs. Lochte…and Cseh.

The big rivalry in the pool in the late 2000's was between Michael Phelps and a surging Ryan Lochte. At least, that's where all the attention was being placed. The two raced often, and so the constant clashing in Grand Prix meets,

Nationals, Trials and international meets made for an easier storyline and rivalry.

But despite the media attention heaped on the two Americans, it was Hungarian Laszlo Cseh who posed the biggest threat to Phelps' dominance, particularly in Beijing.

At the 2008 Olympics, Cseh would win silver three times behind Phelps, in both medleys (relegating Lochte to bronze in both events), and the 200m butterfly.

In the years that follow, as Cseh continues his pursuit for that elusive gold medal, there are moments when he is exhausted. The training necessary to dethrone the greatest swimmer in history in two of the hardest events on the swimming program is no joke.

When the doubt creeps in, when the fatigue begins to cloud his motivation, Cseh cues up the video from the final of the 200m butterfly in Beijing. In that race, Phelps, on his way to his fourth gold medal of the Games, beats Cseh by nearly seven tenths of a second. Cseh keeps the video on his phone for easy access and quick viewing on those days.

"Sometimes when I go to training in the morning and I get tired or I want to sleep more and I feel I need some boost, I watch it," Cseh says. "I watch it a lot of times."

At the 2012 Olympics, Cseh again places behind Phelps in the 200 IM, this time taking the bronze medal.

Four years later at the Rio Olympics, Cseh nearly bests Phelps for the first time in the 100m butterfly, only to look at the scoreboard to see that he and his long-time rival have tied for the silver medal.

There's some weird cosmic irony that the closest Cseh gets to beating Phelps is a tie in Phelps' final individual Olympic event. Small mercies.

Cseh admits that he thought about whether his career has been elevated or cursed by swimming in the same generation as Phelps and Ryan Lochte.

"Maybe if there is no Phelps, no Lochte, I'm not as good," said Cseh. "They make me better and the other swimmers better because of how fast they are swimming."

In that 100m butterfly final in Rio, while everyone is watching Phelps, Le Clos, and Cseh battle to the wall, it's newcomer Joseph Schooling of Singapore who storms to the gold medal.

"Swimming isn't boxing," said Cseh's long-time friend and former champion breaststroker, Karoly Guttler. "You can't focus on one individual.

You have the entire field to beat. There are new swimmers, surprises. You have to do the best you can and hope it's enough."

DISCUSSION

From local summer league swim meets to the bright lights and grandeur of the Olympic Games, competition challenges swimmers to push beyond their perceived limits and find a new level of performance.

The swimmers in the next lane push us, promote higher output of energy and focus, and help redefine what we think is possible in the water.

These rivalries exist for us in our own, less-Olympic pursuit of the sport. There is that one swimmer who you always search for in the heat sheets; the swimmer who you've battled with on a few occasions; the teammate who never backs down on hard sets.

Rivalry can be massive when it comes to boosting our performance.

Research into how rivalry affects athletes goes way back to 1898, when psychologist Norman Triplett discovered that cyclists would consistently work harder and race faster when paired up against another cyclist instead of merely trying to beat the clock. His experiments revealed something called the co-action effect, where we increase our effort because we see someone else doing the same thing.

Beyond the benefits of faceless competition, there is a performance benefit when the person in the next lane is a rival.

A study out of NYU followed over 1,000 runners during a six-year period. When a runner's rival was competing in the same race, the runner would run an average of five seconds per kilometer faster. Spread that improvement over a 10k race and we are talking about a whopping 50 seconds. Sweet chlorinated drag suits!

Gavin Kilduff, the NYU professor who authored the paper, found that the boost in improvement wasn't automatically because the rivals didn't like each other.

"Rivalry is not necessarily a situation in which two competitors hate one another," he says. "It's more of a situation in which two competitors are inextricably linked to one another. A rivalry will motivate athletes to train harder, to practice longer and typically perform at their absolute best when they are competing with a rival."

In the pool, this manifests in a few different ways. When someone is ahead of us in the lane, we try to catch them. When a swimmer is in the next lane and they are pushing the pace, it motivates us to get after it, too.

This kind of competitiveness is natural and farm-to-table healthy!

Too often swimmers will ease off their effort in practice (or even competition!) at the risk of looking like they are being too aggressive or competitive, believing that being competitive is like being a try-hard.

But our sport is competitive by nature and by definition. We rank by placings and times, but against other swimmers and against our own bests.

And yet, often we shy away from the competitive aspect of it because we think of the negative and ugly sides of competition—cheating, poor sportsmanship, boorish aggressiveness.

Being competitive doesn't mean being a jerk—it means giving your best. Every day, in everything you do.

You deserve nothing less.

CHALLENGE

- This week, partner up with a teammate and go head-to-head in training. Challenge and push each other to get the best from each other.

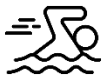
KEY TAKEAWAY

A competitive mindset promotes continuous improvement in the water.

"I love the competitiveness and the training. I love to push my body to be faster and stronger.
– Natalie Coughlin

Chapter 10

Summer Sanders – Don't Fear Pre-Race Nerves



The hard work in training has been completed. You've performed a moderately successfully shave down. Even had a good night of sleep at the hotel last night.

And now, you are moments away from racing your best event at the Big Meet. You go over the race plan in your head, squish your goggles even further into your face, and triple-check… for the tenth time… that the drawstrings on your tech suit are securely tightened.

In these moments, as the nerves are pulsing through your arms and legs, you take stock of all the other familiar things that are happening with your body and between the ears:

- Legs and arms pumping and swinging at 300bpm.
- A thirsty dry mouth.
- Tummy feels like it is doing the Indy 500.
- Recheck your heat and lane number continuously.
- Suction and re-suction your goggles into your face over and over.
- Randomly think about that one practice, three weeks ago, where you bombed the main set.

And of course… There is the nearly constant urge to pee.

But have you ever been so nervous that you peed yourself before a race? Summer Sanders has. At the 1990 Goodwill Games, Sanders was pitted against the dominant distance swimmer of the age and one of the distance legends of all-time, Janet Evans.

The event? The 400m individual medley, and event Evans had decimated the world in at the 1988 Seoul Olympics on her way to a golden finish.

For Sanders, the pre-race nerves are off the charts. "Every five minutes I had to rush off and pee," she said.

Marching out of the ready room, Sanders, Evans and the rest of the finalists made their way behind their respective starting blocks. The introductions began, each swimmer's name, nationality, and brief history were read out. That sudden, almost overwhelming urge to pee once again struck Sanders.

With no time to dart off and find a bathroom, she made an executive decision: She would let out just a little bit into the gutter beside the starting block.

She knelt down and started splashing herself like crazy to cover up what she was doing.

"I thought I'd let out just a little. But I didn't have that kind of control; I couldn't stop," Sanders said.

Now, you can imagine the panic and horror of a moment like this. There are thousands of people in the stands. A televised audience of millions. And you are about to race your idol.

But as Sanders, uh, finished up, the whole moment seemed a little… comical.

"I'd been so stressed about competing against Janet Evans that relaxing my control like that was a grounding moment," she said.

The swimmers stand up on the blocks, the thousands of spectators fall silent, and after taking their marks, the starter's pistol fires. Sanders takes off to a big lead in the butterfly—her best stroke—and even though Evans reels her in on the final 50m, Sanders touches first.

Sanders's winning time is a 4:39.22, a new personal best time by a whopping nine seconds.

Her crowning performance would come two years later, at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, where she wins four medals including a gold in the 200m butterfly and a bronze in the 400m individual medley.

"Nerves made me run to the toilet every five minutes. Nerves made my heart bang against my chest. Nerves made me shake from head to toe," said Sanders. "But I learned, from feeling them over and over before countless competitions, that nerves are not a sign of anything until you give them meaning."

DISCUSSION

The key lesson here isn't that you should pee in the gutter in the moments before your races. (But hey, do what you gotta do.)

The main thing to take away from Sanders experience is that pre-race nerves happen to everyone, including future Olympic champions.

Ultimately, pre-race nerves are a sign that big things are about to happen. While some swimmers find them discomforting and overwhelming, the pre-race nerves are designed to help you perform your best.

When swimmers learn that properly interpreting pre-race nerves are like jet fuel, they start performing and stop choking when stepping up on the blocks.

Put a positive spin on pre-race nerves by:

- **Adopting a challenge-based mindset**. "I wonder what I can do here" vs. "What will happen if I fail?" Framing performance anxiety with a challenge-based mindset has been shown to boost performance.
- **Reminding yourself that pre-race nerves are part of the deal**. Suppressing pre-race nerves usually results in tightening up and choking. Stop resisting them and remind yourself that the shakes and the peeing are a normal biological function.
- **Use affirmations in the days and weeks leading up to competition**. Write out some simple phrases and self-affirmations on an index card and read them to yourself each day: "Pre-race nerves mean I am ready to swim fast!", "I enjoy competing and the adrenaline that comes with it!", etc.

"Nerves are not a sign of anything until you give them meaning," said Sanders. "I never interpreted my trembling or constant need to pee as a sign of unreadiness; that wouldn't have made sense, because I was ready. I'd gone to every practice, pushed myself to the max at every opportunity, put myself to challenges outside the pool as well as in it."

Nerves are fuel. Frame them properly, stop trying to fight them, and let them push you to faster swimming and new PBs.

CHALLENGE

- Each day, in your logbook or training journal, write an affirmation about how you much you enjoy the intensity of competition.
- In the weeks and days leading up to the Big Meet, spend 5 minutes per day visualizing walking out onto the pool deck for your best event, and

imagine the physical symptoms of the nerves, and framing them as excitement.

THE KEY TAKEAWAY

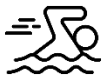
Pre-race nerves are a NOS boost for your swimming. Dangerous when used improperly, but pure speed and performance when framed correctly.

"I get just as nervous behind the blocks at the Olympics as I did at my first competitors as a five-year-old. I take deep breaths and give myself positive affirmations all the way until my races are over."

– Jessica Hardy

Chapter 11

Natalie Coughlin – A High-Performance Focus



When Natalie Coughlin stepped onto the pool deck at Cal Berkeley as an 18-year-old freshman, there was little indication that she would turn out to be one of the most dominant swimmers in Olympic history.

Her teenage years had held promise. At the age of sixteen she'd already set three national high-school records and was pegged as a contender for the Sydney Olympics in 2000.

But, in March of 1999, after a particularly challenging practice, Coughlin woke up in the middle of the night with a piercing pain in her shoulder.

"It was just throbbing like crazy," she recalls. "Hit-your-thumb-with-a-hammer-type pain."

The next morning at practice, she tries to help remove the cover on the pool. The pain sears through her shoulder to the point she can barely move her arm.

She'd torn the labrum in her shoulder, and what followed was fifteen months of physical therapy, consulting orthopedists and doing lots and lots of kick. Her goal turned from making the Olympic team to putting Olympic Trials in the rear-view.

By the time she got to Berkeley the following fall for her freshman year, her enthusiasm and passion for the sport had soured.

"If college wasn't around, and I wasn't going to get a free education out of it, I would have quit," said Coughlin about her time prior to arriving at Cal Berkeley. "I *hated* swimming."

Getting back into the pool and swimming fast would start with getting healthy—the Cal coaches recognized that Coughlin had developed some remarkable asymmetries in her shoulder and neck.

The next step would be getting mentally squared away. And that started with being more mindful in the water. Of taking advantage of the hundreds of small improvements that were available to every athlete each day in the water.

The coaching staff at Cal helped Coughlin rethink how she mentally engaged herself with the sport. Gone would be the daydreaming, the mind wandering, fixating on the "what-ifs."

"They really made us think about everything that we were doing in the water," said Coughlin. "It was always about paying attention to every tiny detail and how you felt both in and out of the water."

By December of her freshman year, with her shoulder healthy, and her mindset dialed in, Coughlin began to see serious improvement from her increased focus. When the NCAA championships rolled around a few months later in March of 2001, Coughlin would hammer the NCAA records in the 100 backstroke, 100 butterfly and 200 backstroke. Coughlin would win her first of three NCAA Swimmer of the Year awards.

Over the next decade, Coughlin unleashed a hurricane of world records and international medals. The first world record—set when she became the first woman to swim under a minute in the 100m backstroke—came in 2002. She won five medals at the Athens Olympic in 2004. Broke the world record four more times in the 100m back. Six more medals at the Beijing Olympics. Another medal—her twelfth total—at the London Olympics.

"In the backstroke specifically, there isn't anyone in the world who has her efficiency level in terms of technique," marveled Olympic champion and former Alabama coach Jonty Skinner.

Her secret weapon?

Being relentlessly focused.

Training with an eye on how she wants to feel in competition, and relentlessly trying to experience that in practice.

"My best attribute is my ability to be highly focused for long periods of time," said Coughlin.

DISCUSSION

When Coughlin decided to improve her focus during practice that fall at Cal, she began with visualization, a mental training technique popular among swimmers.

But instead of just thinking about an ideal race, of winning gold on race day, she concentrated on connecting how she wanted to perform on race day with how she wanted to feel in the water at practice.

"I used a lot of imagery. Focusing on how I wanted my races to progress. Visualize the lead up, the race, the post-race," she said. "I would try to imagine

as many details as possible and engage all of my senses in this visualization practice."

This connection between training and competition makes the "dull" meters and yards in the pool more meaningful. Instead of just slogging through the meters to get it over with, you are fine-tuning how you are going to swim when it's time to go off the blocks.

"In training, I always brought my attention back to how I wanted to feel in my races," she said. "If I need to work on my body position at the end of my races, then I would push myself in practice to the point of exhaustion then work on my body position when exhausted."

High-performance focusing in training doesn't just yield better results in the pool, but ironically makes time go by faster in the water.

"Believe it or not, focusing in on everything you're doing will make practice go by much faster," said Coughlin. "Daydreaming seems like a great way to cope with the physical and mental monotony of being in your own head, underwater for hours on end. But daydreaming is an opportunity wasted."

No matter where you are at in terms of ability, talent, or ambition, putting in the mental effort to really focus on peak performance in the water will help you improve by leaps and bounds.

"Focusing on everything that you're doing keeps you in the moment, helps you get through practice and, most importantly, helps you achieve your goals," says Coughlin.

CHALLENGE

- What are 1-2 technical things that you can focus on at practice today from the time you dive into the water until the warm-down wraps up?
- Before practice, try visualizing how your body and stroke feels during competition and try to mimic those sensations in training.

KEY TAKEAWAY

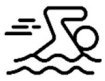
By focusing on your stroke, body position, and performance in the water, you will supercharge improvement, make practice go by faster, and better prepare yourself for racing.

"I used a lot of imagery. Focusing on how I wanted my races to progress. Visualize the lead up, the race, the post-race. I would try to imagine as many details as possible and engage all of my senses in this visualization practice."

– Natalie Coughlin

Chapter 12

Rowdy Gaines – The Importance of Swimming Regret-Free



On March 21, 1980, American president Jimmy Carter sat down with 160 athletes and coaches and confirmed what many were terrified of: The United States of America would be boycotting the 1980 Olympics.

The decision was final.

There would be no competing under a neutral flag (Carter threatened to revoke the passport of any American athlete who tried this). Although Carter is still the face of the decision, public opinion at the time was in favor of a boycott and congress had voted overwhelmingly in support of it.

For 21-year-old Rowdy Gaines, the news was devastating.

The world record holder in the 100 and 200m freestyles, Gaines was projected to win a fistful of gold medals at the summer Games in 1980.

"I felt physically at my peak in 1980—and mentally up, too. It was tough, really tough. I had the chance for four golds," he said.

The next year Gaines hung up his racing suit.

He'd had a stellar NCAA career at Auburn, and it was time to move on with life. There was no such thing as pro swimming back then, and financial opportunities for the sport were far and few between. It was generally expected that once a swimmer finished university that swimming was over.

But as he transitioned to the dry side of his swimming career, the Olympic dream continued to claw at him.

Finally, a conversation with his father made him realize that he would forever have that "what if" lingering in the back of his mind. The sport, and the unfulfilled dream of competing at its highest level, would tug at him until he'd done it.

"Can you look at yourself in the mirror for the rest of your life and say 'what if?' Can you look at the Olympic rings and say, 'what if?'" Rowdy's father told him.

After a six-month hiatus, Gaines got back into the water. But the trip to the Los Angeles Games in 1984 was not without trial.

At the 1983 Pan Am Games he swam terribly. He didn't improve on any of his times and failed to win the 200m freestyle, an event that he'd held the world record.

"For the first time, I felt old. I had doubts. I sat down with my parents, my coaches, and my friends, all of whom really helped me. And in the end, I decided to go for it — win, lose, or draw — because otherwise I would never know," said Gaines.

At the US Olympic Trials in 1984 he failed to qualify for the team in the 200m freestyle. He was even unable to qualify for the 4×200 freestyle relay.

On June 27, 1984, Gaines' Olympic dream was finally realized, when he placed second in the 100m freestyle in a time of 49.96, just out-touching Chris Cavanaugh for the second—and last—individual spot for the event by 8/100's of a second.

The world record holder would be going to LA for the Olympics. And he would leave it all in the pool.

"Twenty years from now when I looked back, I knew it would be pretty sad to think that I hadn't given it all I had," he said.

"The happiest person in Los Angeles"

The following month, at the Los Angeles Olympic Games, the finalists for the 100m freestyle step up on the blocks. Gaines is among them, having swum a 50.41 in the preliminaries to secure lane three.

Earlier that day his coach Richard Quick had given him what would be a fortuitous piece of advice. The starter had been pulling the trigger on the gun quickly that week in Los Angeles. Quick told Gaines to get down into a "set" position as fast as possible and to avoid rolling back so that he'd be ready to go.

Sure enough, it was a quick start, with Gaines the only swimmer in a "set" position when the starter's pistol went off. He pulled away on the second 50m, touching in 49.80, breaking the Olympic record. Gaines looked at the scoreboard in disbelief before rapturous joy took over.

In that moment under a golden California sun, Gaines clenched his fists and shot them to the sky. All the doubt, the uncertainty, washed away.

"When I won that gold medal in the 100, without a doubt I was the happiest person in Los Angeles," said Gaines. "Nobody could have been happier than I was that day."

He knew that the trials and uncertainty he'd experienced had morphed into lessons. With the passing of time, he even came to appreciate the hardship of the boycott.

"I learned a lot more about myself in 1980 than I did in 1984," he reflected.

DISCUSSION

We've all made less-than-great decisions at some point under impulse or from emotion.

We give up in the middle of the main set because we aren't making the interval. We quit on something because it's not going our way. Or we decide to not go to practice tonight because we aren't "feeling it."

Making rash decisions in the moment at the expense of tomorrow's success is something we all struggle with.

In a research paper aptly titled, *The Future is Now*, researchers took a group of participants and had them sit down and talk about either positive future events (the future thinking group) or talk about an event that had happened to someone else recently (the control).

They were then asked to talk about some of their favorite foods (in particular the naughty ones that we all struggle with—pizza, cheeseburgers, and so on) and then were unleashed for 15-minutes on their favorite foods.

The ones who had performed the future thinking exercise ate 25% less of the comfort foods, showing that they'd learned a sense of delayed gratification simply by having talked about positive future outcomes.

Talking about a positive future outcome had the effect of teaching them to make better decisions in the present.

What does this mean for you, the enterprising swimmer with big goals in the pool?

That by regularly reminding yourself of the things you will accomplish and experience tomorrow by virtue of your good actions today you strengthen your self-control.

Sure, you don't want to go to practice tomorrow morning… But you know that you will feel good about yourself when you finish it.

Yeah, crushing a large pizza in one sitting seems like a great idea now… But you will thank yourself an hour from now when you aren't feeling like a bloated mess.

And yes, giving up during the main set might seem attractive in the moment… But you know that if you don't that you've just brought yourself that much closer to your goals.

We all make impulse-based decisions from time to time that we come to regret later. Thinking about, or writing out, the better-case future will help you make better decisions today.

Stay on top of this by creating an environment that supports your goals, making the hard thing easier to do. Write out your goals and keep them visible, so that you know what you are grinding for today and swim without regret tomorrow.

CHALLENGE

- What is something you can do today that tomorrow you thank you for?
- How much closer will you be to your goals tomorrow by doing the "hard" stuff today?

KEY TAKEAWAY

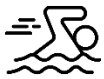
The sting of regret tomorrow is more painful than the discomfort of pursuing your goals today.

"I don't want to look back on anything and say, 'Could I have worked harder?' I see a lot of unused talent in this world, and I don't want to be one of those people."

– Brendan Hansen, six-time Olympic medalist

Chapter 13

Mark Tewksbury – Visualizing Gold



It's January, 1991, and the FINA World Championships are being held in Perth, Australia.

In the final of the men's 100m backstroke. Canadian Mark Tewksbury lunges backward into the touchpad, looks up at the scoreboard, and immediately feels a big wave of satisfaction.

Tewksbury has placed second, just 0.06 seconds behind the winner, Jeff Rouse of the United States. The silver medal is a validation that the training was working, the commitment was paying off, and that he was inching closer and closer to his ultimate goal of being the fastest 100m backstroker in the world. For Tewksbury, the silver medal is high-grade, nuclear motivation to keep doing what he is doing.

Olympic gold the following year at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics was so close he could taste it.

The trajectory had been in the works for a while. At the Seoul Olympics two years earlier, Tewksbury had placed fifth in the 100 backstroke and collected a bronze medal in the medley relay with the late Victor Davis.

At the Pan Pacific Championships, held in Edmonton later that summer in 1991, Tewksbury and Rouse again meet in the final for the 100m backstroke. Given that Tewksbury was still working hard in practice, and that he'd been so close the last time they'd raced, Tewksbury figured he had a serious shot of unseating the world-leading Rouse.

Not so much.

Tewksbury was never in the race, with Rouse using his superior start and underwater dolphin kick to drop a blistering 53.93, wrecking the world record by over half a second.

This time, when Tewksbury looked at the scoreboard and saw second place there wasn't joy or satisfaction. There was the sickening feeling of his world having been shaken, turned upside down and thrown across the room. Rouse's time surpassed what Tewksbury thought was humanly possible in the event.

“In my wildest dreams I thought it might be possible for me to swim a time of 54.50,” Tewksbury recalled. “That was an outrageous, wild dream that I kept in my head.”

Tewksbury would have to drop 1.2 seconds to be competitive with the time Rouse swam. This was the same amount of time Tewksbury had dropped in the previous seven years, and now he had only one year to match that improvement.

He left the pool that day winded, his dream of Olympic gold evaporating into the chlorinated air.

Visualize Success

The year of the Barcelona Olympics, 1992, started on a better note. In February, Tewksbury and his teammates from the University of Calgary set the world record for the 4x100m medley relay in short course meters, with Tewksbury leading off in a blistering world best of 52.50.

The next month Tewksbury traveled to Barcelona to see the pool where the swimming events were going to be held. He had been using visualization regularly to picture that perfect gold-medal winning performance, but in his mind every time he swam his goal race, he placed fifth, like he had in Seoul.

To “rewrite” the visualizations he traveled to the still unfinished Piscines Bernat Picornell, where the Olympic swimming program would be held. Construction workers milled about the site, but Tewksbury could see the finished pool in his mind.

“I tried to imagine where the sun would be in the evening for the final and made a mental note,” said Tewksbury. “The picture in my mind was becoming a little clearer. I stood up in the stands looking at the pool for a long time. Eventually I went down and stood on the deck. I walked from where I thought the ready room would be out to lane four and I waved to the imaginary crowd. I then walked back to the ready room and went through the same procedure to lane five.”

Tewksbury soaked it all up, remembering the random features of the pool so that he could enrich his daily visualizations.

“I pictured winning in this pool. I imagined the feeling I would have when I looked up at the scoreboard and my name had the number one beside it. It was so exhilarating I had goosebumps just thinking about it.”

The trip went a long way in boosting Tewksbury’s confidence that he could bring his absolute best performance later that summer.

Six One Hundredths in Barcelona

On July 30, 1992, the finalists of the 100m backstroke were paraded out at the Barcelona Olympics. The sky was overcast—great for backstrokin' as this meant the sun wouldn't be in their eyes.

In lane four, Jeff Rouse. In lane five, Tewksbury.

Here we go again.

Tewksbury felt calm and relaxed. An hour earlier he had been in the midst of his final preparations. "I visualized the race over and over again, always winning," he said.

When the starter's gun finally went off, Rouse surged to a quick half body length lead, dolphin kicking nearly all the way to 15m. By the 50m mark, Tewksbury had largely caught up, only to get soundly beaten on the second turn and underwater.

At 75m of the race, Rouse has half a body length lead. Tewskbury's tempo doesn't yield and continues to charge back, slowly clawing back distance.

With five meters to go Tewksbury pulled even. Stroke for stroke they went under the flags, and with a final hurl of the arm both swimmers hit the wall.

The scoreboard lagged for an endless second before it spat out the results.

Canada, gold.

Tewksbury erupted, pushing off the wall, throwing his fist into the sky, sitting on the lane rope, hands clasped on his hand, struggling with the realization that he'd achieved his ultimate goal.

The gold-medal winning time?

Ironic—he'd won in a time of 53.98, an Olympic record, personal best, and out-touching Rouse by the exact same margin that Rouse had beaten him 18 months earlier in Perth.

Just six one hundredths of a second.

DISCUSSION

Tewksbury's reaction to victory was a blend of joy and shock. And while his reaction suggest he may have been surprised by the result, the truth is that

he'd rehearsed that exact race so many times in his mind that the physical performance was just another rep.

Elite-minded swimmers experience the race they want—the smell of the chlorine, the coldness of the pool, the pain of that third 25—long before the starter's gun, so that when it's race time all they have to do is clear their mind and let their body take the wheel.

Effective visualization works because our brains have difficulty telling the difference between real and imagined events.

By incorporating visualization into our regular training process, whether it's to steel ourselves for the challenge of Olympic competition, improve skill development, or manage nerves on race day, we can mentally and physically prepare for excellence.

Ultimately, you need to be able to imagine the success you plan on achieving for yourself.

CHALLENGE

- Sit down and rehearse everything about your goal race. The nerves before the start. Walking across the cold pool deck. The sound of the starter's pistol. The excitement and adrenaline coursing through your blood. The fatigue creeping in as you turn for the final lap. The steadfast, resolute effort you give all the way to the finish. Experience the race using all of your senses to make it feel even more real, so that when you get up on the blocks, you've already swam the race a thousand times.

KEY TAKEAWAY

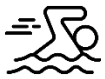
Visualization is a way to rehearse the race of your dreams by experiencing it over and over again, giving you confidence on race day.

"It's weird because I didn't really get that nervous during the Olympics. I'd swam that race a thousand times in my head."

– Adam Peaty

Chapter 14

Caeleb Dressel – Carry a Big Kick and Bigger Goals



It's March 23, 2018, and inside the Jean K. Freeman Aquatic Center everyone is standing. *Everyone*. Coaches, swimmers, parents, spectators. The sense in the building at the men's NCAA championship meet is universal—something historic is about to happen.

And University of Florida senior Caeleb Dressel doesn't disappoint.

After a heavy silence and the starter's signal, the finalists for the men's 50-yard freestyle launch themselves from the blocks. In lane four, Dressel disappears deep below the surface, seemingly bounces off the bottom and explodes to the surface in a significant lead. He body-surfs into the turn, again disappears into the depths, erupts to the surface in a full body-length lead in the shortest event on the swimming program.

The crowd can feel it about to happen, even though they don't know what "it" quite is. Dressel powers to the wall, a huge wave following him, touches, and *boom*--it's official, he has completely obliterated what was once thought possible in the 50-yard freestyle.

Beside his name on the scoreboard, it reads 17.63.

Spectators, coaches, and swimmers erupt with a mixture of cheering and complete disbelief. Hands go on heads, mouths agape, people turning to one another in stunned silence, cheers and complete bedlam.

In less than 24 hours Dressel has dropped a wrecking ball on the 50-yard freestyle US Open record, taking the mark from 18.11 to 17.63.

Nearly half a second.

In a 50-yard race.

Dressel's post-race interview provides a telling glimpse into his mindset. He is asked what his goal time was coming into the meet.

"Everyone in the world of swimming probably expected a 17.9," Dressel says.

This is very true—the belief was that Dressel would be the first man to crack the 18 second barrier. Dressel's best time heading into Minnesota was

18.20. Commentators thought he just might be the person to swim a 17.9. *Maybe*.

But Dressel was looking much further.

"I was focused on 17.6", he says, calmly and matter-of-factly.

DISCUSSION

Having big goals isn't rare. We all secretly harbor fantasies of winning the Olympics, dropping a stunning amount of time off our PB, or smashing a US Open record by nearly half a second.

But few of us actually try to live out those dreams.

Which is unfortunate.

The big goals and dreams are scary, but they are also motivating if we pursue them.

They encourage us to look deep into what is possible in the water. While I preach often on the importance of working the details and being process-oriented, what gets us motivated to do those things in the first place is the big goal.

Think of those greasy goals like the Big Bang—that first blast of heat and energy that powers everything comes next.

Having the big goal isn't why so many swimmers struggle with them—it's battling the self-doubt and external expectations that follow: Can I do this? Is this actually possible? Do I have the talent and commitment to follow through?

While big goals are easy and safe while we are in the comfort of our own thoughts, the moment it turns to action and planning things change.

Your big goals require you to continually battle what you (and others) perceive as your limits. It's an ongoing struggle to balance being realistic and completely insane.

We tend to play it cautious. No sense in dreaming too big, we remind ourselves whenever we get carried away with our goals.

Far too often we short-sell our ability to be awesome in the water.

The reality is that you don't know yourself as well as you think you do. You are far tougher than you give yourself credit for. Far more resilient than you know. And as much as you think that you have a grip on precisely what you are capable of, you don't know until you repeatedly and whole-heartedly give your all.

Maybe it's because of a peer group that encourages mediocrity ("Why would you want to stay after practice and do extra?"), or it comes from yourself ("What makes me think that I can accomplish this goal?"), we limit what we think is possible in the water.

Dressel didn't advertise his goal times over the course of the season. He knew what people were saying was possible (or not possible), but he had his eyes on a bigger prize.

There is a lesson here: if you are doing the work and you have your big goals, things will take care of themselves. Don't waste your time and focus on what other people are saying you can (or can't) do.

There were plenty of well-respected coaches and authorities on the sport who didn't think it was possible for someone to swim a 17.6 from a flat start in the 50-yard freestyle.

On the week of NCAAs, Dressel shut down his social media accounts and focused on what he thought was possible.

"I've set my own goals and ignore all the expectations and what people expect me to do," he said.

In today's day and age everyone has their own personal megaphone to tell you what they think. Which can make external expectations and pressure overwhelming if you are putting yourself out there and paying attention to it.

Chasing excellence naturally attracts the thoughts, opinions and expectations of others. Whether it's jealousy, small-minded thinking or straight-up nastiness, the toxic expectations of others can derail our focus and energy.

Don't fall into the trap of worrying about what others think about you and your swimming. It's your swimming—no one else's. You are the one that is toiling away, putting everything you have into the pool on those early mornings.

Like Dressel, get ambitious, set your own expectations, and decide for yourself what you want for your time in the water.

"I don't really care about other people's expectations. I want to set my own [expectations] and put my own pressure on myself," says Dressel.

CHALLENGE

- Looking at your goals for the season, are you being overly cautious and conservative? If you truly went “all in” on your goals, what would be possible?
- Once you’ve got a big goal in mind, start working on the process required to achieve your big goal. What does it look like a month from now? A week from now? Today?

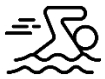
KEY TAKEAWAY

Focus on your own expectations and don’t be afraid to set goal higher than what others think is possible.

“There needs to be a fine line between goal setting and laughter. I don’t think you should sell yourself short.”
– Caeleb Dressel

Chapter 15

Jon Sieben – The Underdog Mentality



There was approximately zero reason to believe that Jon Sieben would compete for the gold medal in the 200m butterfly at the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984.

Two years earlier he'd collected a bronze medal at the Commonwealth Games. He was ranked 25th in the world in the event heading into Los Angeles.

Sieben's personal best time was over four seconds slower than that of the favorite and world record holder, Michael Gross of West Germany. Sieben's nickname—"The Shrimp"—didn't exactly strike fear into the hearts of the competition either.

And yet, Sieben would pull off one of the greatest upsets of the Olympics, dethroning Gross and committing grand larceny on his world record in the process.

How?

By mastering the role of the underdog.

Swimmers train and race with one eye on the black line and the other on the clock. They commit a hysterical amount of time and energy to see the clock stop just a fraction of a second sooner.

So, you can imagine the sheer joy of seeing four seconds being shaved from your personal best time in a 200m race.

This was the kind of day 17-year-old Australian Jon Sieben had on August 3, 1984.

During the morning preliminaries Sieben cracked two minutes, swimming 1:59.63, securing him lane six for the final. Cruising through with the fastest seed time was the tall and lanky Gross, known as "The Albatross" for his endless wingspan which extended over seven feet. Rounding out the contenders was American butterfly champ Pablo Morales in lane three and Venezuelan Rafael Vadal in lane five.

In this corner, at 6'7", the world record holder, The Albatross. In the other corner, standing at 5'9", The Shrimp. The chlorinated version of David and Goliath. No slingshots here, however, just Speedos.

As the race got underway Gross sailed out to a half body length lead by the 25m mark. No shocker there.

Out in lane six, Sieben cruised along, jockeying in the middle of the pack with Tom Pointing of Canada in lane seven.

Turning at the halfway mark, Gross was a shade over his own world record pace, Morales and Vadal in hot pursuit. The three men charged into the final turn, Sieben a body length and a half behind.

With Gross and company thundering for the finish, the 17-year-old Australian punched the nitrous and began to mow down the leaders. His stroke rate picked up as the leaders began to labor. By 175m Sieben was positioned to compete for a medal. By 195m Sieben was competing for the unthinkable.

In the final strokes, Sieben passed a seizing Gross to touch first.

Gold to Sieben…

And a new world record.

Sieben swam a 1:57.04, shaving the smallest margin possible—1/100th of a second—off Gross' world record.

Sieben's coach, the legendary Laurie Lawrence, explodes in jubilation.

"We clipped his wings, the big fella [Gross]," Lawrence said. "It's been fantastic. I knew Sieben could go good but I didn't realize he could get the world record. I'm out of my tree!"

How did Sieben do it?

How did he toss aside one of the greatest swimmers on the planet?

And max out his potential and training on the day it mattered most?

By relishing the role of underdog.

"This morning I was looking at getting a medal, I didn't really think about winning," said Sieben after the race. "I didn't let anything bother me or worry me. I felt comfortable. There wasn't any pressure on me."

DISCUSSION

Expectations and pressure for swimmers are a tricky thing, and we all react to them in different ways in different situations.

In some cases, we use our high expectations to fuel a better effort. We expect to be good, we know we are good, and so we rise to the level of our expectations.

Other times we use the low expectations of others combined with the high expectations of ourselves to create memorable performances. This is where the underdog lives, the sweet spot between wanting to prove others wrong and proving ourselves right.

Although Sieben wasn't favored, he had the calm confidence to know that he would perform well, and the advantage of being able to fly under the radar, with all eyes on the world record holder in the middle of the pool. Before his race, Sieben had to tell the exuberant Lawrence to chill out a little bit.

"I know what I am doing," Sieben told his coach.

We love a good underdog story and we've each had moments in the pool where we've embraced underdog status and seen good things happen as a result.

We qualify in lane eight but end up competing for a medal. We are a body length behind on the anchor leg of the relay and catch the leader. We move up to a faster group and end up pushing ourselves because we don't have to stress about leading the lane.

When external expectations are low, we are free to do our best without fear.

But what happens if you are not actually the underdog? What happens if you are the swimmer in lane four?

Great question.

And the answer is something you can apply to make yourself the underdog even if you are not.

The motivated underdog thrives in situations where they want to prove themselves right and prove others wrong. This combo creates a motivational climate that gives us the aggression and motivation to show others what we can do while also having the confidence to know we are capable of big things.

Wielding this mentality is why the very best stay at the top and why some athletes absolutely shine when things appear to be the toughest.

Michael Phelps is a prime example.

The GOAT might have hated to lose, but he loved being the underdog even more.

Wait, what?

Michael Phelps…underdog?

Doesn't seem to add up when the guy is the greatest athlete to lace up a swimsuit. But this was one of his tried-and-true mental approaches when it came to getting prepared to race.

When Ian Thorpe and Dan Talbot, a coach for the Australian swim team heading into the Beijing Olympics, voiced their doubts about Phelps' run at eight gold medals in one Games, it lit a fuse:

"I don't want to say it's more ammunition, but it kind of is," Phelps said. "It's just one thing I've always loved, just proving somebody wrong, making them eat their own words. As a kid, I just wanted to beat everybody. I do want to win all the time, but it's also proving other people wrong."

Even though most observers would have been hard pressed to consider Phelps an underdog, the comments made by the Australians allowed him to position his mindset as one.

An underdog mentality reduces the sting of pressure and external expectations and generates a different type of fuel that can help swimmers thrive. Your swimming suddenly is about proving others wrong instead of not disappointing others.

This approach helps you to stay focused on your own performance. It allows you to channel aggression and vigor towards the execution of your race plan. And it frees you from the pressure and expectations of others.

Back to Sieben:

"There was no pressure on me, and I felt completely relaxed before the race and during the race."

CHALLENGE

- At practice this week, position yourself against faster teammates and compete with them. Or intentionally give yourself a handicap—pushing off later, doing a more difficult breathing pattern—to channel the drive and determination of the underdog.

KEY TAKEAWAY

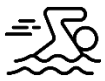
Embracing the underdog mentality can reduce pressure and ignite a powerful drive to exceed expectations, leading to golden performances.

“Mental toughness can’t be taught or bought. When [Sieben] stood up on the blocks with two world record holders in the field, he was completely unfazed. You’d have thought he had ice in his veins.”

– Laurie Lawrence

Chapter 16

The 1976 USA Women's Olympic 4x100m Freestyle Relay – Success is Measured by Adversity



How do you swim when you are lined up against a much faster swimmer in practice?

What's your mindset like when standing on the block about to race an invincible opponent?

How do you perform when the swimmers in the next lane, and the country they represent, have been so dominant during the Olympics that they completely swept the podium in an event? Went 1-2 in another six races? Won the medley relay by almost seven seconds?

In this kind of blowout situation, a lot of us would find ourselves sitting on the edge of the pool, feet dangling in the water, that blank, defeated thousand-yard stare splashed across our face. *So much for this*.

Crushing defeats happen to us all. Those moments where we are a body length lead behind on the start. You take your first breath and the swimmer next to you is waving goodbye with their ankles. Shortly to be followed by thoughts of, "Why do I do this sport, again?"

Some swimmers throw in their soggy towel when faced against a competitor that is head and shoulders above them.

But the women on the US swim team at the 1976 Olympics in Montreal didn't do that.

No one would have faulted them if they had. The dominant country in women's swimming, East Germany, had been thoroughly stampeding the best the world had to offer that week in Montreal.

On the final night of swimming events, the Americans were still without a gold medal. The last event on the program was the 4x100m freestyle relay, an event that on paper had all the markings of another East German beat-down.

Leading off would be Kornelia Ender, the "wundermädchen" (Wonder Girl) of the East German gold medal winning machine. Earlier in the meet she'd broken her own world record in the 100m freestyle for the *tenth* time.

When you compared personal best times, there was no way the Americans could threaten for gold. In the medley relay they had been thoroughly trounced, losing by several body lengths.

And yet, that's just what happened.

The East German Machine

The dominance of the East Germans that week at the Montreal Olympics is hard to overstate.

In one example, the winner of the 400m individual medley, Ulrike Tauber, had slashed almost ten seconds off the world record since the previous year. Her winning time, 4:42.77, would have easily won the men's race eight years earlier at the Tokyo Olympics.

Although there was suspicion that the East Germans were doping, among the swimmers there was little doubt. The gong-show performances were simply too good to be true. In just a year the GDR program had gone from middle-of-the-pack contender to veritable superpower/smothering the podiums.

Four years earlier at the Munich Olympics the GDR women had collected just three individual medals. The following year, 1973, at the first FINA World Championships in Yugoslavia, they took home a staggering 28 medals.

"In one year, they got so big; they were now beating us by 25 meters in a 200m race," said Marcia Moran, a member of the US team at Worlds.

The domination continued three years later in Montreal, where the East German women won 16 individual medals, seeing gold in every individual event except the 200 breaststroke. The dramatic rise was limited to the East German women, and not their male counterparts, making the GDR claims of revolutionary and advanced training techniques dubious.

"It was pretty well accepted among the swimmers that, yes, they were using steroids," said Lauri Siering, an American breaststroker who swam on the medley relay in Montreal.

"The East German swimmers came out of the locker room, and they were so big, they looked like wrestlers," added her teammate Shirley Babashoff.

Although it may have been obvious to those on the pool deck and in the locker rooms, governing bodies hesitated to point fingers. Developing overnight superpower status—on just one half of the swimming program—wasn't enough to determine cheating. After all, there had been no positive tests to use as evidence of malfeasance.

The GDR's state sponsored doping system, managed by the state secret police, was a well-oiled machine, described as the Manhattan Project of athletic performance and doping. Athletes were tested before they were sent out for competition to make sure performance-enhancing substances were sufficiently masked and flushed.

Anyone who tested positive was pulled from international competition, a press release swiftly justifying the withdrawal because of a "training injury."

"We knew it for years; we weren't stupid," said Sherm Chavoor, one of the leading US coaches of 1970s. He coached Mark Spitz and Mike Bottom among other Olympic legends.

The tension manifested into some testy exchanges through the media. When public criticism noted the East Germans deep voices, an East German official replied, "We came here to swim, not to sing."

Speaking up incurred you the label of being a sore sport. When Shirley Babashoff said that "at least we look like women" the media branded her Surly Shirley. Time Magazine ran a picture of her and branded it "Loser."

Babashoff was likely the swimmer who lost out the most that summer in Montreal.

A generational talent, the 19-year-old was as versatile as she was outspoken. At the US Olympic Trials, she ran the table in the freestyle races with American records in the 100, 200 and 400m events. She took down the 800 freestyle world record and won the 400m individual medley.

But her performance in Montreal was silver. Four times, in fact. All behind East Germans.

On the last night competition Babashoff would have a final chance to win gold.

All it would take is a miracle.

The East German strategy in the freestyle relay was simple. Eliminate any pretense that there was a race for gold by leading off with the world record holder, Ender. Extend the lead with Petra Priemer on the second leg, who'd placed second in the individual event.

Establish dominance with an early lead and don't look back.

As the race got underway, Ender swam as expected, leading off with a 55.79, just a tenth off her world record. The Americans were already over a second back.

The second American swimmer, Wendy Boglioli, clawed back four tenths on Priemer, splitting a blistering 55.81. The Americans were now just half a body length behind.

In striking distance.

Off her flip turn, Jill Sterkel's high speed stroke rate burst the Americans out to the lead. The rising anticipation of an upset spread like a fire through the 10,000 in attendance at the Montreal Olympic Pool. It had been a long week of total domination by the East German women, and now there was a chance, just a chance, that the streak could be broken.

Sterkel charged for the wall, splitting a monster 55.78, putting the Americans into a half second lead.

On the block, waiting to dive into the water to swim the anchor leg, was Babashoff.

Claudia Hempel of the GDR next to her.

Babashoff flew off the block and charged down the length of the pool, the crowd at her back, Hempel at her hip.

That's as close as it would get.

Breathing every three strokes, Babashoff stormed to a 56.28.

When she reached for the touchpad, she didn't need to turn her head to see if she had touched first.

The week had been dominated by the East Germans, crushing the world in one race after another.

But for one moment, one race, the world had stood firm.

DISCUSSION

The relay of 1976 is an extreme example of swimmers who are forced to compete against athletes in an unfair situation. But it's not a big stretch to take that same sense of "this is unfair" and apply it to the experiences we all swim across from time to time in the water.

Some examples:

- Competing against the kid who hit half a dozen growth spurts over the summer and suddenly has a foot of height on you.

- The swimmer who rarely shows up to practice and then manages to razzle dazzle everyone in competition.
- You do your best to prepare for the biggest race of your life–and your goggles fill up when you dive into the water.

There are moments in the sport that are flat-out unfair. That's just part of the deal. For as much as I preach about the importance and benefits of hard work and focusing on the controllables, there are going to be moments of significant adversity in the pool.

So how are you going to react? Are you going to focus on doing your best? Are you going to lament your fortune or do everything in your power to write the best ending possible for your story?

For Shirley Babashoff, her best was all she could do. She went best times that week in Montreal. Even though her criticism of the East Germans has been vindicated after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and details of the vast apparatus of state-sponsored cheating became public knowledge, she did swim on one of the greatest relays of all time, swimming her best in the face of an invincible opponent.

And maybe that's how history will remember her.

Perhaps not as a swimmer who was cheated by cheaters, but as someone who persevered in the face of unfairness, a swimmer who faced an impossible opponent and worked her butt off anyway. Ultimately, our greatest victories in the water are measured by the amount of adversity and challenges we overcome to attain them.

By this metric, Babashoff and the relay team of '76 achieved one of the greatest victories in the history of our sport.

CHALLENGE

- Choose excellence and your best effort, no matter what. This week, there will be moments when victory is unlikely or that feel unfair. Commit to excellence anyway.

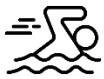
KEY TAKEAWAY

Success is felt by the level of adversity we face.

“Persistence can change failure into extraordinary achievement.”
– Matt Biondi

Chapter 17

Duncan Armstrong – Dream Big and Prepare Better



Duncan Armstrong was having the meet of his life at the 1986 Commonwealth Games. The 18-year-old Australian had won two gold medals. His coach, Laurie Lawrence, pulled Armstrong aside at the end of the meet, being held in Edinburgh, Scotland.

"Are you happy with that?" asked Lawrence.

Armstrong replied that yeah, he was happy. Lawrence pushed—what would make the young swimmer ultimately satisfied in the sport? Well, replied Armstrong. Winning a medal at the Seoul Olympics, being held two years later, would be great.

"Fantastic," said Lawrence. "I'll see you at the pool at 5am."

Over the next two years Armstrong was a monster in training.

Lawrence's philosophy was old-school and simple: they would outwork and out-prepare the competition. This meant Armstrong regularly did 20,000m a day in the water. When Lawrence learned that the swimmers would be walking a few kilometers a day between the pool, accommodations and the athlete's village in Seoul, he added 6 kilometer runs to their training regimen.

"Laurie manufactured tension on a daily basis," Armstrong said. "It was antagonistic, eyeball-to-eyeball stuff that toughened you up for competition."

Lawrence's coaching style was in-your-face, but it was endlessly energetic. Something that Armstrong recognized as being key to his ability to endure the tough training that developed him into a champion.

"He just sells it," Armstrong said of his coach. "He sells passion… In swimming, where you have to do hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of laps, passion and enthusiasm are very important."

Armstrong would need every ounce of it. The competition in Seoul were two of the great swimmers of the 1980's, Michael Gross and Matt Biondi.

West Germany's Michael Gross had been the star of the Los Angeles Games and was the world record holder in the 200m freestyle four times.

Meanwhile, American Matt Biondi was projected to match Mark Spitz' record-setting haul of seven gold medals in Seoul. The two were also giants in

the literal sense, Gross at 6'6 and Biondi at 6'7, towering over Armstrong at 6'0.

Lawrence had done reconnaissance of Biondi's swimming and noticed that the wave that followed the American was massive. With the skinny lane ropes and the big wake Armstrong could hitch a free ride, conserving his energy for the back-half of the race.

With the preparation completed, and a race strategy in place, Armstrong stood up for the final of the 200m freestyle in Seoul believing that he belonged there and that these legends of the sport were beatable.

"You look down your lane and know you've done everything you possibly can and you're prepared for this race. Someone has got to win it. Why not me?"

Armstrong dove into the water and immediately locked on to Biondi's hip as the "California Condor"—so named for his seven-foot-wide wingspan—surged out to an early lead.

In the stands Lawrence was pacing manically, a heat sheet rolled up tightly in his fist. Biondi used his big arm-span and early speed to turn in the lead with Sweden's Anders Holmertz out in lane 8, with Armstrong tagging along, half a body length behind.

The Australian turned third at the 150m and made his move, swimming off the lane line. By the time they hit 175m, Armstrong had surfed into a clear lead. He sailed into the wall, crashing in a flurry of white water in a time of 1:47.25.

Armstrong had won gold in world record time.

Up in the stands Lawrence was going bananas.

This was the second Olympics in a row he'd coached a swimmer to gold from lane six. Four years earlier at the Los Angeles Games Jon Sieben had won the 200m butterfly, upsetting the favored Gross to win gold. Just like Armstrong had. "Lucky lane 6!" the coach bellowed from the stands in Seoul.

When a reporter tried to pin down the erupting Lawrence for a quick interview, the coach's response was classic Lawrence.

"Mate, we just beat three world record holders! How do you think I feel? What do you think we come for, mate? Silver? Stuff the silver! We come for the gold!"

DISCUSSION

Laurie Lawrence believed that with enough hard work and self-belief that anything was possible. Height didn't matter, past performances didn't matter. Lawrence's enthusiasm and unwavering belief in his swimmers was infectious and infused them with the idea that they could be world-beaters.

"Don't leave any stone unturned in your preparation," said Lawrence.

The recipe for success is as simple as it is timeless: good things happen when you enthusiastically do it better and harder than the swimmer in the next lane. The physical preparation will sculpt you into a faster swimmer, and enduring and conquering the training will give you the confidence to believe that you can beat the Biondi's and the Gross' of the world.

Does this mean you should go to the pool and start dropping 20,000m days of training? Running six kilometers a day too? Not necessarily.

But this does mean you can take that same all-in approach to the focus levels you bring in practice. You can take that same ambition and apply it to your lifestyle habits outside of the pool, whether it is doubling down on getting a full night of sleep or cleaning up your nutrition habits. You can take the all-in approach and focus it tightly on the things that have the biggest impact on your performance.

Don't be afraid of dreaming big.

We all need a little more of that.

Just make sure that when you dream big you are willing to prepare and prepare bigger and better, too.

CHALLENGE

- We often underestimate the work needed to achieve epic feats of excellence in the water. Look at the training, lifestyle, and mindset you are currently using to prepare. Is it worthy of excellence on race day?

KEY TAKEAWAY

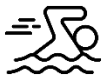
There are a lot of things you can't control in the water; the competition, your height, how fast other swimmers go. But you can always control the way you prepare.

"We will ask for more effort, more focus, more persistence, more toughness, more training, more creative thinking, more problem-solving, and more honesty than you've ever put forth. These are the hallmarks of champions."

– Bob Bowman

Chapter 18

Jeff Float – Swimming for Self-Confidence



An upset is being written under the Southern California sun at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. All eyes are on the middle of the pool, as Bruce Hayes of the United States and Michael Gross of West Germany are furiously going head-to-head.

But for right now, Jeff Float, the third leg of the American 4×200 free relay team, has gotten out of the pool, water beading off his face, soaking in something that he's never heard before at a swim meet.

The unmistakable sound of cheering.

Loud, boisterous, bleacher-rattling cheering.

As a toddler, Jeff Float contracts viral meningitis.

Not usually fatal, this particular case of meningitis runs through Float, nearly killing him. He loses most of his hearing on the left side, and almost all of it on the right side. Legally, he is deaf. As the young Float grows, he wears hearing aids, learns to read lips, and with his lisp is often an easy target at school.

"Kids would boost their self-esteem by putting me down," Float reflects.

He finds refuge in the pool, getting his first taste of the water at the legendary Arden Hills Swim Club. Other swimmers at the pool, led by coach Sherm Chavoor, include Debbie Meyer, Mike Burton, and Mark Spitz.

In the water, Float is able to develop a degree of self-belief and confidence.

Given his name, he notes that he didn't have much a choice.

"My name isn't Field or Court. It's Float—I had to swim."

Float attends the University of Southern California, where he is a 6-time All-American. At the age of 20, the big prize looms—the Olympics, and a chance for gold, just like his idols, the swimmers he trained with back at Arden Hills.

At Trials, Float punches his ticket to the 1980 Summer Olympics in three individual events. His prospects for a solid medal haul—when you add relays—are significant.

But then, a whole bunch of nope.

President Jimmy Carter announces the Americans—and many of their western allies—will be boycotting the Moscow Games to protest the Russian invasion of Afghanistan.

For Float and a full generation of athletes, the Olympic dream in 1980 has been extinguished.

It's July 16, 1984, and an upset for the ages is unfolding in Los Angeles.

Float, now 24-years old, and elected team captain of the team in Los Angeles, has completed the third leg of the 4×200 free relay. He joins his teammates Mike Heath and David Larson behind the block.

In the water, the American anchor Bruce Hayes is battling with West Germany's Gross. The heavily favored Gross—also the world record holder in the 200m freestyle—has lurched ahead of Hayes and looks to be cruising to an easy gold.

But Hayes claws back, and does the unthinkable, passing Gross over the final 50 metres to win at the wall. It's pandemonium in the stands, behind the blocks, and in every corner of America.

The world record has been shattered by over three seconds, one of the craziest upsets in Olympic swimming history has been written, and Jeff Float has become the first legally deaf American to win gold at the Olympics.

The roar of the crowd is something completely new to Float.

"It was the first time I remember hearing distinctive cheers at a meet," Float said. "I'll never forget what 17,000 screaming people sound like. It was incredible."

DISCUSSION

Swimming does a lot of things for those of us who call it our own. For Float, the pool was a refuge. The hearing aids, lisp, the bullying—they could be forgotten when he dove into the pool and glided up and down the black line.

Those things simply don't matter when it's just you and the water.

Swimming was where Float could test himself, push limits, safely navigate failure, and develop the kind of formidable spirit that would help him become an Olympic champion.

“Swimming gave me the self-confidence I couldn’t find anywhere else,” said Float.

CHALLENGE

- Swimming is more than medals and records. It’s a place to build self-confidence and develop yourself. Are you finding moments each day to find gratitude for your time in the water?
- Identify a personal challenge or limitation you face and use it as a source of motivation in your training. Just as Jeff Float turned his hearing impairment into a source of strength, focus on how your unique challenges can fuel your determination and resilience in the pool.

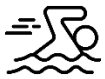
KEY TAKEAWAY

Let the pool be a sanctuary for building self-confidence and resilience.

“Why is it we do sport? We do it because it resonates with us... This is where we choose to be. We learn and find ourselves in the process.”
– Aaron Piersol

Chapter 19

Caeleb Dressel – The Mindset for Big Goals



The timing of it all made the comparisons so easy that they wrote themselves. After the Rio Olympics in 2016, Michael Phelps, the GOAT, retired from the sport.

Best of all time.

Hands down.

The following year, at the 2017 World Aquatic Championships, Caeleb Dressel has his big international breakthrough.

Dressel had been a superstar during his collegiate career at the University of Florida, but that week in Budapest was his first big showing on the international stage. Dressel's week includes winning seven gold medals, rattling world records and posting world textile bests in the 50m freestyle (21.15) and 100m butterfly (49.86).

Until then, there had been only one other swimmer to win seven gold medals at Worlds.

You know who.

It didn't take much imagination for commentators to start saying, "Welp, here's the next Michael Phelps!"

The heir apparent.

And so, expectations were running at a frothy boil for Caeleb Dressel leading into the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, the first time he'd be swimming at the Olympics in individual events.

With three individual races and a bunch of relays, with prelims, semis, and finals, Dressel's calendar was busier than the warm-up pool.

And how did he manage the hectic schedule and pressure of the Olympics?

By taking things one swim at a time.

In the days following Dressel's gold medal performances in Tokyo (five in all), he was asked repeatedly how he'd dealt with the pressure.

The expectations.

Not only his own, but those of everyone else, too.

Over nine days of swimming competition in Tokyo, Dressel competed in nine sessions and raced 14 times.

To help keep perspective on the job at hand, he printed out a schedule for the meet and circled the events he was swimming.

At the bottom of the page, he wrote the number of swims he had during each session, and along the sides of this sheet of paper he scribbled out simple reminders for himself.

Control what you can control. Progress not perfection. Give yourself a chance. Pressure is good.

Each day when he left the pool, he would cross out a big X on the session.

He'd also cross out the swim(s) he did that day.

This simple act was one of the keys to his success that week in Tokyo.

"One thing that really helped during this meet, and I've done this before at other big meets," said Dressel. "Every night I'd take my pen and cross out every session…. Before you knew it, I was quarter of the way done… Before you knew it, I was halfway done, and before you knew it, I had two days left. That helped a lot physically seeing how much I actually had left to do."

After each swim, each session, he'd bust out a pen and cross out the session and the swim.

Done.

Next.

"For me, it's taking it one race at a time."

DISCUSSION

When we have a big task before us, whether it's a massive test set at practice or a nine-day Olympic schedule, it's easy to start time traveling with our thoughts. Instead of being present and in the moment, we open up the mesh bag of our past swims and future worries and start rooting around for things to overthink.

Thoughts like the following bubble to the surface:

- That week of training I missed over the holidays is going to cost me.
- Last time I swam in this pool, I didn't swim fast at all.
- I don't feel as fast as I did the last time I went a PB.

- If I don't go a personal best time tomorrow, this whole season will have been for nothing.
- I still have three more days of competition, how am I going to have the energy for it all?
- Everyone expected me to win gold last time around, and I choked.
- My first race of the meet didn't go well. Does this mean the rest of my competition schedule is going to flounder, too?

And on, and on, and on. Like a main set with infinite rounds. It's almost impressive the lengths to which our memory and brain will go to root out every last negative thing that's happened to us in the pool. Almost as impressive as the "worst possible scenarios" we can begin to dream up when our mind skips ahead to what *might* happen in the water.

Simply crossing out the day's activities won't completely remove those pesky thoughts or make you immune to worrying about the future…

But it will help you get better at being present so that you can spend more time delivering your full effort and concentration on the Next Lap instead of worrying about bad swims from last season or a hypothetical bad swim in the future.

Swim each lap one stroke at a time, be present, and not only will you perform better in the moment, but you will also reduce needless stress and anxiety when chasing big goals.

CHALLENGE

- Today at practice, instead of worrying about how much the main set is going to hurt, or how close/far you are to your goals, mentally swim one lap at a time. Focus on being totally present with what you are doing with each stroke in the water.

KEY TAKEAWAY

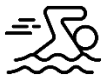
Staying present when swimming, whether that's in competition or during a particularly brutish main set, will help you perform at a higher level and reduce the feelings of pressure.

"As I begin to swim, I allow myself to feel where the water is moving around me, how it flows off my body. I listen for any erratic movement which means I'm not relating to the water and I have to modify my stroke, change it until I feel the water moving smoothly past me. I can do this at low speed or very high speed."

– Ian Thorpe

Chapter 20

Misty Hyman – Adversity is a Weapon



It's five months out from the 2000 Sydney Olympics, and American Misty Hyman has decided she's had enough.

The past couple years haven't been very smooth for the butterfly specialist, who catapulted to the top ranks of the swimming world with her signature underwater dolphin kicking style—fish kicking.

Hyman would dive into the water, turn on her side, and just like a fishie, would dolphin kick powerfully in both directions, surging out to massive leads in her races.

At the 1998 World Championships in Perth, she would explode to early leads in the 100m butterfly (kicking 35-metres underwater) and the 200m butterfly (touching at the 50m mark 1.3 seconds faster than world record pace).

In the short course pool, she was overwhelmingly dominant. With the added walls she could really flex her dolphin kick, breaking the world record in the 100m butterfly in 1997 while taking just 16 strokes.

But Perth would be the last chance for her to use her fish kick for extended use.

Although FINA had restricted backstrokers from kicking further than 15m underwater ten years earlier, every other stroke was still fair game.

Until now.

Months away from the Sydney Games, Hyman was in the throes of self-doubt.

"I questioned everything," she said. "Maybe I'm too old. Maybe I need a new kick. Maybe I've lost my passion."

Hyman, frustrated and overwhelmed with doubt, called her coach.

"I'm ready to throw in the towel," was her message.

The underwater dolphin kick has always been a bit of a troublemaker in our sport.

There was the duel between David Berkoff and Daichi Suzuki in the 100m backstroke at the 1988 Seoul Olympics, when both swimmers disappeared under the surface of the water for 30-35m on the first lap alone.

The final was one of the big storylines in the pool that week in Seoul, with spectators and viewers watching with bated breath as half the lanes churned with backstrokers while the other lanes looked eerily empty, their occupants meters below the surface kicking furiously.

Months later, citing athlete safety, FINA changed the rules for backstroke, mandating swimmers surface before 10m after every start and turn. (This was extended to 15m in 1991.)

Denis Pankratov of Russia, another butterfly specialist who performed "extended breakouts" did so in an un-streamlined position, with his hands several inches apart, basically sculling. Pankratov powered to gold medals in the 100 and 200m butterfly at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. Other early pioneers included Sean Murphy of Canada and Mel Stewart and Jesse Vassallo of the United States.

And of course, more recently there was the debate over the "Lochte rule"—whether a swimmer could push off on their back during freestyle events to perform fly kicks on their back before turning over onto their front.

Hyman's case was unique as her and her coach, Bob Gillett, had quite literally turned the novel concept of longer underwaters on its ear by having Hyman turn onto her side after diving in or pushing off.

The idea was that the waves of the kick would reverberate off to the side (instead of hitting the bottom and surface), creating less turbulence and drag, which would be faster. Fish kicking also tends to encourage a more balanced up-kick, which would ostensibly propel a faster kick.

As simple as it might have been in theory, there was considerable risk to this style of kicking. For starters, swimmers don't have the usual markers to guide them for going in a straight line. The black line is now to their peripheral. And of course, there is the very real concern of training yourself to be able to manage oxygen intake so that you can go without air for long stretches during a race.

"It's not like you can have instant success with it," said coach Gillett back in 1997, as the controversy over her kicking roiled the swimming world. "It takes discipline to practice and develop over the years."

Since the rule change, Hyman had struggled to keep the pace, while also fighting the doubts of whether she could surface swim fast enough to compete with the best swimmers on the planet.

She'd always had difficulty bringing it home during her races, usually fading badly on the final lap. And now she would have to depend more on her swimming ability than her kick to get onto the podium.

"It was a huge challenge," said Hyman. "I had developed a technique for swimming that brought me to an elite level. I wasn't sure if I was an elite swimmer anymore."

One of the main storylines for the hometown Australians at the 2000 Olympics was Susie O'Neill. Earlier that year O'Neill had erased Mary T. Meagher's storied world record in the 200m butterfly, a mark that had stood for nearly two decades.

O'Neill was also the defending Olympic champion in the event.

So, when the finalists got up on the blocks for the 200m butterfly on the night of September 20, 2000, all eyes were on O'Neill and countrywoman Petra Thomas.

In lane six, Hyman.

Although she is last off the blocks, Hyman's underwater fly kick give her a quick advantage when the swimmers surface.

The body-length-off-the-start leads are a thing in the past, but Hyman's dominance on the underwaters is still potent.

Compared to O'Neill, who surfaces right away off the walls, her head breaking under the backstroke flags, Hyman kicks out to 10-12m, keeping an early lead at the 150m mark.

When Hyman and O'Neill turn, commentators ready the viewing audience for the Australian to assert control of the race. O'Neill has a history of fast finishes, including in the final of the 200m butterfly in Perth, where O'Neill sailed past a fading Hyman to win comfortably.

But the rule change has created an unexpected advantage for Hyman—the shorter underwaters doesn't create the same kind of fatigue and oxygen deprivation that comes from holding her breath off the start and walls.

Also, since the rule change, Hyman had worked diligently with her coaches to make her stroke more sustainable and efficient.

Where the final lap would have been her weakness, in Sydney her lungs are fresh enough to power her home.

This time, she doesn't crumble coming down the stretch.

Hyman touches first in a time of 2:05.88, just several hundredths of a second off O'Neill's world mark.

When she sees the scoreboard, Hyman erupts in joy.

She is asked afterwards why she appears so stunned, so surprised by her win.

"It's happened so many times in my mind," she said, smiling from ear to ear. "I was surprised it was real."

DISCUSSION

Adversity is an opponent every swimmer faces in varying degrees. They don't have the best facilities. They lose to swimmers that they outwork in practice. They feel the deep frustration of not improving as fast as they want.

But adversity doesn't mean you are unworthy.

The opposite, actually…

Adversity is the opportunity to show how worthy you truly are. There are countless examples of top performers in our sport who have done the exact same thing, using difficulties, injuries, rule changes, and faster competitors as fuel for improvement.

Adversity, when you treat it as such, is the engine for improvement. It's the moment where you realize you need to work harder. Or smarter. Or be more honest about how focused you are in practice.

Adversity is a launch pad for better things. Even if you can't immediately see what they are.

Misty Hyman could have very well decided that throwing in the towel was the smart thing to do that spring before the Olympics.

She'd spent years perfecting a kicking style only to see the advantage be wiped away.

But in reality, that kick, the leg fitness, the breakouts, and the limitations imposed that allowed her to better oxygenate her muscles, turned out to be completely to her advantage.

She'd also been forced to find a way to make her stroke more technically efficient so that she could close out the 200m butterfly with the world record holder.

Although it seemed hilariously unfair at the time—the rule change was largely driven by her specific case—the "adversity" of the rule change actually worked to her favor.

Something to think about the next time you find yourself face to face with some adversity that feels unfair and sucky.

CHALLENGE

- The next time adversity rears it's ugly, chlorine-laced face, ask yourself: *How can I make this the best thing to ever happen to my swimming?*

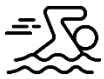
KEY TAKEAWAY

What separates middle-of-the-road swimmers from elite swimmers is the ability to use setbacks and adversity to accelerate into improvement.

"All we can do is the best we can do with what we've got."
– Misty Hyman

Chapter 21

Dana Vollmer – Find Your Anchor for Success



Forward. That's the last thing Dana Vollmer glimpses before she dives into the clear water during the preliminaries of the 100m butterfly at the Rio Olympics in 2016.

The road to Rio has been bumpy—literally. A year and a half earlier, Vollmer was eight months pregnant and ordered to bed rest. The inactivity drives her crazy. As many swammers can attest, when the pool and the sport is taken away or kept from us the more deeply it calls out to us.

Then and there, Vollmer vows to get back into the water and see how far she can come back. *Forward*.

It's the word that Vollmer has chosen to write on her right foot—the foot whose toes are curled around the front of the starting block that day in Rio. The word is the last thing to go through her mind before the starter's gun goes off and she launches into the void.

When Dana Vollmer stepped away from the sport in 2013, no one would have faulted her for retiring.

At the London Olympics the year before Vollmer set the world record in the 100m butterfly on her way to winning gold. She'd add a couple of relay gold medals to cap a successful Olympics. It seemed like the perfect swan song to a successful and long career in the pool.

Vollmer qualified for her first Olympic Trials at age 12 years. Won a gold medal in Athens as part of the world record setting 4×200 free relay squad. She later missed the Beijing team, and then rebounded for the 3-medal performance in London.

After the 2013 FINA World Championships Vollmer quietly walks away from the sport. While there is no retirement ceremony, she takes a step back. The constant fatigue, the training cycles and endless laps have taken their toll, and she is ready to get her life outside of the pool started.

In 2015, her and her husband, former Stanford swimmer Andy Grant, have their first son, Arlen Jackson Grant. Eight months into her pregnancy she

is ordered to bed rest. The lifelong athlete is forced to do the one thing she struggles with most—not being active.

"I was getting antsy," she said. "All I wanted to do was move."

Shortly after giving birth to her son, Vollmer is back in the water in the familiar waters of the Cal Berkeley pool. The break from the pool refreshes her outlook on the sport.

"To actually not swim—I really started to realize what I missed. Was it really that bad, working out for a living all the time? It helped me in coming back and appreciating all the things I had started to reset, like being tired all the time and waking up early in the morning."

A few months later she is back on the national stage, making the finals at US Nationals in the 100m butterfly. At Olympic Trials she places second, good enough to qualify for the team going to Rio.

While Vollmer writes the word *forward* on her foot during the prelims of the 100m butterfly, for finals she writes the first name of her newborn son, Arlen.

Looking down and seeing his name would give her the perspective she needed to stay poised in the pressure-cooker of an Olympic final.

"He doesn't care if I have a bad race," said Vollmer.

With the name of her son on her foot, Vollmer takes the bronze medal in the 100m butterfly in Rio.

DISCUSSION

The stress of competition is real. The lights, the expectations, friends, teammates and family—they combine to create pressure that can break a swimmer's confidence and focus.

Although there are things we can do to better deal with the mental aspects of anxiety and pre-race nerves, the physical symptoms of pressure and competition are universal. We all experience the same blast of stress before a competition.

One study of ballroom dancers found that the stress response before competing was similar to someone jumping out of a plane for the first time. The stress response was also nearly uniform across the experience levels of the ballroom dancers. The physical response to competition was the same whether they had competed twenty times in the past year or not at all.

Knowing that being nervous is normal is one thing, but what can we do to manage and funnel those nerves to swim fast when it matters most?

Anchors—writing an action word, focus word or mantra on your foot, for example—is one way to keep the focus internal and positive.

It gives you something concrete and controllable that you can hold onto when things are getting a little crazy around you, helping you stay planted when the world is swirling and packed with pressure.

Anchors should be relevant to you, help you get in the right mindset to perform, and be framed positively. (For example, "Don't choke" is not an effective anchor.)

Vollmer used her anchors to stay focused and grounded: Forward. Arlen. And for her final race in Rio, *calm*.

On the final day of competition in Rio, Dana Vollmer is back up on the block. The 4x100m medley relay is underway, and in the water is her teammate, breaststroker Lilly King, roaring towards her.

The word on Vollmer's foot is calm.

"I felt strong," Vollmer said. "I kept taking out my 100 flies really fast. I was like, 'Calm down. You're OK and just really bring it home and have a good finish for the next person.'"

Vollmer hits the water and gets the Americans out to a body-length lead, dropping the fastest split in the field with a 56.00. On the strength of her leg the US handily win. It's Vollmer's fourth Olympic gold medal, and seventh overall.

"I kept thinking back to London, and that was by far one of my favorite moments, and to get to stand up there with three different girls and the energy they bring to the team, that kind of added to me writing *calm* as well. I was like go out there and swim how we know how to swim."

CHALLENGE

- What are 2-3 simple phrases or words that encapsulate the proper mindset to help you perform in the water? Write them where you can see them—on your water bottle, on the background of your phone, or even on your foot, and swim with intention.

KEY TAKEAWAY

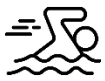
Anchors are a unique point of focus that can boost self-belief and confidence, reducing anxiety and stress in the water.

“Surround yourself with people who will help you achieve your dreams. Find a way to believe in yourself even on your darkest days. Write your dreams down and work relentlessly towards them. If you do this, you might just surprise yourself.”

– Larsen Jensen

Chapter 22

Missy Franklin – Build a History of Success to Build Confidence



The world came to learn the name Missy Franklin at the London Olympics. While she was a recognized star within the swimming community by 2012, Franklin achieved stratospheric heights of fame in London. She ran away with the gold medal in the 200m backstroke, taking down the world record in a time of 2:04.06.

Her career continued to soar from there. She won six gold medals at Worlds in 2013, the most by any female swimmer. Was the first woman to break 1:40 in the 200-yard freestyle. Won a ton of individual and team titles at the collegiate level, swimming for Division I powerhouse, Cal Berkeley. And another gold medal at the Rio Olympics in 2016.

You would think that with this pedigree of excellence, records, and gold medals that Olympic levels of self-confidence would come naturally to Franklin.

But Franklin, despite the smiles and bubbly personality, had her own doubts, uncertainties, insecurities and lapses in self-confidence. Just like any other swimmer, there were moments before big races and swim meets where doubt and uncertainty plagued Franklin.

And one of the tools that Franklin used to help her stay focused and confident when the pressure was at its highest was a Confidence Jar.

After Franklin's five-medal performance in London at the 2012 Olympics, she could have cashed in on her success and collected millions in endorsement money. She postponed the transition to pro, enrolling at the University of California, Berkeley to gain the unique experience of NCAA swimming.

Swimming collegiately is all about the group. The team cohesion, the dual meets, the electric championship meets. And it was at Berkeley, swimming for the Golden Bears, that Franklin started using a Confidence Jar.

The purpose of the Confidence Jar was simple.

Keep a jar and fill it with hand-written highlights and moments of success and excellence.

Have a good swim practice? Write a note and put it in the jar. Conquered a hard set? Put it in the jar. Drop a new PB in the weight room? In the jar.

"As a team activity we all decorated our own jar and then throughout the season we would write notes of encouragement to ourselves," said Franklin. "We would write down really good practices that we had or really any moments that we were very proud of ourselves."

There were several reasons Franklin used the confidence jar.

For starters, the jar was a personal Hall of Fame, a place where she could log and recognize all of the little things that she was doing well, that might otherwise get lost in the shuffle over a long season.

When you think about how many workouts, sets and reps compound into a full season, the highlights can get buried under the not-so-great moments.

A Confidence Jar is a way to recognize all the little moments of excellence that happen along the way. Reminders of all that the things that have been accomplished.

"Seasons are so long that we tend to forget all of the incredible things that we've accomplished throughout the entire season," said Franklin. "To have a jar that is full of all of the accomplishments that you have achieved in a season, whether it is just a really good practice or set, a time that you encouraged a teammate, or even a really great weight session, there were so many different options for things to put in the confidence jar."

At the end of the season, of when you need it most, the jar could be opened and used for a jolt of hair-raising motivation.

"Eventually, you opened it up and you were reminded of not just the past couple weeks of good work or the past couple months, but the entirety of the season that you had put in and all of the work and effort."

When you decide to open the Confidence Jar and reflect on your personal history is up to you. You could do it monthly. You could do it when you are having a rough patch of training. Or like Franklin, you could bottle that bad boy right up until the night before a big swim meet. Save it for when the pre-race nerves and performance anxiety are peaking.

"I only opened my confidence jar the night before the biggest meet of the season," said Franklin. "It just made that so meaningful to me, being able

to go through all of these notes, so many of which I had forgotten about, and to open them the day before the biggest competition of the year right before I'm about to race was always so powerful."

DISCUSSION

Confidence on race day is shaped from the training you do over the season. All of those early mornings. When you challenged yourself to a more difficult interval. Swam an in-practice best. Stacked up a ton of race pace yardage. The extra sessions you did outside the pool to increase mobility and build strength.

But if the wins and progressions you worked diligently for aren't recognized and logged, it leaves space for the doubts and dwelling on the far fewer moments where things didn't go your way. The workouts you missed. The sets you failed. The teammates and competitors who beat you.

Focus and mental energy will always go somewhere. A Confidence Jar channels it into a direction that is more likely to build self-confidence, as opposed to allow it to decay.

The Confidence Jar is a visual accounting of the hard work you've done. The jar, filled to the brim with mini-achievements, is physical proof that you worked hard to improve this season.

Having a Confidence Jar will also motivate you to chase more moments in excellence so that you can continue filling the jar. It creates a positive feedback loop that inspires awesomeness more regularly. Work hard, write a note, deposit it into the jar, feel that self-confidence seeing the jar fill, and rinse and repeat.

Self-confidence comes from the habit of recognizing and logging your victories; a confidence jar keeps a detailed inventory of them so that you can reflect on your wins when the pressure goes up and the doubt creeps in.

CHALLENGE

- This week, take note of your victories in the pool. Whether you use a Confidence Jar, a logbook designed for swimmers, or a text app on your phone, log your wins.

KEY TAKEAWAY

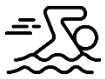
Swimmers work hard and achieve moments of greatness in training that can build legit self-confidence. By stacking and recognizing them, swimmers get the full dose of self-confidence that they've worked so hard to create.

"When you go into a competition, so much of it is mental over physical, and to go into a competition with the best mindset possible is the most important thing that you can do for yourself. My confidence jar helped me do that."

– Missy Franklin

Chapter 23

Ryan Lochte – Relentless Improvement



University of Florida head coach Gregg Troy found himself with a unique problem. Troy, one of the best coaches of all-time, having helped countless swimmers swim to NCAA titles, Olympic finals, and World Championship podiums, had a swimmer that was improving rapidly beyond his peers.

The swimmer? Ryan Lochte. The laid-back, surfer-hair-cut Lochte had been progressing so much over the past couple seasons at Florida that he was thoroughly and consistently destroying his teammates during practice.

Although most of us see the laid-back and easy-going and potentially troublemaking Lochte, when it came to competing in training, he was anything but laid-back.

Lochte *loved* to compete. And this meant that Lochte refused to allow anyone to beat him during the main sets.

"He would not allow anyone else to win anything in practice," said coach Troy.

The swimmers Lochte was training with at the University of Florida were far from a slack group—nearly a dozen Olympians and NCAA finalists were churning the waters in Gainesville.

To keep himself motivated and hungry during challenging workouts, Lochte started intentionally pushing off late so that he could make racing his teammates more of a fair fight.

At first, it was five seconds.

And then 7 seconds.

"He would leave sometimes 7 seconds back and it took me a little while to figure it out," said Troy. "He is leaving 7 because 5 wasn't enough."

Eventually, Lochte was pushing off ten seconds behind his teammates, which, as you can imagine, began to cause problems.

"It was really destroying some of our other guys because he just would not allow them to ever touch the wall first," Troy noted.

DISCUSSION

The lesson of this little tale isn't that Lochte was super-fast in training. Or that he ended up making a lot of his teammates feel like chlorinated super-plugs. It was that he went out of his way to keep himself motivated and hungry in training.

That is the lesson.

Lochte was determined to compete with his teammates and find ways to make it as challenging as possible, creating a loop of perpetual improvement. Even if that meant he would purposely place himself at a disadvantage each time the red top came around.

Finding challenges, finding ways to keep things motivating, finding opportunities to turn the competitive spark into a bonfire. This is what champion swimmers do.

Playing these games with themselves keep them charging forward and prevent them from becoming complacent or getting too comfortable. By finding challenges in the otherwise mundane slog of training, they maintain a high-velocity trajectory towards excellence in competition.

For a lot of swimmers, the tendency is to go to practice and more or less go through the motions with whatever the workout is. They focus on completing the workout, and not *challenging* the workout. But pulling out a fork and knife and feasting on challenges brings with it a mouth-watering set of benefits.

Including:

Challenges keep things interesting. When things get easy, or you start to get bored, your attention wonders. This is natural. But our swimming suffers. Difficult circumstances, whether self-inflicted or courtesy of your swim coach, keep things spicy.

Challenges force you to be present. You don't need to go ten seconds behind your teammates to get the challenge-based benefits. Can you do each turn at practice a little bit better? Can you add one extra dolphin kick to your walls? Can you kick with a six-beat kick through the whole main set?

Challenges yourself keeps you improving. Getting better in the water is a perpetual upward cycle of pushing your limits. Little by little, as you get better, you make things a little more challenging. With a mindset of perpetually challenging yourself, you land butt-first in the equivalent of an F1 car mounted on a space shuttle rocket. Straight-up hyper-improvement.

Challenges build confidence. Supercharged self-confidence comes from seeing a pattern of excellence. It happens naturally—and without having to fake it—from facing challenges and adversity. From choosing to take the challenges head-on.

If you are challenging yourself relentlessly in practice, the pressure and expectations of competition won't seem too scary. Going head-to-head against the competition will seem almost laughably easy compared to the hundreds, if not thousands of times, that you have butted heads with your own challenges.

Competition will simply be another in the long line of challenges—particularly enjoyable now because you know that challenges and adversity bring out the best in you.

When you go to practice today, put aside the mentality of "only" completing the workout, and find a way to challenge it.

CHALLENGE

- What are 2-3 ways that you can increase the challenges in training today? A slightly longer kick-out? Faster interval? Jumping into a lane with faster swimmers?

KEY TAKEAWAY

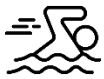
Challenges are lightning rods for the crackling electricity of improvement. Chase them relentlessly and you will build authentic confidence, hone competitive instincts, and get faster.

"The harder I worked, the better I got. The better I got, the more I believed in myself and the goals I wanted to achieve in swimming."

– Erik Vendt

Chapter 24

Sarah Sjostrom – Failure is Feedback



The 2009 World Aquatics Championships, held at the beautiful Foro Italico pool in Rome, Italy, were, for lack of a better term, an absolute gong show.

Over the course of eight days of competitive swimming events, an eye-popping 43 world records were broken, shattered, and donkey-kicked. Of the 40 individual events in the pool, 32 of them saw at least one new WR, with several of those records stubbornly on the books to this day.

Why so fast? The meet was the final major international competition that allowed the "shiny" suits, the full body polyurethane technical swimsuits that helped swimmers sail across the water.

Sarah Sjostrom of Sweden was one of the swimmers setting records that week. Just 15-years-old at the time, Sjostrom broke the world record twice in the 100m butterfly. First time in the semi-finals, and then again in the championship final, swimming a 56.06 to win gold.

Two years later, she entered the 2011 World Championships in Shanghai as the favorite to defend her title and WR.

Instead, she placed fourth in the 100m butterfly (outside of the medals by just a couple hundredths of a second). Well off her best time. And then fourth in the 50m freestyle. And fourth in the 200m freestyle.

Not exactly the golden bonanza she'd expected. Nevertheless, when Sjostrom reflected on that meet, she noted:

"I love the challenge of finding out what I need to do to swim as fast as possible. Worlds [2011] was one of these challenges. I learned a lot. One of many things I learned was that I have to do better work in practice if I don't want to be fourth three times in one championship again. I can admit that this result was exactly what I needed to get more motivation to do better work in practice."

The career that Sjostrom has had since then is… incredible. 14 more world records. 15 more World Championship gold medals. Four Olympic medals. (And counting.)

And still improving.

In 2015, Sjostrom breaks the world record again in the 100m butterfly, in the semi-finals at World Championships in Kazan, Russia. The next evening, at finals, she breaks it again. And for good measure, a year later at the Rio Olympics, Sjostrom swims a dazzling 55.48 to win Olympic gold, again in world record time.

"I just have to continue enjoy the swimming and continue to improve the details—like underwater kicking, breathing control, swim technique, starts and turns," said Sjostrom.

DISCUSSION

When swimmers take an "L" in the pool, it can feel personal. Like a validation of their biggest doubts and uncertainties. But elite swimmers understand that failures and setbacks are instructional. They are 100% free-range feedback.

Setbacks shine a light on what you need to be doing to take things to the next level. Failures remind you that your preparation didn't match your goals. That there is still improvement to be had.

When a swimmer stinks it up In the pool, the temptation is to latch onto some personal judgements—"I'm no good at this sport" or "I'll never be successful because I'm not as talented as the competition." These responses don't promote growth. They keep you stagnant, or worse, cause you to withdraw.

Failure points you in the direction of improvement. Did you die badly at the end of your race? Develop a better race strategy and plan to improve your fitness. Did you get hammered off the start by the competition? Time to sit down and hash out a plan to improve the technique of your start and structure a game plan to develop more explosiveness in the gym.

Failures, and the lessons they provide, are superchargers for improvement. They are bottled potential, just sitting there, waiting to be unleashed.

Sjostrom's meteoric rise and incredible consistency in the sport is measured by her constant focus on improvement. Her start. Turns. Technique. Nutrition. Recovery habits. Sjostrom's keen eye on improvement has been sharpened by the real-time feedback of her performances in competition.

And you can only learn what you truly need to improve by giving your all in training and competition, and yes, occasionally failing along the way.

Failures can either tell you that you aren't worthy or simply remind you that the preparation you've done so far isn't yet worthy enough.

CHALLENGE

- Think back to a swim meet or even a workout where you didn't perform as expected. You were disappointed, frustrated. What did you learn about how you can be better?
- When you meet adversity in the form of a bad race, are you going to view it with the mindset of "I'm going to find a way to make this the best thing to ever happen to me!" or "I'm going to allow this one bad swim dictate how I swim"?

KEY TAKEAWAY

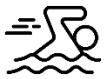
Failure is feedback. When we experience a setback or disappointment in the water, it's a learning opportunity. Learn from your failures to improve faster than ever.

"When I did lose, I understood it happened for a reason… Failure just showed me what, exactly, I had to work on—my stroke, my dive, my turns. If I did the work, I had nothing to fear."

- Summer Sanders

Chapter 25

Mike Burton – Hard Work Redefines Limits



At the 1972 Munich Olympics, the big story in the pool was Mark Spitz. And with good reason. The guy won seven gold medals in world record time, all while rocking a world-class moustache.

With most of the swimming world transfixed on the Flyin' Stache, his teammate Mike Burton somewhat quietly performed out of his mind, breaking the world record in the 1500m freestyle and repeating as Olympic champion in the event.

Burton was far from an unknown: he'd won a pair of gold medals in Mexico City four years earlier (while reportedly battling Montezuma's Revenge). He'd also won a mitt-full of NCAA titles in the 1650-yard freestyle.

The repeat performance in the mile at the 1972 Games—which he won in world record time—was all the more impressive as he barely squeaked onto the team at Trials a couple months earlier.

Despite being the defending Olympic champion, and having a metric-ton worth of NCAA hardware, Burton had suddenly become far from a sure thing to make the team: he'd been diagnosed with a vitamin deficiency in the months leading up to Trials, leading him to miss sizable blocks of training.

As the weeklong Trials meet unfurled, Burton failed to make the team in his other events, the 400 free and 200 butterfly. With only the mile remaining, Burton's chances at making the team were dismal at best.

On the last night he limped into the final of the 1500m freestyle—getting the last spot to swim in lane 8. Burton cobbled together a gut-ripping performance that qualified him to the Olympic team, placing third. (Each country could send up to three swimmers back then.)

In Munich, Burton would shave a couple tenths off the world record in the 1500m freestyle, the fifth time he had broken it. Over a period of seven years, Burton had torn a chasm of nearly fifty seconds between the first time he broke the world record in the mile (16:41) to that Olympic gold medal winning performance in Munich (15:51).

This mind-blasting canon of work is accented by something particular: Burton wasn't really built like a classic swimmer. He wasn't excruciatingly tall; at five foot nine, he wasn't the longest guy in the pool. He didn't have over-sized hands and size 18 feet.

But the one thing he did have was a vociferous appetite when it came to hard work.

Here's an example.

At the end of one particular week of training, Burton's coach, the legendary Sherm Chavoor, a World War two pilot, decided to keep the group late after their usual Saturday morning two-hour practice to do some extra work.

When a couple of Burton's teammates complained, Chavoor's response was simple: *Swim a 'fast 66.'*

(66 is the number of laps in a yard pool that make up a mile or 1650 yards. In other words, go sprint a mile of freestyle. Yay!)

Burton, sniffing blood in the water and sensing the challenge, swam his brains out, lapping his teammates up and down the pool.

"I was so shot afterward. I've never been that tired in my life, neither before nor after that Saturday," he said years later, smiling. "But I knew from that point on that there was nothing Sherm could give me that I couldn't handle."

DISCUSSION

Swimmers know all-too-well the importance of a killer work ethic in the pool. The long training cycles, early morning workouts, the perpetual sogginess from being at the pool so often. When giving it your best in training, you are learning how to swim with more efficient technique, honing a race-day performance, and competing with your teammates.

But with hard work, you are also constantly redefining what you think is possible. And what you think is possible matters a great deal. Your perceived limits are an invisible stop line that you haven't crossed.

But working hard helps you move that line, workout by workout, main set by main set. It goes a little something like this:

The harder you work → the more you see is possible → the more you expect from yourself → the more awesome stuff you are positioned to achieve.

This positive feedback cycle goes round and round, fueling better performances, faster swimming, and a mindset that is tougher than a used catcher's mitt.

Swimmers often shy away from pushing things in training, testing their limits, and testing their assumptions about what they can do, for a variety of reasons including fear, procrastination, and even perfectionism.

But it's in those moments, in those workouts when you overcome a hard set, stay later than everyone else, and battle-harden your mindset, that turns you into a champion.

CHALLENGE

- Go the extra mile (figuratively) at training this week. Pick something extra that goes above and beyond what is expected of you. Do 15 minutes of core work after training. Do one more repetition of the main set.
- Reflect on a set (or interval, or race pace) that you've flirted with doing, and give it a shot this week. No expectations, just a "first draft" mindset of seeing what you are capable of doing.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Consistent hard work and embracing challenges redefines what you think is possible in the water.

"If you haven't failed you aren't pushing hard enough."
– Adam Peaty

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Olivier Poirier-Leroy is a former national level swimmer, two-time Olympic Trials qualifier, former NAG record holder, and current noon-hour lap swimming aficionado.

Olivier is the author of *Conquer the Pool: The Swimmer's Ultimate Guide to a High-Performance Mindset* and *YourSwimBook: The Swimmer's Ultimate Logbook*.

He writes everything swimming-related at YourSwimLog.com while also contributing to SwimSwam, USA Swimming, SwimOutlet, and pretty much every other website on the internet that smells like chlorine.

He publishes a (free) email newsletter for competitive swimmers that includes motivational tips, technique and training advice, and much more.

You can sign up for the newsletter by clicking here.