

Swim in Your Own Lane for FAST Times

Dr. Alan Goldberg, Sports Psychologist

One of the biggest and costliest mental mistakes made by swimmers at every level is getting too caught up with their competitors. You know what I mean. Before the race you "study" the heat sheet and freak yourself out by all the faster times you see. Or, perhaps you pick out one opponent pre-race and study his size and muscle development. Why is it, you wonder that their biceps are bigger than your thighs? Then too, you might think to yourself how you have never, ever beaten this swimmer. Or maybe you're OK until the race starts and this other swimmer begins to pass you. Then it seems like you spend most of your race in her lane thinking about her.

A few swimmers out there will actually go faster by focusing on an opponent. This type of swimmer, a "racer", always seems to get motivated by racing someone else and will perform better as a result. The "racer" has figured out a way to stay focused on his race while he races the guy in the next lane. However, MOST swimmers are NOT "racers" in this sense of the word. They get too distracted when they focus on or think about who they're going up against. As a result, they get too nervous, lose their confidence and stop paying attention to their race, all of which slows them down immediately! Mentally leaving your lane before or during a race is a great way to psych yourself out and ruin a perfectly good swim. If you're like most swimmers and you want to start swimming faster under pressure, then you have to begin to discipline yourself to STAY IN YOUR OWN LANE before and during your swims. This means that you want to keep your concentration on what YOU are doing. In general, every time your focus leaves your lane and drifts to an opponent's lane, you will quickly slow down. Why?

Because in order to go fast you have to focus on those things that help you go fast like your rhythm, keeping your stroke long and smooth, maintaining a proper breathing pattern, finishing your stroke, etc. When you swim well you automatically focus on these things. Because concentrating on these elements gets you to go faster, I like to call them the "gas pedal" in swimming. However, if you begin to get distracted by that "world record holder" in the next lane or that teammate you're real competitive with, then you will immediately "take your foot off the gas." In this way, moving your concentration over to your opponent's lane is like stepping on the brake pedal. Every stroke that you take in a race where you are thinking about who is in the next lane is a slow stroke!

So if you want to swim fast when it counts the most you have to learn to stay in your own lane. This means that the instant that you find yourself mentally drifting to an opponent either before or during the race, you want to quickly and gently bring your concentration back to what YOU are doing. If your focus drifts back again two seconds later, no problem! Quickly and gently bring your focus back! Every time you leave your lane you want to repeat this "bringing yourself back" process. As a swimmer, a break in concentration won't hurt you. What will hurt you big time is when you lose your focus and you don't bring it right back! You don't want to swim more than one stroke mentally in the wrong lane. So start today to practice swimming in your own lane. Pick something in your set to focus on, (i.e. the feel of the water, finishing your stroke, your elbow being placed in the right position, staying long and smooth, etc.) and whenever you find yourself leaving that focus and going somewhere else, bring yourself back to that concentration point. Remember, you can't swim fast if you're always spending time in someone else's lane.

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STAYING IN THE "NOW" FOR VERY FAST SWIMS

I bet you never knew that swimmers have a brake pedal that they unknowingly use at all the wrong times. Here you are in your big race with 50 to go and tough opponents on both sides of you. Time to step on the gas and what do you do instead? You jam your foot on the brake and slow yourself right down! Or it's your shave and taper meet and your one big chance to finally make the cut in your best event. What happens? Halfway through the race you hit the brakes again and fall way off your pace!

So what's this mysterious brake pedal I'm talking about that causes so many swimmers to slow down when what they really want to do is speed up? It's nothing more than a very common mental mistake that swimmers of all levels make called "time traveling." Time traveling involves losing your focus on what's important in the "here & now" and beginning to concentrate on something in the past or the future.

For example, a past focus might be thinking about your last race while you're standing behind the blocks for your next one, ("If my first race is bad the rest of my meet is usually bad!"), worrying that you didn't train hard enough as you wait for the starter to begin the race, or focusing on how you always seem to swim poorly in this pool. A past focus right before and during your swims will always slow you down because it distracts you from concentrating on the things that help you go fast like your feel of the water, finishing your stroke, feeling long and smooth or kicking hard. Swimmers will know when they are mentally in the past because they use words and phrases like "here we go again", "I knew this was going to happen", "This always happens to me", "I can never break that time," etc.

Time traveling into the future involves mentally getting ahead of yourself. It's interesting to note that in too many 200's, the 3rd 50 is usually slower than the last 50. Why? Because during that 3rd 50 the swimmer starts to shift his or her focus into the future to the end of the race. Other examples of future focusing include, thinking about the time you want for this race, concentrating on needing to win, dreading how you'll feel at the end of the race if you're feeling this badly now and worrying about your next race before you've finished this one. A future focus is most often responsible for choking in swimming and is why a lot of swimmers seem to fall apart under pressure. Like a past focus, concentrating on these future thoughts makes you uptight and distracts you from paying attention to the things that get you to go fast.

The trick to swimming fast when it counts the most is to keep your concentration in the "now" of the race. This is your "gas pedal" in the pool. This means that you have to focus on one race at a time, one lap at a time, and one stroke at a time while you swim. By staying in the "now" just before and during your swims, you will dramatically increase your chances of getting the times that you really want. Being in the "now" means that you usually focus on how the swim feels and nothing else.

So if you want to go fast when it counts the most you have to train yourself to keep your focus of concentration in the "now" of the race. This means that if you begin to notice that you're starting to "time travel", quickly and gently return your focus to the task at hand right now. By quickly bringing yourself back to the "now" every time that you drift, you will increase your chances of getting that fast time.