

P.B. or Not P.B. – That is the Question

by Wayne Goldsmith

P.B.s – Personal Bests, the best ever times that a swimmer has swum, are an important part of swimming. They are an indication of the best performance of a swimmer and are often used to determine the appropriate training speeds for a swimmer. They can be part of the process or achieving qualifying standards for metropolitan, state and national championships and are a useful measuring stick to track the progress and improvement of a swimmer over time.

However, too much focus on the importance of doing a personal best rather than on the aspects of the swimming performance that lead to the personal best can be counter productive.

National Team Sports Psychologist Clark Perry says: “Swimmers should concentrate on the PROCESS of doing a personal best, rather than the actual OUTCOME (i.e. doing the time). Parents, swimmers and coaches need to focus on the CONTROLLABLE aspects of the performance like the number of strokes per lap, the number of strokes per minute, streamlining off starts and turns, kicking rhythm etc rather than on WINNING or doing a PB.”

The goal of competing in a race may be to win – come first. However, in most cases WINNING is something over which swimmers have little or no control. They have no control over the talent of the other swimmers in the race. They have no control over how much swimming training the other swimmers in the race have done. They have no control over the commitment or dedication of the other swimmers. The only thing they have some control over in terms of the race outcome is their own performance. Therefore, it makes sense to focus on those things over which the swimmer has control to achieve the best possible result.

Swimmers will often worry about the outcome of a race and stress about winning or losing. By giving swimmers control over their performance and reinforcing the importance of concentrating on the skills and techniques they have learned in training, the “freak-out” experienced by many swimmers prior to a swim meet can be reduced. Of course the time to be working on swimming skills and techniques is at training. Getting to the meet and worrying about how to get that PB is too late. The skills and techniques that will make the PB a reality are the things you practice as part of your daily training routine.

In training – MAKE IT HAPPEN. In racing – on the day of the meet – LET IT HAPPEN! If you concentrate on doing the little things right in training all the time, you can make the PB happen. If you just roll through training, not concentrating on great turns, great dives, great technique but then try to turn it all around on race day, it’s too late! Make your success happen in training, then on race day, let the skills and techniques you have developed in training help you achieve your goal. Success means leaving nothing to chance. Success means not relying on luck. Success means taking control over your performance by working on doing the little things right in training every day.

Aspects of a PB Performance	How to MAKE it happen
Training	Get to every session the coach has scheduled. Do all of the workouts to the best of your ability. Ask of yourself MORE than the coach asks by setting little goals in each session. For example, do what the coach asks but with fewer strokes, fewer breaths or at a faster speed. When was the last time you asked the coach if could do MORE work than has been set?
Skills	Make every dive a race dive, every turn a race turn. Streamline past the flags off every turn. Always touch the wall with two hands in fly and breast. Never breathe on your first or last stroke in fly and free. Always take your bottom hand away first in free and back to take your first stroke.
Technique	Do your drills and technique work in training 100% right all the time. Work on perfecting the drill technique, then on doing the drill with fewer strokes and at a higher speed. Practice swimming with great technique at race speeds and under race simulated pressures.
Mental approach	Learn what gets you ready to compete at your best. This might mean reading a book, getting extra sleep, listening to music, playing a Game Boy, talking with friends etc. Practice using these skills and techniques before and after training.
Race strategy	Go through a race plan with your coach. Practice the plan in training during your training sets. Write it down and go through it in your head (see yourself doing the race) a few times before race day.
Nutrition	Eat a high carbohydrate, low fat, low salt diet with lots of variety of healthy nutritious foods. Drink plenty of water; eat lots of fresh fruit and veggies.

Nothing can absolutely guarantee success. But you can increase the likelihood of success by MAKING things happen through your own hard work, commitment and dedication.

The Big Question is how do you control the controllable on race day?

1. Focus on the elements of the race competition that are important to success. For example, focus on the number of strokes per lap, the number of strokes per minute, your speed for each lap (splits), your pacing strategy and so on.
2. Focus on the elements of swimming technique and race skill. For example, think about exploding off the blocks in your dive, about keeping your strokes long and strong and smooth, about streamlining and kicking powerfully out of each turn, your breathing pattern, when to take your first breath after a turn, when to take your last breath before the finish, attaching the final ten metres, etc.
3. Focus on doing the little things right before the competition. Eat a light, sensible breakfast of fruit, cereal, toast and juice. Get to the pool early and make sure of marshalling procedures, warm up facilities and swim down areas. If a backstroker, make sure you know where the flags are and how many strokes you need to take from the flags to the wall. Get a good feel for the

starting blocks and practice some starts. Do a great warm up, have a great stretching session and drink a little sports drink or some water and eat a piece of fruit to keep energy stores topped up.

For the “control the controllable” approach to work, the swimmer, coach and family must all be aiming for the same thing. It is vital that all three communicate and understand that success is a team effort.

Aspect of Performance	CAN CONTROL	CAN'T CONTROL
Training	Your own commitment, dedication and attitude to training.	How much training or what type of training anyone else has done.
Nutrition	What you eat before and during the meet.	What anyone else had to eat before and during the meet.
Rest & Recovery	How much sleep and rest you get in the days leading up to the meet.	Everyone else's sleep and rest.
Pre-race preparation	Your own warm-up and stretching.	Everyone else's warm up and stretching.
The race itself	Your own pacing, skills, techniques, breathing, streamlining, turning, starting, diving and finishing.	Everyone else's pacing, skills, techniques, breathing, streamlining, turning, starting, diving and finishing

Concentrating on the process of swimming well rather than on the outcome of winning or doing a PB is a great way to achieve your swimming goals without experiencing the highs and lows of aiming to win every race. Winning and doing PBs are a fantastic HIGH, but if these are your only aims and you DON'T win or do a PB the lows can be really painful.

As one swimmer put it:

“If I concentrate on doing my job right, I know the clock will do the same.”