

"Pick Your Target"

Goal setting. Commitment. Accountability. These three keys unlock every swimmer's potential for success. They may sound obvious and simple, but they are vital. So vital, in fact, that diving into the pool without them is like taking a drive without knowing where you're going.

This was the message Bob Bowman, men's head coach at the University of Michigan, gave the Ann Arbor Swim Club at its awards banquet in Ann Arbor, Mich., recently. Although his words were addressed to that particular group, they ring true for swimmers, parents and coaches of any club. As for their effectiveness, there is no better proof than Bowman's most famous swimmer, Olympic phenom Michael Phelps.

"Every swimmer needs three things to succeed in this sport. Ignoring them prevents athletes from doing what they are capable of," Bowman said. Embracing them, on the other hand, opens doors, overcomes obstacles and helps athletes soar to their full potential.

Set a Goal

The first key is setting a goal. "Imagine if you got in your car and just started aimlessly driving. That's what not having a goal is like. Goals are the targets that direct your aim," he said.

The end goal is the big question that must be answered first. Where are you headed? Do you want a state cut? An Olympic gold medal? Once you determine your destination point, the other stops along the way will automatically follow.

"When I sit down with my swimmers at Michigan, I tell them, 'Once you've answered the big question, the small ones are easy. You want to be an NCAA champion? OK, there are some things that go into that. You're not going to miss a practice, ever. Because on that level, everybody trains. You're going to get rested. You're going to eat right, and more.'"

Knowing where to set goals is an art that can be refined with the help of your coaches. Ask them, if you haven't already, because the stakes are high. Goals that are too easy remove the sense of challenge. Goals that are too difficult lead to discouragement. Either extreme produces the same result: swimmers who lose interest in the sport. Basically, goals should have enough risk so they are exciting, but enough chance of success so they are achievable, Bowman said.

The whole process is a bit like playing a game of ring toss. "If I gave you rings to throw at a target, there would probably be a group who stood right over it so they would hit it every time. And there would be another group who wanted to stand as far back as possible for the challenge. Then there would be a third group who would stand somewhere in the middle so they had a 50/50 chance of hitting the target. That's where you want to set your goal."

Make a Commitment

The next key to success is making the kind of commitments that help you reach your goal. How many times a week are you going to practice? How hard are you willing to work? Don't make your commitments week by week. Make them for the long haul and make them ahead of time. Then stick with them.

While adolescent swimmers only need an occasional reminder, youngsters may need something more. "This is where parents come in," said Bowman. Their supporting role not only provides the time, finances and energy that drives swimmers to practice and equips them with goggles, fins and other tools of the trade, it provides the emotional backbone needed to keep commitments.

Bowman spoke from experience.

"I remember times as a young swimmer when I would say, 'I'm not going to practice today.' My mother would tell me, 'You are going to practice because you made a commitment.' Then I would say, 'I'm going to quit.' And she would counter, 'You can quit at the end of the season.'"

But when the end of the season rolled around, Bowman found he had developed a very different attitude. "Because I went to all the practices, I always did better and never wanted to quit at the end of the season," he said, chuckling. "I'm no different than many of you. Everyone has times when they don't want to follow through. I'm here to tell you to keep going," he said.

Be Accountable

The third key is accountability. Once you've set your goals and made commitments, own up to them and take responsibility for the results. "Ultimately, it's you who is going to decide where you end up in this sport," Bowman said. "If something doesn't go right, claim it. Say, 'It's my fault. I'll do better next time.'"

Accountability can be discouraging when goals are not met and there is no one else to blame, or it can be exhilarating in the face of triumph. While the emotional responses vary, one fact does not: accountability is an essential part of growth. Owning up to your results cultivates a take-charge attitude that can give you a jump start on your competition.

"When my guys are getting ready for an international meet, I tell them: 'When it comes time to get on that block, it's just you."

You better know who you are, and what you're all about." Swimmers who have stared accountability in the face without flinching, have developed that inner strength, he added.

Ann Arbor Swim Club head coach Dan Ohm agreed, adding that these practices benefit all aspects of life. "Setting goals, making commitments and being accountable are character-building traits that not only make you a better swimmer, but a better person," Ohm said.

There's more to swimming than fast times and momentary triumphs. The benefits extend well beyond the pool and into life. Just ask Bob Bowman, men's head coach at the University of Michigan.

Bowman had no idea, when he first got involved in swimming at the age of 11, how much it would positively impact the rest of his life. But it has, and it can do the same for any serious devotee, he told swimmers, coaches and parents at a recent awards banquet hosted by the Ann Arbor Swim Club in Ann Arbor, Mich.

When Bowman first joined a summer swim league in Columbia, S.C., his initial focus was on performance in the pool. Like many youngsters, he was impressed with fast times and records.

"I still remember attending my first big meet at the University of South Carolina in 1978 and witnessing a record-breaking swim. I thought, 'Wow, this is great. It must happen all the time.'"

His enthusiasm propelled him to practice harder, and he ultimately went to Florida State University, where teammates, inspired by his determination, made him captain of the swim team. "It was unusual because I was one of the slowest swimmers on the team," he said.

As he matured, however, his eyes were opened to the enduring value of swimming.

"There's more to swimming than records and fast times. The ability to set goals, make commitments and be accountable for your performance benefits everyone. And unlike records, they last a lifetime."

"Keys to Success: Nathan Adrian"

Nathan Adrian won gold this summer in the 400m free relay at the 2009 FINA World Championships in Rome. Here are the keys to his success:

- 1. Do your best to stay focused in practice.** Many times practices turn into two or three hours of swimming back and forth with your favorite song stuck in your head. While this is a great way to pass the time, it may not be the most conducive to swimming your best. Instead, try focusing on one thing per practice that you want to improve. Mondays could be a day to focus on turns while Tuesday could be used to work on head position.
- 2. Don't underestimate the importance of persistence.** Everybody has a bad race or season. The best way to approach these disappointments is to learn from them and move on. A bad season could be used as motivation to work harder next season.
- 3. Communicate with your coach.** Your coach is doing his or her best to make you the best swimmer possible. There is a reason you are doing what you are doing in and out of the pool. It is important to talk to your coach, and if you don't understand why you are doing something, just ask.
- 4. Don't be afraid of being great.** Never become intimidated by anything when you swim. Most great swimmers all have one thing in common: they were never afraid to go out and race their heart out to try and do something special. Most recently, we all saw Jason Lezak prove that he knew he was great. Setting limitations on yourself is the worst thing you could do as a swimmer.
- 5. Enjoy the process.** Most importantly, swimming should be fun. Although I have had to wake up at 5:20 a.m., five days a week for the last two months, I still look forward to the next time I get to hang out with my teammates at practice. Find something that makes swimming enjoyable for you and cherish the time that you get to spend doing it.

"Carbs, Carbs, Carbs"

BY KATHLEEN WOOLF, PhD, RD//Special Correspondent

Swimmers, like most athletes, use carbohydrates as fuel during exercise. Unfortunately, the body only stores a limited amount of carbohydrate, and it can easily be depleted after a vigorous workout. To maximize your body's carbohydrate stores, consume carbs before, during and after exercise.

Carbs Before Exercise

Before every practice or competition, include carbs as part of a pre-event meal to "top off" your muscle stores. Select foods that can be quickly digested and absorbed. Depending on the time of your pre-event meal, vary your meal patterns. When a pre-event meal occurs 4 hours before your event, consume foods

such as a turkey sandwich, apple, oatmeal cookie and low-fat milk. If your pre-event meal occurs less than one hour before an event, limit your intake to a small amount of juice or fruit or a sports beverage. Research consistently supports that eating a pre-event meal improves performance. However, a single pre-event meal will not compensate for an overall poor training diet.

Carbs During Exercise

When exercise lasts more than an hour, carbs are recommended during exercise to provide additional fuel for your body. Carbohydrate intake during exercise allows athletes to exercise longer and harder. Consume 30 to 60 grams of carbs per hour during long duration exercise. To provide your body with 30 grams of carbs, choose 2 cups of a sports beverage or 1 medium banana or 3 large graham crackers.

Carbs After Exercise

Immediately after every practice or competition, consume carbohydrate-rich foods and beverages as part of your recovery. Choose fruit, 100% fruit juices, low-fat milk, cereal, sports beverages and bagels to replenish your carbohydrate stores so that you are ready for your next event. What you eat after a hard practice affects your ability to perform during your next workout.

Carbs Always

Because carbohydrates are the predominant fuel for most events, swimmers need to focus on a carbohydrate-rich diet. For optimal performance, make it a habit to consume high-carbohydrate meals and snacks, before, during and after exercise.

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"What are you doing today to guarantee greatness tomorrow?"

BY DR. ALAN GOLDBERG//Sport Psychologist

What if you knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that what you did today, in this set, how hard you pushed yourself and how precise you were with your strokes and turns would guarantee a "meet-of-your-life" performance in your events come taper time? How motivated would you be? Would you concentrate more? Would it bother you that you went into practice a little tired? Would you allow yourself just to go through the motions the way you sometimes do or cut as many corners? Would you complain to yourself or a teammate about how you hated this set?

Chances are pretty good that if you knew that today's practice would guarantee you great swims at the big meet, then you'd be totally psyched and willing to work your butt off. In fact, you'd probably go into practice with a seriousness of purpose that would instantly raise the quality of your training.

It's this mental approach to practice that you need to adopt right now to help get you through the grind and drudgery of this, the toughest part of the training cycle.

Come December and January of the short course season, the intensity of your practices has increased, your body is more broken down and your motivation may be at an all-time low. The taper meet seems months away, and it's easy to lose sight of why you're doing what you're doing. This is the time when swimmers are most vulnerable to wasting valuable practices by giving in to their mental and physical fatigue. Take note: If you want to become a winner, then you can't allow yourself to do this.

You have to approach today's training as if this is championship time! You have to mentally connect what you are doing right now in the pool with what you want to be doing at the taper meet. You have to create a sense of inner importance for today's practice by directly linking it with your end-of-season goals. You do this by asking yourself the question, "How is what I'm doing today and right now going to help me get to where I want to go?"

By continuously connecting your big goals with what you are doing right now, you will out-work the competition, and in the process, distinguish yourself as a champion.

"Warming Down"

BY KELSEY SAVAGE HAYS with Kristin Hill, Head Coach of Boise State Swimming

Warm down gives hard-worked muscles the chance to prepare for the next practice or race. Swimmers should aim to get their heart rate under 100 beats per minute before exiting the warm-down pool. While a 200-300 yard set with some drills and easy swimming is usually enough recovery after practice, races require a little extra strategy. Here are five tips for getting the most out of warm down:

1. After a race, warming down should be the immediate focus. A long wait between competition and recovery gives the body more time to tighten, making it harder to flush out the lactate acid built up in muscles.
2. Start with a relaxed 300 yards before doing a short interval set; Kristin suggests doing 6x50 yards on :45 seconds. The slight increase of intensity hastens the removal of lactate acid by increasing blood circulation. Finish with some more easy swimming, or, if there isn't much time between races, start preparing for the next event with drills and pace work.
3. Hydrate with water between events or with a recovery drink if it's the final warm-down of the session. Fluids, especially those including carbohydrates and protein, can greatly aid recovery, but stick to drinking something you've already tested during practice. Keep your choice beverage on the side of the pool and sip it during your warm down.
4. Most swimmers need 600-800 yards before their heart rate settles, but some might need longer. Don't shortchange your body with too little recovery; leave the warm-down pool fresh for the next race.
5. Stretching after warming down can also loosen the body, if it's already part of your routine. Don't push yourself into stretching in ways you aren't used to. Stretching not only helps the muscles relax, but it gives a swimmer a few quiet minutes to prepare for the next race.

"Bilateral Breathing"

The Tip:

If you're not breathing to both sides, it's never too late to start. It helps balance your stroke, creates symmetry in back musculature, helps eliminate cramping and increases your oxygen intake, resulting in a more efficient, faster stroke. Plus in a race, breathing bilaterally helps you keep an eye on your competition.

The key to doing this correctly is proper rotation. If you're whipping your head around to breathe on your weaker side, your hips will drop and throw your balance. Here's how to make bilateral breathing easier:

- Practice rotation drills. A great one to start with your body on its side, with the bottom arm extending out in front and the top arm resting on your side. Point your nose to the bottom of the pool. Slowly kick to keep your hips up. Roll and stroke until you are lying on the opposite side. Breathe freely and check your balance. Then turn your head so your nose points to the bottom, and stay on your side for 10 kicks. Repeat the motion for the length of the pool.
- Try a set where you breathe to your right side on one length and to your left on the next.
- On a set of 75s, breathe every five strokes on the first 25, every three strokes on the second length and every stroke (right-left-right-left) on the last length.
- Breathe to your weak side in all warm ups, cool downs and slower swimming sets, and to your strong side on main sets. Gradually make the shift to bilateral breathing on main sets.
- It doesn't matter if you practice bilateral breathing per lap or per set. What matters is staying balanced and symmetrical so you can breathe easily on both sides. Once you begin regular bilateral breathing, it gets easier with every practice.
- Stay smooth and fluid while breathing every third stroke. Eventually with practice, breathing every cycle with no interruption in your flow should be easy. Your goal should be to breathe evenly to both sides in all your practices and races.

"Drink Early and Often."

There are 2 reasons to drink fluids: (1) to stay hydrated, and (2) to provide the body with fuel.

During Workout - Regardless of age or length of workout, all swimmers need fluids during practice to stay hydrated. Easily accomplished with a couple of sips from the water bottle every 15-20 minutes. As swimmers progress, workouts get longer and tougher. It's well established that exercise beyond 90 minutes benefits from a supplemental fuel source. The sports drink can provide it. But we still have hydration to think about. Drinks that are too strong, or "concentrated," can provide the fuel but also inhibit fluid absorption and often lead to cramping.

Years of research tells us that drinks that are 6-8% carbohydrate by weight provide the perfect balance. Enough carbohydrate to provide a fuel source during long exercise, but not so much that will inhibit fluid

absorption. A couple of sips every 15-20 minutes keeps the body fueled, helps prevent unnecessary tissue breakdown, and maintains hydration. Today, only Gatorade and Powerade meet the 6-8% criteria. Most other drinks are too strong to be effective during workout.

After Workout – Water is an excellent choice to replenish fluids after practice. It's always wise to drink at least one cup. But after a tough workout, replenishing fuel stores is equally important. Competitive swimmers need a little over 1 gram of carbohydrate for every kilogram they weigh (lbs/2.2) each hour after workout. And they need it within the first hour.

Oftentimes, a sports drink that is easily digested and quickly absorbed, such as Gatorade or Powerade can provide a convenient way to get some of this fuel within the first 20 minutes. Accelerade, a newer drink on the market may also do the trick. Endurox, perhaps, but beware of the high protein drinks, as they often forgo the carbohydrate, and carbohydrate is what you are trying to replenish within that first hour after workout. A little protein won't hurt, in fact a little bit of protein may actually help by supporting tissue repair and re-building processes. But too much protein, especially when it comes in place of carbohydrate, may actually be detrimental to the post-workout recovery process.

**Remember...

1. Carbohydrate is the primary fuel source during tough workouts. Protein is used as a fuel source during exercise only when carbohydrate and fat are not present in sufficient quantities. This can happen during long/tough workouts when the body uses much of its stored carbohydrate, and it must find an additional source. If an additional carbohydrate source (ex. Gatorade, Powerade) is not supplied, the body taps into stored protein, aka your muscles. This is why we drink carbohydrate-electrolyte solutions during workout...to spare muscle protein. And this is also why it is important to replace carbohydrate stores lost during a workout...so you start the next workout with a full tank of gas!

2. Following exercise, the body is very sensitive to the hormone insulin. Insulin is that hormone that rises every time blood sugar rises. In other words, every time a swimmer eats carbohydrate, which causes blood sugar to rise, insulin goes up. Well, it's insulin's job to remove sugar from the bloodstream, and it does so by facilitating its storage as glycogen. Glycogen, the storage form for carbohydrate, is what the body taps into for fuel when exercise is very intense. This can happen quite a bit during a tough workout, which is why it's important to see that glycogen is replenished before the next practice.

During the Day – Staying hydrated during the day is just as critical as hydrating during and after workouts. Most swimmers can do this by incorporating a variety of fluids into their daily diet. Water, fruit juice, milk, soups, etc. Water is always an excellent choice, but other drinks, including sports drinks (defined as 6-8% carbohydrate by weight) are okay too. Just remember that variety is the key to a healthy diet. If you use a sports drink during and after practice, it may be better to drink water and juice during the day to stay hydrated. Juices are often healthier than sports drinks in that their sugars are natural. Always keep in mind that juices and sports drinks contribute to total caloric intake.

For the purpose of this article, a sports drink is defined as a 6-8% carbohydrate-electrolyte solution. Do NOT include "energy drinks," such as Red Bull, 180o, Sobe, etc. These dietary supplements fall into the Yellow Light category of the Dietary Supplements Health & Contamination Risk Chart.