

INTRODUCTION

Mental Toolbox: Mental Excellence, Physical Success



Mental Toolbox: Achieving Success Through Mental Excellence



Mental Toolbox: How Do You Build a Staircase?

Have you ever tried to build something out of wood? Imagine a carpenter preparing for a challenging new project such as building a staircase in a house. First the carpenter would make sure she has the blueprints for the job. Next she would call the lumber store and order the necessary lumber and building supplies. Finally she would gather together all of the essential tools for the job then commence with the project. Can you imagine a carpenter trying to build a staircase with only a screwdriver? In sport, we are making a similar mistake if all the tools necessary for success are not “on hand”.

Season after season swimmers spend time at the pool working on their strokes, swimming lap after lap, doing drylands and lifting weights. It is often the case, however, that the mind is not trained along with the body.

This season it may be beneficial to start using the Mental Toolbox to help develop mental skills. The Mental Toolbox is designed as a resource for coaches, swimmers and parents. The information included in the upcoming chapters should be both a useful, practical tool for coaches, parents and swimmers who are training and competing at the club, regional, national and international level. A new chapter will be released once every three weeks starting on August 21st on the USA Swimming web site (www.usa-swimming.org).

Included in each edition of the Mental Toolbox will be educational information related to the given skill, basic teaching instructions, and exercises/ handouts to help develop these skills, and a guide for coaches. Let’s look at the overall layout of the Mental Toolbox.



The Toolbox: Mental Skills Preview

Due to the installment nature of this manual we have carefully determined the order of the chapters. The first four skills, **practice and foundational skills**, are goal setting/keeping track of progress, mental imagery, self-talk, concentration. Following these skills will be a chapter on team cohesion. The next four skills are grouped as **performance skills**; they are more complex skills that build on the practice skills. They are self-confidence, energy management, mental preparation and handling the pressure of competition.

GOAL SETTING/KEEPING TRACK OF PROGRESS – Goal Setting is an effective way to add direction, feedback, motivation and support to everyday practices and competitions. In addition, this chapter will outline a system for

keeping track of progress through the use of both practice and competition logbooks.

IMAGERY – This installment will focus on the skills necessary to create and recreate athletic performances and images in the mind. Imagery is especially helpful when learning new skills and focusing in on success.

SELF-TALK – Self-talk, the internal dialogue that goes on in your head, can be positive or negative and either help or hurt performance. This chapter will teach swimmers how to identify self-talk and how to control it.

CONCENTRATION – Concentration is the ability to pay attention to the right things at the right time. If swimmers can recognize their own concentration strengths and weaknesses and where their attention should be focused, they can better anticipate and prepare themselves for critical performance situations.

TEAM COHESION – Swimming is an individual sport, right? Why team cohesion?

SELF-CONFIDENCE – One common characteristic of top athletes is they have a high level of self-confidence. Self-confidence, which is the swimmer's belief in her abilities to succeed, is usually displayed in the way she walks, talks, behaves, thinks and feels. This chapter will demonstrate ways to help boost a swimmer's self-confidence.

ENERGY MANAGEMENT – Often at big meets swimmers complain of being too nervous or sometimes even too relaxed. This chapter will help swimmer's identify their current energy levels, define what energy level is best for them, and learn strategies to manage their energy.

MENTAL PREPARATION – By race day, swimmers should be physically "ready to go." But what about their mental states? Because the "mind" goes to the blocks with the body, it is equally important to mentally prepare for competition as it is to physically prepare. This chapter is a culmination of the seven previous chapters, with swimmer's mental toolboxes full, mental preparation for race day should be a snap!

HANDLING THE PRESSURE OF COMPETITION – Although some swimmers may be superb practice swimmers, their performances in meets never match up to their overall physical abilities. Coping with the pressure changes from practice to competition can be difficult, however as this chapter emphasizes, with a developed mental toolbox this transition can be much smoother.

The Philosophy of the Mental Toolbox

Mental Skills are SKILLS.

Mental skills are analogous to physical skills in that they are both *skills* that can be learned and ultimately lead to peak performance. Oftentimes, coaches and athletes approach mental skills as something an athlete either has or doesn't

have (i.e., she is confident or she is not confident) instead of something the athlete can learn and develop.

Mental Skills are Important for ALL Levels of Swimmers.

Mental skills are not only important for elite level swimmers but they are also important for developmental swimmers. Like any physical athletic skill, mental skills need to be practiced. This mental practice leads to a strong mental foundation and solid mental routines, which are important components of both swim practice and competition. Without mental training, athletes often miss opportunities to succeed; they are physically ready but not mentally ready.

Mental training isn't easy.

Athletes can learn to manage what goes on internally. However, some athletes never develop that ability fully due to an unwillingness to train the mind along with the body. These are athletes who tend to be inconsistent - - some good performances and many sub-par performances. Athletes who do make the effort to train the mind discover that it takes time, effort, and persistence, just like physical training. But just like physical training, the rewards can be great.

Coaches CAN aid in their Swimmer's Development of Mental Skills.

Although most coaches and swimmers consider mental skills an important aspect of a well-rounded athlete, not all swimmers and coaches have access to a mental skills specialist (sport psychologist). However, coaches, who interact daily with their athletes, can serve as mental skills facilitators, helping to provide direction and support. This manual has been created, in part, to aid coaches in teaching mental skills to their athletes.

At the end of each chapter, a section entitled "Coaches Guide." This section is designed to aid the coaches in teaching the basic mental tools they need to gain more control of their thoughts and images.

The Reality of Sport Psychology:

Sport Psychology **can**:

- Increase your swimmer's ability to be in control under pressure
- Increase your swimmer's consistency
- Help your swimmers perform to the best of his/her ability in practice and competition

Sport Psychology **cannot**:

- Replace physical training
- Replace technical training
- Increase your athlete's physical potential to excel in a sport

Introducing Sport Psychology to your Swimmers

Each chapter stands on it's own, you are not required to teach every skill. However, we suggest that every three weeks, as the installments are made available, you conduct a mental training session and have your swimmers complete your choice of the handouts and the exercises that accompany each edition. Each training session should run between 15 and 30 minutes either at the beginning or end of the practice. You may want to alert swimmers to the meeting in advance and suggest they bring paper and pencil.

In your first session with your swimmers, discuss the following key points that have been highlighted in this introductory chapter:

1. Importance of addressing mental skills (i.e. carpenter example)
2. The need to consistently practice/ develop mental skills
3. Mental skills aren't easy
4. What sport psychology can and cannot do
5. Testimonies from elite athletes who use mental skills
6. Tell your athletes that as they train their bodies this season you want them to also train their brains.

In conjunction with introducing the new mental skill, steps should also be taken to integrate it with the physical skills. After the initial training, swimmers should be reminded several times a week about using their new mental skills in either practice or competition.

If at any time you have questions or comments about the manual please contact either Suzie Tuffey (stuffey@usa-swimming.org) or Katie Petrock (kpetrock@usa-swimming.org). To aid in answering everyone's questions, several times during the season we will publish a question and answer page in addition to the regular manual chapter. We will try to address your questions as best we can.

GOOD LUCK!