MENTAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR ELITE ATHLETES

PART 1

by Dr. Murray Smith

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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INTRODUCTION

Mental or psychological preparation for training and competition is used by elite athletes throughout the world, especially in the aesthetic sports. While the target of this article is synchronized swimming, the principles which guide the development of mental skills remain the same, no matter what the sport. Techniques advocated here, designed to complement the NCCP Theory and Technical programs, can be adapted by an imaginative coach to fit his or her athletes' special needs. These procedures are organized on three levels: introductory, intermediate, and advanced.

MENTAL SKILLS – A DEFINITION

Mental skills are expressed by the ways we think in order to learn, solve problems, plan and carry out action. The terms “mental” or “psychological” skills are used here interchangeably to describe processes that enable us to control and direct the thoughts and feelings/emotions required for skilled performance. This control becomes especially difficult when we perceive pressure, as often happens during competition.

The primary objective of mental skills development is to enable us to perform to our potential: to be the best we are capable of being at any given time.

A major premise of this particular approach to mental skills training presented here is that pressure does not exist, no matter how significant the situation appears. Pressure exists only by perception: in the way the individual experiences, defines and evaluates the situation.

It is important to remember that there is a significant difference between mental skill and physical skill. While physical skills are observable and open to collaborative correction by coach and athlete, mental skills are internal and personal. One can judge the degree of mental skill only indirectly and correction is often difficult. In addition, mental skills are unstable. The athlete may be able to control thoughts and emotions on one occasion but not on another very similar occasion.
Six basic mental/psychological skills

There are many ways to describe the mental skills important for success in sport. The following works well for synchronized swimming and can be applied to most other sports as well:

Relaxation: The skill of relaxing with deep breathing so that muscular tension is reduced and thoughts and emotions are brought under control. The swimmer is free to perform to her potential, with skilled, refined movements and rapid problem-solving to avoid or correct errors.

Mental rehearsal: The skill of “seeing” success in the mind. By complementing physical in-water practice with relaxed mental rehearsal in the water, on the deck or away from the pool, we improve the learning of new skills and routines and make the correction of errors more manageable. When well developed, mental rehearsal will involve not only the usual five senses, but also the kinesthetic sense—the inner awareness of the feeling of movement.

Staying positive: The skill of knowing how to avoid letting down or becoming discouraged, especially when faced with failure, disappointment or an unexpected problem. The key elements are using “thought-stopping” and re- framing or re-stating negatives into positives.

Realistic goal-setting: The skill of beginning with small, incremental goals to guide learning and improvement, and extending this process to intermediate and then long-range goals. Realistic goal-setting depends on accurate knowledge of present ability coupled with a commitment to the actions and effort necessary for improvement.

On-task focus of attention and control of emotions: The skill of focusing on the task at hand. Enemies of this skill include: fear of failure, worry about the score or the final result; allowing attention to jump to an event in the future (out-of-sequence thoughts); thinking about irrelevant factors. Closely related is the skill of exerting conscious control of emotional reactions that interfere with performance. (Emotions that support performance are, of course, encouraged.)

Becoming and staying energized: The skill of getting into and maintaining a positive, energized state that matches the demands of the situation so that the athlete is ready and eager to perform both physically and emotionally. This requires careful self-study by the swimmer, together with the sensitive involvement of the coach.

Principles of mental skills development

- Mental skills training is most effective when it is an integral part of the learning of figures and routines (physical skills), rather than as an add-on to be learned afterwards.
- Since mental skills should be learned concurrently with physical skills, the coach is the best person to teach them.
- Mental skills training is a developmental process. It begins with simple, familiar examples and grows gradually with practice and good instruction to embrace complex and unfamiliar situations.
- The athlete’s objective is to become self-sufficient, to guide her own learning and use of mental skills independent of the coach or sport psychologist.
- Individual differences in experience and background have a much stronger effect on mental skills than on physical skills. For that reason, a more individual and sensitive approach to conquering difficulties may be necessary. Fears or phobias that interfere with performance cannot be dealt with as easily as the refinement of precision in a skills sequence.
- Both coach and athlete must bring the same quality of effort to the learning of mental skills as they do to physical skills and routines.
- One of the most powerful influences in all learning—including mental skills—is the example of the coach. To be really effective, the coach must be a positive model of the skills being taught.

Sequences for effective learning

Mental skills should be developed slowly and applied first to body positions, then to transitions and finally to entire figures. For example, to develop a physical routine you might begin with the entry and first boost and progress methodically adding components until the whole routine is under control. Table 1 provides a summary overview of the recommended sequence for effective learning.

In the best of all worlds, there will be a close match between the swimmer’s water skills and mental skills. In reality, you will find that some girls with great physical abilities do not have equivalent mental talents, and some with few water skills are quite sophisticated in their approach to the mental aspects.

You must determine through observation and discussion with each swimmer her real degree of mental skill and begin at that level, even though the other girls in the same age or performance group may be at a different state of development.

HOW TO USE THIS PROGRAM

As coach, you have many options. This program has been designed to help you decide how and when to incorporate mental skills training into daily workouts in a logical and developmentally-sound progression. In general, you can start with Step 1 at the Introductory Level (Relaxation) and proceed page-by-page. However, the particular needs and personalities of different groups of swimmers may indicate a need for changes to the suggested order. You should feel free to make changes.

While many children younger than 10 years of age are able to profit from mental skills training, some will find it difficult. As a general rule it is best to wait until the individual is at least 10 and has made a personal commitment to competition. When their focus is on sport as an enjoyable recreation and learning experience with friends, it is premature—and may even be counter-productive—to teach mental skills. Such young athletes should have the option of choosing between recreation and competition without undue external pressure from either parents or coaches.

In teaching mental skills, there is no need to make drastic changes to your customary workout time allocation. The progression offered here will take several full seasons to learn. You need to devote only five or ten minutes to the program per workout, three to five times per week. You should, however, find yourself applying many of the basic ideas in your regular teaching and coaching progressions.
### Table 1. An Overview of the Developmental Approach to Mental (Psychological) Skills

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The advantage of this program is that your athletes will incorporate mental skills directly into their water skills, figures and routines as they are learned. This is far more efficient than working several seasons on physical skill development and then trying to plaster on mental skills at the end. Even worse is to import a sport psychologist to do the plastering job, making mental skills something separate and distinct from what the swimmers do in the water. Because physical and mental skills go together, they should grow together under the guidance of the coach.

### Introductory Level

#### Introducing relaxation

The following steps should fit naturally into the workout so that they facilitate your coaching. Initially, they will be a two to three minute item in each workout or every second workout. Progress to the next step only after the swimmers have mastered the skill. Do not force or hurry the process.

**NOTE:** We have provided examples of the type of wording you can use when teaching or coaching mental skills *in italics*. When they fit your style, these can be used verbatim, or they can be rephrased in your own language.

**Step 1: The coach as a model**

The coach should always model the ability to change mood, from sharing the fun and excitement of learning and practicing new skills, to quieting down to a relaxed discussion of what is going on. Become aware of doing this intentionally. Be on the alert for emergencies and then model relaxed control if your athletes are showing signs of stress.

**Step 2: Brief relaxation (dry land)**

After an interlude of action or excitement, ask the swimmers to get out of the water. Then tell them ... Sit quietly, slow down, and relax ... close your eyes for a few minutes.

Quietly ensure that talking ceases; then ask the girls to ... Turn your attention inward ... become aware of what is going on inside your body ... what you are thinking and feeling ... ignore what is going on around you and be calm, quiet. (Repeat this once or twice, as you think necessary.)

Begin with 5–10 seconds of quiet time; over several weeks or months work up to 20–30 seconds. Be patient; do not force it. Extend the relaxed mood as you carry on with your regular coaching: reviewing, explaining, asking or answering questions. Then move to the next item in your regular workout.

**Step 3: Extended relaxation (dry land)**

After several weeks, or as long as it takes for the girls to learn to remain quiet for about 30 seconds without any hushing by you, ask them to sit on the deck ...

Quiet down, close your eyes, turn your attention inward ... take a deep breath, hold it for a second or two, and then let it out slowly through slightly parted lips. Now go on, repeat your deep breathing and focus on how relaxed it makes you feel.

Give them time to take 4–5 breaths and encourage them to focus on the calm, relaxed feeling that results. Then move to the next item in your workout.

**Step 4: Relaxation (in the water)**

When Step 3 has been mastered on the deck, ask the girls to try it as they rest, submerged to the neck and holding the gutter or pool edge. The eyes can be open or closed, as they prefer. They should actively experience achieving a relaxed state in the water with the help of deep breathing. Work on this for several sessions, until you are satisfied they are comfortable with it.
Introducing mental rehearsal (MR)

Step 5: MR: Immediate recall (dry land)
Let’s assume that some of your beginners have learned to do a reasonable basic figure—say a Ballet Leg—which they have just been practicing in the water. Have them leave the water and ask them to ...

Sit or lie quietly, relax and close your eyes ... turn your attention inward ... take several deep breaths in your own time. Now, while you are relaxed, imagine you are in the water doing the Ballet Leg, the way you were a few minutes ago ... see if you can remember what it felt like ... pretend in your mind that you’re doing it again ... try it several times.

After 15 or 20 seconds, ask for their attention and encourage a few minutes of discussion. Be tolerant of confusion or negative reaction but don’t dwell on it ...

It’s a bit strange, isn’t it? Now, let’s try it again. See if you can get it to work a little better this time.

Repeat this patiently once or twice a workout, always selecting a skill that is familiar and that they have just been practicing. Use it for each new skill as it is learned. Tell them that ...

This is called mental rehearsal, or visualization. It means practicing or rehearsing in your mind, or seeing yourself in your mind’s eye. It will help to learn each skill more thoroughly and to improve your skill more quickly.

Step 6: MR: Immediate recall (in the water)
Once they can do Step 5 fairly well, have the swimmers repeat it in the water while resting and holding the edge of the pool. They should soon find it easy to produce an accurate and vivid recollection of a familiar skill they have done just moments before. Encourage patience in those who have difficulty, and motivate girls to help each other solve problems.

Incorporate this type of practice at least once in each workout. It is especially effective after a fairly strenuous routine when the swimmers need time to catch their breath.

To this point, your swimmers have been recalling an experience they have just completed. Do not rush this process. Stay with immediate recall rehearsal until you feel all are comfortable with it and have used it on four or five different skills.

Step 7: MR: Delayed recall (dry land)
At this stage, the girls will recall a familiar skill they practiced during the previous workout as a form of rehearsal before repeating it in the water ....

Sit down for a moment, relax, take a couple of deep breaths, and recall what it felt like to do the Flamingo Position we worked on yesterday ... remember it as clearly as you can ... make it as real as you can. See if you can feel it exactly as you did it in the water yesterday. Go ahead—repeat it several times in your mind’s eye.

A relaxed discussion will be helpful ...

How did it work for you? ... What is going well? ... What not so well? ... Let’s see if we can help each other.

Now return to the water to practice the skill they have just mentally rehearsed.

Step 8: MR: Delayed recall (in the water)
This is the same as Step 7, except that it is carried out in the water while the girls hold the edge of the pool.

Step 9: MR: Chaining skills (dry land)
When the swimmers are comfortable with mental rehearsal of a single skill both in and out of the water, they are ready to start chaining—adding a second movement sequence. Since this is more difficult, revert to the immediate recall type of rehearsal ...

Let’s sit down quietly on the deck for a minute. We have just been practicing a Ballet Leg into a Knight Back followed by an Arch-Out and extension of your knee to the Extended Back Layout position. Close your eyes, relax, slow down ... turn your attention inward ... recall as accurately as you can how that sequence felt. Repeat it several times in your own mind. Feel it just the way it felt in the water.

It may help if the swimmers return to the water to repeat the skill sequence several times, and then rehearse it mentally back on the deck.

Step 10: MR: Chaining skills (in the water)
Once swimmers can comfortably rehearse a chained sequence of two skills in their minds, they are ready to repeat the process in the water. They swim through the skills, rest and, holding the edge of the pool, immediately recall the activity in their minds. Then they perform the skills again. This procedure links actual movements with mental recall.

Introducing positive thinking

This skill does not lend itself to neat little exercises of the type described for Relaxation and Mental Imagery. The coach should introduce the key concepts. The swimmers then discuss them and share experiences and incidents that took place during workouts. Look for the “teachable moment” that will help you to introduce this vital skill.

Step 11: Staying positive when faced with difficulty
Look for a natural opportunity to introduce this skill. For example, while learning or improving a figure or routine a swimmer might say, “I can’t do this!” or “This is too hard for me!” Respond with ...

It is a bit hard, isn’t it? But keep working—you’ll get it. Where do you think your difficulty is?

The intent is to acknowledge the difficulty and encourage the swimmer to try to solve it herself. If she asks for help or tries hard without success and you are satisfied she cannot do it alone, provide assistance. If you are too quick to help, however, you can make the young swimmer too dependent. This may slow or even prevent the growth of independence. A clear sense of autonomy and personal confidence is necessary for success in competition. This must be nurtured by allowing the swimmer to take as much self-responsibility as she can at any stage of her development.

Step 12: Monitoring negative self-talk
Soon afterwards, when the girls need a short break, seat them comfortably on the deck ...
Did you hear what Alice said when we were working on that Leg Boost? Tell us what it was, Alice. Come on, because we both know it turned out to be false! (Alice repeats what she said.) Yes, she said she couldn’t do it but then she kept on working and within a few minutes she had it down pat. That was good, Alice! Often when we are trying something new or difficult we find ourselves thinking negatively like that. But if we keep trying we get it, don’t we? Who would like to tell us about a similar experience? (Try to collect examples.)

See what happens? Think negatively and you start heading for failure. But if you switch to positive thinking and keep working, you can succeed. Negative thoughts are self-defeating, so it’s really important to monitor your thinking and recognize negatives as soon as possible, and then eliminate them. Remember, the next time you feel something is really hard, just stay with it; try to see it as a challenge rather than something negative. Stay positive, don’t worry about it, try to figure out where your difficulty is—and if that doesn’t work, ask for help. OK, let’s go back in the water.

Step 13: Using thought-stopping on negatives
During your next few workouts, note one or more similar situations where negative thoughts or strong doubts are expressed by swimmers who then master the drill. Bring these to the group’s attention during a brief rest break...

That’s the way to stay positive! Twice in the last drill some of you groaned or said it was too hard, but went right on to prove you could handle it. Let’s try this: Whenever you notice yourself thinking or repeating negative thoughts like that, just say “STOP!” very forcefully to yourself to stop those concepts. Change your thinking to positive thoughts about how to solve the problem. We’ll work on keeping our thinking positive all the time. Think positively yourself, and help each other to do the same.

You might prefer to use your own word rather than "STOP!" Do any of you have a word or something you do to switch from negative to positive? (See if you can collect several words or actions that girls are already using.) Some athletes use "CHANGE CHANNELS!"—from negative to positive—or "RELOAD!"—which is another way of reminding yourself to get back on track.

Here’s an idea that can really help you to get better at switching off negative thoughts as soon as you become aware of them. See this strong elastic I have on my wrist? Well, every time I catch myself thinking negative, self-defeating thoughts, I say “STOP!” very firmly to myself and snap the elastic. It sort of jolts me back to positive thinking. After you use the elastic for a while you won’t have to actually snap it, or even wear it, because as soon as you say “STOP!” you automatically do it in your mind. You can even use it when you’re in the water, and if you can’t actually snap it, you can do it mentally. Here is an elastic for each of you. Let’s start using it from now on.

It is particularly important to reinforce changes in athletes who tend to have a poor self-image or low self-esteem. For example, a swimmer may resist encouragement and insist she probably will fail. As you continue to stress positive thinking, she begins to resist less and try harder. She should be rewarded for improvement and reminded that...

Now you’re really helping yourself by being positive, Marion. Keep up the good work and you’ll find out just how good you can be!

When you’re trying to turn a girl like this around, be alert for small signs of improvement. Reward each one and help her change to a positive outlook.

Introducing Goal-Setting

Step 14: Quantitative goal-setting
Awareness of improvement is one of the most powerful motivators available. The potential is great because there are so many aspects of learning and performance for which improvement can be measured or described, or both. There are rich dividends to be had in motivation, improved self-esteem and the development of a realistic and optimistic sense of confidence that is the foundation of consistent high performance in competition.

Effective goal-setting begins with accurate knowledge of one’s present capability, or skill level. This gives the swimmer a baseline from which to observe her own improvement. Real success grows from the athlete’s personal confidence in her program, not from the opinions of the coach or others. You should strive constantly for workout features that lead to accurate knowledge of present performance, and give the swimmers strategies for assessing their own performance and setting goals for improvement. Here’s how it might work...

Girls, the Head-up Front Flutter Kick is coming along. Your endurance is better. Most of you are able to maintain an even waterline for about eight meters. Keep track in your own mind how far you can hold good form and work hard to extend it. You know the goal is 12 meters but we’ll keep it at until you can handle at least 15.

In a few weeks we’ll be able to do that nicely because our endurance and neck strength will be much better. See how we’ve got several goals tied together there? A goal of at least 12 meters, a steady head position at the right level, stronger neck muscles and more endurance. All of those are improving every time we work on this skill.

The Eggbeater is another one that’s starting to look good. It’s not easy in the beginning. The leg action is coming but some of you need to be careful about body position. Remember, your body should be vertical—try not to lean forward. You need more work on maintaining a constant water line, too. Right now most of you are OK for 10 to 20 seconds. Be patient and work on extending the time you can perform it well—we’re shooting for at least 30 seconds.

Today we’re going to work in pairs on both these skills. Your partner will give you feedback on how far you can go in the Flutter Kick with a good head position, and how long you can hold an Eggbeater with proper body position and water level.

Remember, no judging—be honest with each other. The idea is not to keep up with anybody or to beat them. Your goal is to get stronger and build endurance and skill. The time for competition is later. Right now, focus on learning and improvement at your own rate. OK, let’s get at it.

Be alert for opportunities to apply this approach to goal-setting as the girls learn their figures and as they build up their duet or group routines.
Step 15: Quantitative and qualitative goal-setting

Essentially, there are two different types of goals that people can set:

- **Quantitative**: Those things or qualities you can measure or quantify;

- **Qualitative**: Those things you cannot really measure but can feel, see and describe.

Quantitative goals can be set when you are able to measure the number of repetitions or sets of things, the time in which something is done or the distance covered. This means you can decide to increase the number of repetitions, change the time or distance, boost the weight, reps and sets in dryland weight training, and so on.

Look for innovative ways to measure things and encourage your athlete to do the same. As long as you don’t overdo it, having things to measure makes daily workouts more fun, more challenging and more clearly focused. A beneficial side-effect is that it reduces the tendency to deny or hide errors or lack of skill. The swimmer can identify precisely how far, how long or how much of something she is capable of, and then set higher goals. Because of her awareness of what she can do, she will know when she has achieved her quantified goal.

Qualitative goals can be set for aspects of performance that cannot be accurately measured, such as smoothness, subtle timing, fluctuations from a precise position, synchronized movements between partners or a group, or precise changes in speed or rhythm of movement. Most of the important elements that add up to what we call style are qualitative. We can usually observe them but cannot measure them. And some things that cannot be observed can be “felt” by the athlete: “Now it feels right; before it felt awkward.”

In any sport, but especially in aesthetic sports such as synchro, diving, gymnastics and figure skating where beauty of form and movement are central, crucial elements of performance can only be felt or described (often, not very well). They are beyond measurement in the ordinary sense of the word—hence the controversies surrounding judging. Qualities cannot be captured by numbers, by quantities.

Young swimmers can learn to identify and describe feelings associated with qualitative improvement: greater ease and smoothness of execution, subtle movements of body parts, and a sense of confidence and control. Here’s a hypothetical discussion leading to awareness of these feelings ...

*Girls*, we’re getting pretty good at the Alligator. It was a bit of a challenge, wasn’t it? But now we’ve got quite a bit of control. Let’s talk about how it feels now and how it felt when you first started.

*Norma*: At first I really had no idea what I was doing, I just wadded my hands even though you had shown us exactly how to do the Reverse Scull. But gradually I discovered how to use my wrists and to feel the press of the water on my palms that has to be there to make me move my head first. It feels really good now, I’m still not sure how I do it, but I know how it feels when it works.

*Coach*: What is your goal now? What do you think you need to do next to make it better?

Norma: See if I can get rid of the confusion at the start. The first few movements are all over the place and don’t do anything, but then it kicks in. I want to start without the false actions and confusion.

*Frances*: I was really frustrated, I couldn’t seem to get the hang of it. Once I calmed down and tried to think about what was going on in front of my head, it started to come. Sometimes it’d be OK, and the next time I’d lose it again. When I started to visualize sort of pushing or pulling water toward my feet, it got easier; now it’s pretty good, I know exactly how it feels when I’ve got it right. What I want to do now is cut down the extra movement in my shoulders and the bend in my elbows and smooth that out. It’s getting better though.

What we are striving for here is a rational approach to talking about concerns that are difficult to discuss. These often lead to frustration, impatience and even anger. This can complicate communication and, in the worst case, propagate long-term friction between you and the athletes you coach.

Besides learning how to cope with the qualitative aspects of performance, such discussions can serve as a rational model for handling any topics that are hard to talk about because they deal with qualities.

**Helping individuals with difficulties**

This marks the end of the Introductory Level. Remember that some athletes will master these skills very early in their training. Others may be physically skilled but still struggling with their ability to relax, to use mental imagery and to think positively.

When you are faced with one or two individuals who are still trying to gain control of the technique you must do more individual work with them, in contrast to the group procedures described above. The method remains the same. Be patient and encouraging. As in teaching water skills, motivate the athletes to help each other solve problems and share their personal mental skills success stories.

**INTERMEDIATE LEVEL**

The focus at this level will be on extending competence in Relaxation, Mental Imagery, Positive Thinking and Goal-Setting to more complex situations. The remaining two mental skills in this program—On-Task Focus of Attention and Control of Emotions, and Becoming and Staying Energized—will also be introduced.

**Relaxation**

**Step 16: Pre-workout relaxation**

When swimmers become proficient in the four introductory relaxation steps described in Steps 1 to 4, have them sit quietly before the workout starts—either in the dressing room before they change, or on the deck after changing—to relax, cool down from the activity of the day and focus on the coming workout ...

*Just sit quietly, relax, turn your attention inward, breathe deeply in your own time ... feel your body get heavy, feel your muscles relax as you exhale ... that’s right, relax. Go on breathing deeply and getting very relaxed ... clear your mind and get that calm, controlled feeling.* (Pause for one or two minutes.) OK, let’s get started.
Use this exercise at least once a week for a month or so. Encourage the swimmers to do it themselves on the other days, without making it a requirement.

**Step 17: Reinforcing pre-workout relaxation**

After three or four weeks, finish your pre-workout relaxation session with...

Learning to relax like this—in the dressing room or on the deck before the workout—will not only enable you to shift gears from what you were doing before you got to the pool but also will help you to keep calm and in control of yourselves during tests and competitions. It will help you get ready to do your best. All right, let’s start the workout.

**Step 18: Relaxation during distractions and while away from the pool**

Pick a day when it seems as if all hell has broken loose in the pool, perhaps repair work or preparation for some major event. Get your swimmers together either before the workout begins or during it...

Isn’t this something today? Let’s take this opportunity to see how well we can use our relaxation skills. Get comfortable, close your eyes, turn your attention inward and go ahead. Relax by deep breathing in your own time. Just ignore the noise and sounds around you ... shut them out. It may help you to picture in your mind a beautiful quiet beach, or a garden of flowers where everything is calm and peaceful. (Pause for two or three minutes.) OK, I’ll count to 5 and then I want you to open your eyes ... 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... 4 ... 5 ... open your eyes. Did that help? (Discuss for a few moments.) Are you getting better at relaxing when there’s a lot going on around you? (Discuss.)

Be very open to athletes who complain or say it was impossible, and be equally receptive to reports of success...

It takes some effort, doesn’t it? But if you keep working at it you’ll all get pretty good at it, and it will really pay off by helping you to keep in full control of yourselves in tests and competitions where conditions can be very different from regular workouts, no matter what the situation. And remember—if your competitors can’t do it as well as you, it gives you a big advantage, especially in competitions in unfamiliar surroundings.

**Step 19: Using relaxation and simple strategies to improve performance on school examinations**

Too often there is a tendency to treat youngsters as “athletes” rather than young “people” who have family, friends, schoolwork and other social responsibilities. Many of them will come to their coach with questions about succeeding in school.

This step provides a set of guidelines for writing exams. Without fail, young people who have used them say they have made a very real difference to their performance. Attention to schooling scores big points with parents, as well.

Involvement in competitive sport has often been shown to improve scholastic accomplishment. But, quite apart from that, test/exam anxiety can seriously reduce performance both in school and in the water. Doing well in studies contributes to sport adherence and, more importantly, positions young people to do well in their preparation for a life’s work...

Have any of you tried using relaxation to help you prepare for school exams, or other situations in which you might tend to get tense enough so that it interferes with what you want to achieve? Who wants to tell us about it?

Listen carefully and make whatever comments seem appropriate. In such discussions, athletes often will reveal their own unique patterns of thinking, feeling and reacting to perceived pressure in ways that will help the coach to understand them and work more effectively with them. You learn to talk “their language” more fluently...

Some of you have mentioned that you’re not very happy with the results you’ve been getting on recent exams even though you’ve been studying hard. In exams, as with a lot of things, working harder is not always the answer—often working smarter is what you have to do. Here are some simple rules that will help you to work smarter in your next exams:

1. Begin personal exam study sessions with your weakest subject when you are fresh and at your best. Later in the session, when you go on to your better subjects, you will still have some enthusiasm.

2. Get a good sleep the night before an exam. By now you should be well aware of what helps you to sleep well. Use that knowledge.

3. Keep calm on the way to the exam and while waiting to get your paper. Use deep breathing and consciously relax your shoulders and neck muscles. “Talk yourself” into staying relaxed. Stop negative thoughts and replace them with positive ideas. Keep your expectations realistic and don’t expect miracles—be ready to settle for your best and occasionally “miracles” will occur!

4. Once you sit down, consciously relax. Use deep breathing and positive self-talk: “Relax, cool down, take it easy, I’m quite well prepared, I just have to stay cool. No miracles—just my best.” Then read the paper.

5. If the exam calls for written answers in paragraph form, or has long problems in math or science, read over each question carefully, checking to stay relaxed. Pause and take a deep breath or two if you start to tense up. Make a check mark beside each question you like and feel you can answer well. Re-read the question you liked best of all to make sure you understood it correctly. Then start to outline your answer. You don’t have to answer them in order but be sure to number your answers so the marker knows to which question you are responding. A common cause of poor exam performance is getting off to a bad start on question one and becoming upset and frustrated and losing valuable time without getting much done. Later, you discover several questions you could answer well but time is running out. Sound familiar?

6. If the paper is all or mostly short-answer questions, it can be confusing to start by reading them all. Instead, read the first five or ten. Check the ones you feel good about and go back and do those only. Then go on to the next group or five or ten and do the best of that lot. Continue through the paper that way. With whatever time you have left, scan each question you skipped and answer the best of them. If there are still unanswered questions, take a third run through.

The process outlined in 5 and 6 can help to keep you in a positive frame of mind and allow your
confidence to grow as you go on without wasting productive time.

7. If you get bogged down and confused, stay calm, tough it out for a while and things may clear up. If not, leave the question and go on to one you can handle better. Return to the tough one later, if there's time.

8. The sky will not fall if you don’t answer all the questions. The high school on up, most exams are set so that only a fair small package of students can complete the. Make the best use of the time available and don’t worry about missing some questions.

Mental rehearsal

Step 20: Slow-time micro-mental rehearsal of figures

Because figures are so important in synchro, very detailed rehearsal is required. Once the swimmers have a figure under reasonable control, focus their attention on Slow-Time Micro-Mental Rehearsal...

You know how picky judges are when you’re doing figures. The best way to practice is that is to be just as picky yourself. You’ve just worked on your Foot-first Dolphin ... now, while you rest, relax and turn your attention inward ... take yourself through the figure very slowly ... try to do it in slow motion in your mind, paying attention to exactly how each phase feels and to exactly how you control your movements. Feel your body slipping smoothly, effortlessly through the water. Take your time. Go ahead. (Pause for about two minutes while they practice.) How did that go? Let’s talk about it. Who wants to start?

Because mental rehearsal is so foreign to some athletes they may react negatively. Be patient and empathize ...

OK, it didn’t work too well for Shirley, but it will come. Did anyone have some success? (Two or three girls describe how it went.) I want to stress that each of you is so wonderfully different that you will get very different results in something like this, especially at first. Don’t worry about keeping up with anybody or doing it the way they do. Focus on what you are doing, stay relaxed and try to tune in a clear image and the same feeling you get in the water. Ask for help when you need it. Be patient with yourself.

This is called Slow-Time Micro-Mental Rehearsal because you are trying to examine the figure magnified and up close in slow motion, the way you’d see it under a microscope. Some of you will get pretty good quickly; others will take more time. But you’ll all get there in your own way. Let’s try it again. (Pause again for two minutes.) OK—back in the water and try the figure again for real.

Step 21: Worksheet diagram for slow-time micro-mental rehearsal of figures

Repeat the exercise in Step 19 several times until the swimmers feel fairly comfortable with it for three or four different skills. At the end of a workout in which they have used this rehearsal several times, get them together ...

Look at this worksheet*. It’s a large diagram of the Barracuda Back-Pike Somersault that we worked on today. Let’s walk through the diagram and talk about the details you have been focusing on—both your actual performance and your micro-mental rehearsal. Who wants to start? What are you thinking about first, Margaret? (A discussion follows to which most girls contribute.)

See how many of the things you focus on are the same for all of you, and how many of them you do your own way? That’s the way it should be. Do it any way that works for you. At the same time, don’t be afraid to try something that works for someone else.

I have written in key words at places where each one fits in the diagram. See how useful they are? Words such as “focus,” “relax,” “pause,” “smooth” and so on, will help to guide and control what you are doing—they will help you to recall the feeling you need to make it go right. You can use this diagram and the key words to guide your mental rehearsal and, just as important, get the feeling you need for success in the figure.

---

**EXAMPLE: WORKSHEET DIAGRAM FOR FIGURES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barracuda back pike somersault (degree of difficulty 1.9)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extend Knees!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Here comes the surface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“10” layout! I'm a winner!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus! Thrust up is coming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relax</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* NOTE: This worksheet is an example of a solo diagram for a specific figure. Duet and team diagrams follow a similar pattern. Swimmers may use one worksheet for each length of the pool, and it may take several worksheets for each number.
What I'd like you to do is take home a sheet for the Barracuda, and put it into a special three-hole binder that you'll keep as a training and competition diary. Tonight, write in your own comments and the key words from your own imagery during your micro-rehearsal of these figures. Use pencil so that if you find better words later you can make changes. After you've done your homework, spend five or ten minutes rehearsing the figures mentally, using your notes on the diagram.

Over the next few days, talk over your notes with any of the other swimmers and, if you like, with me. Once you get your key words set, I'll give you a new diagram so you have a good copy for your diary.

Step 22: Real-time mental rehearsal of figures
Continue slow-time micro-rehearsal until swimmers are proficient. Review the diagrams and personal notations with them from time to time. Provide help, but allow them to use their own key words and concepts. The more personal these notes are the more effective they will be. One of the best ways to build the swimmers' confidence is to respect their individual approaches to personal challenges. They will be on their own when they're in the water for a test or a competition; encourage them to take responsibility for their own performance.

Swimmers should now be ready to start making the switch from slow-time to real-time in their mental rehearsal. To prepare for this, each girl will have to know her average time for each figure. To increase their sense of control, contribute to their growing confidence and develop a spirit of cooperation, get them working in pairs, timing each other with a stopwatch or a large pace clock with a sweep hand, the kind competitive teams use all the time ...

You've done a good job of finding your own key words and ideas to guide you through the actions and the feeling of your figures. Now what we want to do is work on mentally rehearsing in real-time. That means doing the rehearsal as close as possible to the time it takes in the water. If the figure lasts 45 seconds from start to finish in the water it should take 45 seconds to do it mentally. Take turns with your partner and time the figure three times. Keep lists and make a note in your diary tonight of all three times, and then the average of the three.

At this stage, the important thing is to be honest about recording the actual time it took for the figure in the water, and the honest time for your mental rehearsal. Even if there's a difference of 15 or 20 seconds between the two, as you practice mental rehearsal you'll bring that difference down until you are within a few seconds of real-time. Be honest, and be patient.

Do several figures while they get accustomed to using real-time. Then, during a break ...

Don't worry if times don't agree closely at the start. Some girls will be accurate quite quickly; others will take longer, but you'll all be accurate before long. There's space on the back of your figure diagram sheet to keep track of how close you come to real-time. Keep your records honestly—there's no prize for being fastest at matching times.

The real payoff is in learning to do each mental rehearsal accurately every time and that may take a while to achieve. Be patient with yourself and do 10 to 15 minutes of mental rehearsal everyday in as close to real-time as you can.

At intervals, ask the swimmers to bring in their diaries and check on their progress. Provide help and praise them for their headway. Pay particular attention to encouraging and rewarding those who find it difficult as well as those who keep accurate diaries and show steady improvement.

Step 23: Real-time rehearsal of segments of routines
Once the swimmers have made progress in matching actual times with rehearsal times, they are ready to start in-water mental rehearsal of segments and then entire routines for solos, duets or group numbers. As the routine is built-up, they should mentally rehearse chunks immediately after they have been practiced ...

We've just chained together the figures and strokes in the first 32 beats of this routine. Tread water in your relative positions. While I count out the beats, stay in place and go through very abbreviated movements to represent the actual action—for example, use short little hand movements to indicate strokes, drop your chin forward to indicate where you go under, and so on. Ready, begin ...

Now, that takes 20 seconds. Tonight, after your homework, spend five or ten minutes rehearsing that segment and see how close you can come to 20 seconds. Keep notes in your diary so you can see how you are improving.

You may want to schedule land drill instead if you think the girls are not quite ready to do it on their own. There's no need to hurry. Work hard, help the swimmers when they need it and be satisfied with the best progress you can make. Being methodical and patient will help them to develop more realistic expectations to take into competition—and this is the key to performing confidently.

A sure way to undermine the growth of confidence is to pressure young performers to progress faster than their capabilities, or to foster unrealistic expectations which, by definition, are doomed to failure. Such failure leaves you with the daunting task of trying to rebuild the swimmer's shattered confidence—and your own credibility as coach.

The athlete's single most valuable skill in preparing for a tough competition—especially in unfamiliar surroundings—is confidence in her ability to relax and rehearse accurately in real-time. This is also true at home competitions where the capacity to focus and concentrate must be learned before confident control can be extended to situations on the road.

Step 24: Worksheet diagram for real-time mental-rehearsal of a complete routine
Once a routine—solo, duet or group—is nearly complete, swimmers should be given a layout sheet showing the pattern of the routine on the surface of the pool ...

Take a look at this. It's quite a bit like the Figure Sheet we used to nail down our Micro-Mental Rehearsal with our own key words. It's a pool surface outline of the routine we're working on. I've marked it to show where each change comes, and put in a few key words we've been using as we learned the routine.

As we walk through the routine you can give me some of the words you say to yourself—your self-talk—to guide your actions and your feelings. That way we'll get both the precise timing and movement
and the right “quality of movement” to express the emotion we want.

Remember, although synchro is competitive it’s first and foremost an art form. In any artistic expression, the feeling or emotion is one of the most important elements. Start at the beginning and give me the words and images you use in each phase. (Lead a discussion and collect key words and images that describe both the actions and the feelings.)

That was good. Remember, you can use any of the ideas that came from the swimmers, but also substitute or add your own personal words and images where they work better for you. I’ve put times for each segment of the routine on the diagram to use when you do real-time mental rehearsal at home. Refer to the table on the back of the sheet to keep track of your improvement in rehearsal timing.

You will want to supervise additional real-time mental rehearsal either in the water or on the deck. Follow your gut reaction as to how much of each kind the swimmers need. By doing just enough real-time rehearsal under your guidance they will be able to handle the responsibility of practicing it at home.

Every now and then ask them go over their routine sheet with you for advice. This will give you a chance to commend consistent effort and progress and encourage those who find it difficult.

Staying positive

Step 25: Three coping strategies for staying positive: thought stopping, constructive problem-solving, re-framing

Your swimmers have begun to recognize negative thoughts. Your next objective is to raise their awareness of negative self-talk and to select the best personal strategy for dealing with it ...

We’re getting a lot better at staying positive when we’re having difficulties. But every now and then some negative thoughts pop up to discourage one or two of us. The best way to deal with this is to start making notes in your diary about when negative thoughts appear and exactly what you say to yourself when you’re thinking negatively.

Let me give you a personal example. This morning I looked at the list of things I have to do today and said to myself: “I can’t get all of this done; there’s just not enough time!” It was quite discouraging. But then I said to myself, “STOP! Let’s look at the list and see how I can handle it.” It turned out that by putting things in a better order and using the phone rather than seeing a couple of people in person, and by postponing things that didn’t have to be done right away, my day worked out fine.

You can see how easily I could describe that incident in my diary, if I were keeping one. So from now on, when you’re writing in your diary about how to mentally rehearse things, what I’d like you to do is search for negative ideas that pop into your head while you’re practicing, either mentally or in the water. For example, “This is too hard,” or “I hate this.” Write them down and put quotation marks around them.

Now, you can pick any one of three ways to stay positive:

• take a constructive problem-solving approach, as I did this morning;
• re-write or re-frame the idea into positive form.

So you might write in your diary any one or all of the following: “This is hard, but when I bear down I do OK and it’s over quicker” ... “This isn’t my favorite, but let’s get into it and see how it goes.” ... “It’s silly, wasting time on this kind of negative thinking. I’m going to use thought stopping and get back on the positive. This is challenge and I like challenges—they’re what sport’s all about.”

Let’s share some negative thoughts or examples that are real for you and see how we can either use thought stopping, re-frame them in positive terms, or use constructive problem-solving as I did with my list. (Lead a discussion in which the athletes share examples.)

That was helpful. Be sure to put those good examples into your diary tonight. By doing this, you will become much more aware of negatives that are hurting you. When those are eliminated it will make a big difference to how well you learn and perform, especially under tough conditions. Negatives are self-defeating, and who needs that?

Do the same things with negatives related to school or your family. Put those in your synchro diary too, and watch the big difference it makes almost immediately in how you feel about school and relationships with other people.

From time to time, ask the swimmers to bring in and share examples of negatives they have eliminated in synchro, in school and in their social relations. This will help swimmers to recognize progress and to learn from each other. Each one will realize that she is not the only one facing difficulties.

People often think no one else has the same problems they do. The whole process will illustrate in the best way possible that negatives can be turned into positives.

Step 26: Applying coping strategies in advance to avoid problems

Once you are satisfied that your swimmers are more aware of negatives and able to stop them or re-frame them, extend the skill to dealing with such things in advance. Again, seek a natural opportunity to introduce this step ...

As you know, we’re going to West Podunk in 10 days for their Invitational. Some of you remember from last year that the pool is small, fairly dark and not as deep as our pool. Let’s talk about that and how it makes you feel.

Encourage comments from as many girls as possible. Some will be negative and some will use one or more of the three coping skills for staying positive. Try not to be judgmental; focus instead on getting a good list of reactions, both positive and negative. Draw a line down the middle of a flip chart and list the positives on the right and the negatives on the left, without labelling them ...

Well, look what we have here! Why did I separate your reactions into these two lists? You can see that the ones on the right are positive and the ones on the left are negative. But let’s see if, in fact, some of them are just the flip side of another. For example, if you found yourself thinking this first negative thought—"I’d rather
not go; it's too crummy"—is there a positive thought on the right that could replace it? There are several, aren't there? One is, "It's a good chance to practice relaxing and staying positive under poor conditions." Or how about, "We can't change it so let's forget about it."

So we can use our ability to recognize our negative thoughts and switch them off, or change them to positive in a completely new way: to help us get ready for possible difficulties in the future. Let's build up a little list of negatives that might bother you, and then see how we can deal with them by using one of the three skills for staying positive:

Collect four or five suggestions and have the girls translate them or suggest how to deal with them. Accept completely different solutions to the same problem. One girl could use thought stopping, another girl might re-frame, and a third could go to problem solving...

You can see that what works for you may be quite different for others. The key to confidence in competition is the knowledge that you have the personal resources to cope with problems. So, here's another kind of entry for your diaries. Look ahead and identify things that may turn you off or upset you, but can't be avoided—or things you think might bother you if they came up. Write out your negative self-talk about them and decide what is the best answer for you, personally. Then write out the positive self-talk to go with your solution. Once you've done that you can use mental rehearsal to prepare yourself to stay really positive.

It may take several months to achieve the results you want. Put a five to ten minute segment into your practice schedule a couple of times a week and watch the skill grow. Be patient and be satisfied with the best progress you can help your swimmers generate. They will soon have good control over this essential step.

Equally important, even those who lack confidence will make real strides in becoming more poised and independent. This will transfer directly to their ability to achieve full potential in testing situations and competitions.

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