



Sport psychology is the study of how psychology influences sports, athletic performance, exercise and physical activity. Contemporary sport psychology is a diverse field that can help a range of areas, such as optimising performance, improving motivation, coping with pressure, overcoming injury or enhancing wellbeing of athletes, just to name a few.

Each month Helen Davis, a sport psychology consultant, will explore a different area of sport psychology and how you can relate it to you and your swimming.

THIS MONTH: Are you ready? Being prepared is key: This article will focus on what areas of your preparation help you be an all rounded performer and feel 100% ready on the start line.

you be thinking and feeling?

Imagine the scene. It is 9pm and Max has read the race briefing details for the last time. He has planned his travel route for the morning and his kit is all in his bag ready for the next day. He knows his breakfast will be hot porridge and fruit. He sets his alarm for 6.30am and allows himself to think once more about what he needs to do to perform well tomorrow. He talks through his plan with his partner. He reaffirms that he has done everything he can to ensure he fulfils his potential tomorrow. After emptying his head of thoughts he goes to sleep feeling calm and confident. On waking, his morning is planned. He showers, dresses and eats breakfast before heading out of the door to the car. He already knows the route to the lake and has allowed plenty of time. On arrival he knows where to park the car and register for the event, as he has checked beforehand. After registering, he changes into his wetsuit, chats amiably with fellow competitors and waits calmly for the event to begin. Max reminds himself of his race plan and visualises the mass start. He reminds himself of how well he has prepared for this race and says, "I am ready" to himself. With nervous excitement he enters the water...

This may sound like ideal preparation for some, yet in reality, many of us do not prepare in this way or are unable to do so. However, it is useful to have your own view on what your ideal preparation would be.

ARE YOU PREPARED AND READY?

Standing on the start line of any race, no matter what sport, can be a tense time. Outcomes in sport are rarely a certainty; our performance environments can be complex, dynamic and unpredictable. Open water swimming is no exception, and presents us with an environment where we have to accept that there are many aspects that are outside our control. Research on athletes suggests that individual preparation strategies can

make big differences to performances and determine the likelihood of how effectively we perform.

WHAT IS PREPARATION?

The definition of preparation in the Cambridge English Dictionary states 'to make or get something or someone ready for something that will happen in the future.' The word 'ready' is key here. How can we prepare so that we feel as ready as we can for competition? If you were to feel 'ready' what would



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Max's preparation illustrates a range of strategies to event preparation that we can all use and work on to improve our readiness to perform. His behaviours are constructive (his swimming kit is ready, he knows the route to the venue and he is calm and relaxed) and his thoughts are self-promoting (he revisits his plan, he visualises the start and says "I am ready"). He has these thoughts and behaviours because he knows that he has done everything in his power to ensure he fulfils his potential for his open water event. Research on athletes indicates that taking time to prepare well from a psychological as well as a physical perspective is a good investment for performance outcomes. Take a look at some of the strategies below and try some for yourself, work out which ones are realistic and can work best for you.

WHAT CAN I DO?

1 Preparation and performance routines

A pre-performance routine can be characterised as a sequence of task-relevant thoughts and actions that an athlete engages in prior to performance. This routine helps you be as ready as you can be to deliver the performance that you want. Numerous studies suggest that adopting a pre-performance routine can have a positive impact on performance and offers many benefits:

- Routines provide attentional focus, ie. focusing on the things you need to do to help you perform, thereby reducing distractions.
- Routines can be a trigger, to remind you of habitual thoughts and behaviours.
- Routines can divert attention from task irrelevant thoughts.
- Routines can remind you of physiological and psychological states of previous performances where you were successful.
- Routines can help you cope with the pressure of a performance context, by reminding you to focus on the right things at the right time.

The key to making sure that routines work well is to practise them prior to a less important event or in a training situation. This process allows →

READY TO RACE

← for refinement and reflection on the content to enable you to develop an individualised routine that really does aid your sport performance.

2 Praise yourself for your physical preparation

Physical preparation is about the weeks and months of hard work and physical training leading up to an important performance. Feeling 'ready' from a physical perspective before a performance is important; this can give you a greater likelihood of a successful performance outcome. Remind yourself of all the training and effort you have put in, rather than what you haven't done. Avoid thinking of the barriers to training; focus on what you have done. Even if preparation has not been ideal in the run up to your event, remind yourself of the effort and sessions you have put in, despite your circumstances.

3 Take time to prepare psychologically

A number of psychological strategies can aid your mental preparation. Briefly, some of these strategies are described here (you can learn more about these strategies in future issues of *Outdoor Swimmer*).

POSITIVE SELF-TALK

This internal dialogue frames our reactions to life and circumstances. Positive self-talk is about recognising and seeking the positive out of the negative to help you do better, go further or just keep moving forward.

FOCUSING

Focusing on the right things at the right time; this helps your mind to focus and not whizz off and think about 'uncontrollables' and 'uncertainties'.

MANAGING EMOTION

Developing an attentional focus in a pre-performance routine; this might be something as simple as focusing on three main things when you arrive at the venue, eg. 1. I will remind myself of the effort I put in during training, 2. I

will take six deep breaths to relax when I am getting ready to enter the water, 3. I will focus on saying 'strong start' when the klaxon goes off.

VISUALISATION

This is a key skill that can be used to prepare you for an upcoming competition – this mental rehearsal of the race can be used to manage anxiety, help keep your mind focused and prepare in advance for challenging situations.

RELAXATION

Having a plan for working on staying relaxed can help you keep focus, remain calm and think clearly.

4 Use your preparation to help you

Try and see your preparation as a 'resource' that you can call on to help you. Dedicate time to thinking about all the preparatory factors you have invested time in to enhance your performance. Here are some ways you can use preparation to help you.

CONFIDENCE

Preparation can help to build self-confidence. This is important in sport as athletes often attribute their success to self-confidence. Reminding yourself of your preparation strategies can fuel your self-confidence and enhance your performance (see August issue on self-confidence).

GETTING INTO CHARACTER

Take the view that preparation is helping you to "get into character" ready for the performance. Adding up all the things you have done to help you prepare can help you believe that you can do it and be successful.

WARM UP

See your preparation as a warm up to facilitate effective performance and give you motivation to perform. By warming up and getting into character this can boost you, not only psychologically, but

can give you motivation to perform and oxygenate the brain – helping you get into a challenge state (see February issue).

FOCUSING WHEN PREPARING

Remind yourself when you are preparing for an event why you enjoy doing what you do. This can help to reduce perceptions of stress that an upcoming competition can bring and help you adopt a positive approach.

SWITCHING INTO PERFORMANCE MODE

Once you are at the start line, all the preparation that you have done is behind you and you can switch into performance mode and the task you have to do. See yourself performing well under pressure and hold that image in your mind.

INFLUENCING FACTORS

It is important to acknowledge that there are a number of factors that can impact upon the quality of preparation for performance. Be realistic about what you can achieve and accept that there may be barriers to you fulfilling your goals.

Fatigue This can impact on the quality of preparation and general preparedness for performance. Specific sources might be lack of sleep or physical and mental fatigue resulting from engagement in performance.

Unexpected events You might feel you have prepared as well as you can, but there is always the potential for something unexpected to happen that could knock you out of your stride.

Recognise that adaptation is a crucial skill to help here. By learning to adapt, you can solve a problem quickly and settle on an effective course of action.

Experience effect Knowing about yourself and what is most effective for you is an important factor to take into consideration when you prepare. How you prepare can be a continual process; you learn as you go along, with age you gain experience and this helps you learn what makes best sense for you.

Keeping perspective It is important to accept that circumstances can affect your performance; a busy life, job, family, illness, injury are all factors that can influence preparation. Remember, if preparation has not been ideal, you are still there, still swimming and still performing. Praise yourself for making it to the start line!

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE:
SELF-CONFIDENCE IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS RELATIVE TO SPORT PERFORMANCE. NEXT ISSUE WILL FOCUS ON WAYS TO HELP BOOST YOUR SELF-CONFIDENCE