

THE BENEFITS OF SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

Helen Davis summarises the benefits that working on your psychological skills can bring to your swimming

SPORT PSYCHOLOGY CAN BENEFIT EVERYONE

“Psychologist” can be such a label or even something of a cliché. For those who haven’t worked with a sport psychologist, the word might conjure up images of the psychiatrist’s couch, therapists in white coats, and psychoanalysis. Maybe you’re thinking you have to only have a ‘problem’ to see a sport psychologist. This couldn’t be further from the truth! Sport psychology is a field aimed to study how the mind affects physical

activity and athletic performance. As a swimmer who now works in sport psychology, I truly believe that sport psychology can make a difference to your performance as a swimmer. A big difference. I’m not just talking about elite swimmers, I’m talking about swimmers who purely swim for pleasure, swimmers who swim for sociability, swimmers who swim for fitness, swimmers who swim in clubs or groups and swimmers who compete locally, nationally and internationally. Sport psychology really is for everyone! To get better at swimming, most people logically conclude that to improve performance we need to understand and work on aspects of stroke technique and physical fitness. But when it comes to psychological

STRENGTHENING OUR MENTAL ‘MUSCLES’ IS ESSENTIAL TO SUCCESS

characteristics of performance, we often make an exception. How many swimmers approach psychological preparation with the same care and attention as technical and fitness aspects? One of the reasons for this is because we can’t easily see the end result. It’s not difficult to see and admire the fluency of Adam Peaty’s breaststroke or power in his physique, but we cannot see directly into his mind. It is natural to be more inclined to work on other factors that are easily observable and therefore appear somehow more credible.

There are some people who feel uncomfortable with the idea that psychologists evaluate weaknesses or problems in mental functioning. However, this type of approach is adopted throughout coaching science with technical and fitness flaws being continually monitored. This can however, be only part of a sport psychologist’s work; most work tends to be proactive rather than reactive. In just the same way that swimmers who work with a coach to feel fitter don’t have to be physically unhealthy, athletes who work with a psychologist to develop useful skills are not necessarily mentally unstable. In fact, the majority are often well-adjusted and balanced individuals who are simply seeking to enhance their performance and gain the competitive edge.

If sport psychology assistance is only pursued when difficulties arise, swimmers can be missing out on a key opportunity to boost performance. We know, both through research findings and reports of performers in a variety of fields, that our mental processes can have a significant impact on our physical abilities and performance. We also know that strengthening our mental ‘muscles’ is just as essential to success as is strengthening our physical muscles and skills. The psychological tools that a swimmer has in their repertoire – and uses – are often the difference between good and great performances.

So, sport psychology really can benefit everyone. By taking some time to have a think about your swimming, psychological improvements can always be made.

Let’s take a look back at some previous Outdoor Swimmer sport psychology topics of the ways that sport psychology can benefit you. →

← HOW SPORT PSYCHOLOGY CAN BENEFIT YOU

The 'feel good factor' Swimming can help to give you the 'feel good' factor, which in turn can boost your self-esteem. Your self-esteem can influence your happiness or success and can be swayed by everything from the people in your lives to your own inner voice. Take time to work on building your self-esteem through swimming; identify and challenge any negative self-beliefs about yourself; connect with people who care, listen to what they say about you. If you enjoy swimming, do more of it and focus on the process of swimming, rather than the outcome. Finally, keep practising, self-esteem is so important, it's worth working at!

Be challenged

When approaching a pressure situation in swimming, swimmers who experience a 'challenge' state, perform well (better than normal in fact) than if experiencing a 'threat' state. A challenge state increases your heart rate so more blood is delivered to the brain. This is good for concentration, decision-making and having control over your thoughts and emotions. In a challenge state your body will deliver oxygen and energy to your muscles more efficiently, helping your physical movement and technical ability. In order to work on getting yourself into a challenge state, three key ingredients can help you: confidence, control and achievement goals.

Managing emotion

Open water swimming can be a source of anxiety for any athlete at any level; even the most confident swimmers can experience it. Having

very high levels of anxiety can impair your swimming performance and sport psychology can help you to work on coping strategies that can help to alleviate symptoms and reduce anxiety-provoking thoughts. Techniques such as: rephrasing statements and focusing on what you can do, rather than what you cannot; developing a challenge state and developing a positive light on experiences, rather than negative ones can be beneficial.

Preparation

Sport psychology can help athletes to see preparation as a tool to enhance performance. Preparing not only physically, but psychologically can be a valuable resource to help boost your confidence prior to a race or important competition. Psychological preparation might involve working on positive self-talk to help you do better, learning to focus on the right things at the right time, rather than uncertainties.

Self-confidence

Self-confidence is a priceless trait that swimmers consistently attribute to their success. Having self-confidence in your swimming is typically no accident, it is usually as a result of particular thinking habits; habits that when consistently practised, enable swimmers to use their self-confidence to enhance their performances. Sport Psychology can help to boost your self-confidence by helping you seek out sources of confidence, helping you to remember previous times you have been confident and develop ways to remind yourself of confidence.

Controllables

Having control is about a swimmer investing time and effort into aspects of your performance that you have control over, rather than aspects that you have no control over. "Controlling the

Working with a sport psychologist

Sport psychology is not just for when things go wrong, it can help to enhance your well-being and move you to the next level. There are many swimmers who will be seeing a sport psychologist every week to not just talk about issues with swimming, but to learn more about the field and themselves as swimmers. If you choose to work with a sport psychologist, make sure your psychologist has the necessary qualifications. All practising sport psychologists should have completed:

- A degree in Psychology accredited by the British Psychological Society (BPS)
- A BPS accredited MSc in Sport and Exercise Psychology
- Working at or completed Stage 2 of the BPS Qualification in Sport and Exercise Psychology (QSEP; two years supervised practice).

controllables" is promoted by many sport psychologists working in performance domains and can be hugely valuable in the lead up to a competition. Sport psychologists can work with athletes to prepare 'if... then' plans to help you prepare for potential obstacles and challenges you may face, giving you a plan to provide direction and control and help you move forwards. Keeping control of your psychological state in moments of anxiety and pressure can be worked on with self-talk.

Self-Talk

If you could listen to the voice inside your head and what it says, what does it say about your swimming? When you listen to the internal dialogue you have with yourself, you are engaging in self-talk. Self-talk is powerful as it can be constructive, destructive, positive, negative and move us to or away from action. Working on your self-talk can give you benefits in lots of different ways: it can help with technical aspects in swimming, by placing cue words to direct your focus on desired movements; focusing your mind on the present; maintaining energy and persistence in controlling effort; build self-efficacy and challenge any irrational thinking.

Seeing is believing!

By creating pictures in your mind, you can train your mind to help program your mind and body to respond in an optimal way for performance. This form of visualisation, often referred to as imagery, allows one to use senses to re-create or create an experience in the mind. This power of imagery is very strong and if worked on correctly allows athletes to practice sport skills, strategies and mental skills without physically being in a training or competitive

environment. Research tells us that imagery can enhance your performance and learning, enhance your thoughts and emotions and more successful athletes use it regularly. It can be used to improve technique, prepare for a race, to swim faster and help recover from injury.

Motivation

Motivation is a key ingredient to participation in swimming and can impact on how we think, feel and interact with others. Sport psychology can help you to identify what drives you and maximise your quality of motivation. There are three key ingredients that need to be at play when we are at our most motivated: competence, relatedness and autonomy. Without these, we can lack motivation. Competence is a state where you feel like you have mastered your swimming and things are going well for you. Relatedness refers to feelings that you have that make you feel connected to others and have a sense of belonging. Finally, autonomy is having a sense of freedom and choice over what you do, where you engage in swimming because you choose to. If you are finding you are not motivated, a sport psychologist can help you identify why.

Setting goals

Sport psychologists regularly work with athletes to set goals to achieve personal growth and peak performance. Careful goal setting can influence performance of athletes of varied ages and ability levels, but can also be linked to positive changes in important psychological states, such as anxiety, confidence and motivation. Effective goal setting is important and distinguishing between types of goals is important. Outcome goals are exciting, but not necessarily in your control, performance goals monitor if you are on track and give you opportunities and challenges for improvements, and process goals are most directly in your control. Process goals are goals you can work on to help you achieve your performance and outcome goals. Working on goals can help you to focus your attention, mobilise your efforts, enhance your persistence and develop new learning strategies.



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