

TAKE CONTROL

Helen Davis looks at how you can 'control the controllables' of your race

I WANT CONTROL!

Performance environments, such as open water swimming, can be described as complex, multidimensional and dynamic; open water can be unpredictable and changes can happen rapidly at any time. It can be difficult for swimmers not to worry about this unpredictability, indeed it can cause a great deal of anxiety in the lead-up to an event. Some people, such as Team GB's 10k open water swimmer, Jack Burnell say that it is this unpredictability that makes them love open water swimming so much. For others, unpredictability can be an anxiety provoking challenge.

WHAT IS CONTROL?

Having control is about an athlete investing time and effort into aspects of their performance that they have control over, rather than aspects they have no control over. This might mean ensuring your pre-race plan is well timed, your nutrition and hydration is planned or you sticking to a well-rehearsed routine. "Controlling the controllables" is promoted by many sport psychologists working in performance domains and can be hugely valuable in the lead-up to a competition.

THERE'S NO ESCAPE!

Learning to accept that there are many factors outside your control in open water swimming is the first step in the process; there is no escaping uncontrollability and unpredictability in this sport! There are so many factors that can change without warning and keeping control of thoughts and feelings, particularly in pressured environments can be challenging.

THERE'S A LOT TO CONTEND WITH...

Open water swimming does carry risks and it is important to have a healthy respect for the environment you are entering and follow appropriate or publicised guidelines. However, investing time in aspects of the environment that you cannot control can unnecessarily inflame your emotions prior to performing. Focusing on these aspects can distract you from the task in hand and can use up vital mental energy. By choosing to take the route of control, it will help you to have clear thought processes and allow you to perform to your best.

HOW DO I DO IT?

Firstly, take some time to think about what you have to contend with as an open water swimmer. Consider the list below; these are some examples of the unpredictable 'uncontrollable' events you may have to deal with. Can you add some of your own to the list? Think about whether you have spent time considering these events rationally in terms of your performance or have these events ever provoked worry or anxiety? Secondly, take some time to consider what you can control as part of your performances in open water swimming and list them in the chart. One example has been added to start you off.

'Uncontrollables' in open water swimming

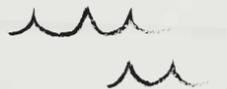
- * Water temperature
- * Changing weather and water conditions
- * Nature's creatures (eg, jellyfish)
- * Water conditions (eg, currents/tidal flows/waves/swells)
- * Other people (eg, arms flailing, bodies jostling for position, being kicked)
- * Visibility
- * Wetsuit issues (eg, comfort/chaffing/restrictions)
- * Water quality

Can you think of any others?
Add them in here:

'Controllables' in open water swimming

- * my nutrition (eg, I have my snacks and gels prepared and ready the night before)

What else is controllable?
Add them in here:



← IS IT HELPFUL OR UNHELPFUL TO THINK ABOUT 'UNCONTROLLABLES'?

It is important as an open water swimmer to consider the 'uncontrollables' which are part of your performance environment, how this may impact your performance and how you might want to deal with this. Take some time to look back at the list of 'uncontrollables' again. It is important to recognise that these are aspects of open water swimming that are largely external to you. It may be that these factors could be influenced by you in some way, but ultimately, they are uncontrollable. It is valuable to remember and accept that stressful situations have an element of uncertainty, it's part of what makes those situations stressful; some people thrive on them (clearly Jack Burnell is one of those swimmers), and some people find them more difficult.

This is where mental preparation can help you. Directly before the competition, you want to be ready to perform. At these moments, it is much more useful and helpful to your performance for you to focus on what is under your direct control in that moment. At this stage, spending too much time on trying to control other aspects means that you are directing your energy away from the task in hand and can be unhelpful to you in that moment. When competition time arrives, you want to be focusing on the right things at the right moment and directing your focus to what you can achieve.

BE SELFISH

Being able to focus on what you need to do to perform well will bring a sense of control and can lead to a better performance. It therefore makes sense to avoid wasting important mental energy and resources on things which you cannot control, but rather become



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IF...THEN PLANS

Setting up 'if...then' plans is both simple and helpful and can have a great impact on your sport performance. These plans help you prepare for potential obstacles or challenges you may face (the 'if') and give you direction and control to help you move forwards with a plan (the 'then'). The 'then' part can involve thinking, doing or even ignoring something. Here are a few examples of 'if...then' plans I have used with open water swimmers:

IF I find myself worrying about the water temperature, THEN I will visualise myself coping with this and remind myself of the preparation I have put in for this in my training
IF my goggles get knocked off at the start, THEN I will swim to the side, adjust them, take three deep breaths and continue

IF I get stung by a jellyfish, THEN I will remember times in previous swims where I have been stung before and coped successfully

It is important to practise and reinforce your 'if...then' plans to make them stick.

selfish. By doing this you can choose what to think about before, during, and after competition; you can choose to think in ways that are helpful to you. If you are able to focus on being self-confident and focus on what you can control and achieve, you are much more likely to flourish in an uncertain and unpredictable environment.

KEEPING CONTROL – HOW DO I DO IT?

Working on developing your personal resources will help you to fulfil your potential. This is all about helping to get yourself into a challenge state. Here are five ways that Turner and Barker (2014) believe will help you learn to focus on the 'controllables':

1. PSYCHOLOGICAL STATE

Always remember you are in charge of your psychological state, that is, you are in charge of what you say to yourself and when you say it. This is something that you can control using self-talk.

Self-talk is about finding the right words to say to yourself at the right time. This can help you control your attention if you find yourself focusing on 'uncontrollables'. In a challenging open water environment, remind yourself that you have recognised there are aspects that you cannot control, but that there is no further need for you to have those thoughts now; those thoughts are not helpful to you. Tell yourself that it is now a time for positive and helpful thinking.

Positive thoughts can be triggered by key phrases that you can tell yourself to help you to perform. The idea of using trigger words or key phrases is very popular with athletes and can be highly motivational. Here, allocate words to specific thoughts, so that with a quick reminder you can tell your brain what you want it to think and feel (see next month's self-talk article).

2. PREPARATION

Preparation can also help you to feel a sense of control. Having a pre-performance routine can be a great way of bringing consistency and controllability to your preparation. Consistency in your approach brings many benefits as routines can foster self-confidence, develop focus on relevant behaviours and thoughts and bring the vital element of control to unpredictable situations. Remember, it is you and only you who can control the thoughts and behaviours that precede your performance.

The main advantage of having a

OPEN WATER CAN BE UNPREDICTABLE. YOU HAVE NO CONTROL OVER WATER CONDITIONS



routine is that if you are focusing on your routine, then you are unlikely to become distracted by external uncontrollable factors that you know are there, but which you do not need to focus on right now.

If you wish for more control, be strategic in your planning. Identify key time points when you will engage in performance preparation thoughts and behaviours. For swimmers I have worked with, this typically may involve:

- The night before the competition
- The morning of the competition
- Your travel to the venue
- Arrival and preparation at venue
- Immediately prior to competition

At each time point engage in specific and consistent thoughts and behaviours that will contribute to the performance you wish to have. To make routines work well practise them prior to a less important event or in training sessions.

3. EFFORT

As effort is a choice, this can help to bring a sense of control if viewed in the right way. As an athlete, you are the controller of when and how to apply effort. We know that the secret to many athletic successes is effort, persistence and commitment, so knowing where to direct this effort is essential. It's about recognising where your effort can have the most impact for your progression towards what you want to become, not what you are now. Identifying the areas in which to invest your effort is central to achieving all that you want to achieve – by doing this you are taking control of your performances.

4. COMMUNICATION

Taking control of your verbal and non-verbal communication and how you present yourself prior to a pressure event will have a big

effect on your thoughts, feelings and behaviours and on those people around you. Emotions are contagious! While you cannot control what others say to you, you can take control by transmitting a message through your reactions to others of ways to cope and deal with difficult situations. By setting an example you can help others with your effective controlled communication. Evidence tells us that the way you think and feel can be determined by the way that you act. Aim to act positively and your mind and body will respond to this.

5. FINALLY,...

Remember to accept that there will always be aspects you cannot control in a performance environment, but in the heat of the moment, placing your focus on what you can control is very important and will benefit your performances more.

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE: SELF-TALK
SELF-TALK CAN HELP YOU THINK RATIONALLY AND COPE WITH STRESS. THIS ARTICLE WILL FOCUS ON ATTENTION TO FACTORS RELEVANT TO SUCCESSFUL PERFORMANCE, THIS CAN BE NOT ONLY TO ENHANCE PERFORMANCE DURING COMPETITION BUT ALSO HOW ATHLETES TALK ABOUT SUCCESS, FAILURE AND THE THOUGHTS THEY HAVE ABOUT THEIR PERFORMANCES.