

Winning Sport Swimming: VISUALIZATION DRILLS SUCCESS

By BOB STEELE

This program is presented to assist coaches in developing essential components of athletics: skill, fitness, and motivation, the keys to success in sport. The coach must decide how to best help every "individual swimmer" and then encourage their development by providing impacting "tools." The coach must believe in visualization; provide a visualization assessment, and time to learn, practice, develop and use with feedback to improve those components. For help, please contact fastswimmin@gmail.com. Please read the credits at the end of the article, and be sure to make copies of the Assessment tool and Drills for each of your swimmers. Enjoy and good luck.

*Yours for FAST swimmin',
Bob Steele*

RELAXING ON CUE

Relaxing on cue practice enables the swimmer to relax in about five minutes, relying mainly on "centered breathing" – inhaling and exhaling fully and mentally; flow relaxation to any tension in the 'body.

1. Have the swimmers lie down with their eyes closed in a quiet place. Relax for about five minutes, but stay awake!
2. Flow relaxation through the muscle groups by mentioning them in a "program relaxation" sequence. Move from the feet to the head, mentioning muscles/groups and with 10 seconds to relax that area.
3. Do centered breathing again and visualize each muscle group "turning off" like a string of light bulbs. Now work with a triggering cue as they breathe and relax. Visualize a relaxing color (green, blue...), scene (the beach, your room, the woods...), or word (loose, calm, warm,

heavy...) that helps relax.

4. Use that word along with "centered breathing" prior to visualizing.
5. Perform this technique again. Practice twice daily for about four days recording responses in a diary.
6. Do this prior to swimming practice daily, standing or sitting. A relaxed person may have a higher pain tolerance which in training and racing may be quite helpful when one needs courage and toughness!

Following a five minute relaxation drill, have the swimmers close their eyes and visualize the following with verbal guidance by the coach. It is imperative to emphasize the importance of visualizing strokes, skills, environment, and races accurately. Don't socialize, laugh, or use incorrect swimming techniques or skills. Imitate great swimmers.

Following the Assessment, the swimmers should use their best method, OR experiment with three ways to determine which method is the most effective for them. The effectiveness of each method will vary with the individual swimmer and they may find one method is better for skills, strategy, toughness; etc.

1. **Objects:** See your correct strokes and feel the water as you move over the lanes, targets, lanemarkers in the pool. Feel flawless strokes as you see everything around while training or racing.
2. **People:** See an outstanding swimmer perform. Relate the visualization to your observation of a World, Olympic, State or Conference record holder. Visualize your face on their body. Useful in developing skills.
3. **Yourself:** See yourself performing the skill flawlessly, as if you were looking at yourself in a mirror or monitor or TV

screen, seeing a replay of a race or practice.

ESTABLISH THE ENVIRONMENT

After taking three deep centered breaths, close your eyes and visualize the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and feelings as part of all visualizations in the pool environment, when the actual race or practice did or will occur. Use words to trigger an accurate visualization. Pause following each word to permit time to visualize that word. Involve all the senses in visualizations.

1. **See:** The pool, balcony, water, lane lines, lane markers, teammates, family...
2. **Hear:** Your coaches, teammates, spectators, officials...
3. **Feel:** The air, water, temperature...
4. **Smell:** The air, chlorine, popcorn...
5. **Taste:** The water...

7 EXERCISES TO PRACTICE

1. **LIFETIME BEST** – Immediately after the last relaxation, establish the environment and go right into stepping onto the block; take your mark, beep... Now see yourself swim a lifetime best with the strokes, strategy, pace, and feelings you experienced in that race.

Purpose: Develop skill based upon a vivid past success!

Question: "What is the last thing you saw?" Have the swimmers tell what they saw last. Acknowledge those that saw "celebrating" because an opportunity to celebrate is a reason to come and never miss a practice, learn skills and race hard. Have the swimmers sprint in from the pennants, practice touching the target, seeing a lifetime best and celebrating. Do

race stroke/pull/kick rate).

- Know the difference between effort and speed.
- Sustain, rather than descend, high performance endurance sets (mature breaststrokes may be the exception to this).
- Maintain consistent weekly training volume and vary the training intensity within this volume (rather than varying the volume from week to week).
- Keep one training session per week "open" to allow individual adjustments in program design from swimmer to swimmer.
- Females (and some males) perform resistance pull sets without leg flotation devices; practice race stroke-rate.
- Use an "Individual Checking Speed" (ICS) training set on Monday morning after a session off.
- Practice underwater – fast/streamlined push-offs and dolphin kicking.
- Race someone faster during each training session.
- Do some training activity (in every workout) that requires 100% effort, i.e., this may be a swim, or swimming set, or a technical aspect of swimming.
- Consider three smaller volume training sessions a day, such as during training camps and school holidays, rather than 1-2 larger volume sessions as a way to achieve your training objectives.
- Drills should be done in a progression – commencing with very basic skills and progressing to race objectives. I.E., basic skills such as body position, reducing resistance, distance per kick or arm stroke – race skills such as pace, stroke-length, and stroke-rate.
- Correct faults immediately.
- Females to use land-based training (2-3 exercises) every day prior to pool training; mature females to add three 45 minute sessions weekly.
- Develop core body strength (i.e. trunk – abdominal, hip, lower/upper back) first.

COMPETITION

- During maturation, hold back two events from your competitive repertoire; these may be used to kick-start continued improvement should your performances (in your main event) plateau.
- There is no such thing as "social competition." Have a strategy for social interaction (fun away from the pool) and a strategy for competition (serious and competitive).
- Prepare to overcome the "third day let-down" at Championship Meets by participating in weekend meets and then swimming a test set (or time trial within 3% of PB) on Monday. Follow with a full training



program on Monday and have another day/session rest that week (if required).

- Practice a 3-session progression containing quality swims to prepare for "heat-semi final-final" competition format.
- Swim heats using specific race strategy on the front-half and swim finals using specific race strategy on the back-half to educate young swimmers in competitive skills.
- Prepare to race fast in winter, i.e., Northern Hemisphere Summer.
- Practice relay skills with all team/squad members.
- Use a 3-2-1 ratio to construct your seasonal competition calendar, such as three competitions below one's current ability, two competitions equal to one's current ability, and one competition above one's current ability.
- Encourage weekly (juniors) or fortnightly (seniors) club swims for all team members.
- Have your Club conduct their Club Championships on the same day as another (or several others) Club and compare results.
- Differentiate the training of males and females at maturation to individualize the strengths and weaknesses of each group. Schedule an additional training session per week for some groups of females.
- Maintain an uncompromising standard for each training group: attitude, attendance training commitment, competition standard, skill, and proficiency.
- Program recovery during school exam periods and adjust morning training times during school holiday periods (if possible).
- Have all swimmers making a national qualifying time compete in an additional swim meet (not open to the other members of your team) prior to the Championships. The goal is to improve upon time or practice a Championship meet program.
- Simulate major meets (States and

Nationals) in the home program, so that the step-up to the real thing is easily made.

- Learn to swim fast heats and faster finals by scheduling morning quality sessions (as well as afternoon quality sessions).
- 'B' finals are a second chance for swimmers not capable of making an 'A' final – they are not for 'A finalists' swimming below their capability.

TEAM BUILDING

- Have a social program in your Club: beach days, movie nights, bowling; etc.
- At least once a year, invite the School Principal/Teacher/Phys. Ed (from the local schools your swimmers attend) to come along to your training session, or put on a morning tea or Club competition and sell the benefits of your program.
- Offer something different, challenging, and special in your program for each age. For 12 years, weekend training camp; 13 years, one week school holiday camp; 14 years, gym training education program; 15 years, bus tour and competition; etc.
- Conduct specialized and/or additional training sessions from time-to-time... i.e. only swimmers above 800 IPS, or stroke specialists, or State Championship finalists; etc.
- Rotate the leader of each lane... i.e. last swimmer into the water is the leader, or swimmer with the lowest heart-rate leads the next repeat/set; etc.
- Have occasional workouts that equalize the talent in your squad... i.e. girl or juniors wear fins, boys or seniors do band only pull; etc.
- Recognize and applaud 100% attendance at scheduled training sessions.
- Encourage volunteer help and manage the way help is provided to achieve your objectives: use parents as record keepers, communicators, publicists, technical officials, organizers – not as coaches. ■

5 celebrations at the end of practice.

2. **FLAWLESS FIFTY** – Following a one minute relaxation, see; a championship start, entry, glide, pull-out, head pop, strong kick, long powerful strokes, turning target, fast feet, bouncing off the wall, streamline glide, pull-out, head pop, strong kick, long powerful strokes, breath control, passing pennants, reach for the touchpad with fingertips, touch the pad, stand up, see a lifetime best, turn to teammates and coaches and celebrate, jumping off the bottom, arms raised in celebration.

Purpose: Guidance through the race with trigger words for skills to be visualized. Eliminate negative thoughts; however, David Berkoff set a World Record with 15 negative critiquing thoughts during the race. Bad thoughts don't always give bad results.

3. **BACK-UP FIFTIES** – After one minute of relaxation and establishing the environment.

Perform FIVE flawless 50's on your own. If you make a mistake in any way, see or feel something wrong, you must back up and start over again. Repeat this drill until you've done FIVE flawless fifties.

Purpose: To perfect visualization of skills or strategies and eliminate negatives.

4. **GOAL TIME FIFTIES** – Relax again for ONE minute. Perform a flawless 50 on PACE or on GOAL.

- Sit with back to pace clock or second hand.
- Start all swimmers with a "take your mark" on 58 and BEEP on 59 for start on "0."
- Visualize a 50 and look at the clock upon touching to see your time. Three times and they're on pace.

Purpose: Reinforce a goal pace or time in mind and the exact, positive skills needed for achievement.

5. **PRE-RACE VISUALIZATION** – Practice prior to time trials or hard practice swims. Eventually use at starting blocks just prior to a race. Use in lesser meets prior to big races.

- Relax for five seconds with centered breathing.
- Visualize the important and sometimes faulty parts of your races being done FLAWLESSLY.



Select 2 or 3 skills, such as: streamline entry, bounce of the wall on turns, head still/no breath on fingertip touch, negative/split, out faster, change from high elbow to straight arm the last 10 meters...

- Complete in 10 seconds. Have swimmers rehearse with one foot on blocks at start of warm-up.

Purpose: A quick review of proper techniques or strategy required for success.

6. **PRE-RACE WITH NOISE** – Since effective visualization must be done immediately prior to a race, have swimmers perform PRE-RACE VISUALIZATION (#6) with the team cheering and yelling for the motivational situation swimmers would experience at the meet. It's fun just before a championship start at the beginning of warm-up.

- Have eight swimmers on the blocks as they would be prior to starting. Perform #6 with noise.

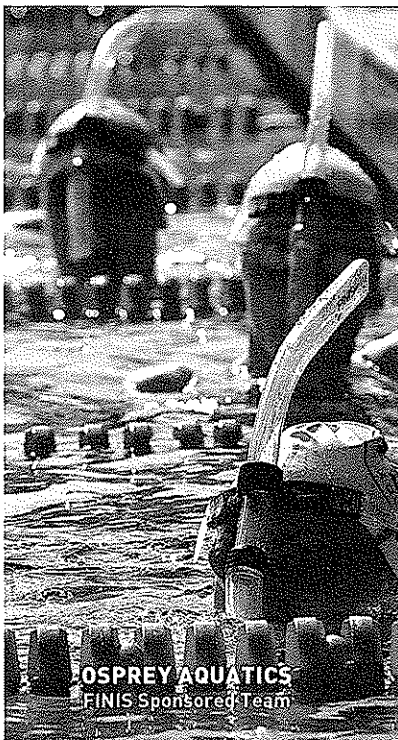
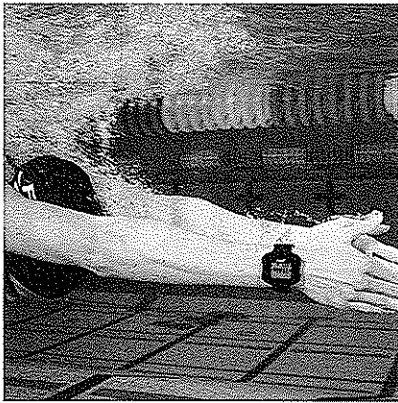
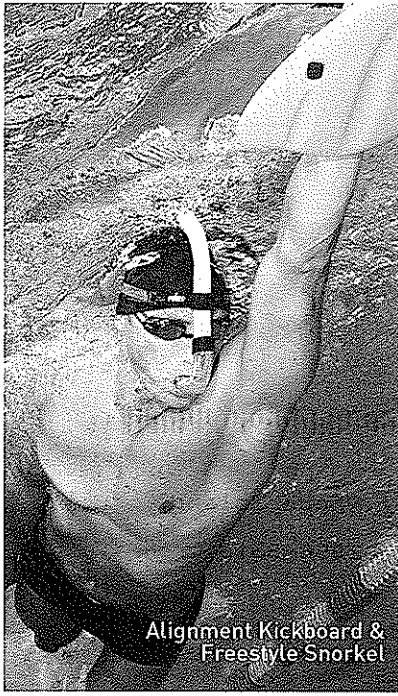
Purpose: A "quick" review of proper techniques in a pressure situation. Things they've been working on with the coach in practice; skills, strategy and maybe visualizing an opponent's face.

7. **KEY WORD or CUEING** – In an effort to get swimmers through the different part of their race when legs and arms are heavy, the stroke shortens, breathing is

difficult, the competition makes a move and "the piano is ready to fall," try to:

- Develop a meaningful KEYWORD that cues light legs and arms, long strokes, second wind, keeping a lead and all those things that mean success.
- This word should focus on and be equated to a "winning goal" like: All-Star, Speeder, Hero, Blaze Orange, Gold Medal, or First Place, or Time Standard. This word is only known to the swimmer. Do not share it with others. Some swimmers have a song they sing that revs them up or takes as long as their goal time. The song must finish AFTER they touch the pad.
- Use the word daily whenever failing adaptation begins and swimmer needs to dig deep for fortitude, courage and a RACING attitude. Two testimonials are a girl who made the Olympic Team in 3 events and a man who won the 400 meter Free at USA Nationals. The felt it made a difference.
- Use the word before a race and/or a pressure point in the race. Don't think about the symptoms in the race; think about the keyword and make it fit your race strategy with the help of your coach.

Purpose: Maintain skills and race strategy under pressure. ■



VISUALIZATION: Championship Season

Brought to You by the Professionals at Finis

With a number of important spring meets fast approaching, it is time to start "sharpening the saw" and putting the finishing touches on a season's worth of work. In addition to tuning the body for peak performance, it is also essential to keep the mind focused and sharp. Being in the correct frame of mind, stepping up onto the blocks is arguably just as important as the countless hours of hard work in training. The old adage, "whether you believe you can or can't do something, you are almost always right," fits perfectly here. Our thoughts prior to diving in dictate so much of how we perform in the pool.

Just as we train our bodies to compete, we must also train our minds to deal with the intense emotions we face on race day. Having said that, learning to use your mind as a tool can be an easy process to begin. In order to become comfortable with visualization, it is recommended that you begin at least two weeks prior to the start of the event. There is no particular time of the day that is better, nor a maximum number of times you should engage in this activity. Instead, it is critical to keep the goal of the exercise in mind: to focus, relax, gain confidence, and help you produce your best swim.

There are many different ways you can visualize, but it is generally easiest to relax while lying on your back. Allow your arms and legs to flop over to your sides naturally and then close your eyes. Spend a few minutes focusing on breathing into the pit of your stomach and out slowly through your mouth. If you try to visualize the air

in your lungs, then it will often help to clear your mind of distractions and of nervous energy. Once you are relaxed, begin to take yourself through your race preparation, from warm all the way through the time you stand behind the blocks.

The more specific you are the more helpful it is when you are actually at the meet. Imagine how the venue will look and feel, and also remember to relay thoughts of confidence as they happen in "real time." Now that you are behind the blocks, set yourself off into the pool and visualize your race as you had dreamed it could be. Picture your dive, streamline, breakout strokes, tempo and turns. Visualize your finish to the wall and always, always be sure to see your goal time on the board.

It is important for coaches to encourage your swimmers to develop good visualization practices before their races to prepare them mentally. They put in the hard training, so now they just have to prepare their mind to get that goal. As with swimming in the pool, the key to training a strong, mental focus through visualization is consistency. Tell your swimmers to allow at least 20 minutes a day to complete this exercise during the last few weeks of rest. Whether they do it randomly throughout the day or at a certain time each day is a matter of their preference. Just as swimmers lose the feel for the water after some time off, they can also lose the familiar feeling created through visualizing the meet. A strong mind and a strong body are the two main ingredients for making dreams a reality. ■