

WHAT IS Mental Toughness?

Submitted By **Coach John Casadia**

Hi John,

Last weekend (Martin Luther King weekend) I took several high school swimmers I'm training to this three day long course meet. It was a prelim and finals meet. Our goal was to experience long course competition. For some it was their first experience. Naturally I was very excited when we qualified swimmers for the evening finals (since the meet was being held only 25 minutes from our home we left after prelims and came back for finals since there was a 4 hour break). On the third day (Monday) two swimmers qualified for finals but elected to scratch. I was dumbfounded! They had a high school meet the next day which I believe they were thinking about. I was still dumbfounded believing they could compete on Monday evening's finals and be home by 7 PM, giving them plenty of time to rest.

Weeks prior to this meet I reprinted the article "MENTAL TOUGHNESS" which appeared in an ASCA publication asking every swimmer to read it and rate themselves on just how mentally tough they thought they were. As we were leaving the meet they said they'd see me at AM workout. At this point I stopped them and said they needed to reevaluate just how "mentally tough" they were so I told them they could not return to AM's until they reread the "MENTAL TOUGHNESS" article. The following is the response from one of my swimmers. I thought his comments and personal insight is worth sharing with others. What do you think?

John Casadia, Jr. (NOTE: I coach these swimmers in the AM and they go to their high school practices in the afternoon.)

After going through the "Mental Toughness and Swimming" packet, I came up with my own

meaning of what mental toughness truly is in the swimming world. This does not pertain to school, or any other aspects except swimming. To me, mental toughness is "the ability to eliminate pain during a race, having heart, and having the will to achieve your goals no matter the cost." I thought to myself, "What are the components that make a swimmer tough?" - And these two qualities sum it all up. When it comes down to that last turn, or last lap, or last man in the relay, it comes down to whoever wants it more. Sure, it's clearly a simple concept but that is what it takes. You will never beat someone with equal ability as you without heart or pain tolerance. Giving in for even a second will eradicate your chances of winning. It's easy when you work hard in practice and have more talent than the guy next to you. But what happens when your opponent trains harder? You need to have the mindset that you can never lose, even if you are racing Michael Phelps. Of course he's going to rip you a new one but when you're behind the block, **NO ONE** can beat you.

Now back to the packet, it was intriguing to read about the coaches' responses when they were asked if mental toughness could be taught. All around, they said it can be reinforced, but not taught. You are either born tough or you're not. It is as simple as that. Additionally, they were asked "when can you tell a swimmer is mentally tough or not" and some answers were very humorous. Most of the coaches said that they can tell after a few weeks, or through body language but that is all false. One coach even said "Oh, around the 13th 100 of a set of 20," which also is false. Mental toughness in practice is far different than in a meet. They aren't even close in my book. I know swimmers from the past that would just sit on the bottom of the pool and be able to break records. You may think this is because of talent but I think otherwise. I remember seeing this

swimmer behind the blocks in his own world. It looked like a bubble was around him that no one could burst. Mental toughness in a meet is far greater to achieve than in practice. You can have a good work ethic but if you are mentally weak in a meet, you won't be successful.

Personally, I need to work on my "meet" mental toughness. I need to learn to just forget everything and get it done in the pool no matter what it takes. Not just when I shave and taper but also during the regular season. Behind the blocks I don't have that "animal mindset." By animal mindset I mean complete, direct focus, ready to kill in the water. It strikes fear into his opponents when they look over to see a guy focused and on his race. Staring at the other end of the pool, not talking, not joking, just ready to race. I need to develop a better race mentality like the one I just described to be successful. In practice, I am pretty tough as I work hard and will do any set that comes my way. Meets are my problem. Most of the time. I need to just put my head down and **DO IT**.

In summarization, my point of view of mental toughness is far different than any of the coaches portrayed in the packet. I believe that there are two different aspects of mental toughness: in practice but also in a race. Some believe they are the same and are morphed together but as my experiences as a swimmer I know otherwise. You also need heart and the desire to win as I stated before. Many may argue about my outlook on what mental toughness truly is but this is clearly just my opinion. Striving to reach your goals no matter what it takes and going to the next level. As the great Olympic Champion, Michael Phelps, once said "You can't put a limit on anything; the more you dream, the farther you get." ■