

MENTAL TOUGHNESS AND SWIMMING

[BY WAYNE GOLDSMITH]

A Report for ASCA The American Swimming Coaches Association

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Introduction:

Mental toughness is often described by swimming coaches as a desirable quality – something they believe can help swimmers realise their potential. Yet, at the same time, mental toughness has been difficult to define and even more difficult to measure. Mental toughness is commonly referred to as “possessing resilience” or having the ability to “bounce back” when things go wrong or to show “determination” when the chips are down but a uniform, consistent definition of mental toughness in swimming has been elusive.

Purpose:

The purpose of this report was to ask practicing swimming coaches about their views on mental toughness, to ask them to define what it is, how to measure it and most importantly if and how mental toughness can be coached. It is hoped that this report will help more swimming coaches to better understand mental

toughness and how it applies to swimming – and in doing so be more effective in helping their swimmers to develop mental toughness in training and racing.

Outline:

110 swimming coaches were surveyed using the Mental Skills for Peak Performance Swimming Survey 2012 designed by Wayne Goldsmith and Helen Morris of Moregold Sports Pty Ltd. The results of the survey are detailed in the report.

Reporting – disclaimer:

The responses that appear in this report are the actual and unedited responses of the coaches who participated in this report (except for a few spelling corrections). The views and opinions of the coaches who responded to this survey do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of either the author or the American Swimming Coaches Association.

Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank all those coaches who contributed to this report: without you and your honest, professional, intelligent contributions and your willingness to share your experiences and expertise, this report would not have been possible.

We would also like to thank John Leonard and Matt Hooper of the American Swimming Coaches Association for their support.

COMMENTS ABOUT THE FIRST THREE QUESTIONS IN THIS SURVEY:

This first three questions in this survey were designed to gain an understanding of the experience level and coaching background of the coaches responding to this survey.

It would reasonable to suggest that the coaches who responded to this survey could be considered sufficiently experienced to be able to define and discuss mental toughness in swimming from a position of knowledge, expertise and understanding of the topic.



A PROFILE OF THE COACHES WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THIS REPORT

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING BEST DESCRIBES YOUR CURRENT ROLE IN SWIMMING?

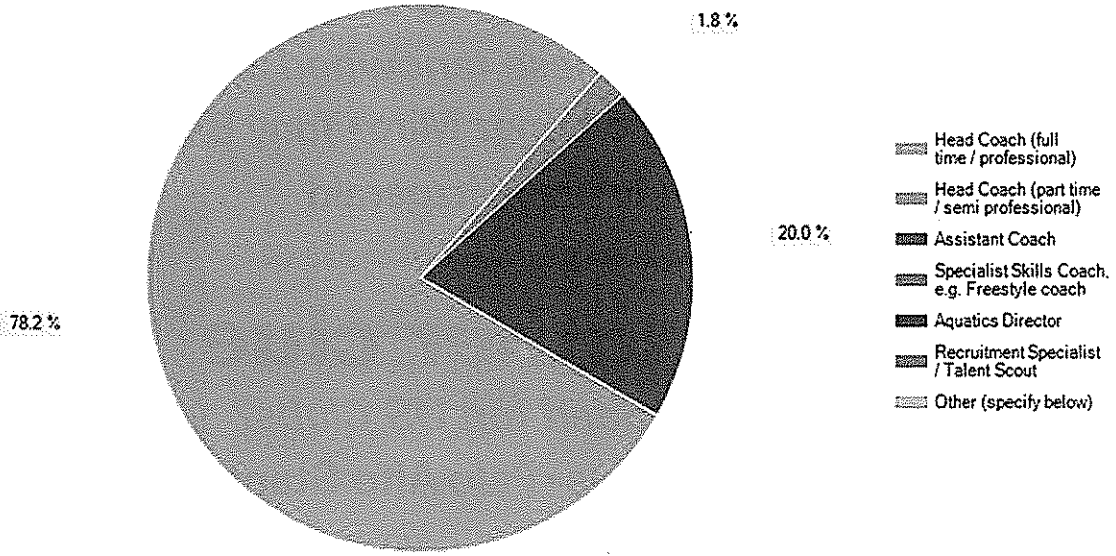


Diagram 1: Responses to the question “Which of the following best describes your current role in swimming?” Over three quarters of coaches who responded to this survey were head coaches.



HOW MANY YEARS HAVE YOU BEEN INVOLVED IN SWIMMING (AS A COACH)?

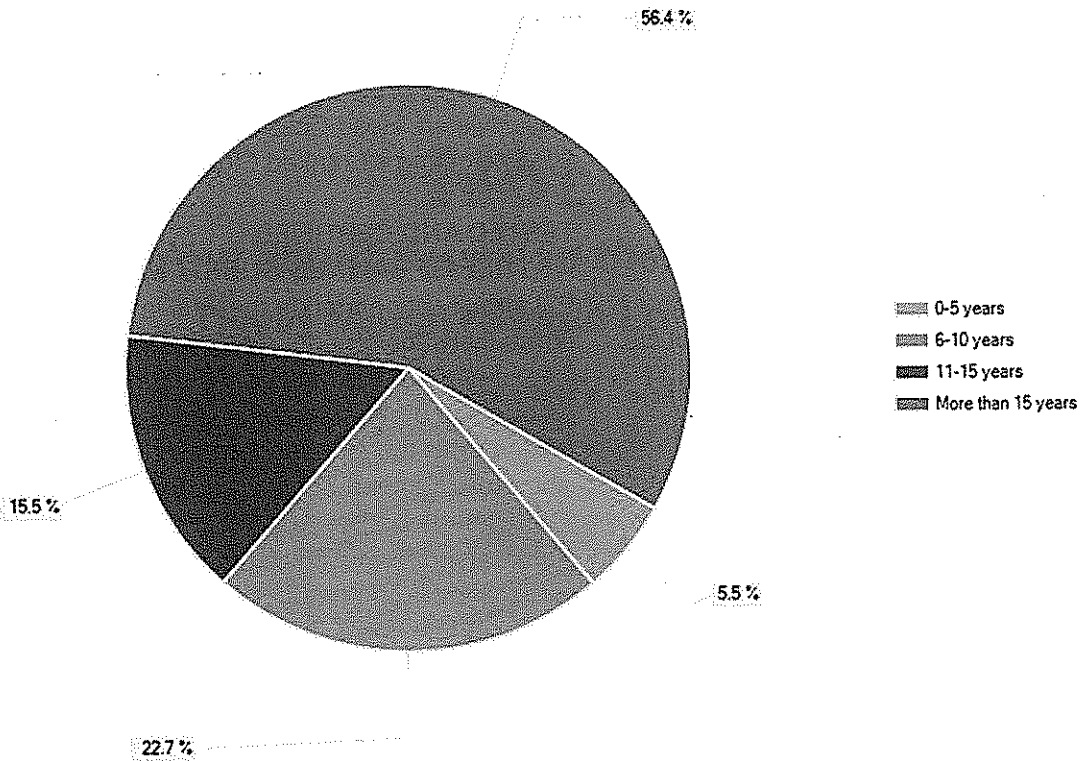


Diagram 2: More than half of the coaches who responded to this survey have been coaching in swimming for more than 15 years with a further 15.5% having been swimming coaching between 11-15 years.



WHAT LEVEL OF SWIMMING DO YOU CURRENTLY COACH?

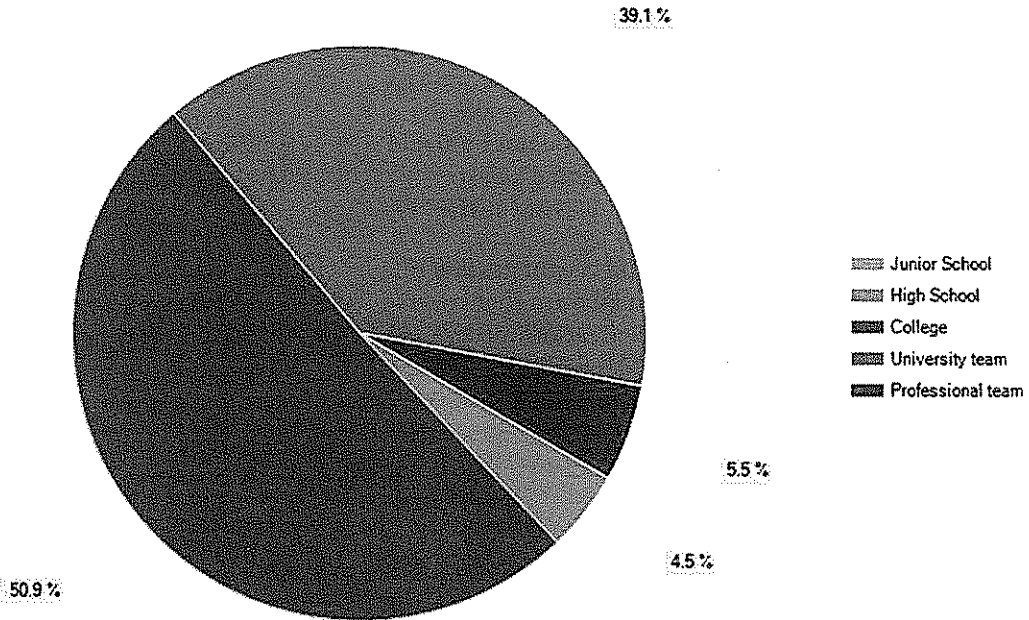


Diagram 3: Over half the coaches who responded to this survey coached at College level with a further 39.1% coaching at University team level.



WHAT IS MENTAL TOUGHNESS?

CAN YOU DESCRIBE WHAT YOU BELIEVE THE TERM “MENTAL TOUGHNESS” MEANS AND HOW IT RELATES TO SWIMMING?

Ability to Consistently
 Ability to Deal Ability
 to Overcome Ability to
 Push Able Accomplish
 Apply Attitude
 Challenges Compete
 Disciplined Feeling
 Great Focus High
 Level Mental
 Toughness Motivated
 Order Overcoming
 Adversity Regardless
 of the Circumstances
 Swimming

(Text analysis – i.e. most common words and themes reported by the coaches who responded to this survey in answer to the question “Can you describe what you believe the term “Mental Toughness” means and how it relates to Swimming?”)

- Mental toughness is the ability to actively focus on actions that result in fast swimming, both in practice and competition. Mentally tough athletes set aside distractions such as family, school, relationships, past failures, minor injuries, and training pain.

- Mental toughness is the ability to do the right thing regardless of the situation one finds oneself in. In swimming that means not giving in to the urge to take the easy way out.
- The ability to sustain focus and composure during a time of high stress and anxiety.
- Being able to handle the pressure and not be afraid of not getting a best time or getting beat.
- Mental toughness is a catch all term that covers concentration/focus, confidence, “pain” (good pain) management, staying on task, pushing through perceived limits and obstacles, not give up attitude/belief. Swimming is no difference from other sports - to be the best, you have to be good with these skills/traits. Swimming is slightly different in that most of a workout is swum “by yourself”, so it can be a little harder to continue to push with your head in the water.
- Ability to stay focused on task at hand...ability to persevere despite distractions and hardships... clearly an ATTITUDE!
- Doing what has to be done, when it has to be done, as well as it can be done and doing it that way all the time.
- The ability to push through challenging physical or mental situations on a consistent basis.
- Ability to train at the level you expect to compete.
- It is the ability to get back up when you get knocked down

and go even harder. It is the ability to look at challenges and think they are “doable”. It is the ability to try and pick it up a little more when things are very difficult. It is the expectation to win and the will to prepare.

- The ability to stay adaptable in the face of dynamic conditions and to accept challenges while embracing the possibility of failure.
- “Mental toughness” is a swimmers ability to stay present and focused on the task laid before them The ability to sustain those two things is how I measure how mentally tough a swimmer is. In swimming, the more developed these two things are, the “tougher” the swimmer seems.
- Mental toughness is the ability to push yourself to, and even beyond, your limit - be it in athletics or any other area of your life. In swimming, mentally tough swimmers are those that continue to push themselves to swim faster when they reach the point at which they are in pain.
- Ability of the mind to overcome the failings of the body
- Having a physiological edge that enables swimmers or athletes to be consistent, confident, focused, and determined during high pressure situations during workout or race in order to perform at maximum potential.
- To me, it’s the ability to overcome doubt, fear, pain,



and distractions to achieve optimal performance.

- Mental Toughness is a multitude of abilities that describe an athlete's ability to not only overcome their fears and insecurities, but to thrive in any environment. Mental Toughness also relates to an athlete's ability to push themselves to new areas to become comfortable with learning new and more difficult tasks
- Dealing with success and failure equally. Know that in swimming it needs to hurt, but does not need to be painful.
- Ability to stay positive and focused under difficult situations.



- Mental toughness is one's ability to overcome or suppress pain throughout tough workouts and competition. In addition, mental toughness extends to one's ability to self-correct and adjust to better their performance in and out of practices.

- Swimmers need to be "mentally tough" to endure the hard workouts and pain. They need to be able to push themselves to the limits, to stress their system, in order to get the desired adaptation and improvement. "Mental Toughness" also needed at meets. At a high level of their sport, during their races, everyone is hurting at some point. "Mental Toughness" will make most of the difference between swimmers. The ones who are able to overcome that feeling and able to push through the pain keeping up the intensity, will be winning.



- Mental toughness is an athlete's ability to stay motivated and focused through the intense pain of high level performance.
- Being able to race/practice in non-ideal conditions, able to move on after a bad race for your next race. Keeping a calm, cool composure regardless of how you feel.
- Adapt, improvise, overcome ... doing what's required, when it's required ... regardless of circumstance or challenge.
- Mental toughness is one of the key ingredients needed before success can happen. It is as essential as having water in the pool.
- Do the right thing when the right thing is tough to do.
- Mental toughness is having the heart, determination, and commitment to deal with all the rigors in the sport of swimming: training hard every day with your head down in the water with only own thoughts to get in your way from a good practice, swim, or race.
- Being able to work hard every day for your goal, even the days you have a lot of other things to do or your body is not feeling great.
- Being able to personally deal w/ all challenges- physical and mental
- The ability to determine the difference between "want" versus "need" and the mental capacity to enforce what is needed to improve and do the things that are uncomfortable versus just

wanting to be better and not doing the necessary things, even if they are uncomfortable or "hard." The person who wants to be better will kick 15 meters underwater off every wall- when you first try this it is very difficult and your workout times suffer- mental toughness allows one to consistently do this and become better

- Ability to avoid distractions and to bring positive focus on the moment's task. In swimming, that means bringing your best on a consistent basis and creating peak performances in the biggest moments.
- Having the ability to deal with pain (muscle fatigue) in important practice and competition situations
- A person's ability to consistently perform at his/her best and consequently judging his/her performances as successful without deficits due to mental, emotional or psychological limitations or strain.
- Mental toughness has everything to do with persistence in the face of discomfort. Sometimes that discomfort is physical in nature (one must be tough enough to decide to kick out 15M on the last wall). Sometimes that discomfort is contextual in nature (one must be willing to say goodnight to their friends who are going out for drinks). It is strengthened when the embrace of discomfort is positively reinforced (a win, a best time, or a great training session).

- The ability to make the right choice rather than the easy choice in order to reach your goals.
- Staying positive and focused on the task at hand. Being able to handle and overcome adversity.
- Swimmers who have the ability to keep going when they are exhausted, or can find another level at the end of sets or races
- Mental toughness is the ability to be intrinsically motivated to perform at your fullest potential during each set in a practice.
- The ability to stay strong through a tough set, rebound when you do not achieve a goal at a set time. I feel it is all about being able to keep going when things are hard or not going as planned as well as keeping your head on straight when things are going well as not to fall off track.
- The ability to compete at a high level and maintain positivity through adversity while keeping an internal focus.
- Mental Toughness means you have the ability to adapt, improvise, and overcome any situation or skill that will lead toward individual or team success. Mental toughness is an integral quality for any swimmer to possess and apply in both training and competition to reach a medium or high level of competitive swimming.
- Someone who can handle anything you bring to them during practice and can rise up to the challenge at a meet when needed.
- Being able to overcome the physical and emotional challenges one comes upon with strength. Being able to work hard to make a bad situation better or remain positive when things don't go your way.
- The ability to allow your mind and thoughts to overcome obstacles.
- Being able to control your emotions before a race, being able to get to a point where you rise to the challenges (whether they are in practice or race settings) as opposed to being scared by them. Gaining confidence.
- Being able to get through a hard set or workout to accomplish the goals that have been set.
- Mental Toughness to me means the willingness to challenge yourself through practice and meet performance to be better than what you think.
- The ability to consistently overcome challenges, both acute and chronic, regardless of the circumstances.
- The ability to clear your mind of everything that won't help you accomplish the task at hand as well as use the confidence and smarts to accomplish the same task.
- The ability to face whatever challenge is thrown at you in training or competition. How does one respond to these challenges, especially the unexpected ones?
- Overcoming adversity whether it is a major obstacle of just the boredom of a particular set.
- Performing at your highest ability regardless of the circumstances around you.
- Being mentally strong - ability to overcome obstacles and challenges, ability to train hard and ignore "excuses", ability to race hard and thrive on competition.
- For the swimmer--Mental toughness is the ability to control ones effort so that the athlete is always proud of their effort and attitude.
- Mental toughness is a psychological trait (either inherent or developed) that enables an athlete to cope with the demands of high-level sport, including competition, training, and the overall lifestyle of being an athlete. Mental toughness has to do with determination, confidence, focus, the ability to work well under pressure, pushing physical and mental boundaries, dealing with setbacks in a productive way, etc. Mental toughness is especially important for high-level swimmers because swimming is such an intense, individual sport. When training and racing, swimmers are entirely on their own--senses are very limited, and swimmers cannot hear feedback from or talk to coaches, nor can they interact with competitors in the water like other individual sports such as running, tennis, etc., so it is solely up to the athlete to push themselves, be disciplined enough in training to constantly

focus on details, and not be intimidated by competition.

- Mental toughness is the ability to push through tough workouts and reach the highest potential possible. In swimming, this requires going past the comfort zone in workouts and races.
- Training attitude and ability to block out distractions.
- Mental toughness is the psychological ability to cope with the demands of training and competing. It comes from self-confidence that one can achieve anything, motivation - the desire to succeed and ability to bounce back from setback with increased determination, focus - ability to stay focused when there are many distractions, ability to handle pressure and being positive.
- Accept challenges with a positive attitude, being able to perform in the face of adversity,
- Ability to remain focused when faced with mental and physical distractions/challenges.
- Being able to put all things aside and focus on the task at hand.
- Ability to deal with the necessities of what needs to be done to reach goals.
- The ability to meet challenges with the positive resolve and determination that gives you the opportunity to overcome those challenges.
- The ability to stay in the moment and focus on the task at hand without becoming

distracted or psyched out. In swimming, it means being able to swim to your abilities and potential no matter the meet, pool conditions, level of competition, effect on the team, etc.

- The ability to deal with adversity by focusing mentally on the job at hand.
- Overcoming adversity in and out of the pool by staying focused and determined to reach a goal.
- The ability to withstand physical pain, negative mental self-talk, coaching criticism and the ups and downs of a sport in which you do not see success on a regular basis. The ability to overcome fatigue and muscle soreness
- The ability to separate the feeling of pain from your performances so you can swim fast
- Never, ever give up.
- Individuals that are in the swimming mind set during practice & competition. The swimmer needs to be able
- Hunger to compete in practice and at meets. Ability to shut out surrounding events and focus on one thing. Willingness and ability to overcome setbacks/ bad swims and move on to the next.
- The ability to positively visualize the performance you'd like to achieve and the willingness to develop that mindset throughout an entire season and apply it during a taper phase.
- Wow, what an open-ended question! Mental Toughness,

as it pertains to swimming, can mean any number of things. Our sport is gruelling - the day-to-day training can be extremely gruelling and athletes invest copious amounts of time to perform at a few competitions each year. Athletes must be "mentally tough" to not survive & endure, but to thrive and take pride in the training they do. Mental Toughness can also be associated with how athletes react to situations - DQs swim-offs, meet delays, or anything else that does "not go as planned." The last way Mental Toughness can relate to swimming is how an athlete deals with disappointment. There are many ideas here of what "mental toughness" is.

- Pushing past a barrier that previous was thought not to be possible. IE getting out of bed when all you want to do is go back to sleep. Getting in the water and having a great practice after a bad day of class or social issues. Holding fast times when you are feeling great pain
- Being able to push through the difficult times by maintaining focus and poise
- To me, Mental Toughness is the ability to use criticism and adversity to your advantage. I strong believe that Mental Toughness is rooted in focus and desire.
- Being able to stay focused and determined in both practice and racing.
- Mentally tough athletes approach most everything about their sport with a greater desire and passion to succeed. Not all great athletes



are mentally tough nor are all mentally tough people great athletes. (I have coached slow swimmers who became Navy Seals...because they possess a great mental toughness. Ironically, being a great competitive swimmer was just not in the cards for that person. However, that person possesses and demonstrates mental toughness that is not exclusive to an elite athlete.

- The ability to push past negative thoughts when it comes to training and competition.
- Being able to put together all your training & compete at your highest level. Most important part of swimming.

- Being able to push through tough workouts/ in the pool and out and be able to perform optimally at meets no matter what.
- Pure belief in oneself and what they are capable.
- Being able to perform your best when your best is required.
- Someone who can swim well under any circumstances. You don't let things bother your swimming or get in the way and prevent you from doing well.
- Approach to a workout, overcoming a disappointing swim, focus approaching a big meet, being able to focus

and deal w pressure, getting more aggressive coming off a good meet or practice, dealing with life outside the pool so it doesn't affect training.

- The ability to perform under duress, in practice and competition, at a high level and stay true to capability.
- The ability to overcome fear and doubt and channel positive thoughts into racing, and taking responsibility for your own races and swimming.
- Ability to be at your best when it is needed mostalso ability to be disciplined over time.
- We preach and teach skills to achieve mental toughness in

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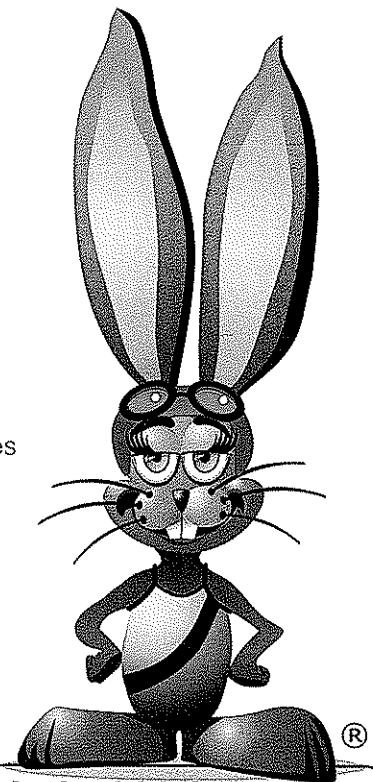
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MEASURING AND ASSESSING MENTAL TOUGHNESS

DO YOU COMMONLY SCREEN OR TEST FOR MENTAL TOUGHNESS WHEN YOU RECRUIT A NEW SWIMMER OR WHEN A SWIMMER JOINS YOUR PROGRAM?

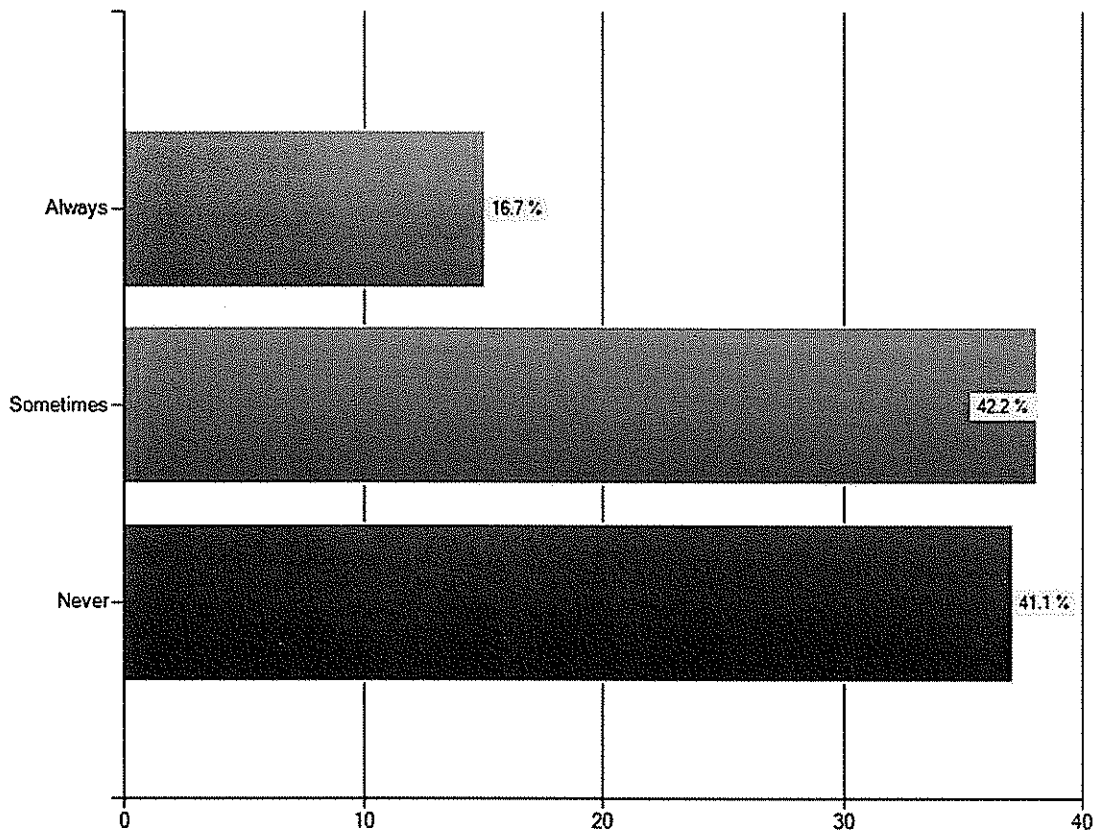


Diagram 4: The responses from coaches who participated in this survey on the issue of screening or testing swimmers for Mental Toughness when they recruit or when a swimmer joins their program.

the event that an athlete lacks some development in this area.

- Ask club and high school coach about the prospect's traits.
- I use a questionnaire I developed to see what each swimmer perceives as strengths and weakness. We do not use a standardized researched assessment. We do one on one talks about best and worst

performances as well.

- Don't have an "A-Z" system in place...yet.
- I ask loaded questions and toss a few comments out to gauge reactions.
- This is difficult. It typically takes 8 weeks of in person coaching to truly know a swimmers degree of mental toughness. Thus, you don't truly know what you have

until you spend a significant amount of time with someone.

- Perhaps we pick up on things from coaches when talking to them during the recruiting process, but there is no formal measure.
- I don't screen or test because my observations of those swimmers during warm-up's, races, cooldowns, and other situations during competition



gives me some insight on a swimmers toughness.

- Just put the swimmer in the hard work from day one and look at his reaction. New swimmers need to be Confident, Focused, Motivated and self possessed. These are the main characteristics of Mental Toughness. Just look for them.
- I ask about history. If a swimmer has quit before, they tend to quit again.
- While we have no formal system and do not specifically look for mental toughness we do assess character and those swimmers who may

be "mentally weak" are not necessarily turned away but may not be the first choice. Our program is not highly dependent on recruiting thus we do not always have the choice to choose who can and cannot participate.

- If talking to a coach I'll ask about work ethic/ mental toughness.
- We interview all recruits and talk about successes and failures in all areas of life in and away from the pool.
- It is my job to increase mental toughness. How "tough" that person is will not be tough enough when they begin.

The opportunity to test one's toughness does not arise very often in an interview process you can't simulate workouts with recruits.

- I don't have a way immediately to screen for it. Would love to have one.
- Through interview and conversation about how they deal with setback and adversity.
- We don't have enough control over the admissions process to be so selective. We try to develop it once athletes are on campus, though.



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- Only in common interaction I have with them over the phone and in person when I ask about past performances, future goals and current training. Sometime ask their coaches about it.
- You ask them about it but it has to be shown to you by what they do.
- Nothing official when I talk to a recruit I simply ask a few questions about how their season is going and gauge their response.
- Looking for body language while they are on campus and talk to their club coach.
- I don't have the ability to other than through conversation. As a recruiter, a test wouldn't go over well.
- I see how they approach challenge. Is it with confidence and optimism? Or do they find ways to avoid it?
- It is hard to "test" for mental toughness. It is something we like to try and find out as much as possible from the coach and the swimmer.
- We always ask for references from not only coaches but teachers as well if possible
- At the university we rarely (3 times out 450) will stop recruiting an athlete who has shown in the recruiting process a problem with effort and/or attitude. In youth swimming we strive daily to understand what is an excellent effort and attitude.
- We are a Division 3 program that doesn't cut swimmers from the team, but we do observe and get an overall feel for recruits' mental toughness in interacting with them.
- There is natural ability to have mental toughness and that is in everyone it is a matter of finding it, teaching, it and training it like any other swimming skill. For some it is slower to develop than others and some have more natural ability and are willing to develop it
- informally, size up their confidence level through body language, comfort in the water, verbal answers to specific questions
- Something you can only find out with time with the athlete.
- I try to get a sense of their goals and the effort that they put into achieving goals from that swimmer and the swimmer's coach(es).
- I believe it is something we need to foster or reward if it is there.
- Never thought of doing it. Watched video to see how they race or to see if they back down.
- Do not ask specific questions about how tough they are, however do ask about their events and the program for which they came. This can tell me a great deal.
- In NCAA Division III swimming, we mostly end up with team members who are mentally tough because there is no other reason to swim other than personal motivation. I will say that most teams at our level cannot afford to be overly picking when recruiting. I do believe most coaches look for individuals who are mental tough. However that does not always mean that that is what we end up with.
- I don't know if you can necessarily test for this. I also believe that Mental Toughness can be developed in someone who may not have it. On the flip side, it can also be lost.
- You can't always tell how tough someone is mentally until you see it in person. Sometimes the environment aids or impedes mental toughness. You can look for characteristics of mental toughness with attitude and work ethic, but as situations change and kids grow, mental toughness can fade or grow.
- Age Group Club Team, we take and teach all.
- When a swimmer complains about past issues I try to dig deeper to find out the true issue.
- I should & plan on adding that into my recruiting process.
- Not in so many words but it certainly filters in from club coaches descriptions of their athletes
- Sometimes I am simply trying to recruit bodies....mental toughness sometimes blooms late at a U.S. service academy.
- Not always easy to detect.
- This is something that is a continual process
- It is a learned/taught quality. Not typically inherent.



HOW DO YOU ASSESS / EVALUATE WHETHER OR NOT A SWIMMER IS "MENTALLY TOUGH"?

Adversity Attitude
 Body Language
 Challenges
 Circumstances
 Coach Complain
 Evaluate Interaction
 Meets Mentally
 Tough Observation
 Performance Practice
 Pressure Profile
 Questionnaire
 Reactions Season Set
 Situations Swimmer
 Training

(Text analysis – i.e. most common words and themes reported by the coaches who responded to this survey in answer to the question "How do you assess / evaluate whether or not a swimmer is "mentally tough"?)

- It's easiest to assess in actual competition. We also look at continued improvement- generally swimmers will be doing the work they need to do at practice if they are progressively successful. We also discuss their outlook on the stresses in their lives.
- How successful an athlete is during a tough set, and whether or not pre-race ritual has been established.
- Talking with their current coach and watching close races.

- Mentally Tough is not black and white! So I look at motivation, goals, and their plans to reach their goals. We then talk about the mental skills they need to get there. Again, this is done with 1 on 1 conversations, goal sheets and a motivation questionnaire.
- More on the informal side... speak with club coach as a starting point.
- Grades, social maturity, respect for parents/current coach, body of work in the pool, events, LCM vs. scy comparison etc.
- Consistency of effort, performance, and attitude over time.
- It sometimes takes an entire season or longer. For about 1/2 it's a process the other 1/2 something they have already learned.
- Talking helps but it is best to see how an athlete handles a stressful situation.
- We get a sense for their adaptability over the course of the season.
- I ask myself four questions: How does well does an athlete stick to race strategy despite competition circumstances? How does the athlete respond to unfavourable competition results/ conditions? Does the swimmer rise or fall during to the occasion during challenge sets? How many times do they rise or fall?
- It becomes apparent if a swimmer is mentally tough during practices. How each swimmer will react to the tough sets that are given

- to them. Mentally tough swimmers may even complain about hard sets, but their actions during the set show that they are willing to push themselves, whereas swimmers that are not as mentally tough will work hard, but are not able to push their bodies to the extent of those who are mentally tough.
- Performance under duress.
- The ability to concentrate on the task at hand and stay focused on that task is an important skill. When a person cannot stay focused it is easy for them to mentally collapse during high pressure workout or situation and this person is not mentally tough.
- Purely by observation.
- Never truly know until they are tested somehow. Sometimes I will be surprised.
- Daily.
- Again, while we have no formal system, we look for those swimmers who push hard during sets and push themselves to their full potential. Those people are the ones we consider to be mentally tough.
- How they handle stress during practices and meets. Can they overcome tiredness and fatigue with "willpower" and putting in the extra effort that will make the difference? A formal/scientific method of assessing and evaluating would be helpful...
- If a swimmer can handle a certain type of set, or consistently races to the finish no matter what



- Good question! Probably most by talking to their coach and asking them how they deal in situations, how they are as a teammate.
- I have a battery of questions that are asked during the interview.
- We look at absences in class. We look at "comebacks" after "setbacks". We ask about peer to peer support- a key ingredient needed in mental toughness development.
- Talk with them.
- A swimmer can listen to constructive criticism and apply the corrections right away. A swimmer leaves everything in the pool and doesn't carry bad swims onto the next one.
- Coming into college, what has been their current commitment how they have juggled school, athletics, etc. so far.
- Simple: tell a swimmer that if you want to be national champion- you will do skill X for whole set- the tough swimmer does this even though the "national champion" may not be possible-- the non-tough swimmer will not do what you ask and make excuses even though as a coach you put a direct goal and result in front of that athlete.
- By seeing how they react to challenges.
- Observation and conversation.
- By observing throughout a season.
- How they handle self-evaluated failure, whether they look at failure as stepping stones to success, what their capacity is toward learning, how they accept a challenge, whether or not they seek feedback to get better and how they view others success.
- Non-verbal cues. Observations of reactions, especially to challenges and adversity. Perspective and approach, daily.
- Tough to know for sure until you are able to coach them and see them compete and how they handle failure or disappointment.
- I use a subjective judgement in how they present their character and personality.
- I like to ask what their favourite, least favourite, and worst sets ever are. I then ask follow up questions on how they reacted to the set and to themselves. The more honest they are with me, the more likely they are to be honest with themselves. Most likely an honest assessment means they are going to be mentally tough. This also provides insight into what they perceive is "tough" and how it correlates to what my definition is.
- Intuition.
- Currently I use unofficial questions and interactions at practice. When I was a head coach I used an official psychological test..
- Written mental toughness test. Talking to them about their focus during competition.
- Measure the qualitative amount swimmers fail or succeed with challenging training and how they process their failure and success when exposed to similar challenges moving forward.
- Place them in a situation to find out.
- How they handle challenging practices, conflict, or poor meet performance.
- Understand the program they are coming from or are currently in. If they are a current swimmer, you test them every way possible and see how they respond.
- I don't officially evaluate this, however I believe through talking with them about their experiences etc. you can get a feel for where they are mentally.
- Observation.
- Their ability to respond to challenge. Do they find a way to be successful? Do they continue to try when they fail? Do they look for new solutions when they are unsuccessful?
- Talking to them and getting to know them as much as possible in terms of recruiting...putting our own swimmers in challenging situations.
- Series of questions that try to elicit information as to how they have handled challenges and stresses before.
- Day to day interaction.
- If they start off with excuses for why they can't do something, that's an immediate clue - or complain



a lot, whether about former team, or coaches.

- Their ability to handle adversity and perform in big meets.
- We strive to be mentally tough every day. I ask how tough they were weekly sometimes daily.
- I have used the Competitive Adjective Profile with athletes to help them better understand their own mental strengths and weaknesses.
- Personality profile
- I have developed a questionnaire.
- Challenge sets. Giving them a set that at some point they

will fail at. Letting them know that this is part of the process and that when we do the set again that they should set the goal of hanging in there longer

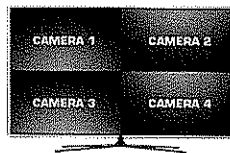
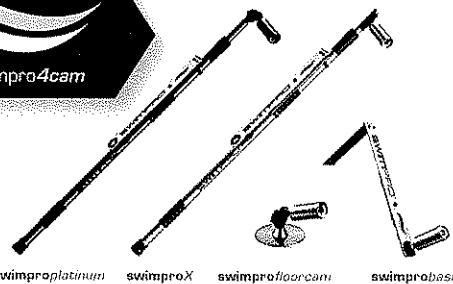
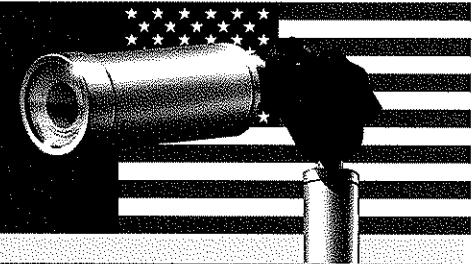
- Body language, type of language they use, how they react to stressful situations
- Observation and listening to them talk about themselves.
- Do they seem to have a training mentality that allows them to have a surplus of resilience? Can they recall and relate tough races they have had when they succeeded and when they did not "succeed" and how they characterize each experience.
- Results after the fact.

- In a variety of ways. First is by observing meet behaviour and performances relative to practice behaviour and performances. The second way is by observing behaviour when a swimmer is faced with difficult obstacles - this can be tough sets in practice or how they deal with stress and tumultuous events in life.
- Oh, around the 13th 100 of a set of 20.
- If they show this attribute in practice or competition
- Hard to do (evaluate) until you coach that athlete on a daily basis. daily observation in training, reaction of athlete to difficulties in training or competition and



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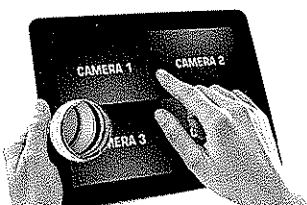
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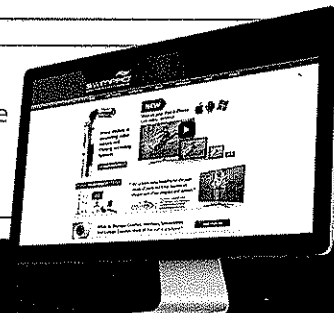
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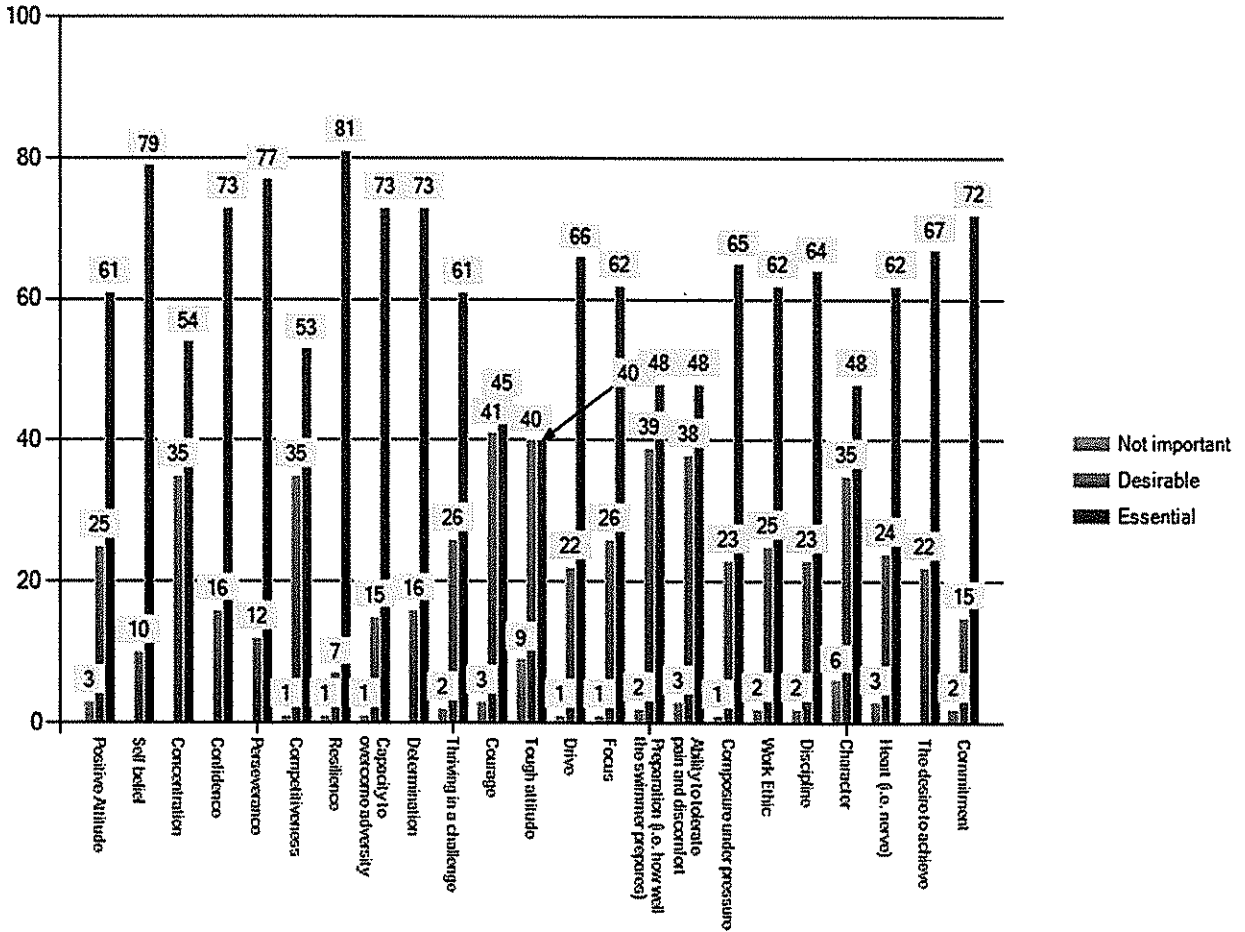
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- experience as a coach are tools I most frequently use in
- How they compete in practice. Racing!
 - There are specific sets in practice that will make that apparent and whether or not they give up.
 - By asking them to define it! I also can tell by their effort during straining sets.
 - I assess for my mental toughness by monitoring what our team members say and do both in practice and in meets. Body language is also another way I look for mental toughness.
 - Actions, Body Language, Visual Emotions, adaptability.
 - We do mental training sessions. We write and talk about bad swims vs. ideal swims and many voice their fears, concerns and tactics for overcoming adversity
 - How hard does someone work when no one is watching? What is a person's desire to get better for only personal satisfaction? How much is a person motivated internally or externally (if you offer rewards, take away privileges, or do nothing at all what is the result). How does a person react to a setback or a loss? How often does a swimmer talk to a coach about how to get better? Also, is mental toughness situational? How does a person's competitive drive change from an academic setting, to a swimming setting, to other competitive settings, and do they transfer that to other areas?
 - I think it comes from experience and the situations listed in Question 4. A coach can see how an athlete responds to these situations on a daily basis. I think the best way is to see how they respond to a tough set or tough practice on a regular basis - do they view it as an opportunity to get better or do they view it as something else.
 - By their attitude, approach and desire.
 - How easily they "shut down" when challenged with tough sets or in the face of adversity.
 - Need to ask a lot of questions. Need to talk to people who know that person. Need to see that person operate under various circumstances. It takes time.
 - At this time, I do not evaluate, would love to learn techniques/ tools to do so though.
 - Their ability to push themselves through a set.
 - Ask them about their club environment, recount a great experience and where it took them, same coming off a bad experience, ask them how they approach the sport, ask about challenges outside the pool, have they been injured, are they getting faster consistently over time
 - By their actions and reactions.
 - Observation or descriptions of their behaviour under stressful circumstances.
 - If they swim well at all different kinds of meets.
 - Observation of the athlete in difficult practice sessions and in stressful/ meaningful competition.
 - How they relate workout to the meet..
 - Daily interaction and race attitude
 - Performance over time..... response to certain questions/challenges.
 - Observation of what happens after a difficulty. Are they at practice the next morning, ready to work to overcome? Or do they sleep in for a pity party.
 - There are certainly skills and talents that can be shaped, some simply by pointing out that a swimmer may already be tougher than they think they are. Setting up a positive feedback loop can reveal substantial immediate improvements.
 - People can learn mental skills as well as physical skills.
 - For the most part I believe they either have it or don't. But I do believe you can make a swimmer more confident and positive with their self-image.
 - You can teach anyone skills -growth mindset. The key is how well they learn it and implement it. Mental toughness has many facets and is certainly on a continuum. It is not either or. Teaching someone to focus on her technique instead of the burning sensation in her arms is going to make her "tougher".
 - I think as a coach you can "move" the swimmer a few notches in the spectrum



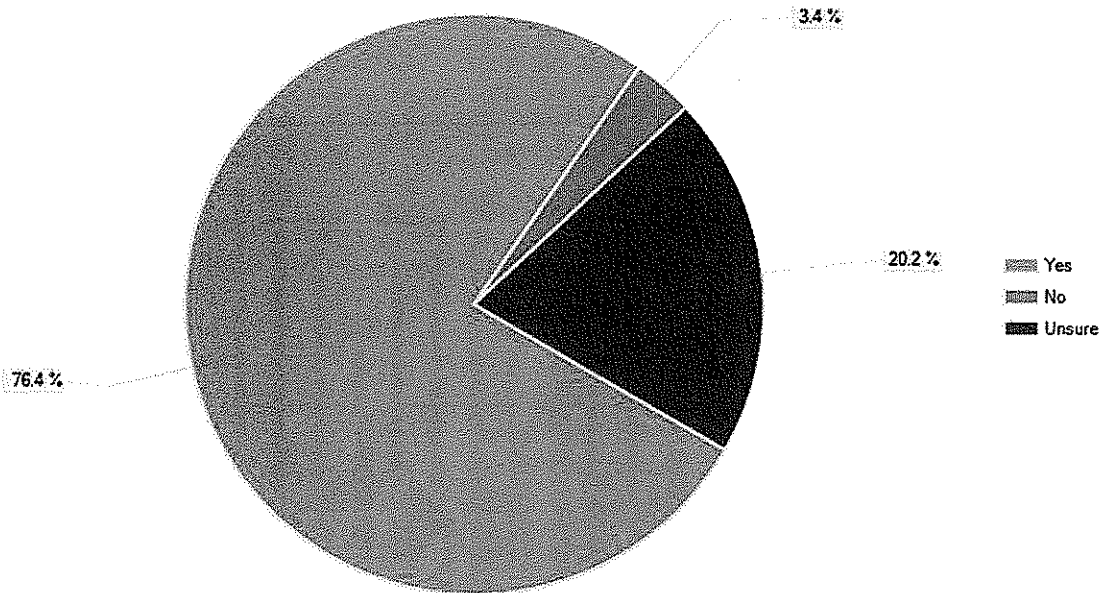
RECOGNISING MENTAL TOUGHNESS IN SWIMMERS

THE FOLLOWING VALUES, PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES AND CHARACTERISTICS HAVE BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH MENTAL TOUGHNESS. RATE HOW YOU FEEL ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF EACH AS AN INDICATOR OF MENTAL TOUGHNESS IN SWIMMING.



COACHING MENTAL TOUGHNESS IN SWIMMING

DO YOU BELIEVE YOU CAN COACH A SWIMMER TO BECOME MENTALLY TOUGH?



of mental toughness to a certain extent...

- I used to think you could challenge a kid mentally or physically to toughen them up...i.e. break them down then build them up...experience has taught that it is a waste of time...they are 18 years of tough or not tough by the time that I get them.
- I don't think you can with everyone. Most of the elements have to be present. It is really more of a path of discovery rather than teaching.
- To a degree. We can do exercises to put them in positions requiring

mental toughness and work on it over time. It's largely intrinsic though.

- If a coach is developing a swimmer for life, then you can provide the tools for a swimmer to become mentally tough. However the most important factor is the swimmer themselves. If they do not strive for or pursue to develop themselves, then you will be spinning your wheels.
- I think you can talk about mental toughness and its importance in the sport of swimming, but I believe that is a skill that the swimmer needs to figure out on their own.

- If you understand what are requirements of being Mentally Tough then you can develop them.

- The only way a coach can help is by putting them in situations where they learn to accept challenges, and get an opportunity to "toughen up". Some kids get it, others never do, and it really is up to some inner ability.
- I believe any person can become mentally tough, though coaching it is a different story. As a coach it is my job encourage the swimmers, teach strategies and techniques to become more mentally tough. Though, there are some



athletes who do not have the will or the drive to do so.

- I think it can be learned. Some swimmers have never experienced what "100% effort" is, or they have never seen "Mental Toughness" around them. If you create an environment where everyone works hard, puts in the extra effort, and gets through adversity, they will learn how to be mentally tougher.
- While it's an inherited trait in some, it's an acquired skill set that can be taught in others -- as evidenced by the work and successes we've had in our program over the past 25 years.
- You (the coach) try, but they (athlete) must do.



- By working on time management, committing to a common goal, hopefully keeping them healthy
- Depends on the individual.
- Put swimmers in challenging situations and then assess how they respond. Talk about "inner self talk" and create drills to visualize and practice the skill.
- Absolutely! Swimmers have the capacity if they have the willingness to be mentally tough.
- as long as the swimmer wishes to progress, challenges can be constructed, and progressed, that reinforce "mental toughness"



- Through discussion and exercises.

- You can push them to it but they finally have to decide to want it.
- I think it really depends on the swimmer. Sometimes, I feel it will work to coach an athlete to be stronger if they desire to get stronger. I feel if their parents are forcing them to swim it will be more of a challenge to coach them to be a tougher swimmer mentally.
- Just like you need to tell them how to swim correctly, you also need to tell them what to think about pre and during the race and what to focus on.
- It has to be part of who they are, as a coach I am just allowing the mental toughness to come to the surface or tell them it is in them.
- Not all individuals (athletes or otherwise) are "built" that way. You can teach skills that increase mental toughness characteristics but a true mental toughness is innate.
- Mental toughness is a skill.
- Through encouragement and support.
- You can teach someone how to approach challenge by leading them through the process and applying appropriate challenges. When athletes are met with success through appropriate challenge and guidance, confidence will improve and they will be willing to face greater challenge. Over time, this feed forward cycle can develop 'mental toughness'. It takes a lot of time, as well as patience on the part of the athlete and coach.
- Throw greater and greater challenges along the way and hopefully they will grow.
- Depends on the athlete's willingness to be coached, and willingness to change.
- Creating adverse situations and increasing their awareness of how to handle them.
- I think coaches can help athletes become aware of what it is to be mentally tough and how they can improve mental toughness, but especially at the Division 3 level, not all of our athletes are there to be phenomenal athletes-- they love the sport, want to be part of a team, and want to contribute, but they don't have that necessary drive and desire that is necessary for an athlete to be mentally tough.
- You can create learning situations in practice to teach and develop aspects of mental toughness. The way you communicate with athletes, parents and the team as a whole dictates the environment of mental toughness.
- Create opportunities to grow mentally tough. Encourage support a motivate.
- In swimming training session the swimmer needs to be presented with the challenges that tax that swimmer a bit beyond what is deemed possible, repeatedly until the swimmer becomes accustomed to the mental and physical side of "beyond possible".
- Mental toughness is a difficult skill to coach, and I believe some have a higher aptitude for what we consider being

tough. That said, I believe all swimmers can improve somewhat through the way they are trained and prepared every day in practice, and through the sharing of knowledge about meet situations, pool conditions, etc. If you take away many surprises from big meets, you lessen the chances of swimmers getting flustered and losing their concentration.

- Every athlete is different.
- I think they can improve.
- I feel it is possible to bring that out in an athlete that has it but has not expressed it.
- I think I can create an environment that allows my swimmers to challenge themselves and be successful. With each challenge they overcome, the more confident they become. The more confident they become, the more they develop their mental toughness.
- Making them aware of mental aspects during sets and mental prep before meets or a challenge.
- One of the things you can do as a coach is put the swimmer in challenging situations in which you know they can succeed. A lot of it has to do with how a coach approaches these things and the language they use. At the base is self-belief -- if a coach can get an athlete to believe in themselves and achieve things in challenging situations, it will all go a long way in developing mental toughness.
- When you push someone and the results of pushing that

person past their previously thought limits results in success, it can change their attitude. Winning is a great motivator and encourager of mental toughness. For example, the first time a child is hit by a pitch in baseball it can be scary. But if a person overcomes that fear and gets hit by a pitcher numerous times, it can become a point of pride and thus build mental toughness.

- I believe that the more the swimmer knows about him/herself as a competitor the better control they will have in a racing situation. We talk about not worrying about the "uncontrollable".
- Through the process of teaching athletes to focus on what being positive really means; how emotions radiate throughout a season and inspiring them to believe in the power of belief.
- Some have it naturally but it can be learned without a doubt.
- Is difficult but I believe coaches can instil a greater degree of mental toughness in their athletes. This often comes primarily through the training experiences over the course of a season.
- There has to be a basic foundation of mental skills in place to work with.
- It depends entirely upon individual circumstances.
- College level adult: You can foster the seeds of the toughness and also give an athlete the opportunity to exhibit the traits of

mental toughness. Not sure if the toughness is an inherent or learned trait.

- Takes time....takes two to tango.
- You can continue to give them tools, whether they use them is up to them.

FINAL THOUGHTS

DO YOU HAVE ANY OTHER COMMENTS OR INSIGHTS INTO THE TOPIC OF MENTAL TOUGHNESS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE?

- It's often easier to achieve as a team as opposed to by individual.
- It is something that is vital in competitive swimming, especially at the collegiate level and beyond. To succeed you need to train your body and your mind.
- Interesting survey. Hopefully people realize there are many mental skills in "mental toughness" and it can be trained.
- It is more important than talent or body type...it is everything in a sport that rewards those can endure
- I enjoyed having to think about mental toughness - it took me a while to come up with a definition that I liked. Thanks for making me sit and think about how I might coach differently in the future in regards to mental toughness!



- Everyone must be aware of how to react in situation where mental strength may be tested. In sport it is knowing how to react when your opponent is stronger, smarter, and faster, than you are. Tough mindedness can make the difference in your life.

- An athlete needs to be mentally tough to reach their full potential, but also need both the support of their coach, family, and team. No athlete is 100% successful on their own.

- As coaches (on the whole), we underestimate/undervalue it. We don't do enough to nurture it in a positive way. Too often, coaches appeal to their baser instincts and abusive behavior to "test" the limits of their athletes. Abuse ... physical, emotional, spiritual, or mental ... has no place in coaching or in developing this skill.

- Coaches must talk about this with their swimmers.

- "Mental toughness" is made up-- you either do what it takes or make excuses

- It is difficult/impossible to change personalities, but you can provide tools for the student-athlete to use to be as tough as they can be.

- Any swimmer that goes through practice every day for a season is mentally tough. But the degree of their mental toughness could be graded. You have to be mentally tough enough to say that you need rest as much as you need.

- I believe mental toughness is an important and trainable skill and look

forward to reading the results of the survey.

- Self-awareness and belief are teachable. Most people don't realize how badly they beat themselves up. I follow Martin Seligman and his self-talk monitoring. You can make a change.

- We need to continue to explore the significance of mental training and training/race psychology more as a nation. I believe we've lost our ability to teach today's athletes about the true American values of the past; i.e. discipline, character, honour, loyalty and integrity. These virtues are what built this country.

Today's child is exposed to a total "click" generation; where they have an answer for every question, a response for every lesson, and total disregard for working day in and day to achieve a goal; everything they need they can have at the simple click of key on any number touch screen devices.

- We should spend more time on mental preparation, sometimes we worry about yardage, when all the athlete needs is confidence gained by mental preparation.

- Resilience is a key attribute. "You find out what's inside you AFTER you get hit in the mouth". •



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Wayne Goldsmith is one of the foremost authorities on high performance sport. He has worked with some of the world's leading coaches, athletes and teams in swimming, triathlon, tennis, football, rugby, diving and softball.

Over the past 20 years, Wayne has observed, studied and analysed people and performance trying to understand what makes champions successful and why the best of the best seem to consistently achieve remarkable things when others fail.

In swimming, Wayne has worked with many of the world's leading swimmers, coaches and programs. He spent five years as the National Manager for Sports Science and Sports Medicine for Swimming Australia, has been awarded the Outstanding Contribution to Swimming in Australia Award and been a guest speaker at the ASCA Conference (twice) and the Australian Swimming Coaches and Teachers Association Annual Convention (seven times).

