

Elements of Speed: How do I get better?

BY ROWDY GAINES

Special Contributor

Olympic gold medalist and former world record holder Rowdy Gaines shares some tips that should help any swimmer reach his or her potential. Here, Gaines offers some advice for working on the mental side of swimming.



There are two sides in the quest to becoming a better swimmer. The first, and in my opinion the most important, is the mental part. The second is the physical aspect.

When I stepped onto the blocks for the 100m free at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, I was probably just the fifth- or sixth-best swimmer physically. Where I won my gold medal was on the mental side.

I knew I had worked harder and spent more time preparing for success at the highest level than anyone in the field that day. I had the confidence mentally, because I had done the work physically.

Surround yourself with positive thinkers. The more negativity surrounding your space, the more likely it will affect you. My coach, Richard Quick, a five-time Olympic coach, would not allow us to use the “nt” words – can’t, don’t, won’t, etc. All those words have a negative connotation.

Keep a positive attitude. Believe me, this is not easy. There were many times I did not want to wake up for that 5:30 morning practice, but these are natural feelings that you must accept and move on. There were hundreds, if not thousands of people just like me who had the same goals I had. They were also waking up at the crack of dawn to work out. It helped to know I was not the only one, and if I did miss it, that only meant I fell behind.

Communicate with your parents, coaches and teammates about what your thoughts are and how your training process is going. You do not have to be an island. So many people think of swimming as an individual sport, and in some ways, it is. But I think it is much more of a team sport than some ever realize. I won three gold medals. I gave one to my mom, one to my dad and one to my coach because I know in my heart I could not have won those medals without their love and support. We did it as a team. I wish I could have won 48 gold medals – one for each of my Olympic teammates – because they were a huge part of my success as well. But you must communicate with this potential support network of if they are going to be an asset.

Be consistent in your emotions. Don’t get too high after a great race, and don’t beat yourself up after losing one either. The champions I know from swimming are the ones who can live through the peaks and valleys. Life is like a roller coaster, and so is swimming. There are good days and bad days, and if you accept that part of the sport, you will not only become a better person but a better swimmer as well

On the physical side of swimming, consistency is the key word. We are in a demanding sport, but one that has so many rewards. As boring as these words sound – dedication, commitment, responsibility, teamwork, setting goals, hard work – they all involve being consistent.

Our sport demands consistency. Whether you are 8 years old and going to three practices a week, or 17 years old pushing eight to 10 practices a week, you need to be constant in going to those workouts.

People often ask me how much yardage they should swim. That is almost impossible to answer, because everyone's physical makeup is so different. Some swimmers can handle 15,000 yards a day, while others may not be able to go more than 2,000 to 3,000.

The best people to determine the proper distance are your coaches. They should know what you are capable of doing because they are with you on a – here's that word again – consistent basis. Age, sex, stroke specialty and what distance you swim, along with your physical makeup, are all incredibly important factors in determining how much yardage you should do in practice.

One thing I will tell you about the physical side of swimming that I think is very important – **your physical makeup has no bearing on how fast you swim.** So many successful swimmers have NOT met the criteria of a "perfect body." It may help to be long and lean, but it is not the perfect answer to swimming fast. Brian Goodell is one of the greatest distance swimmers in history. He won gold medals in the 400m and 1500m free at the 1976 Olympics in Montreal. He did not have a swimmers body. Standing at about 5'9" and not the slimmest guy in town, he had incredible technique and the heart of a lion.

The last thing to stress on the physical side is technique. The best swimmers in the world are constantly improving their stroke technique. Words like core stability, distance per stroke and streamlining are vital to becoming a better swimmer. Ask your coach about them. There really is no substitute for working on your technique.

In closing, I believe we swim for two major reasons – 1) TO SWIM FAST!!! and 2) TO HAVE FUN!!! And the amazing thing is, these reasons are so intertwined. There is no way you will ever be able to swim fast unless you enjoy the sport, and I don't think you will have much fun in the long run unless you see some success. But you've got to remember that success is measured in so many different ways.

To tell you the truth, I remember so many things about my swimming career, but I couldn't tell you my best times in my events. I do remember the friends I made, the travel that was so much fun, the high school bus trips to meets, the shave-down parties and the many values the sport taught me.

Don't get me wrong, I wanted to be successful, and I constantly looked for ways to become a better swimmer. But I guess the things I just mentioned helped make swimming fun, and that was a huge key to my success.

My experience in being around the sport for so long tells me the best swimmers in the world are the ones who enjoy it the most. Michael Phelps is a swimmer that comes along once every generation and will make a ton of money in his career, but if you ask him why he is so good, he will tell you that he has a passion for what he does.

There are two paths you can follow in your life – one is to be a leader, the other is to be a follower.

There are no rewards in being a follower. But to be a leader means a lot more than walking around saying, 'I'm the boss.' It means taking a stand for what is right and believing in what you are doing. To become a better swimmer means becoming a leader sometimes whether you want to or not.

I have offered a lot of long answers to a short question, but if I had to narrow it all down to two words, it would be **consistency and passion.** Those are the keys to becoming a better swimmer in the greatest sport on the planet