

It Hurts So Good

Simply mention the 200 fly, 400 IM or 1500 free, and most swimmers cringe. These brutal events require high pain tolerance, strong mental stamina and sheer willpower – on a daily basis.

But the USA's top stars have a knack for making these races look easy. That's because our Olympians aren't afraid of training outside their comfort zone. Labeled as "animals" by teammates and coaches, they seem to go for pain.

American record-holder Larsen Jensen proved he's no wimp with his impressive 1500m and 400m free races at the Olympics. He says his success is a result of the fierce intensity he maintains at each workout, averaging between 90,000 to 100,000 meters each week during peak training season. He attacks high quality sets with 100 percent effort.

"I always try to go faster than what is asked of me. I don't want to disappoint. I like to surprise," Jensen says.

The mile man spent a lot of time researching the history of distance swimming and realized that training for the 1500 would open up other opportunities. "I train for the mile, so making (the Olympic Team) in the 400 was a bonus," Jensen said.

He admits distance training is a grueling feat reserved for those who can handle a lot, both physically and mentally.

"It's definitely not the easy way out. It has to come from within, and you have to really want it. Weaknesses and doubts start to come out when it hurts, and in distance events, you can't get away with it," Jensen says. "But training this hard also gives you the self assurance that you deserve every win, because you've put in the work."

He explains that making the most of every opportunity, especially when you're really hurting, can give you an edge. It makes you stronger because breaking your comfort zone enables you to do more the next time you face a challenge.

"Your body hurts on those long sets, but you'll get used to it. Everyone hurts just as bad, so focus on yourself. In the 400 at Olympic Trials, it was starting to really hurt," Jensen said. "I was going for broke."

Jensen relies on his mental attitude to get him through on days of exhaustion.

"I like to push until I can push no more. It all comes down to the mental attitude for the day. You should be excited to swim, no matter how your body feels. You can always do something impressive," he says.

2000 Olympian Chris Thompson agrees.

The former American record holder in the 1500 free says he never got fast by taking it easy.

"It takes a certain ability to be a distance swimmer. You're always the first one in and the last one out of the water. Not everyone can handle this stuff. Plus it's not as glamorous as being a sprinter," Thompson said. "But that's what separates us. Distance swimming comes with a special sense of pride."

Taking a risk and just going for it can be scary for some swimmers. They may feel that they're not good enough to train in the "tough" lane, or afraid they may fail in front of their peers. That's the point. Olympic "animals" agree that staying in a comfort zone is the archenemy of personal growth.

“In order to accomplish your goals, you have to feel pain. It’s not about how fast you go, but how hard you work,” Thompson says.

His current focus is the upcoming open water circuit this fall. Thompson was injured just weeks prior to the Olympic Trials, resulting in what he called “a summer disaster.” But that didn’t get him down. Still recovering from injuries, Chris recently swam an impressive 8:04.92 in the 800m free at Summer Nationals, good enough for second place.

“I get beaten in practice all the time. Day to day, I’m not one of the fastest swimmers. But I focus on working hard, never taking short cuts and always doing my best,” Thompson says.

“It’s great when you go out there, the set is kicking your butt and you’re swimming as hard as you can,” Thompson said. “It’s a good hurt at the end of a pushed set.”

Another veteran of hard work is the ever-versatile Kaitlin Sandeno, who is no stranger to intense training. In Athens, she swam some killer events, including the 200m fly, 400m IM, 400m free and relays.

Sandeno makes these events look anything but difficult. Her teammates enjoy her bubbly attitude and know she loves to joke around and have fun. But behind all those giggles, she’s quick to admit she has a serious side too, especially when racing.

“I hate losing. I will fight to the end,” Kaitlin says.

When training, she loves to go after it. “I feel so good after a grueling set. The pain is just temporary. I like to look forward to going to bed because I’m so tired from a hard workout,” she said.

Sandeno averages around 9,000 meters each practice, with lots of IM work. Her challenging training regimen and recent accomplishments at the Olympics are pretty impressive for someone who feels she was starting over from scratch when she injured her back a few years ago.

“Many people wrote me off when I was injured, and it got brutal for a while. But I hung in there, and it’s been a pretty sweet comeback,” Sandeno says.

She feels that working hard and attacking each practice only works if you enjoy what you’re doing.

“The No. 1 thing is to make sure you’re having fun,” Sandeno said. “Secondly, surround yourself with a support group. I’m blessed to have such great parents. They don’t push. And finally, always believe in yourself. Doubts are trouble spots.”

Jensen, Thompson and Sandeno are three of the many tough champions who agree that a little pain from a tough workout feels good. And as their success has shown on the national and Olympic stage, there is no substitute for hard work.

Training Tough

After years of intense training at an elite level, distance aces like Jensen, Sandeno and Thompson can do these types of workouts on a regular basis. These sets are included only to show you how tough these swimmers are. Do not try them at home:

10 x 400 (m):
#1-3 @ 4:50

#4-5 @ 4:45

#7-10 @ 4:40

(Jensen and Olympic teammate Erik Vendt pushed this set at the Olympic Team training camp, racing the last 400. Jensen finished in 3:55. “The interval wasn’t difficult, but we made the most of it. I’m not going to let anything go to waste,” Jensen said.)

Thompson did this set on his own:

3 x 800 (y) pull @ 8:20, descend 1-3

3 x 500 @ 5:10

3 x 400 @ 4:00

3 x 300 @ 2:55

3 x 200 @ 1:55

6 x 100 @ 1:00

Sandeno held 1:04 to 1:05 in this set:

30 x 100 (m) @ 1:20

“It’s not because things are difficult that we do not dare, it is because we do not dare that they are difficult.”
(Lucius Annaeus Seneca)