



## WHAT IT REALLY TAKES

BY *GLENN MILLS*

Setting goals for yourself is the first step in moving forward in your life. But whatever your goals, they are just words and thoughts...unless serious, direct action is taken to accomplish those goals.

There are many swimmers who watch the Olympics or NCAAs or other big swim meets, and dream of someday becoming one of the elite members of the sport. The trouble is, most swimmers have not been exposed to the type of training and commitment that it takes to get to that level. They think that if they are the local champion at age 12, then they are automatically on track to be at the national level by age 14 or 16 - with the same level of training and commitment. Don't get me wrong...it's great to be a local champ. In fact, dominating locally is usually the first step to the elite track. But it's only a first step. This is a quick overview of what it really takes to get to the elite level of swimming. In writing this, I hope that swimmers will begin to understand that if their goal is the TOP, merely showing up for practice will not get the job done.

### **The Goal**

Everything starts with a dream, an idea, something to shoot for. Whether it be long term or short term, there HAS to be a reason why you're doing what you're doing. If your ultimate goal is to get better, that's not quite specific enough. A goal should be something valid and attainable, something concrete. It might be a time (Senior National Cuts), a place (1st, 2nd, or 3rd at the country club championships), or finishing an event (the 200 fly, 400 IM, or, heck, the Ironman). Without a tangible goal, it's hard to sustain the motivation to work out. It's hard to be fully involved. Without a concrete goal, swimming is just another form of exercise.

### **Commitment**

To accomplish a goal, you've got to be committed to doing whatever it takes to achieve that goal. The higher the goal, the higher the level of commitment it's going to take to get there. In developing your goals, make sure you take into account your level of commitment to ACHIEVING that goal. If you say you want to make the Olympic Team, and decide that you can make only 2 practices per week, your level of commitment isn't enough to allow you to accomplish your goal. Something has to give. Make sure you set your goals based on your level of commitment. A high level of commitment will ultimately affect other aspects of your life. Your social life will suffer. You'll have to create a new circle friends, probably based around the pool. You will need to find people who share your level of commitment. Your diet will change, your sleep habits will become more structured, your daily schedule will revolve around practice times, and not social activities. Commitment begins to get you to understand how tough it really is to reach your potential.

### **Dedication**

I know that this seems like pretty standard advice, but dedication and commitment go hand in hand. Dedication means that you NEVER miss practice. Dedication means you are focused on how prepared you are to perform. Dedication, to me, is the willingness to prepare for every practice whether it be through stretching, weights, or mentally preparing yourself for that practice. The most dedicated people LOOK for ways to improve where others don't. They think about how they walk to the blocks, how they put on their goggles, how they tie their suits. The easiest way to say it: **Dedicated people do things normal people don't want to do.**

### **Acceptance of Pain**

Yeah... nice one. Unfortunately, the slogan "no pain, no gain" has been linked to a more barbaric way of training. The problem with this is simple. Uhh...no pain, uh...no gain. It's true! Swimming is a sport that requires the athlete to go through tremendous amounts of pain -- much more than most people understand. While we can get into "good pain" and "bad pain," I think it's important to understand that athletes need to LOOK for pain, to SEARCH for pain, and to accept that pain is part of athletics. Pain in training is the sign that you're making progress, that you're learning how to handle technique when you can't feel your hands. Dealing with pain on a daily basis begins to harden the core of the athlete, and that athlete will be much better able to deal with pain when the race occurs. Pain in racing is simply what it's all about. The higher up you get in the sport, the more equal everything becomes. To even have a chance at the highest levels of the sport, you have to be willing to understand and accept pain on a daily basis. You almost have to love it. **You MUST understand that pain is progress,** and when applied to good technique, you've begun the journey toward your potential.

### Non-acceptance of Defeat

Sure, we all lose from time to time, but you don't have to be happy about it. The less willing you are to accept defeat, the more willing you probably are to do everything in your power to avoid it. Defeats teach great lessons. They teach you everything from what a lack of preparation brings, to poor race strategy, to the fear of pain. Of course there are many other things they bring, but defeats are usually the best teacher, mostly because they bring with them the most study afterward; what happened, how did it happen, what can I do to avoid that ever happening again? Of course, when defeats occur, good sportsmanship must prevail. Accept that you were beaten by someone better prepared. DON'T accept that it will happen again.

### Willingness to Race

EVERYTHING is a competition. Kicking, swimming, whatever. RACE! Learn to win by racing at everything you do. Look to the swimmers next to you every day in practice. Beat them off the turns. Look at the swimmer in front of you, catch her and pass her. Look at the swimmers coming up behind you. Leave them in the dust. Our sport is ultimately about racing, so practice racing every chance you have. Pretend in your mind that the swimmer next to you is your biggest competition at the end of the season, and fight them to the wall. If you're younger, don't be afraid to race the older swimmers. If you're a girl, don't be afraid to race the guys...and vice versa! Make them fight to beat you. Just make sure you're staying legal, and RACE.

### Social Balance

I know I talked about the social life in commitment, but I think for young swimmers, it needs to be said again. Hanging out with friends is a great part of being young. However, you have to determine if the people you consider friends are contributing to your success, or holding you back from it. I'm not saying to dump a group of friends, and I understand peer pressure is tough, but if there are people in your life who don't share your idea of commitment and dedication, and don't understand your goals, then you need to move on with your life. **That's called maturity...and making choices.** Eventually it's gonna happen to everyone, and your willingness to be mature enough to do what you have to do, will pay great benefits in the long run.

### Study and Time Management

Yeah, I mean homework. Making sure you're up to date in all your schoolwork falls back into dedication and commitment. It's making sure you show up at practice with a clear conscious, and so that the thing at the forefront of your brain is swimming. Too many swimmers come to practice thinking about a test they just did bad on, or the report they have due. These thoughts won't help that project get done any quicker, or that grade come up, but it WILL take your mind off your swimming, and the work you put in could be wasted. When you're at the pool, think about swimming. When you're at school or doing your homework, think about school. Put your focus where it will be most productive. If you learn to do this, your life will be more balanced and you'll learn to focus on everything more clearly.

### Enjoy the Sport

With the pain, commitment, dedication, and how you have to change your entire life to become a better swimmer, enjoying the sport may be a tough one to talk about. But the type of people who make it to the top in anything, enjoy the QUEST as much, or more, than the actual event. You can't swim just for glory or the medals. There aren't enough of them. If you're swimming for Olympic Gold just so you can get your face on a box of Wheaties, then you're not doing it for the right reasons, and the chances of your accomplishing that goal are not good. You have to really enjoy going to the pool, showing up for practice, looking forward to what you're going to do, and doing it. I'm not saying you should love the sets; in fact, you'll probably really dislike MOST of the things your coach is putting you through. However, you must enjoy the accomplishment of doing a good job EVERY DAY. When you finish practice, you should feel a sense of pride at what you've just done, and walk away with an understanding that there was very little else you could have done on that day. Day in and day out.

### Summary

While I certainly didn't cover everything, I hope this simple message gets across: Live a balanced, good life. Work hard, don't miss practice, listen to your Mom, Dad, and good friends, and do this consistently. There are NO secrets to success in this sport, only the understanding that if you want to reach your potential, whatever that may be, there are NO easy days...ever.

I wish you all much enjoyment on your journey toward personal greatness. No matter the outcome, the trip will never be regretted.