

Making a Success of your first National Championships – How to win one the first time around. (Part One)

By Wayne Goldsmith and Helen Morris

Being tough has nothing to do with it – you are either trained or untrained
(Actor Denzel Washington – “Man on Fire”)

PART ONE

There is conventional wisdom surrounding competing successfully at any major championship which says, “*In order to win one, you first have to lose one*”.

In essence, this is suggesting that the difficulties of doing well at a major meet mean that swimmers need to go to their first National championships or other major event, swim poorly, hopefully learn from the mistakes, then come back next year and do much better.

This belief has several flaws:

1. What if the swimmer qualifies for only one National championship and they only have one chance to get it right?
2. Considering the time, effort and money that goes into qualifying for and traveling to a National championship (unless it is in your home town) “losing one this year” to win one next year can be a costly exercise.
3. If the swimmer has a particularly bad experience at the “learning” Nationals, this may leave permanent mental challenges to overcome at subsequent Nationals.
4. What if the swimmer and coach lack the ability / capacity to learn from mistakes and come back the following year and make the same mistakes?

Clearly the smart thing to do is to prepare to do well the first time!

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Why is it so tough?

Let's look at the typical home / local meet environment and compare that with the typical National championships environment.

	Local / home MEET	State / National MEET
6:00 AM	Swimmer wakes up in own bed. Mum or Dad make breakfast while swimmer watches tv. Swimmer has a healthy breakfast of fruit, light cereal and juice.	Swimmer wakes up in hotel bed. Sharing room with three others who snore and have other disturbing (noisy) habits. Has had less than 5 hours sleep. Team manager takes the swimmers to a local fast food outlet for (high fat) Egg and Bacon muffins for breakfast which they eat driving to the pool.
7:00 AM	Family drives ten minutes to the pool. Park outside the pool in their usual parking spot.	Team drives one hour to the pool and gets lost on the way. Have to park 10 minutes walk from the pool with swimmers having to carry swim gear about one kilometer.
7:30 AM	Team jumps in for warm up in their usual lane. All team members in together in team gear forming a single pace line. Coach coordinates a good team warm up with some easy swimming, kick, pull, build ups, medley work and short sprints including quality starts, turns and finishes.	Team jumps in for warm up only to find sixteen other teams are also in the same lane warming up. Coaches of the sixteen teams are all standing at the end of the lane yelling instructions. Because the team got in late, warm up is only ten minutes long and there was no time for starts or turns practice.
8:00 AM	After warm up, the team listens to a brief talk from the coach then do some light stretching, shower and snack.	After warm up, the team try to find the coach but can't, the showers have run out of hot water, there is no where to stretch inside the pool area, it is raining outside and the shop at this pool does not sell the swimmer's favourite pre race snacks.
9:00 AM	Swimmer gets marshaled to start area. Good chance to say hello to friends and team mates.	Swimmer gets marshaled to start area where swimmers from other clubs / states are sledging and trying psyche out games with other swimmers.
9:15 AM	Race – DOES WELL	Race – DOES POORLY
9:18 AM	Swimmer jumps out of pool, talks briefly with the coach while sipping on a sports drink, then does a steady 800 metre swim down.	Swimmer gets out of pool. Can't find the coach. Can't get through the crowd to get to their sports drink. Swim down is in the dive pool which already has 300 swimmers warming down in it.

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The reality – PERCEIVED CHALLENGE versus ACTUAL CHALLENGE.

The real reason why swimmers often fail at their first national championship lies in the difference between the **perceived** challenge that the inexperienced coach and uninitiated swimmer **think** the meet presents and the reality of the **actual** challenge the swimmer and coach face.

Example 1

Perceived challenge 1: Swim a PB at National championships.

This implies a largely physical challenge to prepare the swimmer to swim a personal best time on a particular day.

Actual challenge 1: Swim a PB at National championships after eating a poor breakfast, having little or no warm up, dealing with the mental stress of the environment and without any friends or family support.

Swimming fast is not the issue. Not all gold medals are won in national record time. Swimming fast is largely the result of a consistent and thorough physical, mental, technical and tactical preparation and the coach's skills in periodisation and planning. It is swimming fast in a less than ideal environment, away from home and with little or no support that is the real issue.

Example 2

Perceived challenge 2: Make it to a National Age final.

Ostensibly, this means being able to physically swim fast enough to make it to the top 8 in a particular event in a specific age group.

Actual challenge 2:

Swimming a personal best time – maybe even state record time – early in the morning, completely recovering, coming back in the evening, swimming faster and at both swims dealing with compromised warm up and other inconveniences. This is even more difficult if the swimmer has more than one event in a session.

Also overcoming:

- ❑ Local swimmers who have the “stay at home” advantage.
- ❑ Swimmers who lift for nationals, ie swim far above themselves in the inspiring and emotional environment of a major championship
- ❑ Larger numbers of swimmers competing in each event than in most competitions

Success at National Age Championships is largely dependent on preparing effectively to meet the **actual challenges** of the competition environment rather than the **perceived challenges** inexperienced coaches and swimmers imagine they will have to face.

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Look out for Part Two of this Article where Wayne and Helen present you with many strategies to prepare effectively for a successful Nationals.

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