

## **Making a Success of your first National Championships - How to win one the first time around. (Part Two)**

By Wayne Goldsmith and Helen Morris

### **Strategies to prepare effectively for a Successful Nationals – Turning NATIONAL AGE into a NATIONAL'S RAGE**

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#### **1. PREPARE PHYSICALLY**

There is no doubt that this is one of the most important aspects of competing successfully. If swimmers are not ready physically you are not ready! No one can expect to swim at their very best without doing the hard yards in training in the months (years) leading into the championship event. This is particularly true when preparing swimmers for multi round competition where physical fitness and physiological preparation plays a major role in the swimmer's ability to swim fast heats, faster semi finals and even faster finals in one or more events and over several days.

The key principle is:

**The physical preparation of the swimmer in TRAINING should be more challenging and demanding than the physical demands of the COMPETITION.**

In other words, training sets, workouts and preparation need to be tougher, harder, more challenging, more demanding and more uncompromising than the physical challenges the swimmer will face at national championships.

If the swimmer has prepared physically in this manner, there is no challenge or situation they will face at nationals that they can not manage, deal with and overcome.

Another critical aspect of the physical preparation is the taper.

The general rules of an effective taper are:

##### **i) MAINTAIN FREQUENCY OF TRAINING.**

Whilst it is tempting to give swimmers morning sleep ins during the taper period, this sudden and dramatic change in their routine is often counter productive. (The challenge is often to convince parents of this!)

##### **ii) MAINTAIN HARD WORK THROUGHOUT THE TAPER**

Don't be afraid to include some high intensity training during the taper period. It is important to continue to stimulate the swimmer's nervous system and energy systems activity during taper.

##### **iii) SIGNIFICANTLY DECREASE TRAINING VOLUME**

Swimmers can get great benefit from a significant reduction in training loads over the taper period. Volume decreases of up to 60% during the taper period allow the swimmer the opportunity to recover from the hard training and to eliminate residual training fatigue.

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### In summary:

Training sessions during the taper should be conducted at the same times and on the same days as they were during the training cycle but they should be of lower volume and should include some high intensity work.

Ideally the swimmer and coach will practice the taper during the season at minor lead up competitions to refine the process and to determine what works best. It is often the case that a swimmer will feel flat, tired, heavy and lethargic during the early stages of a taper which can be damaging to confidence, self belief and motivation. A good general practice is to plan for rest / recovery training weeks to mirror the first week of the "nationals" taper so that the swimmer can experience what going through the actual full taper will feel like: knowledge and experience provides comfort, certainty and confidence for the nationals "debutante"!

### 2. PREPARE MENTALLY

Without doubt, the mental aspect of achieving a successful result at a swimmer's first nationals is crucial. Many swimmers, coaches, clubs and parents build up nationals to something it is not. This increases the pressure and emotion and in this environment it is difficult for even the best physically prepared swimmers to achieve their goals.

The truth is.....**NATIONALS IS JUST ANOTHER EVENT**: surrounded by a lot of hype, expectations, media, fanfare and pressures - but basically it is just another event.

- The pool length is the same as any other pool.
- The water is still wet and made of hydrogen and oxygen.
- The task is the same no matter where you live, where you train or what you wear.
- That task is, to compete to the best of your ability as a result of a thorough physical, mental, technical and tactical preparation.

The fact that there are a few more people, a few extra flags and clubs and a bit more noise makes no difference: the job is a simple one: prepare thoroughly for the reality of the nationals environment and you can relax with the confidence of knowing you will swim fast when you need to.

### 3. PREPARE TECHNICALLY

Championship races are won or lost by fractions of inches / millimeters. The athletes who win at nationals will be those who have prepared to do the little things well under pressure by practicing to do them well in training.

For example:

- Not breathing inside the flags during starts, turns and finishes.
- Not breathing on the final four strokes in freestyle or fly
- Streamlining until feet go past the flags on every push off
- Learning to kick at speed under water in fly, back and free

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**At Nationals.....there are no little things. Everything can make a difference.**

Under pressure, swimmers will do what they have learnt to do in training and will fall back upon their training “habits”. If swimmers have been allowed to cruise through training sessions without an uncompromising attention to detail in their technique and skills, these bad “habits” will fail them under competition pressures.

If swimmers are to be successful at Nationals, it is essential that their training “habits” be technically outstanding so that when the pressure and pain of racing hits them (usually around the ¾ mark in the event) their “good habits” help them achieve an outstanding result.

On the issue of technique, it is often the case that refereeing, starting and stroke judging may be stricter and different to local competitions. In the weeks leading into nationals, coaches should consider inviting a leading state / national level referee into a training session to report on rule changes and to “judge” the team in training. This simple action can save a lot of pain and frustration at the championship.

### 4. PREPARE TACTICALLY

Tactics play a crucial role in swimming successfully at Nationals. There are many swimmers competing at national championships that the swimmer and coach do not know and have never faced against. Therefore it is likely the swimmer will face a wide range of tactical situations they have not faced before.

Tactical issues to consider include:

- Does the swimmer have a race plan?
- Is the swimmer able to stick to a race plan regardless of what the opposition is doing?
- Have they learnt to change gears (speed) when needed?
- Are they able to change breathing patterns in free and fly to meet the competitive situation?

Being fully prepared tactically means having the skills and ability to deal with any competitive situation the swimmer is placed in. These skills can be developed in minor competitions and in training in the months leading into nationals by practicing and experimenting with a range of tactical options in different situations.

For example: Key event being targeted at **NATIONALS – 100 FLY**

#### Minor competition 1:

Trial tactics:

- Pacing – Even
- Breathing pattern – Alternating breathing every stroke with every two strokes.
- Underwater technique and break out – 10 metres underwater (at a speed of 1.8 metres per second) then no breathing on first three strokes
- Finishing strategy: No breathing last four strokes.
- Stroke count: 20 (first 50) / 23 (second 50)

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### Minor competition 2:

Trial tactics:

- Pacing- Go out fast – PB 50 metre time plus 0.5 seconds.
- Breathing pattern – Alternating breathing every two or three strokes.
- Underwater technique and breakout – 12 metres underwater (at a speed of 1.8 metres per second) then no breathing first three strokes.
- Finishing strategy: No breathing last five strokes.
- Stroke count: 18 (first 50) / 22 (second 50)

### 5. PREPARE FOR THE WORST

If things don't go to plan, swimmers should learn the skills to adapt to any situation and to deal with difficulties. Can they learn to race fast without being fully warmed up..... do they have contingency plans for late flights, long waits, buses not turning up, lane space not available, forgotten race goggles, lost bags.....

Good exercises for coaches to utilise are the **WHAT IF** – scenarios. Around a month prior to the national championships, have all swimmers intending to race at the meet sit together and raise issues that concern them. For example:

**Swimmer A:** What if we get to the pool and there is no pool space to warm up in?

**Swimmer B:** What if we get to the pool and my mum can't find me?

**Swimmer C:** What if we get to the pool and my goggles snap during warm up?

Then the team work through solutions to these "what if" questions and solve the problems as a group.

### 6. PRACTICE PREPARATION STRATEGIES IN MINOR / LEAD UP COMPETITIONS

Swimmers do not have to go into every competition aiming to win! Some minor lead up competitions are the ideal place to practice the physical, mental, technical and tactical strategies that will be utilised at national championships.

For example:

#### Minor competition 1 – Two months before Nationals

- Practice dryland warm up
- Practice eating and drinking between races to see what works best
- Practice recovery techniques like stretching and warm downs
- Practice pool warm up

#### Minor competition 2 – One month before Nationals

- Practice pacing strategies
- Practice any new start or underwater skills
- Practice mental rehearsal techniques
- Practice swimming fast early in the morning
- Practice implementing race plans

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### 7. HAVE SEVERAL WARM-UP STRATEGIES AND LEARN TO SWIM FAST USING EACH ONE

Whilst a good warm up can be important to achieve successful swimming performances, there are hundreds of stories about swimmers winning major events and breaking records after less than ideal warm ups. The key is to have more than one warm up strategy.

**Warm-up Problem 1:** Limited Pool Space due to large numbers of swimmers all warming up at the same time

**Solution:** Coaches should also help swimmers prepare to deal with infamous over crowded warm lanes common at all age national championships by having all the team warm up at training in the one lane three times per week in the month leading into national championships. To take this further, to teach swimmers how to race fast after warming up in a crowded pool, have them "race" in training immediately after the all in one lane warm up practice.

**Warm-up Problem 2:** Can not access the pool for warm up

**Solution:** At training and at lead up competitions practice dryland warm ups. This can include jogging, stretching, skipping and a range of general exercises.

### 8. GO TO THE POOL PRIOR TO RACE DAY AND DO SOME RECONNAISSANCE

Swimmers need to know where the marshalling area is, where they can access the warm-up area and find a good spot for stretching. They should be able to locate a private area for a little "quiet time" before the race. They need to know where the toilets and change rooms are. In short – they need to know the environment they will be competing in. Confidence comes from knowing and being comfortable in the championship environment....and from confidence all things are possible.

### 9. CONTROL THE CONTROLLABLE – SLEEPING / EATING / RECOVERY – MANAGE YOURSELF

The ultimate responsibility for the performance belongs to the swimmer. Swimmers should be educated on how to implement an effective sleeping / eating and recovery strategy in the months leading into the major event.

Practice and rehearse effective recovery strategies like:

- Effective Hydration strategies, e.g. drinking 1500 mls for every 1 kg fluid lost
- Effective refueling strategies – e.g. Immediately post race try High GI Carbohydrates (15-50 gms) and Protein (10-20 gms)
- Learn to use Hydrotherapies, for example Contrast Showers - 3x (3-4 mins at 40 C then 30-60 seconds at approx 11 C)
- Massage
- Mental recovery techniques – learn what works for you and practice them.
- Learn how to achieve Optimal Sleep patterns – REM sleep!

Over the week long competition period quite often it is not the best swimmer who wins....it is the best prepared and MOST RECOVERED swimmer that wins.

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### 10. LEARN TO ENJOY THE EXPERIENCE

Confidence at and enjoyment of the championship environment comes from knowing you have had a total and thorough preparation. Go to nationals **knowing** – that is:

- Knowing** you have prepared to the best of your ability
- Knowing** the competition environment and actual challenges it presents
- Knowing** yourself
- Knowing** your opposition
- Knowing** the event
- Knowing** you can overcome any obstacles or difficulties presented to you.....

And you can relax and enjoy the experience.

### SUMMARY:

1. The “lose one to win one” approach has been a popular way of preparing swimmers to succeed at major championships but it is inherently flawed.
2. Coaches should aim to prepare swimmers to compete successfully at the meet being targeted and to be able to effectively deal with the REAL and ACTUAL challenges the meet presents.
3. To do this, coaches should fully understand the environment and challenges unique to the meet and prepare effectively to deal with them.
4. Coaches should consider all the challenges – physical / mental / technical and tactical - of the championship environment rather than concentrating on the physical aspects alone.
5. Whilst swimming associations make every possible effort to provide a competition environment conducive to fast swimming, swimmers and coaches should expect the unexpected and learn to overcome any obstacles through prior planning and thorough detailed preparation.
6. Importantly, excuses do not win races. Looking back at a “lost” national age or championship meet and complaining that “if only I had a better warm up” or “if only I had better food to eat the night before” or “if only I would have had more rest” do not bring back lost opportunities. Get it right the first time by preparing to meet the actual challenges of the competition environment.

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