

HEAD GAMES

Getting Over the Hump of Training Plateaus

by Michael J. Stott >>> Illustration by Rick Gutierrez

Years ago Walt Kelly's comic character Pogo uttered the ultimate truth, "We have met the enemy and he is us." Masters swimmers can relate, particularly given how they respond to training and its ongoing theater

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of the mind. For some, the plateaus become rest stops on the stairway to heaven. For others, they are roadblocks on the highway to hell.

Meet Walnut Creek Masters Karen Duggan, a 34-year-old mother of three, who last winter found herself bogged down and

lacking serious speed. Training hard since January, she knocked out 251,000 yards in March. A month later she lamented, "I thought if I had good, solid training I'd be swimming fast. I was down to some pretty good [100-yard] repeat times when I was doing 10,000/day (1:08s-9s)."

At the end of April she had significantly cut back her daily yardage. She was doing 3,000 to 5,000 yards but couldn't get under 1:12 for a 100-yard repeat. "It was extremely frustrating," she recalls. She had no sprinting ability, was not excited about Pacific Champs and was "terrified" about going to Nationals. "It's bad enough that

I have to enter such slow times (for me) but then to actually swim them is almost worse...." The week before Pacific Champs she said, "I have absolutely no racing confidence. I'm also wondering how much is mental versus physical?"

The good news? Something clicked and she came alive at Short Course Nationals in Fort Lauderdale last May, managing six top-10 finishes in the back, breast and IMs. She also took first in the women's 200 medley relay and placed fourth in the 200 free relay.

Duggan could be a poster child for all dedicated swimmers. "Plateaus happen. They are just a part of the bigger picture," says Alan Goldberg, Ph.D., a sports psychology consultant in Amherst, Mass. "You need to expect them and a lot of swimmers don't. They think it's going to be smooth sailing and they'll consistently drop time, and that's not the real world. You'll have good years, bad years and parts of bad years. It's up and down."

Many times, plateaus are the result of subtle forms of

BREAK THE MONOTONY

- Go hypoxic. Try a pyramid breathing pattern. Breath every stroke first length, every two on second length, etc., up to 12 and come back down.
- In freestyle sets, swim fly the first three strokes off every wall.
- Pull out the toys (fins, pull buoys, swim gloves, snorkels, etc.).
- Introduce intervals. Instead of a mile straight, do 4x400, 8x200, 16x100).
- Do broken swims for time.
- Change yardage; do less for once.
- Train for a different event.
- Set a goal you can reach each workout.
- Keep a logbook.
- Start a serious kicking program.
- Visit a different pool or workout group once every few weeks.
- Participate in a swimming event outside your local area.
- Sign up for a swimming clinic or camp.
- Watch video footage of swimming, and review video footage of your own swimming with another swimmer or coach.
- Take a break from the pool once or twice a week, and try a new activity such as cycling, weight training or aerobics.

THREE WAYS TO AVOID BURNOUT

- Take time off at regular intervals.
- Keep swimming *fun*.
- Have goals clearly in mind.

exhaustion, notably sleep deprivation, ventures Conrad Johnson, former head coach of the YWCA of New York Masters and now coach of Team New York Aquatics. It is also a function of inadequate feel for and application of force in the water, he says.

An obvious early warning sign of plateauing is workout stagnation. Increasing lack of interest often leads to routinized workouts characterized by the same





drills, sets and yardage. Lack of variety can lead to a leveling of times and rising frustration. Most at risk is the self-trained swimmer. Absence of a coach and teammates exponentially raises the need for an infusion of new processes.

"I usually equate the signs of a plateau to burnout," says Marin County, Calif., sports psychology consultant Scott Boyle. "Burnout is when you no longer look forward to training and come up with

situational and mental excuses not to train. Situational cases are more of a shift in priorities, which Masters swimmers face a lot because they have a lot going on in their lives," he says.

"Mental meltdowns can result in 'garbage yards,'" notes Boyle, who has led sessions at the USMS/USA Swimming/USOTC Camp. "Just showing up and doing what is posted will give you limited results and become boring. There should be no such thing as garbage

yards because a properly set program will lead to training with a purpose."

Goldberg concurs. "To avoid getting stale there needs to be a connection between what you are doing today and your goals. There needs to be some meaning in what you are doing every day."

One way to restore passion is to narrow training focus and to improve techniques that will provide competitive benefit. Jen Carter is a sports psychologist

at Ohio State. She was also a seven-time NCAA D-III champion at Kenyon College in Ohio. Competing in the 30-34 age group at short course nationals in Fort Lauderdale, she took two firsts, three seconds and a third in the breast, IM and backstroke events.

Her suggestions for keeping workouts fresh include cross-training, weightlifting, mental strategies such as deep breathing and visualization, befriending new teammates,

setting process goals for workouts, changing events and even open water swimming.

Excluding the bionically endowed—like Richard Abrahams, 60, and Laura Val, 53, winners of six events each (again) in Fort Lauderdale—most Masters swimmers suffer aging and a natural slowing. The danger for swimmers, notes Boyle, is that many focus on outcomes and become discouraged. "Do not," he cautions, "base your self-worth on former speed. Reflect and say that despite the time, 'I swam as well today as I could today.'"

Goldberg warns against making comparisons with other competitors or doing trips down memory lane remembering how fast we used to be. "That is downright depressing. You don't want to let one race or taper meet define the success of a season, but many fall into that trap," he says. Swimmers hell-bent on remembering times might follow the method

used by Janet Renner, coach and chair of the Hawaii Masters Swimming Association. She prevents self-flagellation by referencing old times and comparing them to various qualifying times. "Then I take my new age group and compare the times and calculate equivalent times to achieve [in order] to reach the same scaled difference to the qualifying times in my new age group. Fortunately I love messing around trying to figure these number things out."

Johnson of Team New York Aquatics believes there is an antidote to plateauing—more and varied practice. "Unless you are an ex-high level swimmer where getting time drops at an older age is just plain unrealistic, I am unconvinced that time drops are no longer possible beyond some mythical age. There is a race going on between one's aerobic capacity/muscle strength diminishment that can

only be won (or offset) by improvements in swimming technique that match this physiological decline.

"The problem," he says, "is that a swimmer needs radical stroke surgery to which he must sincerely commit time and attention, as well as be motivated to leave a comfort zone of training style which he has probably had for years, if not decades. In addition, a swimmer must accept that there is a fairly long period in which he will be slower as the body takes on new technical configurations in the water. It is the latter which stymies most swimmers. This period can take a year or more," says Johnson.

For most swimmers a year of drills would be an eternity. Psychologist Carter has a pragmatic approach for the impatient. She suggests swimmers emphasize process goals (specific performance goals under the athlete's control) rather than outcome

goals (longer term result-oriented goals) and encourages them to keep the process goals foremost in their minds.

Process goals might be "I will focus on a tight streamline off of every turn in practice" or "I will emphasize the finish of my stroke by doing the 'flick' drill at least twice a week," she explains. Examples of outcome goals are "I want to break 30 seconds in the 50 free" or "I want to finish in the top 10 in my age group." Outcome goals allow athletes to dream big, but Carter warns against stopping there.

"We need to set process goals as small, concrete steps toward that outcome goal. When swimmers are no longer able to achieve their best times, they can still strive for excellence by focusing on specific, realistic process goals, i.e., finishing a 400 IM when they are 60-plus or perfecting the latest stroke technique," she says.

Goldberg recommends looking at three elements:

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varied training/cross-training, a training partner and an often overlooked factor—rest. “You can’t just train physically,” he says. “Far too many athletes put in the physical time and don’t do anything mental and sort of hope they’ll swim well. They hope they’ll be ready. Why would you leave that part of your training to chance? Rather than crisis intervention, [rest] should be an important adjunct to your training.”

Swimming fast when it counts is all about performance. Mark Spitz has averred that practice is 90 percent physical and 10 percent mental, with the percentages reversed for meets. Goldberg believes that “once you get to a race, and if you’ve paid your physical dues, it is all mental. Whether you swim fast or not depends upon what is going on between your ears. More specifically, it has to do with your pre-race focus and relaxation level. Obviously, if the physical component isn’t there, the mental is a joke.”

Pre-race jitters before first-time swims like 200 fly, 400 IM or 1500 free need not alternate between fear and loathing. That’s because, says Carter, first-time expectations tend to be rather low so athletes are pretty much guaranteed personal bests. “The best way to deal with fears is to face them physically and mentally head on.” Mental strategies and rehearsals, such as a timed set at the end of practice, can be a good prep for long, grueling races, she says.

Skip Thompson coaches the Michigan Masters Club and the South Oakland Seals Masters Team. He was also Masters Coach of the year in 2000. His advice on mental preparation for that first-time race is to “give yourself credit for trying. Don’t think of the pain, but think of the positive things that the pain will bring when you finish the race,” he says.

“Realistic expectations and a reflection on lead-up training keep the impending event in

proper perspective,” notes Boyle. “Embracing the opportunity as a way to showcase one’s training helps ensure a positive frame of mind.”

So does a booster section. “Without my teammates cheering for me every step of the way I don’t know if I could have muddled through that first 200 IM,” says Heather Howland, who swims for Seadogs in Arlington Heights, Ill. “Sometimes you need others to believe in you before you can wholeheartedly believe in yourself.”

Today’s athletes, most notably professional golfers, increasingly are turning to sports psychologists for mental fine-tuning. With less at stake, most Masters swimmers opt for more intuitive approaches, such as visualization, to increase focus and relaxation.

“Visualization is probably one of the greatest underused tools in sport,” says Boyle. “It is an extremely powerful way to improve skill acquisition and increase the ability to focus, relax and perform. You can only train in the water for so long, and visualization allows you to use land-based training that will specifically improve your in-water performance.”

Carter dabbled with visualization in her high school and collegiate days, but found the guidance provided by two “informal mental coaches,” her mother and Kenyon coach Jim Steen, to be the best of all.

“My mother used to ask me, ‘How much will this race matter to you in one year?’—a question which helped me keep perspective when I became too nervous. She also encouraged me to quit swimming every now and then. While this may sound like poor advice, it made me really think about why I was swimming and ensured that I was swimming for myself,” Carter relates.

“Jim Steen has such a keen intuition about people,” she adds. “He knew how to coax better practice swims out of me when I was having a personal

pity party, and I soaked up his confidence and faith in me at big taper meets,” she says. Steen’s 41 national crowns in 30 years would seem to validate his credentials as a master motivator.

For all the great coaching on deck often it is internal combustion that is a driving force. Bob Strand, 59, swims for The Olympic Club in San Francisco. A multi-time world and national Masters record holder, Strand is recovering from shoulder surgery and using the time to reevaluate his past, present and future. “After 16 years, keeping motivated and truly paying the price in training to attain my goals is always an issue,” he says. “Certainly a 2-year-old daughter can complicate the training.”

Paying the price in meets

requires frank self-assessment. Says Strand, “If you’re not a little afraid on the blocks then you’re not ready to swim. A little fear is always good,” he says, “but, sometimes painful.”

Pain and pleasure sound sadomasochistic, but are significant emotions that characterize the yin and yang of Masters swimming. The best way to overcome training snags, says Goldberg, “is to keep your long-term goal in mind and know that even during plateaus you are making progress. Just because people don’t see time drops they think they are not getting better and that’s just not true.

“Regardless of ability level, paying the physical training dues is a must,” he says. Still, come show time it’s mind over matter that matters most. <<<

A SWIMMER’S GUIDE TO MENTAL TOUGHNESS

- Focus on the race one stroke at a time.
- Let go of mistakes/failures—quickly.
- Stay within yourself and “in the now.”
- Be positive.
- Reframe adversity.
- Be your own best fan.
- “You are not your race.”
- Relax.

—Alan Goldberg, Ph.D., sports psychology consultant

RESOURCES FOR THE PLATEAUED

- Friends
- Coaches
- Lane mates
- Clinics
- Supplemental training (dryland, weights, etc.)
- Books, instructional videos
- Inspirational movies (“Chariots of Fire,” “Rudy,” “Hoosiers,” etc.)
- Music

SUGGESTED READING

- *In Pursuit of Excellence: How to Win in Sport and Life Through Mental Training* by Terry Orlick (Human Kinetics Publishers, third edition, 2000)
- *Thinking Body, Dancing Mind: Taosports for Extraordinary Performance in Athletics, Business and Life* by Chungliang Al Huang (Bantam, 1994)
- *Smoke on the Water: A Swimmer’s and Coach’s Guide to Mental Toughness* by Alan Goldberg, Ph.D. (www.competitiveedge.com)