

# GOING FOR THE GOAL

## Achieving Success in the Water One Aim at a Time

by Bekah Wright >>> Illustration by Rick Gutierrez

**G**oals are more than New Year's resolutions or items on a to-do list. They're tools for achieving our dreams and can be applied to every aspect of our lives, even swimming. There's a science, though, when it comes to reaching

goals. Set the goal of "get back in the water," and you'll likely start including your morning shower as an achievement.

create a vision and come from a sense of purpose, we open the gateway to achievement."

Dean Ornish, M.D., founder of the nonprofit Preventive Medicine Research Institute, issues a word of caution, though, when it comes to goal setting. "Intention can be an important factor in any kind of success," says Ornish, who also serves as a clinical professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. "As long as you don't invest your self-esteem, self-worth, sense of who you are and sense of well-being in it, and it becomes just a goal, not who you are."

Once you've set a goal—whether it's shaving time off your 50-meter butterfly or entering a specific competition—outline the steps necessary for reaching the finish line. Don't hesitate to tap into available resources and ask for support along the way. Buoyed by the

success of reaching one goal, you'll find that a ripple effect occurs and others you never dreamed of will begin to surface.

Following are goals for swimmers looking to shake up their normal routine and get inspired.

**Goal: Cross Train for a Triathlon.** Judy Molnar knows about goal setting. During a doctor's visit she caught sight of a note on her chart—"morbidly obese." Unwilling to become a statistic, she decided to win her battle with weight by setting a goal. Molnar's goal went beyond "count calories" and "drink more water." She chose something concrete with a date attached to it—she signed up to compete in a triathlon. "I believe setting goals along with filling out an event entry form make the difference between reaching a goal versus just talking about it," she says. "A goal gives you something to aim for, a motivation and a little accountability."

Like everyone starting out toward a goal, Molnar took baby steps. She sought out support and guidance. Together with her coaches, Molnar formulated a cross-training program to prepare her for competition. The keys: instruction, practice and consistent pool time. "Swimming ties in all the components of a triathlon and



is certainly the most technical sport to master," she says. "It's the first leg of a triathlon, and usually where participants experience the most fear and uncertainty."

She discovered the swim portion of competition is no mere lap swim. "A lot goes on in the swim—swimming with others splashing like crazy at the wave start, water temperature issues, wetsuits, currents, waves and sea creatures," says Molnar. "The swim can set the tone for your day."

Since setting her first goal, Molnar has participated in 30 triathlons, including the Hawaii

Clarity is essential, as is a road map to success. The first step—stating your intention.

"Most achievement is born from the seed of intention," says Ira D. Zunin, M.D., MPH, medical director of Manakai O Malama Integrative Healthcare Group and Rehabilitation Center in Honolulu. "Once we

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When she's not traveling the world or reporting from the red carpet you can find her in the slow lane at a SCAQ Masters workout.



Ironman in 1999. She's now a certified lifestyle and weight management consultant and personal trainer with the American Council on Exercise and a USA Triathlon certified coach. Along the way she's lost more than 100 pounds and gone on to encourage others to pursue their goals through her book *You Don't Have to Be Thin to Win*.

#### **Goal: Join a Masters**

**Program.** Ask swimmers in a Masters program how they got there and you'll hear myriad stories ranging from a lifetime of swimming to accidentally happening upon a workout. For those unaware of Masters

programs the terminology may be daunting. Masters groups, however, are open to all skill levels—even those swimmers who can't swim an entire lap without hugging the wall and gasping for breath. Coaching, support, a peer group and structured workouts are just some of the pluses of swimming with a team. Once you're in the groove, new goal-setting opportunities are bound to arise.

**Goal: Learn How to Swim—Again.** If you're returning to the pool after a long hiatus or taking up the sport for the first time, you may discover your strokes are rusty or your breathing is

off. Signing up for a stroke clinic will get you back on track. "When swimmers take a clinic and see others struggling with some of the same issues, they start understanding the process—time and effort," says Bonnie Adair, one of the founders of Southern California Aquatics Masters Swim Club (SCAQ). "It gives them a different perspective and allows them to set long-term improvement goals."

Improving technique, Adair explains, enables swimmers to swim farther with less effort. "Swimmers are able to enjoy their efforts more," she says. "They get positive feedback

when they see their times dropping and can go a few laps farther each week without being exhausted."

Even intermediate swimmers gain from improving technique. "It allows them to break through a plateau they may have reached because they simply can't get out of their own way, even though they work hard during workout sets," says Adair.

One-on-one coaching also has benefits. "If you have a coach available to customize a program for you and oversee your progress, you'll most likely have greater improvement over a shorter

## WORK AND FEEL DRILL

Swimmers should work on stroke every time they're in the pool, advises Bonnie Adair of Southern California Aquatics Masters Swim Club. "I tell swimmers to 'think' for the first 10 minutes of their workout (drills, counting strokes) and then 'feel' during the main set, then 'think' again the last 10 minutes (perhaps with some higher quality short-distance laps)."

Her two favorite drills are double-arm swimming (two strokes with right arm, two with left arm) and fist drills. "Double-arm works on many things at the same time—balance, keeping the kick controlled, bilateral breathing and, most importantly, body rotation. A swimmer should be able to double-arm swim almost as fast as single arm. I like to do it in transition, meaning one lap double-arm, one regular. It must be done smoothly—letting the body rotation account for much of the forward progress, not the arm pull," she notes.

"The fist drill is simply a reality check—count strokes and try to reduce them. It forces swimmers to swim with a high elbow and contact the water with their forearm."

## LEGS, ARMS AND NOODLES

Mary Horn, fitness manager at Miraval Resort in Tucson, Ariz., offers this arm- and leg-conditioning drill.

- Sit on noodle and hang on.
- Jog forward, using nothing but your legs for two laps.
- Stay in place for five minutes using scissor kick.
- Complete two more laps.
- Cross legs and use nothing but the arms to open the chest, with no legs for two laps.
- Complete one lap keeping the arms close to the body as you push back with hands.
- Rest your upper body on noodle and water. Tighten your buttocks and start controlled flutter kicks under the water for two laps without using arms.

## COMPETITION PREP

Emmett Hines, coach for the H2Ouston Swims Masters program in Texas, gives these tips to new competitors:

- Practice dive starts enough to be confident of keeping your goggles in place. But, just in case, also practice a backup strategy (like quickly flinging them onto the deck when you reach the first turn).
- Be able to swim a 50 without stopping and grabbing the lane ropes and gasping for air. Start with freestyle (if for no other reason than it cuts way down on the likelihood of getting DQ'd).

## GET OUT THE LADDER

"One of my favorite training sets involves a ladder," says Judy Molnar, author and triathlete. "You start, say at 100, and build up from there: 100-200-300-400-500 and take the distance back down the other side: 400-300-200-100. It is a great way to build up endurance and mentally a great feeling when you are swimming back down the other side of the ladder."

period of time," she states.

As you begin to see progress, the pace clock will become your friend. "Many coaches would say "distance per stroke" and I think that's very important as well, but technique *has* to be applied in order to see real improvement," says Adair. "My philosophy is that all the drills and information will be wasted unless you get into some interval training program and learn to race against the clock and train a minimum of three times each week."

### Goal: Swim as Meditation.

Get the mechanics down pat and swimming will come as naturally as, well..., breathing. It's no accident that swimming reduces stress and improves outlook. "At some point it becomes the journey not the destination," says Adair. "Swimming is a very Zen-like thing." Indeed, for some swimmers, the repetitiveness of swimming laps becomes a form of meditation.

"When you clear the mind and focus on breathing, a communication happens between the mind and muscles," says Maka'ala Yates, D.C., president and CEO of Mana Ola Health Organization and the Hawaiian Healing Institute of Integrated Studies in Oregon. "You visualize your desired outcome. For a swimmer that could be improving their time or being able to rotate their shoulders 360 degrees versus 280."

As for visualization, it's one more tool for achieving your goals.

### Goal: Tackle Open Water.

There's a feeling of safety and security when it comes to swimming in a pool. Adventurers, though, may want to explore new horizons through open water swimming. Swimming in oceans and lakes can lead to other goals, such as open water competitions or triathlons. Of course, proper training will garner success. "We're natural runners and bikers," says Clay Evans, swim director of the

Los Angeles Marathon and one of the founders of SCAQ. "We're not natural swimmers." His advice—interval training. "If you read the clock you learn how to pace yourself and relax," says Evans. "Then you can start learning technique."

When training for an open water event, Evans recommends doing 75 to 80 percent of your training in the pool, and 15 to 20 percent in the ocean, if possible. Time in the open water is an invaluable tool for learning how to get in and out of the surf, sight the course and prepare for dealing with variables such as the elements, group dynamics and waves. Those training for triathlons get an added bonus from swimming—cardiovascular benefits that carry over to running and biking.

### Goal: Recover From an Injury.

Encountering bumps in the road is part of most goal makers' journey. If an injury or physical issue temporarily sidelines you, head to the pool during your recovery.

After a lifetime of swimming, six years ago, 73-year-old Steve Schofield, a Southwest Aquatic Masters (SWAM) swimmer, noticed a change in his swimming. He could no longer accomplish the distances he was accustomed to, up to 10 miles per swim, both in open water and the pool. Swimming 100 yards left him winded. A visit to the doctor revealed he needed a new aortic valve and triple bypass. "The doctor said if I hadn't been swimming, I would have been dead," says Schofield.

Schofield's surgery was followed by a three-month recovery period that kept him out of the water. Once that time period was up, he was back in the lap lanes with a game plan. "The goal was to get back in the pool and swim," says Schofield. "I decided to start with 50 yards to see how that worked. The next day it was 75s, then 100s. Then I'd stay there a week or two before moving up in distance

again.” Six months later, he’d reached his goal of swimming a mile during each workout. Having also coached swimming, Schofield knew the proper approach when aiming for a target. “You take it intelligently and don’t push too hard,” he says. “Just keep moving.” He credits his workouts with helping him recuperate from surgery faster.

Zunin agrees with Schofield’s tactics. “Swimming is a great sport for prevention and physical rehabilitation because it’s a non-impact activity and engages most of the key muscles in the body.”

**Goal: Compete in a Swim Meet.** Even if the slow lane is your home, it’s not unthinkable to have a goal of competing in a local or regional swim meet. “Masters competitors are, overwhelmingly, self-professed fitness swimmers,” says Emmett Hines, coach for the H2ouston Swims Masters program in Texas. “For most, competition serves as the motivation to win the battle with the alarm clock in the morning or whatever other monster might seek to keep one from the pool.”

For Masters swimmers, competitive events are about more than just collecting ribbons. “Competition helps clarify what areas of swimming are really progressing, and what needs to be worked on next,” states Hines. As for tracking progress, Hines says the sooner swimmers compete, the sooner they’ll establish a starting point from which to mark progress.

Hines suggests swimmers come to the pool with a plan to learn new things, refine newly acquired skills, reinforce good habits and improve the conditioning level of the muscles required for excellent swimming. “This allows a swimmer to enter the water with a high sense of purpose,” says the coach.

This philosophy, of course, goes hand in hand with setting goals. “I’ve noticed that the swimmers who are goal oriented

tend to be more consistent over longer periods of time,” says Hines. His advice: “Set goals that can be broken into small, specific, quantifiable chunks. They should include a variety of aspects beyond the standard time and/or distance marks, including skill acquisition, technique refinement, new strokes, stroke counts, heart rates, blood pressure, body composition, participation frequency, etc. Generally, the more opportunities a swimmer gives himself to identify progress, the greater the satisfaction derived from the whole process.”

In addition, Hines encourages swimmers to set long-term goals outside of their comfort zone. “A ‘goal’ that’s inside your comfort zone isn’t a really a goal, it’s just pandering to your inner child,” he says.

**Goal: Cross Train in the Pool.** When work, travel and family schedules get hectic, it’s often hard to train consistently. Don’t abandon ship. Look for other ways to fit in a water-based workout. One to consider— aqua aerobics. These classes, offered in local pools, as well as hotels and resorts around the world, incorporate stretching, water jogging and resistance work. “Nearly everyone can participate in an aerobic water class regardless of age, ability level or physical condition,” says Mary Horn, fitness manager at Miraval Resort in Arizona. “The water provides a comfortable yet challenging environment.”

More than just bouncing up and down to music, these workouts make long-forgotten muscles sit up and take notice. “Practicing hydrofitness improves five components of physical conditioning: aerobic conditioning, strength, resistance, flexibility and body composition,” says Lidia DaSilva, a Los Angeles-based aquatic fitness instructor with Aquamove US. “It also works with the link between body and mind.” In addition, participants gain improved self-esteem, are less prone to injury,

illness, pain and deficiencies of the immune system.

Though dumbbells, flotation belts and noodles are not needed, the equipment can be beneficial, providing added resistance and increasing the workload to achieve the desired target heart rate.

**Goal: Participate in a USMS Fitness Event.** If you want to push a bit harder and increase your personal fitness, the USMS web site has another resource to help you boost your pool workouts ([www.usms.org/fitness/content/fitnessevents](http://www.usms.org/fitness/content/fitnessevents)). The web site’s Fitness Events section provides several national events prime for goal-making swimmers, including the Virtual Swim Series, Check-Off Challenge and 30-Minute Swim Challenge. According to the web site, “Your goals may involve any number of possibilities, such as learning to swim a new stroke, swimming faster, swimming greater distances or logging your distance over time.”

With the 30-Minute Swim Challenge, swimmers chart the distance they can swim continuously for 30 minutes. The objective of the Check-Off Challenge is to swim each of the 18 swimming events found in a pool competition over the course of a year. In the Virtual Swim Series, swimmers apply pool lengths they swim toward virtual swims in bodies of water such as the Erie Canal or around the island of Manhattan. This year, two open water event distances are being added to the mix. “If you’re going to set goals, make them realistic, otherwise you’re going to give up,” says Pam Himstreet, former chair of the USMS Fitness Committee. “Take small steps at a time. That’s what these are.”

Whether your goal is a virtual swim to Alcatraz or competing in the 2006 FINA Masters World Championships, get clear on your intention, plot your course and...dream big. <<<

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