

# **Making a Success of your first National Competition – How to win one the *first* time around**

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

There is conventional wisdom surrounding competing successfully at any major championship competition 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 competition or another 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 championship competition 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 event (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” competition, this may leave permanent mental challenges to overcome at subsequent national competitions.
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!

## **Why is it so tough?**

Let’s look at the typical home / local meet environment and compare that with the typical national competition environment.

	<b>Local / home MEET</b>	<b>State / National MEET</b>
<b>6 AM</b>	Swimmer wakes up in own bed. Mom 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.
<b>7 AM</b>	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.
<b>7:30 AM</b>	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.
<b>8:00 AM</b>	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 favorite pre race snacks.
<b>9:00 AM</b>	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 cheering and trying psyche out games with other swimmers.
<b>9:15 AM</b>	Race – DOES WELL	Race – DOES POORLY
<b>9:18 AM</b>	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.

## **The reality – PERCEIVED CHALLENGE versus ACTUAL CHALLENGE.**

The real reason why swimmers often fail at their first national competition 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 Personal Best (PB) at the 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 the 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 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 periodization 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 regional age group 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 age group 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.

## **Strategies to prepare effectively for a successful championship competition**

### **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 the event.

If the swimmer has prepared physically in this manner, there is no challenge or situation they will face at the event 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:

#### **1. MAINTAIN FREQUENCY OF TRAINING.**

While 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!)

#### **2. 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.

#### **3. 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 allowing the swimmer the opportunity to recover from the hard training and to eliminate residual training fatigue.

## **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 “championship” 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 championship “debutante”!

## **2. Prepare mentally**

Without doubt, the mental aspect of achieving a successful result at a swimmer’s first national competition is crucial.

Many swimmers, coaches, clubs and parents build up a national competition 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.....**CHAMPIONSHIP COMPETION 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 national competition 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. The athletes who win at a national competition 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

At a championship competition.....there are no little things. Everything can make a difference.

Under pressure, swimmers will do what they have learned 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 a national competition, it is essential that their training “habits” be technically outstanding so that when the pressure and pain of racing hits them (usually around the  $\frac{3}{4}$  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 the meet, 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 a national competition. There are many swimmers competing at a national competition that the swimmer and coach do not know and have never raced 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 learned to change gears (speed) when needed?
- Are they able to change breathing patterns in free and fly to meet the competitive situation?

Being full 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 national competition by practicing and experimenting with a range of tactical options in different situations.

For example: Key event being targeted at a **CHAMPIONSHIP COMPETITION – 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)

### **Minor competition 2:**

Trial tactics:

- Pacing- Go out fast – PB 50 meter time plus 0.5 seconds.
- Breathing pattern – Alternating breathing every two or three strokes.
- Underwater technique and breakout – 12 meters underwater (at a speed of 1.8 meters 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.....

A good exercise for coaches to utilise are the **WHAT IF** – scenarios. Around a month prior to a national competition, 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 parents 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 utilized at a national competition.

For example:

### **Minor competition 1 – Two months before the national competition**

- 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 the national competition**

- 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

## **7. Have several warm up strategies and learn to swim fast using each one.**

While 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 group championships by having all the team warm up at training in the one lane three times per week in the month leading into the championship event. 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 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.

## **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 the championships **knowing**:

- **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.

<b>PROBLEM</b>	<b>SOLUTION 1</b>	<b>SOLUTION 2</b>	<b>SOLUTION 3</b>
<b>Sleeping environment not ideal</b>	Wear ear plugs and eye shades to bed and take your own pillow with you – this makes the room quiet, dark and feeling familiar.	Have all the people sleeping in your room go through some relaxation exercises before bed. Allow some winding down time.	Practice sleeping at home with the radio on and with the door open so you learn to sleep with noise around you.
<b>Limited food choice at the venue</b>	Take your own food if possible. Cereals, pasta, bread, fruit, noodles – the choices are limitless.	Have the team manager prepare snack bags for each of the swimmer’s competing on that day.	Have a parent or coach go to the venue a day early to source healthy, nutritious eating options, supermarkets and restaurants.
<b>Limited warm up opportunity</b>	Learn a modified warm up. Ten minutes swimming, five minutes skipping, three minutes jogging, ten minutes stretching, ten minutes stretch cords, five minutes walk.	Practice crowded lane warm up in training three times each week in the month prior to the championships by having all team warm up in the one lane.	Take your stretch cords (and know how to use them properly). Practice doing stretch cord “intervals” – ie using stretch cords with same rating as you plan to use in the race.
<b>Sledging / trash talking from other swimmers</b>	Ignore it.	Smile at them – this is really annoying.	Agree with them – this is also really annoying to a “sledger”.
<b>No swim down facilities</b>	Have your stretch cords at the ready.	Do a walk and stretch at the same time	Go for a slow jog with some team mates followed by a team stretch. Hit the showers and use some hydrotherapy recovery with alternating hot 1 minute (not too hot) and cold water (2 minutes).
<b>Confusing pool environment</b>	Have a manager do all the layout work and present all the areas to the swimmers after warm up.	Include a walk around the center as part of the team warm up period. Have the senior swimmers show the	Go to the center the day before competition starts to allow the swimmers to feel comfortable in and out of the

		rookies where everything is	water.
<b>Having to be at personal best speed early in the morning</b>	Get up early. If your race is scheduled for 9am be up and ready before 6am.	Practice racing fast first thing at training. It is a skill that can be learned and mastered. You can go fast anytime.	Make sure you are thoroughly warmed up. No sleepiness left. Think “fast” use key words like “power”, “explode”, “drive” etc to get yourself mentally focused and ready for speed.
<b>Swimming several rounds, ie heats to semi-finals to finals</b>	In training practice doing time trials on the same day – in the morning session then again in the afternoon with an aim to achieve a personal best (PB) at each time trial.	In lead up competitions, even if the opposition is weak practice going all out in the heats and aim to go faster in the finals. At nationals and major meets there is no easy swimming.	Practice recovery techniques and warm downs. Learn to help your body fully recover between swims so that you can go faster each round of competition.

**Some challenges swimmers will face at a National Competition and some strategies to overcome them**

**Summary:**

1. The “lose one to win one” approach has been a popular way of preparing swimmers to succeed at major competition 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 competition environment rather than concentrating on the physical aspects alone.
5. While 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” a 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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