

Enhancing Performance Through the Process

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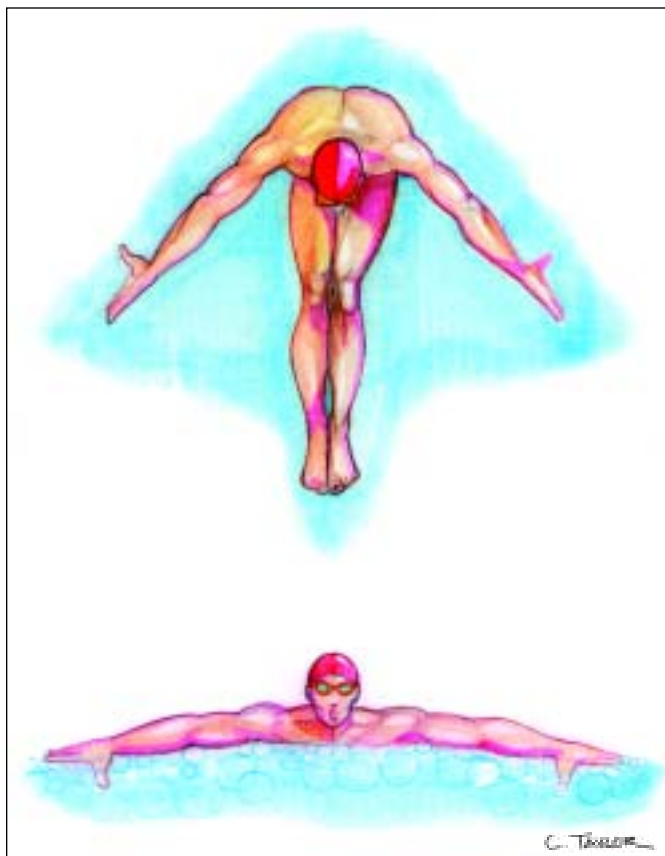
hile as an athlete you know that technique is important, it is also true that most sport performances are evaluated based on the end result (the product) of performance—things like time, place, and score. As a result, the natural inclination often is to focus your attention on the end result. In training and competition, many athletes tend to focus on the product of performance rather than what they need to do to get there (the process of performance). For example, swimmers may tend to be concerned with how fast they swim a race and not necessarily proper stroke execution; lifters might be concerned with how much weight they lift and give little heed to how the weight was lifted; and golfers likely will be concerned with how close the

ball lands to the hole and not the mechanics of the swing that were responsible for getting the ball close to the hole.

Everyone would agree that ultimately the product or end result of performance is important, but what do you really control? To enhance your performance, what can you influence? Can you influence the product by focusing on the process? In short, the answer to this last question is “Yes.” The remainder of this article will provide you with ways to improve the product of your performance by focusing on the process.

In swimming, as in many sports, technique is of utmost importance to performance. Efficiency in the process of movement, whether stroking through the water, lifting weights, or swinging a club, relates to enhanced performance and a decrease in chance of injury. However, to swim faster, you can't simply focus on the time you want to swim. Instead, you need to work on improving your technique and your physiological capacities. Likewise, to improve your score in golf, you would focus on enhancing the mechanics of your swing such as grip, body alignment, and body rotation, not on shooting par. More simply put, you would focus on the process rather than the product.

Given the above examples, it should make sense now that by focusing on the process you can improve the product of performance. As you are probably well aware, this is not always easy to do. As was mentioned, because you and others evaluate your performance based on the end result, you are often “drawn” to the product of performance. But, to improve



performance, energy and effort must be directed to the process. Read on to learn strategies you can implement to help you attend to the process of athletic performance to enhance the end result.

- Set process related goals. It is okay to set a goal to place in the top three or swim a specific time. But in conjunction with this outcome-related goal, set goals that tell you what you need to do to perform well—these goals should relate to the process of performance. For example, as a swimmer, your goal may be to stay streamlined off the walls or to maintain a certain stroke rate for the first 75 meters of a race.
- Use imagery to focus on and enhance technique. Athletes often use imagery to prepare for an upcoming competition by seeing and feeling “success.” That is a great use of the mental skill of imagery. But, imagery is also a mental skill that is of great value to technique enhancement. Imagery can be used as an additional form of practice to master a certain skill. Prior to swimming, mentally rehearse swimming with correct technique; see and feel efficient stroke execution to reinforce the process of swimming.
- Keep your self-talk focused on the process. Talk to yourself about what you need to do to perform well. Reinforce in your mind what you need to do to achieve your performance goal. That is, to swim 100 meters in 1:05, remind yourself that you need to explode off the blocks, push through every stroke, work your kick, and stay in a tight streamline off the walls. If you do this, the end result you want will be there. Focus on the processes that influence the product (swimming a 1:05).
- Evaluate your performance based on the process. When evaluating your performance, avoid the tendency to judge how you did based solely on your time, place or score. Instead, evaluate elements of your swim performance such as your start, your turns, or the stroke rate you held. Evaluating the process tells you what you need to do to improve the product and gives you a focus for upcoming training sessions.

A concern with and focus on the outcome of performance is to be expected, since it gives you an objective measure of how you did relative to yourself and others. However, to enhance your performance you need to attend to the process, to what you need to do to perform well. This is not always an easy task. However, if you implement the above strategies they will help you focus on the process of performance that will in turn enhance the end result.

About the Author

*Suzie Tuffey Riewald, PhD, NSCA-CPT,*D, received her degrees in Sport Psychology/Exercise Science from the University of North Carolina – Greensboro. She has worked for USA Swimming as the Sport Psychology and Sport Science Director, and most recently as the Associate Director of Coaching with the USOC where she works with various sport national governing bodies (NGBs) to develop and enhance coaching education and training. Suzie currently works as a sport psychology consultant to several NGBs.*