

**The York Y Rambler**  
**By Coach Michael**  
**5 March 2008**

***CUT ANXIETY***

It is fairly common for swimmers to make good progress from level to level, then suddenly screech to a halt as they nudge up against a meet qualifying standard that they consider very important: a Y National cut, or JO cut, or Senior National, or Olympic Trials standard, or Grand Prix cut, etc. They want to go to this meet, it is important to them to compete there, so making the cut becomes important, sometimes all-important.

Every day in practice they repeat the mantra, “I must make the cut, I must make the cut.” At a meet, when the time to perform is come, the situation is even worse, and they spend their time before their events obsessing about the cut and focusing on the disastrous consequences of not making it. They set up this cut as the meaning of life, they imbue it with ritual powers, they decide that only making the cut makes them a worthy person and failing makes them unworthy. Instead of being excited and confident and ready to show what they have got, their bodies are wracked with anxiety and fear that paralyze the brain and body when they most want to perform well. When they stand behind the blocks, they look sick; when they race, their strokes look off and their splits are all over the place; when they look up at the scoreboard after the race, they are dreadfully disappointed.

Ironically, this can happen despite stellar training performances. The better the training, the more likely that a swimmer is physically capable of reaching his goal, but

also the greater the psychological pressure – or *need* – to reach it and the greater the anxiety: I MUST make it, I HAVE TO make it, I’ve been training so hard and so well!!! Instead of confidence that oils the wheels and helps the machine run at peak, their anxiety pours sand in the gears. Instead of the hum, we hear grinding and screeching.

Another irony is that this problem arises from a good and positive and necessary beginning. Excellence comes from high expectations, high standards, high aspirations. If you want to get good at anything, you need to set high goals, and you need to care deeply about making those goals. But goals are supposed to motivate you, to excite you about accomplishing something worthwhile – not to frighten you to death of failing. The problem here isn’t the goal, but what you are doing with it once it is inside your mind.

With most kids, focusing on making the cut – “I have to make the cut, I must make the cut, if I don’t make the cut I’ll turn into a giant cockroach like the guy in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*” – doesn’t help. It takes your mind off what you need to do, adds the element of fear, and raises the emotional ante much higher than most kids can handle. Your body works best when your mind is relaxed, confident, expecting good things, and “good nervous” – not scared out of your mind.

The race-saving trick is to change the focus. Great swims, goal-accomplishing swims, cut-making swims, are made up of parts: walls, stroke counts, stroke rates, proper technique, splits, pacing, etc. These parts are matter-of-fact, concrete, emotionally neutral, and they connect with your daily training.

Focus not on a time standard, nor on the consequences of failing to meet it, but rather on what you need to do. Use daily workouts to practice your races, to rehearse the parts of

your races, to work on the simple cues to the point where they are habitual and require little thought. Then when you reach the meet, relax and let yourself swim fast. Relax, awash in the confidence that good training gives. And keep yourself calm, by focusing on what you need to do, the parts of the race you want to swim. It is amazing how many cuts are made when “making the cut” is the farthest thing from your mind.

### ***STURM UND DRANG***

Recently we have had a controversy over relay selection. We shouldn't have had. The principles the coaches use, as well as the ones they explicitly do not, are outlined very clearly in the “Better Parenting” memo that every family has received and that is on our website. The relevant section reads, verbatim, thus:

*“THE wisdom of Solomon. Coaches make many decisions. You won't agree with them all. For instance, relays. As a general rule, every parent thinks his child should be on the “A” relay. But only four swimmers can be on the relay team. The coaches will choose the four kids whom they think will do the best job today. That is not always the four with the top four “best times.” Sometimes it includes a swimmer who has been very impressive in practices, or someone who is on fire at this meet, or someone who hasn't swum the event in a meet in a while and so hasn't officially made a fast time but who has let the coaches know by practice performance and otherwise that he deserves to be in the relay. Trust the coaches to act in what they consider the best interests of the team as a whole, and understand that this*

*sometimes conflicts with what you see as the best interests of your child at this moment.”*

Is this “subjective”? Yes. And so is every other means of deciding who the best four are, in particular when several swimmers are essentially tied.

Does this call for judgement? Yes. In particular one that is impartial. The coaches are going to put what we consider to be our best relay on the blocks. We want our York Y relay to swim as fast and to place as high as possible. That is our primary consideration. Whether or not we like one swimmer better than another, or whether or not we like one swimmer's mom or dad better than another's, is completely irrelevant.

### ***STEPPING OFF THE TREADMILL***

Psychologists have performed interesting experiments on rats. If you place food near hungry rats, they will go to the food. Not surprising. But if the researcher gives them an electric shock as they approach the food, the rats will retreat. After a little while, hunger gets the best of them and they will try to eat again. Another shock, another retreat. After only a few shocks when they wanted and expected a meal, they quit trying to eat, even when the researcher turns off the shock. The rats have learned that there is no point in trying, and they will cower in the corner of their box and starve to death, despite having food near at hand. This is called “learned helplessness.”

A swimmer in a slump is similar to these rats. Usually performance plateaus are more psychological than physical in origin. Once you have fallen short of a goal a few times, for whatever reason (usually you don't think about the reasons for failing, or the means of

turning things around, dwelling instead on the negative emotions of failing), you tell yourself that you can't do it and that there is no point in trying. Then you start to think and train accordingly. Training, in your mind, becomes purposeless: you come to the pool every day and go through the motions, not doing anything to interest or excite or motivate yourself. After only a short period of this kind of training, poor meet performances follow as night follows day, for both psychological and physical reasons: you've told yourself you can't succeed, and you haven't been building the engine you need to succeed. And so the doom cycle – from a “what's the point” attitude, to poor training, to poor racing – continues, and with increasing momentum, until it feels irresistible.

While the situation we are looking at is not so dire as rats starving themselves to death, it is similar in that both the rats and the swimmers have the energy to save themselves, but they don't. It isn't a problem of physical capabilities, but of attitudes determining the use of those capabilities. Rats and swimmers have convinced themselves that there is no point, that they can't do it, that this is too hard, that they aren't good enough, that it isn't worth the trouble, etc.

Fortunately, we're not rats; we have much more control over our thoughts and actions, and we can save ourselves from this doom cycle. If you are stuck in a slump, the first order of business is to change your attitude and your expectations of yourself. If your training is without purpose and focus, give yourself a purpose to your training. Give yourself a goal, something around which to marshal your energies. If you are not interested in or excited about what you are doing, you cannot expect anyone else to be. And if you are not excited about what you are doing, you will not accomplish anything worthwhile.

There is nothing like improving, seeing yourself getting better, for fueling the enthusiasm. We have talked often about the Japanese idea of “Kaizen”, or continual improvement: never being satisfied, always trying to get better in as many different ways as possible, and never leaving practice without having gotten better at something. When you get better, and when you take note of the fact, you show yourself that you are making progress, and you give yourself a reason to feel good about what you accomplished.

Start with baby steps; start small. Don't set unrealistically high goals for some far-off future. You don't need to break a world record in practice to feel good about yourself. Start with small goals that you can focus on, that you can accomplish RIGHT NOW, and that will give you a burst of enthusiasm when you succeed. With a few baby steps each practice, the momentum starts to build, and soon you have taken giant leaps forward, your slump well behind you and forgotten.

### ***STAYING HEALTHY***

Every winter and spring, every swimming team on the planet gets hit with at least one sickness “epidemic”. In some areas, notably where they swim outside and the weather gets cold, teams are hit twice. These epidemics seriously mess with a coach's elaborate training and racing plans, not to mention with the swimmers' training rhythms. There is no way to entirely prevent getting sick, but there are a few easy tricks to lessen your chances of missing school or practice for illness.

= Wash your hands, often. Don't shake hands with someone who has just sneezed or coughed into their own hands.

= Drink water frequently – keep yourself hydrated.

= Don't share water or Gatorade bottles. Sharing food or drinks is the most efficient way to get an illness racing through the whole team.

= Wear warm clothes outside, and especially after swimming practice. This means, at the very least, a warm coat, a stocking cap, gloves, and warm shoes (NOT flip-flops!). For the few hours after a hard practice, your immune system is weakened, so you do not want to give the sickness bugs any help as they try to invade you. Like lions on a wildebeest.

= Quarantine yourself. If there is someone sick in your family or house, try to stay away from that person as much as you can, consistent with being a loving and caring family member.

= Use ear drops regularly to ward off "swimmer's ear", especially when you race in "foreign" pools where the chemicals may be different from those in our pool. Don't wait until your ear hurts. Practice preventive medicine.

= Get enough sleep and eat healthily, so your body recovers from the stresses of school and swimming, and your immune system stays strong.

### ***FOOD FOR THOUGHT***

**“Never let the failure of your last pitch affect the success of your next one.”**

Nolan Ryan, Hall of Fame pitcher

**“It’s easy to stay the course and fight the fight when you’re on top, when you’re winning, but what of those times when everywhere you look you see nothing but hurdles and obstacles, blockages and barricades, detours and swamps? That is when it is hard to continue – when the challenge is to hang on amid defeat, disappointment, and despair, far from the adoring crowd – and that is when you find out who you are.”**

Henry Marsh, Olympic distance runner