

“Don’t Just Keep Your Head Above Water”

By Kari Woodall

Ever feel like you’re struggling just to ‘stay afloat’ in athletics, school, or life? What can you do as an athlete to avoid complacency, which limits progress and leads to stagnant results? Can you proactively prevent spiraling downward? How do you deal with your own negativity and from your teammates? Guess what? There are things *you* can control that will help your respective situation and ultimately help you move beyond your current issues. The goal is to thrive, not just survive.

Here are 10 Tips to lead you in the right direction; the rest is up to you...

- 1. Create Change and be a CATALYST.** It always amazes me when an athlete is struggling, yet unwilling to make a change. It’s very easy to complain, and your friends/coach/parents may listen to you and genuinely feel sorry for you initially. However, the more you wallow in your own self-pity without attempting to make adjustments, the less understanding and tolerant your support group will be. Be accountable. Don’t sit around and wait for superhuman talent—NOT happening! Having a sense of responsibility and accountability go hand in hand with success.
- 2. Fuel your Body to Perform at the Highest Level.** How much *physical* energy do you have? Evaluate your nutrition or seek the advice of a nutritionist and you’ll be amazed at what they tell you about your eating habits. Are you eating enough small meals throughout the day, and is your food intake healthy for the most part? A good approach to healthy meals is to “make your plate colorful”, and this doesn’t mean with Skittles! By trying to hit all the major food groups, you’ll find color in variety. Athletes, and more specifically swimmers, burn so many more calories than the average person. If your energy level during your workouts is consistently low or if you often ‘crash’ before the end of the set or practice, adjust what and/or how much you are eating before and after your workout. If you struggle to maintain your body weight or have difficulty putting on muscle, consider supplements. A coach or nutritionist should help you decide if this is the correct choice for you.
- 3. Put your Energy to Good Use.** Analyze your daily routine. What are your sleep patterns? Are you tired during your workouts and are you able to recover by the next one? Your body will naturally go through periods of adaptation when you increase your training volume, but if you don’t adjust to increased training loads, you may not be getting adequate rest to recover fully. If you can re-energize in between workouts with an hour nap, you’re doing well. If you consistently require hours of naptime to refuel and still crash during workouts, something needs to change. Ax the late night TV, Play Station, online chat groups, etc...and start sleeping instead. This is not rocket science!
- 4. Be Organized.** In my experience, you can not be well rested and unorganized at the same time. I struggle to sleep at night when I have huge “to do” lists that went undone throughout the day. If you are a procrastinator, make lists and check things off upon completion. You will get a grip on what needs to be done and the sense of accomplishment will encourage you to stay organized. The late night cramming for the exam or presentation is undoubtedly necessary at times, but don’t make a habit of it. Be proactive and your stress levels will decrease!
- 5. Surround yourself with the Right People.** The most successful athletes know who helps them accomplish their goals and who hinders them. The most successful coaches know that they are only as good as the people they work with and coach. Do you slip into bad habits easily? Do your friends and teammates have goals similar to your own? Be aware of the strength in numbers, and choose the right crowd.

6. **Use your Resources.** If your competition results have leveled off and you find yourself sitting on a plateau, get off your bum and get on your horse! Read an article, have your technique filmed and analyzed, watch films of great athletes, attend a camp or clinic, attend a private training session—there are a multitude of options, you just need to pick one! Who is knowledgeable and approachable in your area? Ask your current coaches for suggestions or email a former coach or teammate with a question. Then, follow through with their advice! They just might know something you don't, and it never hurts to try something new. If you constantly do the bare minimum, you're really good at just keeping your head above the water.
7. **Help your Peers.** Never underestimate the value of peer coaching. When you help someone in practice or competition, it serves as a reminder of what you should be doing, and you become much more aware of your technique or race strategy in the process. I always noticed how much better I raced and trained right after I coached a swim camp—I was forced to break things down in my own mind and go back to the basics. Identifying problems and conveying and/or demonstrating the correct way to fix them isn't always easy, but you will learn a lot about yourself as an athlete in the process.
8. **Think Positive, Train Positive.** I often refer to the basketball player who visualized 10 perfect free throws each day versus the basketball player who went and physically shot 10 free throws each day. The player who envisioned himself as a success out shot the player who physically trained. Our experiences aren't always rosy, but dwelling on the negative can be curbed. For example, when you choose to approach a workout or race with a positive purpose: "I'm going to attack every flip turn and see how efficient I can be...", then you will undoubtedly feel good about your goal—you may not out turn anyone in the process, but you are creating an edge and focusing on something that you can control. When you approach a workout or race with a potential negative: "If I don't put 5 yards on the people next to me off of every wall, I'm not going fast enough...", you are setting yourself up for failure! Positive energy has to begin somewhere, so it might as well be with you. Don't let the trials and tribulations of teammates, friends, etc... bring you down. By controlling your approach, you can control the outcome much more.
9. **Always End on a Good Note.** It is unrealistic to expect perfection daily. Elite athletes tend to be perfectionists and anything less than a stellar performance is often viewed as failure. How can you trick your body into feeling good? Use your drill sets and warm downs wisely and take them seriously. Remind your body of how you want it to feel at the beginning and end of a practice, and it goes a long way. When you take a few extra minutes at the end of a sub par workout to reinforce something as basic as good body alignment, you help maintain the correct muscle memory. This gives your body one last chance to feel efficient and athletic which then facilitates a better experience the next time you train.
10. **Don't Think, Just Go.** Once you've taken the aforementioned into consideration, here's my best advice yet: Sometimes you need to tune everything out and *just throw down*. A very prominent coach on the US National Team once told me that if you put a dart board in front of men, they look right at the bullseye and are so fixated on it, they don't notice much else. If you put a dart board in front of women, they look at everything surrounding the bullseye and their eyes never stay in one spot long enough to focus. In other words, men tend to throw down more often than women. Women notoriously spend more time thinking about the 'what if' rather than just doing it and they end up shooting themselves in the foot in the process—don't be your own worst enemy! Technique and strategy are essential components in athletics, but the inner drive and passion we have for competition is what it's all about. That's what makes me tick, and when I focus on too much at once, I lose sight of the end goal. As a coach, I am a huge stickler when it comes to swimming 'correctly'. However, I often remind myself that as an athlete, I relished the pain and loved knowing I put it all out there. Pretty simple, really. Just Go.