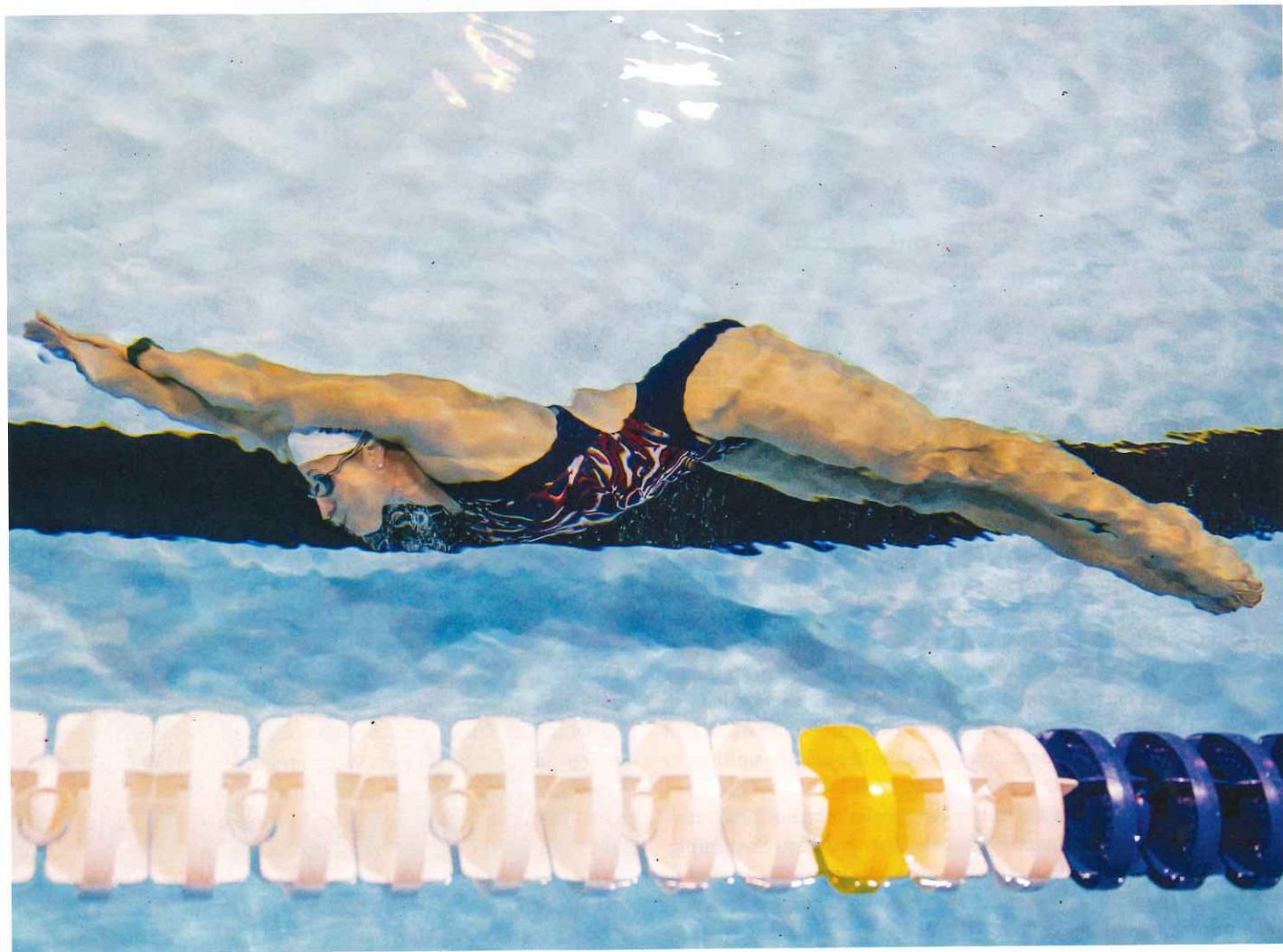


PSYCH SHEET

What Does it Take to Be an Olympic Champion?

Rising to the top takes a lot of practice but also certain mental characteristics that you can adopt



There are countless great swimmers, but only a few ever reach the Olympic podium. Training and talent have a lot to do with who makes it there, but when all of the top athletes have talent and have trained hard, what differentiates them?

In 2002, a group of researchers decided to look into this very thing, investigating Olympians who'd won a total of 32 medals between them. After interviewing the athletes, having them take numerous assessment tests, and talking with their coaches and their families, they published a paper in the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* that found these super performers shared certain psychological characteristics. They uncovered ones you'd expect: confidence, the ability to cope with anxiety, mental toughness/resiliency, sport intelligence, the

ability to focus, competitiveness, a strong work ethic, the ability to set and achieve goals, and coachability.

But the characteristics that were less expected were hope, optimism, and something the study called "adaptive perfectionism." Since then, they've seen their research hold true, noting these characteristics being displayed again and again in winning athletes.

It makes sense. These qualities help you weather everything that happens in a swim career (or in a practice, a week, a year, or a lifetime). "There are very few elite athletes who have a stellar career that's always on the upward trajectory. Ups and downs are normal," says study co-author Kristen Dieffenbach, director of the Center for Applied Coaching and

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Sport Studies at West Virginia University. These traits also help you stay positive and keep moving when you're not getting that external validation of outdoing yourself or your competitors in races.

Hope and optimism sound the same, but technically, hope is about having a sense of agency and pathways for goals and optimism is a general expectancy that good things will happen. Note that neither is about blotting out reality and just thinking happy thoughts, DiEffenbach says. But both help you be aware of the positives about what you have and what you can do with it as opposed to focusing on what's not available to you or what you can't change. It's taking the perspective of "I got a solid 30 minutes in the pool" rather than "I'm frustrated I couldn't get an hour."

Hope and optimism overlap in some ways with what the study called adaptive perfectionism but is better known as a growth mindset now. What it comes down to is "recognizing that a weakness is not a flaw but is something to embrace and an opportunity to grow," DiEffenbach says. "When we talk about weaknesses and flaws, people often adopt a mindset of 'I have a crack that needs to be fixed.' But when you fix a crack, it's still weak." And that can keep you from building something that's strong and successful. So DiEffenbach aims to help athletes frame their thoughts with the idea that there are areas you're good at and there are other areas where you need to grow.

For instance, suppose you didn't hit your splits in the key part of a workout. The honest fact is that you didn't hit them. But what separates the think-like-an-Olympian athlete from the wish-I-were-faster athlete is what you do with that fact. "In order to be successful, there really has to be this embracing of a growth focus [of] 'Where can I improve? Where can I change? What do I have impact over?'" DiEffenbach says. Ask yourself what it means that you didn't hit that split. For a Masters swimmer, it's not because "I'm as slow as dirt," she says. It might be because you're just not as focused as you need to be today because you know there's a big family/work juggling act coming on 10 minutes after you leave the pool or maybe you just didn't have breakfast. It's possible that you overestimated how fast you'd be at this point in the season or maybe your plan is off or something about your recovery isn't right. (Tip: "I just have to work harder" is unlikely to be the answer.)

As opposed to sticking with the "I'm just slow" excuse, see what would happen if you asked yourself "What can I do to change this? What can I do that will be most productive right now?" If you keep landing on critical thoughts, DiEffenbach recommends running through a couple of filters and asking yourself "Is this thought helpful? Is it true? Is it going to get me where I want to go next?" Not being able to answer yes to these questions means it's worth considering ways to change your thinking and your actions. If you try something and it doesn't work, no big deal. Change it again, and you'll be thinking like an Olympian.