

10 Misconceptions About Fast Swimmers

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Here is what you need to know:

- Top swimmers make it look easy, but in reality the path is littered with struggle.
- We tend to view fast swimming as this complicated thing. It's not.
- There is an illusion that fast swimming means that training, competition and life must go perfectly.
- Working hard isn't enough. One must work intelligently as well.
- In the age of *me-me-me*, fast swimmers need to be selfish and cut-throat. Not true.
- Success doesn't exist in a vacuum. There is a support system that holds up the elite swimmer.
- Elite swimmers might all seem to have a common recipe for success, but it's as unique as they are

1. It's challenging so it must be complicated.

Because it is so rare, we expect success at the highest levels to be extraordinarily complicated.

We imagine that the only way someone could swim so fast is by some miracle technique, some crazy unorthodox training schedule, or more increasingly, a miracle supplement (both legal and not-so-much).

I imagine that this is why we are so drawn to the shortcuts and the promises of limit-busting gear and supplements. *Finally*, the advertisements tell us, we have the tools to outsmart what it takes to be elite, to outflank and out-gadget it.

As a result, we begin to lean on them, to the point that we begin to neglect the things that truly matter.

Like technique. Showing up every day. [Doing it a little more and doing it a little better than the next guy or gal.](#)

When it comes down to it, performing well in the pool is *that* simple. Easy? Rarely. But simple? Almost always.

2. They did it alone.

Relying on the innate talent and physical gifts you are provided with is one thing. To succeed in a sport that requires constant feedback, the emotional support of friends and family, as well as the financial resources that comes with being an amateur athlete is another.

Some athletes believe that if they rely on the assistance of others over the course of their journey it somehow cheapens the end result.

Success doesn't happen in a vacuum, there will be those who affect your journey. Your parents, teammates, and of course your coaches will all play a big role in how far you take your swimming.

3. There is no room for mistakes.

We tend to avoid friction at all costs. And a certain amount of friction is counter-productive to our goals. To fail every set would be pointless. But to fail every so often in order to stimulate growth is essential.

Don't assume that the elite swimmers that surround you always make every set, or don't miss the occasional workout, or don't get down on themselves when things aren't going as smoothly as they would like.

There will be strife, there will be challenges, and there will be times where you outright screw up. Understand that messing up and falling short is a vital part of the process, and will provide you a far better lesson than succeeding every step of the way.

4. Once you get to a specific level, you are set.

We tend to imagine that once we achieve a specific level of success that we have "made it."

In some respects, staying at the top is more challenging than the ascent. Now that you have hit the top, a sense of complacency creeps in, added to the big red target that you now have hanging off your shoulders.

Michael Phelps learned this in the years after Beijing. Coming off of the sky-high triumph of the '08 Olympics the *Baltimore Bullet* found his motivation and commitment to the sport wavering. Coasting along on his talent and the work he had done pre-Beijing his grip on the international stage began to weaken.

In London he would still perform well, just not to the atmospheric standards that we had come to expect from the greatest swimmer of all time. He would lose the 200m butterfly, his signature event, while also placing out of the medals in the 400m individual medley on the opening night of swimming events.

Once you are at the top the work doesn't stop.

5. It doesn't matter who we surround ourselves with.

We tend to fall in line with the people that we surround ourselves with. If the swimmers in our lane are leaving a couple seconds early, it doesn't take us long to start doing so as well. If the swimmers in our group are chronically late, than we don't see it as a big deal to show up tardy as well.

Achieving big things in the pool is hard enough. Trying to chase down those big goals while the athletes around you toil in mediocrity is even tougher.

6. Hard work solves everything.

Hard work doesn't make you a fast swimmer; hard, *intelligent* work does.

Getting in and thrashing around at full throttle for 4,000 yards with horrible technique will certainly burn a whole heap of calories, but it won't make you a faster swimmer.

Fast swimmers not only train their butt off in the water, but they do it with purpose, and they do it tactically.

This means being disciplined to maintain good technical form even when you exhausted at the end of a set. It means focusing on their turns and breakouts even during sets that don't require full effort.

7. Success unraveled exactly the way they thought it would.

Swimming is a journey, a long one at that. Even over the course of one season a lot can change.

Your training situation may unexpectedly be uprooted, you might hit a surprise—but not altogether unwelcome!—growth spurt, or find one of your off-strokes developing at an unforeseen rate.

As a result, the goals we set for ourselves at the beginning of the year often come with a shorter than anticipated expiry date. And this isn't a bad thing.

Our goals should be as fluid and open to change as we are. Growth is difficult to come by with rigidity, and to be able to adapt is a skill that will serve you just as well in life as it will in the pool.

Being adaptable means that you welcome the new opportunities that open themselves along the way. It signifies that you are more willing to brave the bumps and unexpected turns in the road.

8. The best swimmers are naturals, they can just wing it.

We all had that kid on our team who showed up late every day to practice, didn't complete the sets properly, goofed off, and then when it came to meet time, thoroughly destroyed us. (Ahem, Ryan.)

The despair that results from this can be overwhelming—you trained your butt off, did everything correctly, and still this swimmer beat you like a rented mule when it mattered most.

The truly good swimmers don't rely on their talent, or luck, or being in the right place at the right time, they seize the talent and abilities handed to them and make the most out of them, using them instead of depending on them.

9. You have to be cut-throat and egotistical to succeed in the pool.

Successful swimmers are among the most generous with their time. You see them at camps working with youngsters, and at the top echelon of swimming superstars are exceedingly generous with their time.

Ryan Lochte, despite what one may think about his choice of tooth apparel during the London Games, and his attempt at becoming a reality television star, refuses to deny fans an autograph. As a youngster he was brushed aside by one of his swimming idols, and with that memory seared into his mind vowed to never turn away youngsters seeking an autograph.

Additionally, the top athletes in the world don't tie their accomplishments to the losses of others. To win against an opponent is never as satisfying as overcoming a competitor who is at the top of their abilities.

They understand that the value of their victory is tied to the level of the competition.

10. You have to develop at a specific rate, by a specific point, to be successful.

Comparison is the mother of all ways to completely discourage yourself. If no two people are alike, than how is it fair to compare yourself up against a swimmer whose path, physical dimensions and innate skills are completely different than those you possess?

One of my favorite swimmers from the 1990's was Bill Pilczuk. Not because he achieved a whopping sense of success—he book-ended [winning gold at world championships in 1998](#) in the 50m free by just missing qualifying for the 1996 and 2000 US Olympic teams—but because he took his own path.

Coming out of high school he was offered zilch in terms of scholarships, had to pay his way while walking on to Auburn, and then didn't achieve “success” until he was 26 years old at the Perth worlds.

His path, far from the typical age group prodigy to NCAA stand-out to international contender, is a powerful reminder that our swimming careers, our expedition towards the summit of our abilities, are wildly different.

At the end of the day you need to be comfortable in knowing that your own journey is going to be completely and uniquely yours.