

10 Things That Have Nothing to Do With Talent

by Olivier Poirier-Leroy

Got big goals in the water, but are feeling doubtful because you might not have enough talent? Or perhaps you haven't hit the genetic lottery like the teammate you have that is built like a starting power forward for the LA Lakers?

Don't let this get you down—success in the pool, while certainly influenced by talent and physical characteristics, usually comes down the “other” stuff...

The work ethic. The focus. The details.

You can be the most talented athlete on the planet, but if you don't have a work ethic to match it, your potential will never be realized. Similarly, if you show up and bust your butt every day, you can at least partially outwork a lack of natural ability.

Here are ten things that you can crush in the pool that have nothing to do with how talented you are:

1. Effort.

Of course we had to lead off with this. Talent is nice. But it is ultimately something you have very little control over.

It's something we can also easily use as a poor source of comparison-making: we look at the ease of an elite swimmer and how simple they make things look and get down on ourselves.

What can you control?

The effort you give each day at practice.

2. Your self-talk.

If there is one mental training trick or technique you should employ during your journey towards whatever flavor of awesomeness you are chasing in the water, it's managing your self-talk.

Why is it so powerful?

Because ultimately, **the self-talk you use directs your emotional state and the subsequent physical response.**

It starts with knowing when your self-talk gets away from you—*“Maaaaan, I can't do this set. Too hard”*—and adjusting it to squeeze more high-performance from your training: *“Okay, this set is stinky hard, but I will give the first round a ripping effort and then see how I feel.”*

3. Being first in the water.

It's likely you have had a coach or teacher who liked to use the expression, "If you're exactly on time you are already late."

Show up and be ready to work. Make sure the pool is set-up. Be the first in the water when practice starts. It costs you nothing to do this.

Rushing and being harried out the outset of your warm-up and playing catch-up is stinky. The workout, for you and your teammates, goes better when everyone is on the same page.

4. Being a good teammate.

Are you contributing to a positive team culture? Are you helping to push your teammates and friends towards their goals?

Doing so isn't a total selfless thing; you benefit from a better team culture in a big way as well. A shared purpose and goal will keep you accountable to your individual performances and training.

5. Using positive body language.

The workout has gone up on the board, and it's something you are really not feeling. A round of $n \times 100$'s on fastest possible interval. Or a timed 2,000 kick for time.

Wahoo, right?

So, what happens? Your arms get crossed. You roll your eyes. You slouch your shoulders. While this kind of stuff seems harmless, it shows that you've already given up on the set and workout. Your [body language has an impact on your performance in the pool](#).

6. Coachability.

Being coachable means that you are open to (constructive) criticism. It means you have the humility to know that you don't know everything.

One of the sneaky realities about elite swimmers is not that they never make mistakes; they are simply **able to identify and correct them faster, speeding up improvement**.

Instead of making the same mistakes over and over again, whether it's in your race plan, your attitude, or your technique, [being coachable means you can be vulnerable enough](#) to be able to listen to what you can build upon.

7. Being prepared.

This falls in line with having a crazy-awesome work ethic. Preparation is something you ultimately have total control over.

You don't wait until two weeks before the big meet to start working your turns and dives. They are things you are working on from day one.

Similarly, it means you show up on deck every day with your gear, your nutrition taken care of, ready to do work.

8. 5%.

Is there room for you to be 5% better when it comes to your swimming and lifestyle choices? At the end of the day, your races and competitions aren't won and lost by much.

The difference between first and second (or first and eighth) is usually only a couple percentage points. **You don't need to be twice as good. You just need to be a little bit better than you were yesterday.**

When you do things 5% better, working that much harder, being that much more focused, eating a little bit better today, those little wins steadily pile up and accumulate into a sizable difference when it comes to the end of the training cycle or season.

9. Focus and deliberation.

How many of the countless meters you perform in practice are completed with full attention on swimming as well as you can?

Effort is one thing, and is prized for sure, but effort without deliberation means that you are simply burning a lot of calories while ingraining poor technique and inefficient motor patterns.

Although we live in a culture of distraction, being swimmers disconnects us from our smart phones and "real life" (to an extent) and lets us get lost in our thoughts. Those thoughts can take you to La-La Land, or they can be zeroed in on swimming with deadly precision and efficiency.

10. Being high-performance all the time.

Some swimmers work their brains out at practice, but then wonder why they aren't improving when they treat their body like a five-alarm dumpster fire when it comes to eating, stress management, sleeping, and other lifestyle choices.

How well can you honestly say that you are taking care of yourself between practices? Again—small differences in a few areas can make a big difference here: an extra half hour of sleep per night. Swapping out sugar-laden drinks for water. Eating better at lunch.