

## 7 Things Swimmers Can Learn from Nick Saban's "How Good Do You Want to Be"

**What can an elite college football coach teach swimmers about perseverance, mental toughness, and swimming faster than ever? Lots.**

Here's a review of just some of the things swimmers can learn from Nick Saban's book on leadership, *How Good Do You Want to Be? A Champion's Tips on How to Lead and Succeed*.

Nick Saban, head coach of the University of Alabama's vaunted football team has dominated the college scene over the past decade and a bit. Since 2003, first with LSU, and five more times since then with the Tide, Saban has won six national championships.

His approach to coaching, developed while at MSU with psychiatrist Dr. Lonny Rosen, places an emphasis on **the process**: the act of focusing and executing the next play (or the next lap as it relates to us), and not getting overwhelmed thinking about the outcome.

From understanding the (other) benefits of hard work to staring adversity in the face, you don't need to be a football player or coach to learn from one of the top coaching minds on the planet.

In his book, ***How Good Do You Want to Be? A Champion's Tips on How to Lead and Succeed***, Saban distills the approach that has led him to success over and over again, in the process (ha!) becoming the most dominant coach in college football.

Here are some of my favorite quotes, along with my own thoughts and applications to swimmers, of what Coach Saban can teach you, the enterprising swimmer or coach, about how to be successful in the pool.

### [\*] Opportunities come when you work hard.

You know who the Sideline Swimmer is?

It's the athlete who waits around for those golden opportunities. The perfect moment. The time where they "feel like it." They figure if they wish and hope hard enough that good things will magically happen to them.

One day, it'll be their time.

But being successful doesn't work this way.

By working hard every day, by showing up and doing the main sets to the best of your ability even *when you don't feel like it*, not only are you going to improve at warp-speed, and enjoy the confidence-boosting effects of taking action, but you will also be ready when your chances to come a-knocking.

*"...those who can handle the hard work that it takes to be successful will always be more prepared to take advantage of opportunities."*

You see this particularly with the swimmers who work their tails off in the pool, but because they didn't hit the genetic Powerball will only ever go so far in the sport.

That doesn't mean the things that come along with working your tail off—increased leadership, enhanced confidence and belief in one's self—don't create even better opportunities down the road.

### **[\*] Doing it right crushes the short-cut every time.**

We compete in a results-oriented sport. It goes without saying.

Because of this, swimmers are judged by their last performance. For the swimmer who has a dip in performance they are “washed up” and for the swimmer who has a breakout performance they are the “next \*insert superstar swimmer's name of your choice here\*.”

And because we are so hell-bent on that gold medal, that best time, or that national standard, **the way is often lost in the shuffle**. In our hurry to sneak around the hard work in swim practice, or find a way to “outsmart” the competition with some new training technique, or find a way to game the system so that we can achieve success with more ease, we forget the basics.

**The “secret shortcut” isn't secret, and it isn't a shortcut, even though it is the quickest way to get there:**

*“Be positive about additional tasks and continually challenge yourself in your work. This axiom may sound trite and elementary, but some of the most basic ideas are monumental and are often lost in the frenzy of getting ahead.”*

### **[\*] Your ability to work hard and do what others won't is what sets you apart.**

You can't control genetics. You can't control talent. And there is often little you can do about the training environment you find yourself in, particularly as a young age grouper.

But there is one thing you can do to pull ahead of the swimmer in the lane next to you. It's not slick, it's not easy, and it requires continual commitment and dedication. Put another way, it's tough. It's simply separating yourself via your work ethic.

*“Most things are difficult, and your willingness to work through those difficulties will set you apart from the competition.”*

### **[\*] Don’t “spend” your practices. Invest them.**

When you hear the term spending, what do you think of? Generally, it’s a wasteful sentiment: “I spent all practice thinking about my homework.”

When you think about it, *spending* a workout is pretty easy. There’s so many of them, after all. Dollar, dollar bills y’all.

But what if, instead of *spending* your swim workouts, you started *investing* them? What if, instead of doing the workouts you actually invested all of your effort and energy into maximizing the opportunity you have today.

While it may not sound like a big difference, the gulf between the two is ginormous:

*“Investing time means something much different. Investing time means spending it for a worthwhile purpose; to work toward something, to accomplish something that will help you achieve.”*

You can spend a couple hours at practice doing the sets as described. You can swim through them, perform it all to a so-so level of satisfaction.

Treat each workout like a \$10 bill: Because it seems like a small amount, you can blow through it, spending it and satisfying a small amount of short-term gratification; or, you can invest it and set it aside as a contribution to a better performance in the long term.

Your call.

### **[\*] Boost the quality of your workouts by only worrying about starting.**

The tough workout always looks intimidating when viewed in its entirety.

When we sit back and think about a full 6,000m workout and the laps it’s going to take, all those moments where you are hanging off the wall heaving, and the massive sum of effort a two hard workout requires, it’s no wonder procrastination and doubt races up our spine.

It’s the finishing part we get fixated on, and as a result we worry only about completing the workout in one piece. So what happens next? We hedge our effort, swimming just conservatively enough through the sets in order to conserve energy and effort before we finish the workout in a final flurry of effort (ahem, Sammy Save-up).

We end up sacrificing **quality over quantity**. Instead of doing each lap, each set, each stroke cycle to the best of our ability, we pump the brakes and hold back.

This leaves us with a completed workout, sure, but completed at far below your potential, and if you waited until the last couple reps to actually try, that means about 95% of the opportunities you had for improvement are left behind you in the pool when you hop out and slide over to the hot tub.

*“Promise a starting time, but not a quitting time.”*

Saban is talking quality over quantity in this respect: no matter how long the workout is done, it will be completed correctly. If the intensity isn’t there, or the drills and sets aren’t being executed as expected, they will be re-done.

### **[\*] Expect things to be tough.**

I’m gonna come right out and say it: Expectations guide your behaviors and actions. If you expect things to be a cake-walk, if you expect the sets to fall easily before you, than your mindset is in for a free-fall the moment you experience even a little bit of adversity.

On the other hand, if you walk onto the pool deck with a positive outlook that the workout is going to be hard, and that the road to success is difficult, than you are better braced for the inevitable difficulty and hardship that is going to come hurtling down at you.

*“Your disposition and your expectations about what it will take to get you where you want to go are truly the core of not getting frustrated by the task at hand. Expect it to be hard.”*

The **wishful thinkers are always the ones who end up the most disappointed.**

Be realistic about how challenging things are, and don’t fall for the fallacy that you are the exception to the whole “lots of hard work = a better chance of success” thing.

### **[\*] Adversity is your chance to truly improve.**

If we have two swimmers, one who is willing to persevere even just a little bit more often through the tough breathing-pattern sets, the long, “boring” aerobic work, and maintain their technique for just a little bit longer, and the other, who gives up the moment things get tough, which one do you think will be the better swimmer by the end of the season?

*“Adversity creates opportunity.”*

You know the answer: it’s going to be the swimmer who uses setbacks, adversity and challenges as tackling fuel, err, jet fuel.

No matter how talented you are, how prepared you are, or how physically stacked you may be, if you cannot view adversity as a chance to get seriously better, you are in serious do-do.

*“You persevere when you can look adversity in the eye and see it as a challenge.”*

When American Mike Barrowman, favored to win gold at the Seoul Olympics in 1988, placed fourth, he could have retreated to the shadows. No one would have thought any less of him.

Instead, [he turned the setback into a comeback](#) of epic proportions: over the next four years he would shatter the world record in the 200m breaststroke a stunning six times, the last of which was a gold medal winning performance at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. His attitude was that he would use the painful memory of that loss to propel him to greater heights.

This kind of attitude is [especially prevalent amongst super champions](#)—one paper took a group of elite athletes who reached the pinnacle of their sport and compared them up against the “almosts”, a group of athletes who came close but never quite got there. One of the key differences was the way they approached setbacks. Where one athlete viewed injury as a game-ender, **the super champion used it as motivation to come back stronger than ever.**

That setback can either be the thing to defeat you, or you can strive to make it the best thing that has ever happened to you.