New Year's Resolution:

Teach Resilience

FUEL for the COACH: Feeding the MIND, BODY, and SPIRIT

Building Resiliency in Your Swimmers

By Bo Hanson – 4x Olympian, Coaching Consultant & Director of Athlete Assessments

No one will ever forget seeing Greg Louganis recover from his poorly executed preliminary dive at the 1988 Seoul Olympics where he struck his head and bled into the water. During that reverse 2½ pike dive he suffered a concussion. However, in his very next dive, despite his obvious injury, he earned the highest single score of the qualifying. He then went on to repeat the dive during the finals, earning the gold medal by a margin of 25 points. This performance was once explained to me by a mentor as an example of a person having phenomenal *recovery strategy* skills.

This made so much sense then and still today. What the best athletes, and the most successful people, have in common is *not* that they do not make mistakes. They all do. However, they do have an incredible ability to *recover* from these mistakes. These athletes have a well-developed recovery strategy, whether it is conscious (known to themselves) or unconscious (they perform this strategy unknowingly). Either way, we view athletes with a well-developed recovery strategy as being resilient.

Defining Resilience

Defining resiliency is relatively easy. Simply stated:

> *Resiliency is the ability to bounce back positively after a mistake, mishap, loss or any negative situation.*

Defining the skills and behaviors of resilient people is not as simple, as there are a range of skills involved. It is critical to realize that resiliency is not a personality trait or behavioral style. Resiliency is a skill anyone can learn.

After reading this article, we trust you will be better positioned to coach and teach resiliency to your swimmers. At Athlete Assessments we believe that technical and physical ability is only a starting point to being an effective performer. To truly maximize these abilities, swimmers (and others) need to develop the non-technical or non-physical aspect of their sporting behaviors. This is where developing a mindset of resiliency comes in.

Research into Resiliency

Through many experiments by researchers such as Martin Seligman, the phrase *'Learned Helplessness'* was developed. This refers to the condition where a human (or animal) has learnt (been conditioned) to behave in a helpless manner. **This condition sees an individual take no action to recover from a failure or unsatisfactory situation because they feel any action will not help them in any way.** Through past experiences, these

people have learnt to do nothing, as in their past experience, any action they did take had no impact on improving their situation. This is why when they are confronted with a negative situation, they 'put up with it', stoically manage the difficulties, often complain to others, and yet do nothing to change their situation for the better.

Human beings learn this behavior the same way animals do. The big difference is that humans can also acquire learned helplessness by watching and observing others close to them suffer the condition. **This is a negative aspect of the modelling process. It serves as a reminder for us as coaches (and parents) that our primary role is critically important in *not teaching* learned helplessness to our athletes or children.** We must always look, act and consciously try to improve our situations, regardless of whether it appears hopeless to do so. We must always try to change any unwanted situation for the better.

Now that you have some insight into the research that developed the understanding of resiliency, we now present 6 ways coaches can help their swimmers (and also themselves) to become more resilient individuals.

6 Tips to Develop your Swimmers' Resiliency:

#1 Reframing

This is a simple concept which most people likely do already. However, the point is to become more conscious of the reframing process, so it can be performed when demanded, particularly in the pressure of a competition environment. Reframing is the process of changing the way you view a situation or event. Instead of viewing something in a negative way (that means associated what just happened with being negative), we can choose to view it in a more productive way. For example, instead of viewing a loss as failure, you can choose to view it as a learning experience of what to do better next time.

You cannot change the result, but you can change what the result means and what something means is what we CHOOSE to associate with it. This is what reframing is all about. It is not about being purely positive, but more importantly being productive with your thinking. A loss is still an unwanted result it is just that now, I am choosing to say to myself, "What do I need to learn from this?" "What did this result teach me?"

Resilient athletes see a loss as a valuable opportunity to learn from their performance. They can even view the winner's performance as a learning tool. Other reframes include turning the question of "*why did I not perform well?*" to "*how can I improve next time?*"

A problem can be better reframed as a great challenge to overcome and test your skills. Before a race or competition, an athlete can reframe their nerves as "*because I feel this way, I am going to have explosive energy to use*".

The choice is yours in terms of what meaning you wish to attach to events and situations you are confronted with. Just make sure the meaning you attach is helpful to your performance.

As a coach it is your role to suggest the reframe for your athletes by asking them questions and guiding them through the process. There is a time after a poor race result where they are disappointed, but not yet ready to move on. In coaching this swimmer, we need to start asking them questions as to how they are feeling, or what they think of their performance. Then start questioning what they felt they could have done better in the race and move towards asking them to put a plan together for the next race (and what they intend to do differently). Then talk about how any race is just an opportunity for feedback on your performance and how swimmers need to learn each time they race and from their learnings, create a better plan for their future races. The mark of their character is what they do next and the improvements they intend to make.

#2 Control and Influence Model

At some point in time, most athletes have been (or should be) exposed to the 'Control and Influence Model'. This is a model for understanding those situations, events and challenges which you have 100% control over, those situations you have influence over, and the situations you no influence or control over. Essentially, we need to spend our energy dealing with those situations where we have control and influence, and not consume any energy over events over which we have neither.

When I was rowing, one thing I had no control over was the weather. Now there was a time, when rowing in rough water would annoy and frustrate me. This only led to poor results and a reputation of being a poor performer in difficult conditions. My coach helped me realize that I could not change the conditions, but I could learn techniques to become better in those conditions. By the time I entered my final fours years as an athlete, I was unbeatable in rough conditions. It got to the point where I hoped the conditions would be rough. When the water was rough, I knew I could deal with it so well that I did not have to row "hard", but instead could work my technique. I enjoyed this challenge (another reframe) knowing that most others would struggle. This was another reframe - I chose to believe others would struggle in poor conditions. Whether this was true or not did not matter. I believed it and it helped me.

Coaches need to understand this model and then question their swimmers over what is within and outside of their control. You can have them make a list and ask them to note where they most spend their time and energy. This exercise helps the swimmer notice where energy is best used and also wasted.

#3 Modelling Resilient Behavior

Modelling is a process where you observe someone who displays behavior which creates results you desire. For example, a successful swimmer being used as a model for other swimmers to learn from. Modelling is about replicating the thought patterns, actions and emotions that successful results are based on. It is these three essential process which create our outcomes. Rather than trying to reinvent the wheel, swimmers can create a shortcut to success by noticing what already successful swimmers do. This becomes the starting point for performance. Each swimmer then makes distinctions to the modelled process so that it suits their unique self.

To coach this, ask the swimmers to find a role model either within their squad or even from another sport. This role model should be one who has demonstrated resilient skills. Ask the swimmer to tell you about their story and what they believe makes them resilient. This helps the swimmer begin to identify behaviors of resiliency and is a critical step in learning how to do them themselves. Swimmers within the squad can share stories and examples. Next, a coach can ask the swimmers what behaviors they have which are similar to their role model or what key behaviors they feel like they need to improve to be more like their role model.

#4 Attribution of Success or Failure

Research clearly states how resilient people attribute their success to those elements they can control or influence. This means their success is not someone else's responsibility or related to external circumstances. The same is true for any poor performance. Resilient people attribute poor performance to something they "did" or the great performance of their opponent. They do not attribute it to who they are. For example, if a swimmer loses the final, they are more likely to say "*today my opponent swam an exceptional race*" or "*today I felt I could have executed my technique better and made better choices at those critical moments*". *They are accountable to what they can control.*

This is different to an athlete who lacks resilience and says ("*I am not a good swimmer. I didn't belief in myself or did not trust myself to take risks*"). What this swimmer is actually doing is defining in their identity (who they are) their inability to be a good swimmer. Whenever someone says, "*I am …*" they are stating that they are their behavior. This is a reflection of their self-esteem. Make sure you clearly define the difference between who you are and how you behaved or performed. A resilient person's identity is more than their actions and results.

Coaches can help teach their athletes this by focusing on their choices of language. Listen to what your swimmers say about themselves and help them see the difference between their actions and behaviors versus their identities. Gently correct their language and tell them why you do this.

#5 Attachment to a Support Team

Resilient people always have a strong support team of people they trust, have acceptance from, feel secure and safe with and like they belong. This is the essence of what we call attachment. In order to boost resiliency, one must feel as though they are exceptionally well supported. How much support one needs differs in proportion to the challenges they feel they are facing. When an athlete is confronted with a significant obstacle or if they have been knocked down by a certain event, those with a great support team are likely to manage that situation more effectively than those who don't. This means a faster recovery.

Coaches act as the primary supporter for their swimmers. To help your athletes further, create a stronger team of supporters such as alumni, fellow swimmers (create a team environment) and members of the community who are interested in being part of the "team". Once you have done this, try to connect your swimmers to this support network through social functions and having these supporters attend practice so they also feel part of the team.

#6 Highly Developed Technical Skills

Athletes who are exceptionally technically competent are usually more resilient to setbacks in their performance. Athletes who have experienced poor performance and have a high skill level realize that recreating a successful result is not about reinventing their whole process. Instead, they know all they have to do is recall times when they had previous success, and go back to the technique which delivered this success. This helps them rebound faster than less skilled athletes who need to also be thinking about the establishment and improvement of their basic skills. We can also refer to this as an athlete's technical reference point (the technical focus point which acts as a reference point to look for, hear and feel). This reference point then acts as a spring board to recreate an effective future performance.

Coaches can develop this in their swimmers by showing them video footage of when they are at their best and asking them questions as to what they see themselves doing well and how this is giving them better results. What coaches need to do is to embed these technical processes and images in their athlete's minds so they can refer back to them at will.

Where to from here

It is important to remember– as coaches we are responsible for an athlete's whole development. Gone are the times when all a coach had to do was teach technique. The defining factor in a swimmer's performance is not going to be their technical skills but rather their non-technical skills. Of those non-technical skills, being resilient is a foundation skill. Writing this article reminds me to improve my skills in this area. I firmly believe all of us can

continue to develop and provide a learning experience for those around us. As a consequence we will provide a role model example of how to behave.

You can watch a video of Bo discussing how to coach resiliency in sport at: www.bit.ly/CoachResiliency

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