



Before Hustling to Finish, Relaxed Is a Good Way to Start

By GINA KOLATA

Published: October 1, 2008

LIKE so many people around the world, Dr. Michael Joyner was transfixed watching [Michael Phelps](#) swim in the Summer Olympics. But while many of us focused on Mr. Phelps's world records, Dr. Joyner, a competitive Masters swimmer and an exercise researcher at the [Mayo Clinic](#), noticed something else.

"I have never seen anyone so relaxed in the water," he said.

Relaxation. It is a trait that is often underappreciated, coaches and athletic trainers say. Yet it can make the difference between doing your best and not doing well, between feeling dragged down or soaring. Coaches search for better ways to teach it. And many athletes, including some of the world's best, work on it constantly. An ability to relax while pushing hard, exercise researchers say, is one reason why winners win.

"It's the paradox of athletics," said Rick DeMont, associate head coach for men's swimming at the [University of Arizona](#) and a former Olympian. "Tension is slow, tension is inefficient. You need to be relaxed." And relaxation can be taught.

"If a person is willing to learn, they will learn it," said Ralph Reiff, a certified athletic trainer and director of St. Vincent Sports Performance Center in Indianapolis.

Coaches agree.

"Some started in a better position than others, but nearly everyone I've ever had can improve," said Clyde Hart, the director of track and field at [Baylor University](#). Mr. Hart has coached some of the world's best runners, including Michael Johnson and [Jeremy Wariner](#). He now coaches [Sanya Richards](#), who won bronze and gold medals at the Beijing Games.

Yet relaxation also is a mysterious state and hard to describe. It's one of those situations in which you know it when you achieve it.

Athletes who get there "always feel wonderful," Mr. DeMont said. But, he adds, "you don't get there by trying really hard to get there."

In a sense, relaxation goes against most athletes' instincts. Mr. Hart likes to point out the way elementary and middle school children run. "The kids throw their heads back," Mr. Hart said. "They think that the harder they go, the faster they run." That sort of body tension is the first thing Mr. Hart tries to correct. "The quickest way to improve a kid is to teach him to relax," Mr. Hart said.





But it's also important for athletes to realize that relaxing does not mean slowing down. "A lot of athletes don't know the difference between relaxing and not running," Mr. Hart said. With runners, he said, the upper body must relax but, he added, "the lower body is going to run."

One of his tricks is to have athletes concentrate on relaxing their eyes. "If they're wide eyed, they're tense," Mr. Hart said. "I tell runners to run sleepy eyed. It's like pouring a soothing oil over the body." As the eyes relax, the face starts to relax, the jaw relaxes and then, Mr. Hart said, he tells runners to let the feeling spread through the shoulders and arms.

"You want your arms to be your rhythm," he said. "They may not help you, but they can hurt you big time if your arms are tense and you are gripping your hands tightly." Mr. DeMont said that in track and swimming it helps to relax the lower jaw and make sure you are breathing with your diaphragm and your stomach.

And Mr. Reiff said that he tells runners to stay tall, avoiding the rolled shoulders and tight upper body form that comes with fatigue and being too tense. He tells them to rehearse the phrase, "stay tall" to themselves while they run. And, he said, coaches or a friend on the sideline during a race can shout it out if a runner shows tenseness. "If you are a coach on the sideline and holler to your runners, 'stay tall,' all of a sudden they lift themselves out of that position," Mr. Reiff said.

People like Michael Phelps, these experts say, are masters of relaxation, able to get into a rhythm and stay there even with the intense pressure of Olympic competition. For example, Mr. DeMont said, when Mr. Phelps swam, his stroke count remained the same in every lap. A tense and inefficient swimmer, he added, will take more strokes with every lap of the pool. Mr. Phelps, he said, "was able to nail it every time." He is, Mr. DeMont said, "a rhythm master."

COACHES and athletic trainers say athletes always know when they relax. Mr. DeMont asks people to remember the best they ever did in a race or in training. "Think of how darn good it felt," he said. "That's the feeling you are after."

It makes sense to Dr. Joyner. He explained that when people start to train and compete, these experiences of being relaxed happen at random. "But if you pay attention you can increase the odds of them happening again and again," he said. "To me this is what people talk about when they say they are 'in the zone.' "

It happened to Dr. Joyner recently when he ran a half marathon after what he said was minimal training. Somehow he finished the race in 1 hour 38 minutes, a result that shocked him.



“It’s a strange thing because at some level you are reading the fatigue and ‘pain’ from your body and using it to get and stay right on the razor’s edge,” he wrote in an e-mail message. “I put pain in quotes because you hurt, but it is not painful in the traditional sense because you are using it and you are not fearful and are just sort of ‘right there.’ ”

“It was interesting when I ran that half marathon,” Dr. Joyner said. “I had not run a race in like 11 years but I was able to get right into a rhythm and just sort of do it. What did Yogi say? ‘It was like déjà vu all over again.’ ”

“At some level,” Dr. Joyner added, “everyone I know who has been a hard-core endurance athlete for many years is a covert religious mystic due to these types of experiences.”