

SWIMMER DEVELOPS MENTAL SKILLS TO HELP SECURE SPOT ON OLYMPIC TEAM

CHAGRIN FALLS, Ohio – July 2012 – Claire Donahue’s biggest dream was to go to the Olympic Games, but after her recent performance in the 100-meter butterfly at the USA Olympic Swimming Trials in Omaha, Neb., she is setting new goals. Her race qualified the Lenoir City, Tenn. native and Western Kentucky University (WKU) graduate for a spot on the U.S. Olympic Swim Team.

“Before the Trials my goals were number one to have fun, number two to have a good race and maybe a best time, and number three to go to the Olympics. Now that I met that goal, I need to reevaluate. I used to tell myself if I reached just one of those goals I’d be happy,” said Donahue. “Now I will still focus on having fun, which I know I will, then to have a good race and a personal best time. My number three goal now will be to get an Olympic Medal.”

“I am 23 and have been swimming for 17 years, but it wasn’t until I started to prepare for the Olympic Trials that I worked with a psychologist. As athletes, we know a certain amount of mental skills, but at this level we look for every advantage and that is why my coach suggested I work with Betsy Shoenfelt, Ph.D., who is a professor of psychology at Western Kentucky University,” said Donahue.

Dealing with Nerves

“Four years ago, when I swam at the Olympic Trials, it was extremely nerve-wracking and it actually hindered my time and my place a little bit,” explained Donahue. “I’ve really been working on controlling my nerves and it was the suggestion of my coach that I start working with a sport psychologist.”

“It’s just been fun to watch Claire progress,” said WKU swim coach Bruce Marchionda. “She came in as a freshman and did not qualify for the national championships. Then her second year, she qualified for the national championships, but did not score. Her junior year she qualified for the championships and was fourth. Her senior year she qualified for the national championships – got second. Just making the finals at the Olympic Trials is a phenomenal accomplishment.”

“At this level when the difference in making the team is hundredths of a second, we were looking for anything that would give Claire an edge,” said Marchionda. “I think it was priceless for her to be able to work with Betsy Shoenfelt on being able to handle anything that might come along like a sub-par performance at a race, an audience of 13,000 people, the pressure of making the team and the journey to get there with all the hard work-outs. The different perspective and mental rehearsal for the race helped so much and by the time Claire got to the race she had already done it hundreds of times in her mind. It was great to have Betsy as part of our staff—she was excellent.”

Developing Mental Toughness Skills

“I have worked with WKU athletes and coaches teaching mental toughness skills and team building for the past 29 years,” explained Shoenfelt, who is a Licensed Industrial/Organizational Psychologist, and CC-AASP. “My training is in Industrial/Organizational Psychology with a Sport Psychology second emphasis and in both areas, I have a performance orientation rather than a clinical or counseling orientation.”

“Claire was completely focused on swimming her own race, with all of the components that make her a great swimmer. That is exactly what she did. She swam a great race and came in second beating six other swimmers in the Finals that included a number of previous Olympic Medalists. Claire swam a new personal best of 57.57 seconds, which ranked her 6th in the world in the 100m fly. Now she is a contender for a medal at the Olympics,” added Shoenfelt, who was thrilled to be at the Trials and witness the results of their teamwork.

According to Donahue, she worked with Shoenfelt a short period of time—about eight months. “I met with her every week and sometimes she would come and watch me swim. She came to the Trials too and for the Olympics I will still talk to her and I have printed sheets with me to remind me of our work. Most of the mental skills will come natural now. She helped me focus on the 3 Ps – present, positive, performance – to keep a positive outlook and turn negatives into positive.”

“Swimmers can really benefit from mental training. There are some people who are great in practice but at a big meet they psych themselves out; or they are very negative at practice and that impacts the entire team,” Donahue added.

For details on Shoenfelt’s mental skills training and motivation techniques see accompanying article: “A Closer Look at How Mental Skills Training Helped Prepare Donahue”

The Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) promotes ethical practice, science and advocacy in the field of sport and exercise psychology. Founded in 1986, AASP is an international, multidisciplinary, professional organization that offers certification to qualified professionals in the field of sport and exercise psychology. With more than 1,500 members in 39 countries, AASP is a worldwide leader, sharing research and resources with the public via its website, www.appliedsportpsych.org.



A CLOSER LOOK AT HOW MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING HELPED DONAHUE

During an eight-month period, Betsy Shoenfelt worked weekly with Claire Donahue to give her the mental edge she needed for the Olympic Trials. With the approval of Donahue and her coach, Shoenfelt shared some of her techniques—information that is typically confidential between an athlete and his or her sport psychology consultant.

“One of the important things for Claire was her ability to separate the context from her task. The context is all of the potentially distracting things in the environment. The task is to swim 100m – the same task she has performed successfully a thousand times,” explained Shoenfelt. “She was able to focus really well in the preliminary round and swam a personal best of 57.83 seconds – the second fastest time of all 126 women in the 100m fly trials.”

Perfecting Practice

“Her practices over the past nine months leading up to the Trials were extremely demanding. So, our first focus working together was to help Claire remain motivated during these grueling practices.” Shoenfelt shared those important details:

- We **set goals for the important components of her swim**. The goals helped Claire focus her attention and provided feedback that enabled her to track her progress over time. Goals were set for things like stroke maintenance (maintaining proper form and technique even when she was very tired), underwaters (staying strong after the turn while under water), and turns.
- She also **set goals for percentage of positive self-talk and for visualization**. Claire had used visualization previously; we worked together to help her learn positive self-talk. Claire kept a notebook with all of her goal charts. The progress she made was gradual, but by tracking each goal she could see the great progress she made over the months of practice.
- **Keeping perspective** – if working hard today made the difference in making or missing the Olympics could you find the energy to go hard all practice? Of course.
- I would look for **quotes or other stories that might help motivate her**. I would give these to her. One that Claire found helpful was from a Women’s Sport Foundation story on Title IX. It quoted a previous Olympic gold medal swimmer who talked about how she had to practice hard even when she did not want to with everything she had – she still had to go hard. It was only a minor part of the story, but Claire could see how this previous gold medal swimmer experienced the same exact thing she was dealing with.
- We also used some **simple techniques for motivation**. For example, when she had really tough combinations of sets for practice, we broke it down into smaller pieces. If she had to swim six 200’s, it can seem overwhelming, but if you ask yourself can you swim one 200 – the answer is sure, no problem. Another technique was, for example, if she had six sets, putting six pennies on the end of the pool and moving one each time she completed a set. Simple, but it showed progress and the feedback helped Claire stay motivated.

Performance Focus

Additionally, Shoenfelt worked with Claire on the performance components of her swim:

- We discussed how repetitions of her swim components leads to **automaticity** (performance that is completed without attention, is more efficient, and faster than performance that we are consciously monitoring) and how this is especially important for performance in stressful conditions. You just do it. Claire focused on automating the components of her swim.
- We used “**performance thoughts**” for certain components of her swim to help her focus on key components. For example, for the turn she used the performance thought “see the wall, give your all, knees up” – this summarized what she needed to do at the turn. By repeating this as she trained, she helped to automate that component of her swim.

Mental Toughness Training

Finally, the focus on teaching mental toughness skills was another important component of the preparation:

- We spent a substantial amount of time with **positive self-talk**. Claire learned to recognize negative self-talk, to stop it, and to replace it with positive self-talk.
- Focus – during practice and especially during competition to **focus on the 3 P’s** – the Present (what is happening right now, not the past or the future), Positive (the desired performance, not all of things that could go wrong), and Performance (focus on the process/performance not the outcome of the performance).
- **Problem Solving Skills** – Claire had a tendency to worry about “what if’s” She learned to look at the concern and determine if it was realistic. If it was a realistic concern, she used visualization to see herself dealing successfully with the situation. Then if it did occur, she already had practice with the situation and knew she could handle it successfully. If it was not a realistic concern, then she used positive self-talk to deal with it.