

From parlor-room to swimming pool

Hypnosis helps leap mental blocks

Hypnosis. The mere mention of the word continues to conjure up images of palm-readers and parlor-room performances.

But a quiet hallway near Leighton Pool isn't exactly what one would call a parlor room. And the man holding court for some Oregon swimmers doesn't plan to levitate his subjects.

Instead of "your eyes are getting very heavy," the words are

"concentration," "stamina," and "strength."

The words have a calming effect. By some definitions, the swimmers are being hypnotized, but actually it is self-hypnosis, says the man — Oregon men's swimming coach Rich Schleicher.

"It's training the mind to overcome mental blocks," Schleicher says.

Despite the skepticism surrounding such hypnotic techniques, he contends that they work.

Schleicher should know. For the past seven years the swimming coach, who holds a Ph.D. in psychophysiology, has incorporated hypnotic techniques into swimming on a voluntary basis.

Since his arrival at the University, Schleicher has successfully used self-hypnotic techniques in Oregon's training program. "I don't care if you're talking about sports or anything else," he says. "Everyone has mental blocks. And those blocks can be overcome."

Overcoming self-imposed barriers, there for one reason or another, is what Schleicher strives to do. "I train people how to understand those barriers and work past them on an individual level."

"I couldn't just go out and hypnotize somebody. I'd have to know them, know what they react to, which words to use to be effective. And then, I'd be teaching them how to effect themselves."

"Everything we use, they can do."

Schleicher's interest in self-hypnotic techniques and athletics began while he was working on his master's degree at the University of Illinois. He became interested in the attraction and hypnotic effect of various charismatic leaders.

A chance to make his own observations came when he was hired by the University of Evansville as the swimming coach. There he was able to formulate his hypothesis.

He observed that college swimmers peaked in their senior year and seemed able to mount the starting blocks and ignore anything about them.

This power of concentration, he observed, was similar to hypnosis.

His first chance to apply his theory though came while he



Rich Schleicher

was at Illinois. One day a swimmer came to him, exhausted after swimming only a few pool lengths.

Schleicher taught the swimmer to focus his thoughts, visualize a single object and breathe deeply. The swimmer entered an induced trance.

The coach then set the stage by having the athlete swim a series within a set time. He did it — down to the second.

From there, the "self-imposed" technique found its way to Oregon.

And Leighton Pool became a place of intense concentration.

"It's not a cure-all or a panacea," says Schleicher. "But there is something to focusing your attention. Telling your self you can do anything."

"It's the same technique athletes have used for years to 'psych' themselves up. I've only developed a more concrete and workable focus."

**Story by Tamara Swenson
Photo by David W. Zahn**

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