

Memo To: TAC Community
From: Derek Wall
Executive Director
Subject: Fuel, Focus & Recovery
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Dear TAC Families,

Thank you to the swim-parents who recently reached out with thoughtful questions and topic suggestions. I genuinely appreciate when members of our community ask *why* things feel the way they do for young athletes, and how we can better support them.

Two recent questions stood out:

- How should swimmers think about fueling *before, during, and after* a meet weekend?
- How can younger athletes mentally decompress or reset after competition?

While those questions may seem separate on the surface, they are often closely related. Both point to a deeper, and very common, experience for young swimmers:

By the end of a meet weekend, many athletes aren't just physically tired. They're mentally and neurologically fatigued as well.

This memo is intended to help explain *why* that happens, what's normal, and how families can support their athlete's energy, both physical and mental, without adding pressure or complexity.

What a Swim Meet Really Demands

A swim meet is more than a collection of short races.

For many athletes, especially in the middle school and early high school years, a meet weekend often includes:

- multiple days of early mornings and late nights
- long periods of waiting between races in conjunction with constant stimulation from the loud atmosphere, announcements, and crowds
- emotional highs and lows tied to performance
- repeated (re)activation of focus, nerves, and decision-making
- disrupted sleep routines
- and, of course, repeated physical effort

Even though races themselves are short (much less volume than a regular practice), the *total load* on an athlete's system is significant.

That load doesn't only show up in the muscles. It shows up in the **nervous system** – the part of the body responsible for focus, coordination, emotional regulation, and energy availability.

Understanding that helps explain why a swimmer may appear “burned out” by Sunday, although their training and fitness are strong.

Mental Stress Counts as Training Load

When we think about stress in sport, we usually think about physical training – practices, yardage, intensity, and recovery.

What's less commonly understood is that the body responds to **mental stress** in many of the same ways it responds to physical stress.

Situations such as:

- worrying about results
- second-guessing race strategies or splits
- feeling pressure to perform (friends, parents, coaches, social media)
- absorbing negativity or uncertainty
- fear of disappointing others (coaches, parents, teammates)

all activate the same stress-response systems in the body that training does.

Mental stress causes the release of cortisol – a hormone that plays an important role in helping us respond to challenges. In appropriate amounts, the release of cortisol is useful. But when overall stress becomes elevated for extended periods of time, it can interfere with physical performance in very real ways.

Athletes may experience:

- slower reaction times
- reduced coordination
- increased perceived effort
- difficulty accessing speed or rhythm
- feeling “flat” despite being physically prepared

In other words, an athlete can be well trained and still struggle to express that training if their nervous system is overloaded.

This is not a reflection of toughness or motivation. It's biology.

Why Trust Matters So Much for Performance

One of the most powerful performance supports for young athletes is certainty, or trust.

When swimmers trust:

- their coaches
- the training process
- that mistakes are part of development
- that their parents are proud of them regardless of outcome

their nervous system can operate in a more stable state.

That stability allows the body to allocate energy toward movement, coordination, and racing rather than toward stress management.

This is why simple messages can matter so much on meet weekends:

- “We love watching you compete.”
- “We’re proud of your effort.”
- “Trust your coach and race what you’ve trained.”

These messages reduce background stress, and reducing background stress often improves physical performance more than any last-minute technical advice ever could. One simple framework many families find helpful is keeping communication centered on just a few consistent themes – regardless of outcome:

1. **Give Today’s Best**
2. **Be Coachable**
3. **Have fun!**

These messages reinforce effort, attentiveness, and enjoyment – all things fully within an athlete’s control.

When expectations remain clear and consistent, athletes experience less background stress and greater confidence. Over time, that emotional stability supports both performance and long-term enjoyment of the sport.

Why Rest Can Feel Uncomfortable – and Why That’s Normal

Another common experience, especially leading into or during important meets, is that athletes feel restless or “off” when training volume decreases.

This is true at every level of the sport.

When training load drops – whether due to taper, rest days, or lighter sessions – athletes often report:

- feeling antsy
- difficulty sleeping
- excess nervous energy
- feeling slower or less sharp
- questioning whether they’re “ready”

This does not mean the athlete is losing fitness.

What’s happening is simple: the body is rested, but the brain is accustomed to frequent stimulation.

Without that stimulation, cognitive readiness can temporarily feel dulled even though the athlete is actually becoming *more* prepared.

Understanding this helps normalize the experience and prevents athletes from trying to “fix” it by doing too much.

Staying Sharp Without Adding Fatigue

The good news is that maintaining readiness does not require more training.

Neuromuscular sharpness – reaction time, coordination, timing – is preserved through **brief, low-fatigue stimulation**, not conditioning.

For many athletes, especially younger swimmers, this can be accomplished through short, fun activities that engage the brain without taxing the body... and (importantly) without working outside of their coach's plans! This works with (not against) all types of taper strategies.

Examples include:

- simple reaction-time games
- light coordination challenges
- partner-based reaction drills
- quick-response activities using balls, lights, or visual cues

These types of activities:

- keep neural pathways engaged
- support confidence and readiness
- provide an outlet for nervous energy
- can be social and fun when done appropriately

Importantly, they do not replace training – and they should never leave an athlete tired.

Used thoughtfully, they can help swimmers feel connected, alert, and prepared without interfering with recovery or taper.

A Note on Phones and “Rest” at Swim Meets

It's also worth addressing something we see frequently at meets – and something athletes often believe they are doing for the right reasons.

Many swimmers turn to their phones between races as a way to “rest” or pass time. The intention is understandable. Meets are long, and athletes are looking for distraction or recovery.

However, from a nervous system standpoint, scrolling rarely provides the type of rest athletes actually need.

Social media and constant digital input stimulate the brain rather than calm it. They increase cognitive load, emotional fluctuation, and comparison – all at a time when an athlete's system is already highly activated from competition.

While the body may be sitting still, the brain is often becoming more overstimulated.

This can interfere with:

- emotional regulation
- awareness of hunger and thirst
- focus and readiness for the next race
- meaningful recovery between sessions

In many cases, athletes believe they are “recovering,” but their nervous system is receiving signals that keep it in a heightened or scattered state.

By contrast, simple alternatives, even brief ones, tend to be far more supportive:

- talking with teammates
- light movement or stretching
- eating and hydrating intentionally
- short reaction or coordination activities
- quiet time without constant input
- listening to music

This isn’t about eliminating phones entirely. It’s about understanding what truly helps the body and brain recover during long meet weekends. Many professional and collegiate athletes intentionally reduce or eliminate social media use during taper and competition periods to support focus and recovery. While that approach isn’t right for everyone, it can be worth experimenting with to see what helps an athlete feel most settled during meet weekends.

I’ve experienced many of these same dynamics firsthand in my own triathlon training and competition. Even as an adult, it’s easy to underestimate how cumulative stress, inconsistent fueling, and overstimulation can affect focus, emotion, and performance – especially across long competition weekends. The lessons for young and aging athletes are often the same: when energy is supported consistently, everything feels more manageable. When it isn’t, even simple things can feel harder than they should.

Fueling: Supporting Energy Across the Entire Meet Weekend

Once we understand how much stress and stimulation athletes experience across a meet weekend, fueling begins to make more sense.

Fueling goes beyond preparing for a single race. It’s about maintaining enough available energy to support:

- focus
- emotional regulation
- coordination
- decision-making
- recovery between sessions

For young athletes especially, inconsistent fueling may not show up as “low energy” in the traditional sense. Instead, it frequently appears in more subtle – yet meaningful – ways.

Athletes who are under-fueled may experience:

- emotional swings
- irritability or withdrawal
- difficulty refocusing between races
- loss of rhythm late in the weekend
- feeling mentally “done” before the meet is over

This is one reason many swimmers appear to fade on Sundays – not because fitness is lacking, but because cumulative energy availability has declined across multiple days.

It's important to understand that these are physiological signals. They don't reflect poor preparation, character flaws, or motivation issues.

Fueling Supports the Brain as Much as the Body

When we think about fueling, it's easy to focus only on muscles and physical output. But fueling plays an equally important role in supporting the brain and nervous system.

Carbohydrates, fluids, and electrolytes are more than performance tools – they help stabilize mood, concentration, and emotional regulation during long, demanding days.

If fueling becomes inconsistent, athletes don't simply "run out of gas" physically. More commonly, we see:

- emotional crashes between sessions
- behavior that is emotionally reactive or overwhelmed and frustrated
- difficulty accessing focus or rhythm
- a stronger need to mentally "check out" once the meet ends

In this sense, a strong desire to decompress after a meet can sometimes be a signal that the athlete's system has been running on limited energy – both physically and neurologically.

Fueling supports *availability*: allowing the body and brain to access speed, coordination, and decision-making that already exist.

When energy availability is supported consistently, athletes are better able to stay regulated throughout the weekend AND recover more effectively afterward.

Why Carbohydrates and Hydration Matter

Carbohydrates are the body's most accessible fuel source for both muscles and the brain.

During long meet days, the brain is constantly active: processing information, regulating emotions, maintaining focus, and responding to stress. When carbohydrate availability drops, the brain is often affected before the body.

When we talk about hydration, it's also important to recognize that hydration is not achieved through water alone. Electrolytes (including sodium, potassium, and magnesium) play a key role in fluid absorption, muscle function, and nervous system signaling. Without adequate electrolytes, large amounts of water may not be effectively utilized by the body. Again, the goal isn't precision or supplementation strategies – it's awareness that hydration is about balance, not just volume.

Even mild dehydration can impair concentration, reaction time, and mood – well before it impacts performance in the pool.

This is why athletes who are under-fueled or under-hydrated often don't simply feel tired – they feel overwhelmed, unfocused, or emotionally flat.

Consistency Over Perfection

One of the most helpful mindsets for meet weekends is this: Consistency matters far more than precision.

For most young athletes, fueling works best when it is:

- familiar
- simple
- frequent
- easy to digest
- early and often

Meet weekends are not the time to introduce new foods or aim for perfect nutrition. They are the time to support stability.

Small, regular intake throughout the day often supports athletes better than large meals spaced far apart – especially when nerves and schedules affect appetite.

The goal is not to optimize nutrition or test fancy solutions – it’s to keep the system supported.

Fueling as Part of Recovery

Fueling shouldn’t end after a race, or after a swim meet.

Between sessions and at the end of each day, replenishing energy helps prepare the athlete for the following morning – both physically and mentally.

If recovery fueling is delayed or skipped, athletes often carry that deficit into the next day, making it increasingly difficult to maintain focus, motivation, and emotional balance as the meet continues... or as their busy school-week starts.

Again, this isn’t about strict rules, expensive supplements, or numbers. It’s about recognizing that energy must be replenished regularly – just like sleep.

“My Athlete Is Too Nervous to Eat” – A Common and Understandable Challenge

One concern we hear often from families is:

“My swimmer gets too nervous to eat before practice or competition.”

This is extremely common – especially for younger athletes and during periods of growth or higher expectations.

When the sympathetic nervous system is activated, digestion (part of the parasympathetic system) naturally slows. This is not a flaw or a lack of discipline; it’s part of the body’s built-in stress response working to divert energy to where it is needed most.

Earlier in this memo, we discussed ways to reduce unnecessary background stress and support nervous system regulation. Those strategies often make fueling easier simply by helping the athlete feel calmer and more settled.

At the same time, there is another important concept worth understanding:

The Stomach Is Trainable

Just like muscles, coordination, and race skills, the digestive system can be trained.

Athletes who regularly eat before practice teach their bodies to digest food while moving. Over time, this reduces discomfort and improves tolerance – including in higher-pressure environments like competition.

When athletes *only* attempt to eat before races, the experience can feel unfamiliar and uncomfortable. But when the same foods are practiced during normal training days, the body learns what to expect.

This is why gradual exposure matters.

Starting with small amounts, using familiar foods, and practicing intake before select practices can help athletes become more comfortable fueling both physically and mentally.

Over time, this builds confidence and predictability, making fueling before competition feel routine rather than stressful. When athletes are consistently fueled before, during, and after meet weekends, emotional “peaks and valleys” often become less pronounced. This supports more stable performance and can make post-meet recovery (including the need to decompress) feel smoother and more manageable.

Practice Is Preparation

The goal is not to eliminate nerves entirely, as some level of excitement is normal and even helpful. The goal is to reduce uncertainty.

When athletes know:

- what foods work for them
- when they can tolerate intake
- and how their body responds

they are able to carry less stress into competition.

That confidence supports both performance and enjoyment and allows athletes to access the training they’ve already done.

The Bigger Picture

Learning how to manage energy – physical, mental, and emotional – is part of long-term athlete and human development.

These are not just swim skills. They are life skills. Learning to manage energy, regulate emotions, and perform consistently across long, demanding days – these capabilities transfer to academic testing, college schedules, career challenges, and any situation requiring sustained focus and resilience.

When young athletes learn how to:

- fuel consistently
- regulate stress
- trust the process

Developing Swimmers
For Lifelong Success



- recover intentionally
- stay connected to teammates

they develop confidence, resilience, and independence that extend far beyond the pool.

Our goal at TAC is to do more than prepare athletes for their next race, it's to help them build tools they can rely on throughout their athletic journey and beyond!

Thank you for investing in young athletes - whether as a parent, swimmer, supporter, or someone who believes in the power of youth sports done well. Your engagement helps us create an environment where swimmers can thrive, grow, and build skills that last a lifetime.

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'DWall'. The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

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