

# **BOUNCING BACK FROM FAILURE**

By Alan Goldberg

*Learn how to handle bad races, tough losses and big disappointments*

It was your best event. It was supposed to be your race. You were supposed to go out there, kick butt and make a statement. Your training had gone well all season long. You were tapered, feeling strong and ready to swim fast.

So what happened?

You totally blew it! Your start was just south of a turtle's, your stroke felt way off and your turns were sloppy. Instead of dropping your time, you ended up adding several seconds.

If that weren't bad enough, you got totally destroyed by your archrival who had no business beating you. All season long, you out-trained and dominated her in this event, then, when it counted the most, you completely bombed! Your grandmother could have gone faster, and she doesn't even swim!

To say that you're disgusted with yourself is the understatement of the year. You feel like a total loser. To make matters worse, your coach seemed disappointed in you after the race. You could see it in his eyes and hear it in his voice. Not only did you let yourself down, but you went and let him down too.

Suddenly, you can't stop the tears from flowing, and the only thing you want to do right now is scratch the rest of the meet, run home and find a hole that you can crawl into for a few weeks.

Welcome to the emotional roller coaster that is competitive swimming!

Like it or not, you now have a "free pass" to ride these lows and highs throughout the remainder of your swimming career. Regardless of the level at which you currently swim or how far you'd like to go in this sport, the one thing that you can always count on are these emotional ups and downs.

One meet, you're on top of the world, racing fast, feeling happy and confident; and the next, you feel super-bummed, as if you're the slowest in the pool and totally overwhelmed by self-doubts.

Take a moment right now just to memorize how awful you feel after that bad race because within the disappointment, frustration and self-directed anger that you're experiencing lies the secret to you becoming a champion in the pool.

Believe it! Right smack in the middle of your worst races and biggest disappointments are the keys to your future best races and swimming success. Let me explain.

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## **Don't Worry, Be Happy**

Far too many swimmers misuse their failures and disappointments as a stick with which to beat themselves up emotionally. When they have a bad race or tough loss, they use it as concrete evidence that there is something wrong with them and that they just aren't good enough.

As a result, they get incredibly negative and put themselves down. To these swimmers, failure feeds their already low self-confidence because they use it to reinforce their belief that they lack ability as athletes.

However, if you interpret your failures and bad races in this way—as proof that you're not good enough---then you'll kill your motivation and seriously limit yourself as a swimmer. More important, when you beat yourself up emotionally and get down on yourself after a bad swim or tough meet, you will end up distracting yourself from discovering the specific and very valuable information that you need in order to go faster the next time.

What I'm saying here is that your bad races and tough losses are just like a box of Crackerjacks. There's always a surprise inside!

If you look closely enough at your bad swims, you should, with the help of your coach, be able to figure out exactly what you did wrong. Perhaps you got too nervous before the race. Maybe you were breathing into and out of your turns. There may have been a problem with your kick. Then again, you might have shortened your stroke at the very first signs of fatigue, and that's why the back half of your race was so slow. Or maybe you wasted too much mental energy focusing on another swimmer during the last 50.

This kind of specific feedback is absolutely priceless because it always instructs you in a positive way on what you need to do differently the next time you swim that same event.

In this way, your bad races are necessary for you to have good ones, and your failures are necessary for you to have successes.

What I'm saying is very simple and important: you can never become a champion without failing enough. No one gets really good at anything without first being really bad at it! In this way, your failures in the pool are the perfect stepping-stones to your future successes because they provide you with all the information necessary to improve consistently and go faster.

This doesn't mean that you have to like failing. As a matter of fact, I've never met a champion who does! Most great athletes hate to lose with a passion because failing is truly the pits! It's frustrating, discouraging, and it flat-out feels terrible.

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You don't work hard, sacrifice and suffer through brutal practices day after day just so you can lose and feel good about it. However, the one thing that every champion knows is that you can't get to your dreams without a healthy dose of failure and disappointment thrown in along the way. Your job as a swimmer is to learn to deal with these kinds of down times differently.

## **Get Curious, Not Furious**

Starting today, you need to change your relationship with failure and losing. Losing should *not* be considered "the enemy" or something that you need to avoid like the plague. Stop wasting valuable energy before or during your races freaking out about the possibility of not getting that time or losing.

The fact of the matter is that if you're a competitive swimmer, losing and coming up short is just a natural part of the sport. It comes with the territory regardless of how fast you are. The more important issue here is to determine what can be learned from the loss or failure.

The question that you need to get in the habit of regularly asking yourself after disappointing races and meets is, "What can I take away from this race or meet and do differently next time?"

You should want to get curious after a failure rather than furious. Far too many swimmers get angry with themselves when they swim poorly. Getting furious with yourself after a bad race or tough loss will never help you improve as a swimmer! On the contrary, it will undercut your confidence and prevent you from learning anything important.

Instead, put your detective hat on, get curious and try to figure out exactly what you did wrong. This will help you come up with a constructive plan for what to do differently in the next meet.

This specific approach toward setbacks and failures is one of the main characteristics that separate the best from the rest in this sport. Simply put, champions always fail better than everyone else.

The best in this sport know that failure is simply feedback. It's valuable information on mistakes that need to be corrected or weaknesses that need to be strengthened. It's this kind of feedback that can ultimately help you to become a winner.

Don't ever fear failing because failure is feedback, and feedback is the breakfast of champions!

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