

# EARNING CONFIDENCE

BY LENNY WEIRSMA, PhD//Correspondent

Peter is a swimmer who performs well at small meets where he knows going in that he will be successful, but folds at big meets where success is not easily attained.

Meghan had immediate swimming success when she was young because she was much bigger than her competitors, but her peers caught up after their own periods of growth, and now she is not as successful as she used to be.

If Laura has a bad first race in a meet, her coach can predict that she will not do well in her next 3 races. Peter, Meghan, and Laura have all learned a painful but important lesson: confidence can be very fragile. In a sport measured in centimeters and milliseconds, when many hours of training lead to just small improvements in performance, confidence can be easily shaken. Pressure from ourselves—as well as from our coaches and parents—lead to high expectations that, if not met, can drastically drain our motivation and enjoyment. All told, confidence is one of the most important and hardest developed aspects of swimming.

Confidence is the product of two primary things. First, and most obviously, it is the result of past success. When you get a best time, win a race, or qualify for a big meet, you are more likely to believe that future success is attainable. It is therefore no big surprise that the most accomplished swimmers also seem to have the most confidence before a big meet or big race. So the most obvious way to build confidence is to be successful.

The only problem is, success generally doesn't happen overnight, and it can seem to be limited to a tiny percentage of those who compete. Only so many swimmers qualify for certain meets, fewer yet make finals, and only two or three in each event get publicly rewarded for their performance.

Luckily, confidence is also the product of one's effort and character. To be successful, one has to first accept that whenever we set out to reach a goal, failure is likely. So you have to have some pretty thick skin when you don't experience success immediately, or regularly. You have to accept the fact that the most satisfying accomplishments are those that take years of hard work—and failure—to accomplish.

The best way to do this is to commit to doing the small things right, every day, such as practicing dolphin kicks off the walls, not breathing during the last 10 yards in the 100 freestyle, or being willing to work hard in practice even when you don't feel like it. You can also define success in a variety of ways, not only those measured in numbers. Chasing down the next-fastest swimmer at the end of a race, refocusing on your next race even when your first race went poorly, or encouraging a teammate when she is tired are all fundamentally important aspects of swimming that, if practiced, greatly increase your chance of future success.

The next time you are about to go to a big meet, create your own "I Know" list. Write down a list of statements starting with the phrase "I know." (For example, "I know I have a strong kick." "I know I can control my emotions." "I know I am fit," etc.). Read this list to yourself before you go to bed the night before the meet, again while you parents drive you to the meet, and again while you are changing into your racing suit. The confidence you get from the knowledge of the little things you have done should give you an edge over the pressure you may be feeling before the race.

When all is said and done, doing the little things can pay off in tremendous ways, inside and outside of swimming. Your commitment to training, your character and your ability to be positive in the face of failure will all be traits that lead to confidence in every area of your life.