

Conquering the Fear of Failure

by David Benzel

I was recently asked by a parent, "How can I help my child get past the fear of failure." An athlete's fear comes from disappointing experiences and exists on three different levels. So the question must be answered on several levels and I'll use a swimming pool metaphor to expose the depth of this common challenge.

"I Didn't Perform"

On the shallow end of the spectrum, a poor performance creates the fear that it's going to be repeated. The answer: "Turn your fear into aggression." Energy is energy, so why not use nervous or fearful energy and convert it into aggressiveness. This fear comes from a silent question like, "What if I strike out" or "What if I choke?" The athlete who hears that thought and quickly responds with, "So, what am I going to do about it?"

immediately puts his mind to work finding a solution that prevents it from happening! It's a proactive approach that gives control back to the athlete.

"I Didn't Win"

A slightly deeper fear comes from losing, especially when it happens repeatedly. The most helpful answer comes from examining the real reason for competing. If the only goal is to win (victory, trophy, championships) then you are always at risk of losing and the fear of losing can cripple all efforts. However if the purpose is to learn (new lessons, new strategies, new techniques) then an athlete is guaranteed success in every practice and at every competition. There are no failures, there are only lessons. When you focus on the lessons learned not only will you learn more, you'll also win more! It's simply a matter of focusing on what creates wins, rather than focusing on wins.

"I Am No Good"

At the deepest end of the fear pool is the most terrifying fear of all –"The problem is me." These questions reveal the real truth: "Does the outcome of any effort –win or lose success or failure –define me?" "Am I the mistakes I make?" "Is any one performance a verdict, or judgment about who I am, or my worth?" The answer to all of these questions is "NO!" The outcome of any effort is only feedback; it is not who you are. Fear of failure is, at the deepest level, a fear that a performance is a judgment about personal worth, and that's a fallacy that must be conquered. Your child's true value as a person and as an athlete comes from an inherent worthiness that was given at birth and does not depend upon today's performance for validation. Conversely, a child is not suddenly worth more because he wins. Sport is something your child does, it's not who he is.

Fear always comes from negative thoughts. When an athlete chooses to believe in herself, and authors positive affirming thoughts every day in practice, fear is edged out and finds no place to dwell on game day.