

COPING WITH PRE-MEET JITTERS

I get very nervous before I race. I am always good at swim practice but the night before a meet and the day of the meet I have butterflies and get sick to my stomach. I made Sectionals this summer and would like to make Junior Nationals this season. Is there anything you recommend to calm my nerves? Thank you for your help!

Jacqui

Dear Jacqui,

Thanks for writing! This is a great question because it applies to athletes at every level. From age groupers petrified of getting on the block for their first race to national champions who lose their dinner before a big night swim, nerves affect everyone at some point. There are many reasons to feel nervous leading up to a race. The first step in learning to manage your nerves is to recognize that you are always in control.

A major factor in dealing with nerves is confidence. If you are working hard in practice, constantly finding ways to improve and placing trust in your coach and their training plan, then you should be stepping up to the block at each meet feeling great about your preparation and confident in your ability.

Nerves appear when doubt sets in. Obsessing about competitors, second guessing yourself and questioning your ability are triggers for doubt. Fortunately, we have the ability to control what we choose to think about. Believing in your ability to succeed and knowing that you have done everything within your power to prepare to race can help to erase doubt and keep nerves at bay.

Another way to control the butterflies is to find ways to balance your mind and emotions before your competition. You want to be in a positive place mentally in order to perform at your best. Finding a balance between being too hyped before a swim or completely disengaged from a performance is critical to your success. Listening to music, hanging with a friend and going to a movie are examples of methods athletes use to ensure they are in a good place mentally and are cool, calm and collected when it's time to perform.

A last recommendation would be to visualize. Find 10 quiet minutes each day and spend time walking yourself through your swim. No detail of this process is insignificant. Imagine what you're wearing, what the pool smells like, how bright the lights are, what song will be playing on your iPod, how you want to feel your first 25 and what place you'll be in. Don't be afraid to be vivid! By replaying your race in detail repeatedly before you swim, it allows you to be comfortable in the moment. By the time you step to the block, you might have been there a dozen times already. Visualization is a powerful tool to have in your arsenal and certainly something to add to your pre-race routine.

As you enter the winter season I hope that some of these tips help. Remember that swimming should be fun! Some butterflies are normal and should always be expected, but never forget that you are in control of your thoughts and emotions. Make them positive and enjoy the process! Best of luck!