

# P IS FOR PERFECTIONISM

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Wouldn't we all like to be perfect and live a Ferris Bueller type of life? Of course we would, but reality makes perfection pretty hard to achieve. I know far too many swimmers who, when they don't have the perfect race, are extremely hard on themselves. This article will focus on the concept of perfectionism and how to encourage individuals to be OK with being slightly less than perfect.

### Striving for Perfection

Are you one of those swimmers who expects every race to go exactly as planned? If so, that's great! I love the optimism! Not to rain on your parade, but the likelihood of you dropping time in every event in every race you ever swim is kind of slim. Believing you can do it is fantastic because that demonstrates you have confidence in yourself, which is extremely important when it comes to sport. However, perfectionist thinking can create problems before, during and after races.

"Perfectionists" often have pre-race anxiety because they look around the pool, see whom they are racing, and assess how they will do in comparison. Totally normal, until people with this personality take it to the next level and have abnormal amounts of stress over the "what ifs" (what if I lose, what if I don't perform well, etc...). So while they have high expectations for themselves (which is good), they worry obsessively about perfection, which interferes with their performance.

I have worked with athletes who expect so much of themselves that if someone passes them during a race they give up almost on the spot. They unconsciously provide themselves with a reason why they didn't win. Basically, at the end of the race they can save their ego and tell themselves "I didn't try my hardest. That's why I lost." If you fall into this category, ask yourself, "Would I rather lose knowing I could have given more or swam my best and it not have been good enough?" Typically, the disappointment of not having been as good as you thought you were fades while the frustration of having given up lasts much longer.

After races, perfectionists often focus on what they could have done better. They may have won by a body length or dropped half a second, but they focus not on how well they did but on what else they could have done. As such, they are rarely happy with their performance and eventually their overall enjoyment of their sport will decline.

My advice? Strive for perfection but allow room for error every now and then. It's the pursuit of perfection that makes you great, not perfection itself.

### But I've Been There Before

You may have had that one "perfect" race where you were confident, had a great start, flawless technique, sharp turns and a superb finish. It felt so good you just wanted to bottle it up and do that every time. It is good to believe you can have that type of race consistently. The problem is not in believing this can reoccur, it's in trying to force it and then being disappointed when it doesn't occur. When you force perfection, it doesn't happen. When you trust yourself to be as close to perfect as the circumstances allow, then you're giving yourself the best chance to at least be in the vicinity of where you want to be.

### Perfection Continuum

Perfection doesn't have to be an absolute; it can be a matter of degrees. Evaluate your race on a continuum:

1) Awful— 2) Could Do Better —3) Good—4) Pretty Good—5) What I Trained For

If at the end of the race you can say to yourself, “That’s the type of race I trained to have,” you should be happy with your performance. You may decide your race was “pretty good.” Maybe it wasn’t exactly like you planned, but it had more of what you wanted than what you didn’t. That’s ok, too. Sometimes “pretty good” is good enough. I’m not suggesting you set out for “pretty good” before races, but sometimes you have to be OK with the way you swam. You don’t have to be elated, but you can be content. However, as I said before, you want to strive for perfection (i.e., work to have the race you trained for) not just to be content. If you fall in the “awful” through “good” categories, it is actually a good sign when you’re slightly unhappy because that means you’re competitive. If you have one of those not-so-perfect races, realistically evaluate what you did well and what you could have done better and use this evaluation to create goals for the upcoming practices and meets.

### **Keep at It**

Wanting to be perfect is a great quality. Too many people waste their talent because “good enough” is always good enough and they are satisfied with just getting by. I’d take someone who is disappointed with anything less than perfection over someone who doesn’t even care. However, if you find that your perfectionist tendencies get in the way of your performance and enjoyment then maybe you need to give yourself some slack. You may just find that you’re actually much better when you expect perfection but allow yourself a bit of breathing room. Regardless, if you are less than perfect, keep working at getting there since hard work will at least get you closer to perfection.

Make it great!