

# **ABC's of Mental Training: W is for Winning**

From USA Swimming website – Aimee Kimball, PhD, CC-AASP



People often belong to two camps: 1) Winning is the source of all things good or 2) Winning is the source of all things evil. Frankly, when it comes to sport, either can be true but the reality is winning is as important as you make it — which is neither good nor bad. This article discusses the concept of winning, from the good, to the bad, to the ugly.

## **Love to Win**

Personally, I love to win, and I'm not ashamed to admit it. One problem I see with the current generation of athletes is they are often too reserved. They won't admit how much they want to win and how confident they are in their ability to win. I love confident swimmers who come into my office with some well-deserved swagger and talk about winning like it's a given rather than something in question. Coaches sometimes get criticized for telling swimmers to go out and win it or for pushing them to out-swim everyone else. Somewhere along the lines people decided focusing on winning was a bad thing. I disagree. Focusing on winning is perfectly fine. The problem really occurs when the **ONLY** focus is on winning. Overall, the athlete who enjoys winning and sets it as one of his/her goals is doing something

all athletes should—competing to be the best, which gives them a much better chance of achieving their best.

### **It's Not All About Winning**

Success isn't defined by how often you win. Winning is simply one way to assess your abilities. To me, athletes are successful if they do everything they can (physically, mentally, nutritionally, etc...) in pursuit of being their best.

No matter how much you want to win, train to win, and deserve to win, it doesn't always happen. There will be times when someone is better. There will be times when you're not at your best. That doesn't mean you're a failure. It just means you didn't win that race. No biggie, you will live to swim another day. Ultimately, you don't control whether you win or lose. All you control is doing everything you can to put yourself in the best position to swim well.

Remember, winning is a by-product of your hard work. Winning is a reward rather than necessity.

### **Winning Can Get Ugly**

If you, your coaches, or your parents make swimming all about winning, you are in for a lot of headaches. When sport becomes all about winning, enjoyment tends to go out the window. You spend too much time in the pool not to enjoy it. Athletes whose sole focus is on winning: a) are often dissatisfied (because they don't always win), b) have trouble transitioning to higher levels of competition (especially if they won most of the time at lower levels), c) burnout, d) let one bad race impact their next event, and e) have significantly higher anxiety before races.

Coaches who focus only on winning place a lot of stress on their swimmers. They often make the mistake of pitting teammates against each other, which increases anxiety and decreases confidence, enjoyment and camaraderie. Parents who focus too much on winning make their children feel less important if they lose. These swimmers can feel like their parents' love is conditional on the outcome of their

meet. Swimmers who have parents who emphasize winning above all tend to be more anxious because they focus on not disappointing their parents or what their parents will say if they lose. When you have a combination of athletes-coaches-parents who all emphasize winning, unhealthy behaviors can result (i.e., eating disorders, overtraining, psychological and emotional issues).

### **Strive to Win**

Most people have heard of the concept of “Fear of Failure” but what few people realize is that some athletes do have a “Fear of Success.” While less common, in theory it does exist since some swimmers think about the pressure that results if they constantly win. They think about the expectations others will have for them and wonder how they will be able to live up to those expectations. They recognize how much harder they will have to work to continue to be successful and to drop even more time. My question always is, “why fear success and what comes with it?” Instead of worrying about what comes next, enjoy the fruits of your labor. You’ve won because you’ve earned it. No one handed a victory to you. You logged the miles and put in the time and energy. You developed your talent.

All sport, regardless of whether it’s in a pool, on a track, field, or court is about seeing what your potential is. There will be a day when your competitive opportunities end. Until that time, strive to win. Better yet, strive to be your best—in and out of the pool—and if that results in winning, then congratulations. If it results in improved times, then congratulations. If striving to be your best results in fitness, enjoyment and participation in what can be a lifelong sport, then that is the best reward of all and certainly makes you an all-around winner.

### **Make it Great!**