

Tapering: How Do You Deal With A Missed Taper? -- October 11, 2010

Feature by Michelle Berman, Swimming World intern

PISCATAWAY, New Jersey, October 11. HAVE you ever had a taper where things did not go quite as planned? How do you pick up and keep going when everything you have worked so hard for ends terribly? And, as a coach, how do you explain to your athletes that what you had them do all year did not play out?

A taper is commonly known to most athletes as a time in which practices start to get increasingly easier as the date of the championship meet arrives. Many athletes experience the pain of a failed taper at least once, if not more, throughout their careers. The very few who never experience a failed taper have a lot to be thankful for.

A crucial part of the tapering process is the coaching behind it. Having a coach who can be by your side through both failure and success is important to overcoming a failed taper. Phil Spiniello, the head coach of Rutgers University's women's swimming and diving program, is a strong believer in both coach and athlete taking responsibility of a failure.

"Hard work and consistency are required from both sides; therefore whatever the outcome is achieved there is dual accountability," Spiniello said.

As Spiniello points out, having both coach and athlete on board for what is in store throughout the season is very important. Many coaches have goal meetings, in which both them and their athlete will sit down at the beginning of the season and map out what they believe they can accomplish for the year.

Throughout the rest of the season, many coaches will also have follow-up meetings just to see how their athletes are doing and if there is anything they can do to keep them on a positive path.

"The purpose of a goal meeting is to make a plan on how to reach the intended goals," Spiniello said. "By putting your goals on paper you are making them real and owning the responsibility to work towards them. Once the goal is set, it is a matter of getting in the pool and focusing on being great every day."

Jessica Witt, a graduate of Richmond University as well as member of the women's swimming and diving team, was one of the many athletes who have gone through a failed taper.

"I had too many to count," Witt said, "But, the last year I swam in college I was stressed about swimming being over and about wanting to make it to NAAs one last time."

Witt's example is a very common way to lead an athlete to a failed taper. Many athletes think about HAVING to make a time and therefore forget to worry about the ways that lead them to the times. Many athletes, like Witt, are so focused on the end result that they can in essence psych themselves right out of achieving their goals.

The result of the failed taper inevitably leads the athletes to blame themselves for the failure. For Witt, the failure was caused by a simple doubt in her ability.

"Because of the stress, I would doubt myself during practice, and wouldn't take anything I did as good enough," Witt said. "So when it came time to taper, I wanted to keep pushing myself and not take a break, so when we had our conference meet, I was tired in every race."

In the weeks leading up to conferences, Witt explained that the level of stress she had already put on herself only increased even more, and ultimately, as she described, it showed up in her races.

For many athletes, once a taper has failed they are left with constant questions such as, "What went wrong?" "How did I mess it up?" "Could I have avoided this?"

However, the hardest part for most athletes is dealing with the gut-wrenching feeling of knowing you came up short.

"It is probably one of the most disappointing things in the world," Witt said. "To know that you have worked so hard for months and months leading up to one race and then to have stress or one wrong move make your whole year go to waste is something that makes swimming one of the hardest sports."

Another common occurrence in an athlete's career is when an athlete will have a great regular season, but come championship time things fall apart.

"I look back and try to see what led to their success in the regular season and why that did not carry over into their championship meet," says Spiniello.

For Witt, having a coach support her even through failure did make a big difference.

"My coach just let me know how proud he was of me and encouraged me to try and go to two more last chance meets, both of which did not end well," Witt said. "But it gave me some hope and closer knowing that I got more than one chance."

The single most important factor that comes with a failed taper is what both the athlete and the coach do about it in the off season in attempt to avoid a miss the following year.

Both Spiniello and Witt have learned a lot through both experiencing a failed taper first hand, as well as witnessing it from the side of the pool.

"I often think there is too much emphasis placed on these few weeks we call taper and not enough on the actual process of getting to that point in the season," Spiniello said. "I come to believe that the foundation for a good taper starts on the first day of practice. Without the work phase, there is no taper phase."

At the end of the day, for both the athletes and the coaches supporting them, the most important

thing is not giving up on what you love. Having the courage and support to continue is what makes an athlete great.

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