

Handling Last-Minute Negative Thinking and Self-Doubts

By Alan Goldberg, PhD

The problem...

You're behind the blocks feeling pretty good about your BIG meet. Your best race starts in just a few minutes and everything has gone OK for you leading up to this meet. Your practices have been good and your taper felt right. But when you get behind the blocks, the "noise upstairs" starts. "Oh my gosh! What if I false start?" "This is my last chance to qualify, and if I don't, my entire season has been a waste!" "What if I die on the last 75 again?" "I don't think I got enough sleep last night!" "Maybe I ate too much... or not enough..." As you listen to this stream of negativity, it seems to build in intensity. Soon, your confidence and all those good feelings rapidly do a disappearing act! You try to "be positive," but it's as if that negative part of you isn't listening...

Did you know that you can still swim your best under pressure even if you are flooded with last minute negative thoughts and self-doubts?

That's right! You can still have the race of your life even if all of those old familiar negatives are loudly playing in the back of your mind. The trick here is **learning how to effectively manage them**, and the very first step in doing this is to understand some of the **myths** that swimmers believe about these last minute negatives and doubts.

Key myths about last-minute negative thinking and your racing:

- You have to "be positive" in order to swim fast
- Negative thinking always lead to poor swims
- You can control your negative thinking so that you stay positive
- When last minute negatives pop up, you must immediately push them away
- Negative thinking and doubts are very bad and mean you're not ready

What's really true here?

First off, you need to understand that all of this last-minute negative stuff is absolutely and totally NORMAL! Even the very best swimmers in the world entertain last-minute negative thoughts because it's simply part of being human. Just because you may be flooded with last minutes doubts, doesn't mean that you're not ready or you'll swim poorly. These unexpected negatives are simply a reflection of your nervous system amping up and getting you ready for the upcoming race.

The problem here is not the negative thinking or doubts by themselves. The REAL problem is how YOU respond to them!

That which you resist, persists!

When you get freaked out behind the blocks because your mind has suddenly turned negative, and then you try to push the negatives away with things like, "I have to stay positive!" and "Don't think that," what ends up happening is that your negative thoughts and doubts get even stronger and louder. Why is this? Because **you can't really control your thinking!** Don't worry! NO ONE CAN! And the good news here is that **you don't need to!** What you need to do is train yourself to **have a calmer, more accepting stance** whenever the negatives start clamoring for your attention.

How do you calmly handle the negatives?

- Avoid fighting with your negatives and trying to turn them into positives
- Remind yourself that last minute negative thoughts and doubts ARE NORMAL
- Reassure yourself that you can still swim YOUR VERY BEST with them

- Understand that your response to the negatives is what's important here
- Immediately refocus your concentration on your pre-race ritual behind the blocks

Focus on DOING and FEEL, not on THINKING

Swimming fast when it counts the most is all about keeping your concentration on what you're DOING both before and during the race. This means that both your pre-race and during-race focus should be on FEEL! So rather than engaging the negative thoughts with more thinking by trying to "be positive" or pushing them away when you're behind the blocks, switch your focus to the feel of your stretching, taking slow, relaxed breaths or whatever else you typically do in your pre-race ritual. If the negatives pop up while you're racing, let them be and immediately refocus your concentration on staying long and smooth, on how much water you're pulling, your breathing pattern or what you need to be doing in order to swim fast.

Keep in mind that I have worked with Olympic medalists who have taught me this very important lesson. Last minutes doubts and negativity DO NOT predict the kind of race you're about to have unless you engage them by fighting with or trying to change them. When your thoughts turn negative, relax, let them be and refocus your concentration on the task at hand.