

3 Tips to Help Shatter Your Pre-Race Nerves

By Will Jonathan//Contributor |

It's something you sometimes hear people say every now and then:

“Being nervous before a race is great! It's a good thing! You should be nervous before you race!”

I'm going to come out hot here straight from the beginning - Nervousness is NOT good for swimming. While there are some small benefits to feeling nervous before a race, those benefits are far outweighed by the negative side-effects.

For example, sure, you'll experience an increase in adrenaline by being in a nervous state. However, one of the negative side-effects and physiological reactions of being in a state of nervousness is that your body tightens up and your muscles become tense. What good is it having extra adrenaline if your body is so tight and your muscles are so tense that you can't even execute properly?

Nervousness is great for survival situations. It's terrible for sport performance. Here are three ways in which you can help shatter pre-race nerves so that you can be in the relaxed, feel-good state you want to be in before you go to compete.

A) Make the outcome irrelevant.

One of my all-time favorite swim quotes is the following:

“Pressure doesn't exist. Pressure is something you either choose to accept or choose to shove away. I choose to shove it away because it doesn't exist. What's the worst that can happen? I lose a race?”

You know who said that? Adam Peaty. I hear he's not too bad of a swimmer.

When you go to swim, you want to approach every race with a similar mindset. Overwhelmingly, nervousness is almost always the by-product of a fear of not getting the results you want. For example, if

you knew ahead of time that you were guaranteed to get PB's every race, would you feel nervous beforehand? Of course not.

However, you can never know with 100% certainty what's going to happen, can you? So, that uncertainty creates nervousness, and that nervousness triggers a fear response. While you can never guarantee the outcome of a race, you can create the same effect in your mind by simply making the outcome irrelevant.

“One of two things is going to happen today. I’m either going to win and that’s great, or I’m going to lose and that’s almost even better, because I’ll know what my weaknesses are and where I need to be to improve myself. I can’t lose either way.”

This thought pattern strips away the fear of loss, and when you don't fear the outcome, nervousness tends to simply melt away.

B) Avoid the trap of expectations.

Here's another one of my favorite swim quotes:

“I try to step back from having any expectations. I focus on me and my own race strategy because I know that’s the only thing that I can control.”

Who dished out this pearl of wisdom? Nathan Adrian. I hear he isn't too bad a swimmer, either.

Having expectations before racing is a huge trap. The fact is, there are a million and one different factors that determine the outcome of a race, many of which are completely beyond your control. All you can ever control is your attitude and your performance. So, just focus on that. Focus on maintaining a good mindset and executing to the best of your ability. If you can do that, you'll get the best results you can on that day, and that's all you can ever ask of yourself. Expecting less than that is not demanding too little from yourself and expecting more than that is demanding too much from yourself.

C) Simplify the occasion and be rational.

Two of my clients just qualified to swim for their countries in the FINA Short Course World Championships in China in December. For their qualifying meets, we talked about simplifying the occasion. We talked about how, no matter what the name of the meet is and what's at stake, swimming is always still swimming - the pool is the same size pool you've swam in many times before. You're doing events you've done many times before. You know how to start, and kick, and stroke, and turn. You know perfectly well how to execute all of your races. What's there to be nervous about?

When you don't feed into the emotion of the occasion, and when you slow yourself down to take a moment to think logically and use your rational mind, you realize how simple the occasion actually is. No matter how prestigious the meet is, and no matter how big the stakes are, it's still a pool that's 25y/25m/50m up and back. You're still swimming in your own lane. You're still doing the same starts, and strokes, and kicks, and turns you've done a million times before. There's no reason for you to feel nervous whatsoever. You know what to do and how to do it. Don't allow the occasion to fool you into thinking differently.