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the POOL'S EDGE

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STAY IN THE KNOW

BY KARLYN PIPES-NEILSEN

Stay positive and mentally focused, and you'll be able to do your best.



It looks easy: step up on the blocks, adjust your goggles, dive in and swim your best time. Anyone can do it, right? Wrong.

Swimmers are some of the best-trained athletes in the world, yet many fall short of their potential during competition. Why? Performance anxiety, worry, fear and doubt take hold, causing even the best athlete to race poorly.

While everybody gets nervous before a race to some degree, it's the athlete who learns how to deal with the stress of competition who usually performs the best.

Following are five tips to help you stay mentally focused at your next competition.

STAY IN THE KNOW

Before and during a race, swimmers often experience negative thoughts such as:

- What if I don't swim well?
- What if he/she beats me?
- Is this race going to hurt?

These thoughts are *fear*-based and focus on the *unknown*. Instead, try to "stay in the *know*." So, what do you know?

- I have worked hard!
- I have done this a million times in practice!
- I am mentally tough!



[PHOTO BY DAVE GONZALEZ]

ABOVE » While everybody gets nervous before a race to some degree, it's the athlete who learns how to deal with the stress of competition who usually performs the best.

- I will swim fast!
- I will have a *great* race!
- I am a good person regardless of how well I swim!

When you stay in the *know*, you concentrate on facts that you know and believe in instead of fearful "maybes" that make you doubt your ability, drain your confidence and deplete your energy.

SPELL IT OUT

At a meet, grab a waterproof pen and write the word, "KNOW," in big letters on your hand. When doubts or fears creep in, look down at your hand, see the word, "KNOW," and think about what it means to *you*. Your thoughts are very powerful, so give yourself a pep talk, and those negative thoughts will quickly disappear.

STAY IN CONTROL

You have no control over the person in the next lane or the performance of

others. Stop worrying about the things you can't control and focus on what you can control such as your energy, thoughts, race strategy, technique and attitude.

BUTTERFLIES FLY STRAIGHT

The next time you feel "butterflies" in your stomach, try this really cool trick. First, close your eyes and mentally picture the butterflies frantically bouncing off the walls of your stomach. Feel their energy buzzing around and around. Now, picture those same butterflies flying straight or in a V-like formation. Really see it! Try to use the power of their wings to help you swim a fast race.

OPEN THE LENS WIDE

Racing can be a lot like a *zoom* lens. All of your energy is narrowly focused on a single target—swimming your best. However, some swimmers spend way too much time in this tight realm creating excess stress on the mind and body.

If you find yourself stuck on *zoom*, take a deep breath, then let it all out with a hearty sigh. Now, get outside yourself by opening your lens wide and looking at the big picture. Recognize that your self-worth is not based on your performance.

Even though you may not have swum your best, the world will not come to an end...and your family and friends will love you just the same.

Have fun, and remember—you have the power to start over with a fresh new attitude at any time. ♦

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