

Earning the Right to be Upset: Lessons in Accountability and Effort

By Kevin Pierce

In swimming and every other sport, emotions are often magnified. The water has a unique way of reflecting our efforts, triumphs, and setbacks back at us. A disappointing swim in a meet can feel devastating, especially when expectations are high. But here's a hard truth: the right to be upset about a poor performance isn't automatically granted. It must be earned through commitment, effort, and discipline both in and out of the pool. Without that foundation, frustration becomes misplaced and unproductive.

The first step in earning that right starts with simply showing up. Consistency is the backbone of improvement in swimming. Every practice missed is a missed opportunity to refine your technique, build endurance, and develop the mental toughness required to succeed in competition. Sporadic attendance or skipping sets sends a clear message—not to your coach, but to yourself—that you're not fully invested. No swimmer can expect to achieve peak performance without committing to regular, focused training. The first question you must ask after a poor race is: "Did I show up consistently and give myself every opportunity to succeed?"

Attendance, however, is only the starting point. Giving 100% effort every day is where the real work begins. It's one thing to be physically present at practice, but it's another to approach every lap with intention and focus. Did you push through discomfort during tough sets, or did you ease up when things got hard? Did you race your teammates in practice to simulate meet conditions? Did you visualize yourself succeeding in the moments that mattered most? Greatness is built in the details. If your training habits don't reflect the goals you've set, you haven't earned the right to be upset when those goals aren't met. Remember, races are often won or lost long before you step onto the starting block.

What you do outside of practice is just as critical as what you do in it. Performance in the pool reflects your overall lifestyle. Are you prioritizing recovery by getting enough sleep and staying hydrated? Are you fueling your body with the right nutrition to sustain your training demands? Are you managing stress and maintaining a positive mindset, or are you letting outside pressures weigh you down? Skipping meals, staying up late, or neglecting your mental health undermines all the hard work you put into training. These off-deck habits can be the silent saboteurs of your performance. If you're not taking care of yourself holistically, it's hard to justify being upset about the results.

Earning the right to be upset is also about taking ownership of your preparation. Accountability is key. When you feel disappointed after a poor swim, take a moment to reflect honestly: "Did I do everything in my power to succeed?" If the answer is yes—if you showed up, worked hard, and made smart choices—then your frustration is valid. Use it as fuel to come back stronger. However, if the answer is no, that frustration becomes a moment of clarity. It's a sign that changes need to be made. Accountability isn't about beating yourself up; it's about recognizing the gap between where you are and where you want to be, then taking action to close that gap.

It's also important to acknowledge that even when you've done everything right, bad swims happen. Swimming is an unforgiving sport where milliseconds make all the difference. Sometimes, the results don't align with the effort you've put in, and that's okay. What separates great swimmers from the rest is their ability to respond constructively to setbacks. Being upset about a race should never be the final

chapter; it should be the prologue to a story of growth. Analyze what went wrong, identify areas for improvement, and recommit to the process with renewed determination.

Ultimately, the right to be upset is not a free pass—it's a responsibility. It's a sign that you care deeply about your performance and that you're willing to hold yourself to a higher standard. But caring without action is meaningless. To truly earn the right to be upset, you must approach every aspect of your preparation with discipline, effort, and accountability. When you show up consistently, give 100% effort, and make the right choices outside of the pool, you create the conditions for success. And when things don't go your way despite your best efforts, you've earned the right to feel frustrated—because you know you've done everything in your power to succeed.

In swimming, as in life, the right to be upset isn't just about emotion; it's about earning the privilege to care deeply and honestly reflect on your journey. Use disappointment not as a stumbling block but as a steppingstone to greater things. Success is built one lap, one decision, and one day at a time. Earn it, own it, and let it drive you forward.

ABOUT KEVIN PIERCE

Kevin Pierce is a dedicated high school swim coach, leadership consultant, and advocate for athlete development. As the head coach of the Ridley High School boys' swim team (Folsom, Pa), he has a passion for helping young swimmers reach their full potential, both in and out of the water. With years of experience in coaching, mentoring, and program development, Kevin specializes in leadership training, team culture, and athlete motivation.

*Beyond the pool deck, Kevin is the founder of Green Mystique Leadership Consulting, where he works with youth and high school athletes to develop leadership skills that extend beyond sports. He is also the author of *Leo: The Lion's Great Adventure*, a children's book that teaches leadership lessons through storytelling.*

Kevin contributes to SwimSwam with insightful articles on high school swimming, leadership in sports, and strategies for fostering a winning team culture. His expertise in balancing athletic performance with leadership development makes him a valuable voice in the swimming community.