

# FAST SWIMMERS LEARN FROM THEIR FAILURES

BY OLIVIER POIRIER-LEROY 0

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Becoming the ultra-best version of yourself in the pool isn't a G-14 Classified secret:

Work hard. Have a good attitude. **Focus on improving your technique.** Measure key markers of progress. And don't give up.

The basics, right?

Not giving up in the face of adversity is one of the biggies.

Persistence in the face of stalled progress or even moments where we've backtracked is key.

But persistence isn't enough.

As it turns out, it's the way you deal with your failures that matters most.

## PERSISTENCE ISN'T ENOUGH.

As long as you keep coming back and not giving up, you will get better, right?

Well, that's not exactly true.

Researchers at Northwestern University analyzed 776,721 grant applications over a 30-year stretch [1]. They also looked at nearly 50 years of capital venture start-ups.

The purpose of the study?

To see if persistence was the main driver of success.

What they found was pretty neat...

*Every successful grant or start-up had some bumps and failures before becoming successful.*

Probably not a big surprise there, right?

But failing also didn't guarantee success.

In fact—and this is the thing that should blow your chlorinated hair back—those who failed and those who succeeded made the *same number of attempts*.

**It wasn't persistence alone that predicted being successful.**

Yes, coming back and trying again was obviously important, but more critical was whether lessons were being learned, capitalizing on what was working, and focusing on how to improve future attempts.

“You have to figure out what worked and what didn't, and then focus on what needs to be improved instead of thrashing around and changing everything,” said lead researcher Dashun Wang.

When we don't learn from our failures, we are bound to repeat them.

## THE POWER OF FAILURES

When we use failure as high-grade motivational fuel, some pretty awesome things start happening.

Elite-minded swimmers pull their failures over their head like a latex swim cap and springboard into doubling-down their commitment and resolve.

They learn from the disappointing meets, the less-than-stellar swim practices, and come back hungrier and sharper.

American butterflyer Mel Stewart, when he placed out of the medals at the Seoul Olympics in 1988, used that defeat as high-octane fuel for the next four years of training.

“It was humiliating. I've been on a comeback ever since,” he said at the FINA World Championships in Perth in 1991.

He would break the world record in the 200m butterfly at worlds, and a year later, at the Barcelona Olympics, Stewart would win gold in the 200m butterfly and pick up a couple of relay medals.

This kind of **mindset is very typical of super-champions**, who face missteps and setbacks with a fierce resolve to overcome them.

Additionally, and this more to the point of this particular post, is **that failure helps you diagnose what needs to change**.

Setbacks and failures are a sign that something can be improved.

And it's on you to step up and grab this opportunity for improvement instead of wallowing in not having been successful.

Summer Sanders would narrowly miss making the US Olympic Team in 1988. After leading the 200m individual medley for 150m, she faltered coming down the home-stretch, getting out-touched at the wall.

Some swimmers, this close to going to the Olympics, would have been devastated, but Sanders had gone a best time, and now understood what it would take to compete at the highest level.

“Defeat meant I hadn’t had enough experience going into the race,” she would reflect later. “It never meant I was destined to fail again, that I had fallen into some impossible rut. Quite the contrary: I was in control.”

Four years later, Sanders would go to the Barcelona Olympics and win four medals, including a gold medal in the 200-meter butterfly.

*“Defeat just showed me what, exactly, I had to work on—my stroke, my dive, my turns. If I did the work, I had nothing to fear,” said Sanders.*

## USE YOUR FAILURES FOR GOOD

I get the tendency to get down on yourself when things don't pan out the way you hope or expect in the water.

You get injured.

Choke on race day.

Get beat at the wall.

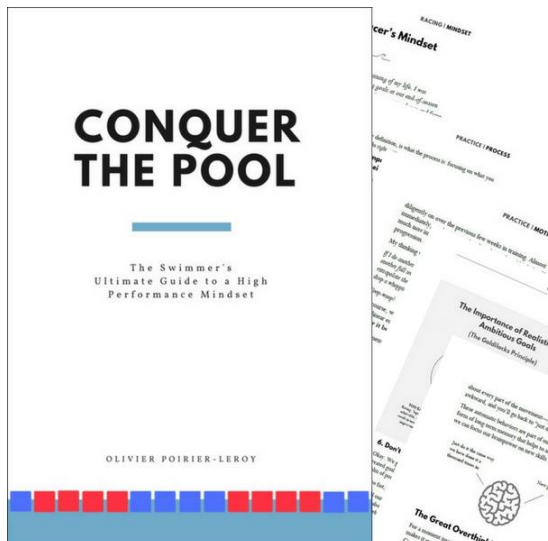
But failing is a part of the process.

Don't fear it.

Listen to what they are trying to tell you and go forth with renewed effort and focus on becoming a better swimmer.

## ABOUT OLIVIER POIRIER-LEROY

Olivier Poirier-Leroy is a former national-level swimmer. He's the publisher of *YourSwimBook*, a ten-month log book for competitive swimmers.



He's also the author of the recently published mental training workbook for competitive swimmers, *Conquer the Pool: The Swimmer's Ultimate Guide to a High-Performance Mindset*.

It combines sport psychology research, worksheets, and anecdotes, and examples of Olympians past and present to give swimmers everything they need to conquer the mental side of the sport.