Developing Swimmers
For Lifelong Success

Memo To:	TAC Community
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DON'T CALM DOWN

Why nerves before competition are a feature, not a flaw — and how to use them

At TAC, we develop athletes for success in sport and in life. That means equipping swimmers with tools they will carry with them well into adulthood. Learning to work with nerves, rather than against them, is one of the most transferable skills a young athlete can develop. And it's not just for kids — the same skill serves a 45-year-old walking into a boardroom as well as a 12-year-old stepping onto the block.

WHAT NERVES ACTUALLY ARE

The flutter in your stomach before a race, the restless sleep the night before a big meet, the sudden urge to visit the bathroom three times in warmup — these are not signs something is wrong. They are signs your body is preparing to perform.

When we perceive a challenge, the brain triggers a release of adrenaline and cortisol. Heart rate increases. Breathing quickens. Muscles receive more blood. Attention narrows. This is the same physiological response our ancestors used to survive genuine physical threats, and it is remarkably well-suited for athletic competition.

The body does not distinguish between threat and opportunity. Your job as an athlete is to make that distinction for it.

THE PROBLEM IS THE INTERPRETATION

Performance psychologists have studied this for decades, and the finding holds up: the arousal state itself is largely neutral. What predicts performance is how athletes interpret it.

Athletes who label pre-race nerves as *anxiety* (something negative to be managed, suppressed, or eliminated) tend to underperform. Athletes who reframe those same sensations as *excitement or readiness* (a positive signal that the body is primed) tend to perform better. The physiological experience is nearly identical. The difference is the story the athlete tells themself.

We often hear elite performers described as "calm under pressure" — the NBA Finals MVP, the EMT working a life-or-death trauma. But are they actually calm? Or are they well-prepared professionals who have learned to interpret what their bodies are feeling as a signal that they are ready — and to use it? The appearance of calm is often the result of harnessing the feeling, not eliminating it.

This is why telling a nervous athlete to "calm down" is often counterproductive. Calm is the wrong target. Ready is the right one.

THE ROLE PARENTS PLAY

Parents are the first and most influential interpreters in a young athlete's life; coaches' words are nearly as influential in the moment. The language used in the week leading into a big event, the car ride to the meet, in the warmup area, at the block — it shapes how athletes understand their own experience.

Well-intentioned questions can inadvertently anchor the wrong frame. "Are you nervous?" invites an athlete to identify with anxiety. Try the shift:

Instead of *"Are you nervous?"* — try *"Is your body telling you it's ready to race?"*

Instead of *"Just try to relax."* — try *"You've done the work. Let your body do what it knows how to do."*

Instead of *"Don't be nervous, you'll be fine."* — try *"That feeling means you care and you're ready. That's a good thing."*

Don't dismiss the feeling. Name it as useful. Athletes who grow up hearing that language learn to do it for themselves.

WHAT ATHLETES CAN DO

Our mental performance work at TAC addresses this directly. Our professional coaching staff understands the usefulness of "nerves." Here are some additional approaches that help:

Rename the feeling. Instead of "I'm nervous," try "I'm ready" or "I'm activated." Language shapes perception, and perception shapes performance.

Build a routine — and start early. A routine is the one thing on race day nobody else controls. Encourage athletes to develop consistent pre-practice habits. Proper fueling is an excellent cornerstone of that routine. When an athlete has fueled intentionally before every practice from an early age, that habit becomes automatic by the time race pressure arrives — and it gives them something tangible to control when everything else feels unpredictable. Nerves can suppress appetite and make eating feel impossible. A practiced routine overrides that. Preparation prevents pressure from hijacking the basics.

Breathe with intention. A few slow, deliberate breaths before a race aren't about calming down, they're about locking in. Use them to arrive in the present moment, not to turn down the volume. Use intentionally long exhales to focus on envisioning the performance, not the result.

Focus on what is happening, not what might happen. Nerves are almost always future-focused — fixated on a time on the board, a place in a heat, a result that hasn't happened yet. The antidote is the present. Feel your heart beating in your chest. Notice the readiness in your muscles. Visualize the race — not the outcome, but the execution: the dive, the first cycle, the first wall. What can you control right now? That's where pre-race attention belongs.

A LIFE SKILL IN DISGUISE

Swimmers will "stand behind the blocks" before job interviews, presentations, difficult conversations, and defining moments across their lives. The physiology will be the same. So will the temptation to "stay calm" or "be less nervous."

The athletes who thrive in those moments are not the ones who felt no nerves. They are the ones who prepared, controlled what they could control, directed their attention to what was actionable… the ones who let the rest fall into place.

That is what competition teaches, if we let it. Every race is a rehearsal, not just for swimming, but for performing under pressure with intention and confidence for the rest of their lives.

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