

Short Term Failure is Part of The Path to Long Term Success.

A True Story

By Don Swartz

A couple of weeks ago at a mutual friend's birthday party I reconnected with a former Masters swimmer from the 1970's. Tom asked me what it was like coaching at this point in time vs. in the 60's and 70's. What had changed, if anything? I replied that some technique issues had been refined and racing strategies had been clarified to some extent. I said that belief systems still ruled the day when all was said and done. He asked me if the kids were any different. I said I thought there was less ability to connect the dots between responsibility and accountability. I also believe that parents are reluctant to allow their children to fail thereby robbing them of one of the great teaching experiences of all time.

He proceeded to tell me the story of his daughter Sydney (not her real name). A handful of years ago when she was 14 years old in 8th grade she declared that she wanted to attend a local private school that is very exclusive. They only admit 85 students each year. Hundreds apply.

She decided that in addition to her outstanding grades, test scores and letters of recommendation from various folks that she would sweeten her chances by expanding her resume by competing in a speaking contest. She entered with the idea of being a finalist, maybe even winning and felt if she did this it would really help her chances of gaining a spot at this school.

She decided to reprise Doris Day's role of Annie Oakley. She got her outfit together and practiced her lines for weeks. As the contest neared the excitement in the home began to build. Tom

was extremely proud of her and she was growing more confident by the day.

The evening of the contest Tom and Sydney drove to Sonoma County where the contest was being held. She took the stage looking sharp; he stood in the wings, the proud parent. As she wowed the crowd and the judges he beamed.

Part way through, she stopped. She had momentarily forgotten her lines. She looked at him for help. He smiled encouragingly. Unable to remember she turned her back on the judges and audience, closed her eyes and took a deep calming breath. For nearly a minute she stood there motionless, and then looked at him asking for help. He shrugged his shoulders and smiled willing her to remember, to go on.

She took another deep breath and turned back to the audience. She said "I am unable to continue. I have forgotten my lines. I thank all of you for this opportunity and while I am disappointed in myself I can tell you I practiced hard and have done my best. Unfortunately today I cannot go forward." With her head held high she walked down through the crowd and out the front door with Tom following closely behind.

They got in the car and she burst into tears, sobbing mightily. He comforted her as best he could. He had mixed feelings of course; he felt badly for her and proud of her at the same time.

The next morning as they ate breakfast together they reread the contest rules. There in the fine print at the bottom it stated that "no contestant shall be penalized for being prompted." He felt extremely disappointed in himself for not reading the rules more carefully. She said it didn't matter all that much that she had prepared as well as she could and it simply didn't work for her that night.

Tom told me that it has been 5 years since the incident and several times over those years his daughter has told him that she learned more about success, perseverance, dignity under pressure, handling disappointment and keeping things in perspective from that one incident than she ever would have had she been able to complete her speech that night.

She was accepted into the school anyway. She decided not to attend. She is a freshman in college today, doing well.