Conquering Burnout
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What happens when hard work doesn’t pay off? Do you push yourself harder? Do you quit? Do you change things up? Do you take time to reflect? I have the urge to work harder because quitting isn’t an option. According to Winston Churchill, “Never, never, never, give up.” I had this quote hanging on my wall in college to remind myself to never give up in regard to swimming. What’s ironic is that although I love this quote and find it incredibly inspiring, it hasn’t always helped me.

As a collegiate swimmer, ups and downs were inevitable. After my freshman year I switched summer league swim programs in order to train with a team that had a more structured, intense summer program and cultivated some Olympians and other extremely fast swimmers. This team wasn’t my hometown’s rival; however, it was competition, which meant I would be swimming against past teammates and good friends. While feeling like a traitor, that summer I trained harder than any previous summer and the coach of this team completely changed my breaststroke technique in order to help me move more efficiently through the water.

At the end of the summer, I felt confident going into my sophomore year. As the season started I trained very hard; never missing a morning or afternoon practice. However, despite all my effort, dedication and preparation throughout the summer, I wasn’t racing well, and as the weeks wore on I kept getting slower and slower. Swimming was my life and I was drowning. Things took a turn for the worst when my grandfather unexpectedly died. The next day my immediate family and I drove from Columbus to Illinois where the funeral would be held later that week. We would spend five day in Illinois before making the drive back to Columbus. I barely trained the week of my grandfather’s funeral. Access to a pool was limited.

Coming back to school was difficult. Not only had my family just experienced a heartbreaking loss but I felt lost in regards to swimming. I equated success with hard work, which entailed never missing a practice and giving each practice my all. Therefore, missing a week of practice meant that I wasn’t going to swim well in our big meet three weeks away. I continued to work hard in practice, but when asked by a teammate a few days before the big meet if I was excited to swim fast, I explained that since I missed a week of practice I had no hope of swimming well. I couldn’t have been more wrong. During my first event I swam faster than I had ever swum before and made my national cut in the 200 breaststroke. The expression on my face after touching the wall and looking up at my time must have been priceless. I was stunned at what I had accomplished. This moment defied what I had previously believed led to success.
How was possible for me to swim fast after swimming so badly for so many weeks in addition to missing a whole week of practice? I attribute my success to physical rest during the week of my grandfather’s funeral. Up until that week, I had pounded my body into the ground but was too ignorant to acknowledge that I was physically burned out and approaching mental burnout. The week of my grandfather’s funeral forced me to take a break, which allowed my body to recover. Prior to this experience I was so focused on never giving up that I failed to recognize my body was screaming, “SLOW DOWN OR ELSE!” For so long I had equated taking breaks with giving up, and if I hadn’t been forced to rest my body I would have kept pounding it into the ground and probably wouldn’t have made my national cut.

This experience changed my beliefs about what constitutes as quitting. I began to understand that taking a break isn’t quitting, rather, it can mean that you’re listening to your body and making a smart and much needed decision. Our society often frowns upon slowing down and taking time for contemplation. Despite this popularly held belief, slowing down can help us to tackle situations more effectively and efficiently. Working hard but not listening to our bodies can cost us a great deal and although taking a break might not be the easiest decision to make often times it’s a smart decision.