

# UNDERSTANDING COMPETITIVENESS

From USA Swimming

One of the most highly prized athletic traits is competitiveness. Applying what we now know about achievement-related motives helps us to understand what goes into being a good competitor. From youth leagues to professional leagues, outstanding competitors are almost always people who are high in achievement motivation and low in fear of failure. Challenging athletic situations arouse their strong desire to achieve, and unhindered by performance-disrupting fears of failure, they tend to peak under pressure. They enjoy and seek out the challenge of athletic competition.

Quite the opposite occurs in the child who is primarily motivated by fear of failure. Competitive situations provide little to gain but much to lose for such children. If they can avoid competition, they will do so. If other factors force them to compete, they derive little enjoyment from it and their performance tends to deteriorate under pressure. Some children who apparently enjoy sports but who have a great fear of failure tend to like practices and "goofing off" more than they do games.

Besides children with such high-low levels of achievement motivation and fear of failure, there are also children who have high levels of both and those who have low levels of both. The child who has high levels of both motives is in a state of conflict between approach and avoidance motives. This child wants to achieve but also fears failure. If the child enjoys the sport itself, he or she tends to remain in it but experiences stress and anxiety under pressure. The key to helping such a child to become a good competitor is to reduce fear of failure so that the positive effects of the motivation to achieve are not interfered with.

For the child who has low levels of both achievement motivation and fear of failure, achievement concerns have little importance. When such children do elect to participate in sports, it is often because they simply enjoy the activity or because of the social benefits of participation. As a result, they exhibit a rather nonchalant attitude about the sport. This can

prove perplexing and irritating to parents and coaches who are more concerned about winning and achievement.

Relationship Between Achievement Motivation, Fear of Failure and Competitiveness			
Achievement Motivation			
		Low	High
Fear of Failure	Low	Achievement concerns are largely irrelevant. Appears "laid back" and is probably in sport for reasons unrelated to achievement.	Is a good competitor; peaks under pressure because fear of failure does not disrupt performance.
	High	Competition is threatening. Experiences anxiety under pressure which lowers performance. Does not enjoy competition and may avoid such situations by dropping out of sport.	Enjoys and seeks out the challenges of competition and is motivated to win. Has conflict in competitive situations. Wants to win but also fears failure, so performance may suffer. Does not enjoy the threatening part of competition.