



## More than just numbers

Often, the difference between success and failure is how you define your terms

By Amanda McCracken

Upon returning home from my disappointing Boulder Peak Olympic-distance triathlon last summer, I was greeted by my housemate's cries of "Hail to the conqueror!" In tears I responded, "Thanks, but I sucked! I croaked on the run and was nine minutes off my best time on that course."

"But you finished!" she continued, sincerely impressed with my effort, of which I thought very little. In my head I didn't think it was enough to have just finished. Having competed in many triathlons of varying distances, my perspective had changed and I was at a loss to know how to measure my success. I struggled to feel good about my two-hour and 39-minute effort after five months of training geared to succeed at that particular race. To me, success was measured solely by the extent to which I was able (or in this case unable) to better my previous finishing time—I had left myself no other way to measure success and had downplayed my effort despite the 100-degree heat.

If you've ever beaten yourself up after a disappointing race, then this type of scenario might sound familiar to you. Either way, the take-home message here is to try to identify a variety of targets and goals for measuring triathlon success. Let's explore this concept a bit further.

### POTENTIAL AND THE MOMENT

Defining success requires one to stop and consider one's potential in the moment. A former athlete of mine, suffering from severe depression, says "not giving up" is the definition of success for him at the moment. According to two-time Olympian Alan Culpepper, success is doing his best with the potential he has on any given day and having the ability to shift perspectives as his potential changes. In more concrete terms, when we create a definition of success, or failure, it's important to consider the moment and its unique set of circumstances in each of these definitions.

To that end, measuring success in triathlon can be especially difficult because there are so many uncontrollable factors, such as weather and equipment, that can contribute to or detract from your individual performance. Still, by establishing multiple goals, or targets—some of which you are able to control—you can avoid a potentially self-destructive all-or-nothing definition of success. Goals, says Bobby McGee, author of the book *Magical Running*, should create awareness and serve a purpose, not hold you back. Consider the following possible combination of targets, some of which are dependent upon outside factors and others over which you have control:

- finish in the top 10 percent of a race
- improve your power output on the bike
- finish a season injury-free
- complete a new distance
- improve your time on a familiar course
- register for a race
- enjoy your training
- incorporate more family time in your training

### GAINING PERSPECTIVE

It's easy to lose perspective on why we train and why we started doing triathlons in the first place. Indeed, it often requires we step outside the athletic world of age-group rankings, lactate-threshold data and race times to better understand our athletic identity (the who) and appreciate the benefits of sport (the why). When finding success in race-day results seems impossible (due to uncontrollable factors) and merely finishing a race doesn't seem significant anymore, remember that what you deem success should turn upon a combination of achievements and circumstances. When you feel like the race number marked on your arm makes you just that, a number, remember who you are and where you've been. These, not your race statistics, make you a success. ▲

*Amanda McCracken is a triathlete, coach and freelance writer living in Boulder, Colo. She coaches individuals to success at [d3multisport.com](http://d3multisport.com) and can be reached at [amanda@d3multisport.com](mailto:amanda@d3multisport.com).*