**Prompt 2: The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?**

“There it was, a black piece of fabric plummeting towards the swimming pool floor. I laughed at myself as it fell down my field of vision into the abyss of water behind me. ‘Who’s the idiot who lost his pants during the swimming race?’ And then I realized. In my next freestyle stroke, I pulled inwards and felt my body, hoping to be met with friction from the black Speedo I was donning. Nope. Just skin. On a normal day, pure skin to skin contact of any kind is something I’d be very happy with, but not this time. Standing out from all the racers in the 50 meter pool was me and my 8th grade rump. How did I get here?

“Alright guys, it’s now or never. We have been training weeks on end for this. If you’re not giving it your all, why do you think you deserve to race?” said my coach. And I agreed. Feeling as aggressive as an alligator, I anticipated a medal in my jaw.

My head, usually a treasure trove abound with math conjectures, physics formulas, bus services, now devoured by the sweet temptation of triumph, with the occasional hallucinations of the blue and black refractions of the swimming pool tiles. I stood, firmly, aside the starting block as my competitors stretched their rigid bodies in a variety of ways. I give my teammates one last fist bump before we take on the final nightmare that is the 4x50m freestyle relay.

As the whistles blow, I promptly jump up onto the starting block. However, something was off. I feel uneasy, as if I’m about to slip. My grip on the hard, gray stone has never been so loose. Maybe it’s just the pre-game jitters.

Beep!

Under the water I go. With each stroke, I pull the water as hard as I can possibly manage without using up all my energy. Also with each stroke, I feel a tingling sensation in my waist. ‘Do I need to pee? Am I going into some episode of paraplegia? What could it be that was bothering me so much?’

No. The demons of misfortune are on the pool floor grabbing me by the leg, but all they’re able to grab is the ill-fated Speedo. The layer of rubber separating the world from my mini-me is slowly traversing the length of my leg. For every ten centimeters I manage to pull the pants up, it goes twenty centimeters down. ‘What can I do? What should I do? Should I stop and save myself from the embarassment?’ screams my inner voice, frantically.

No. Making any effort to save my slipping shorts would simply not suffice and only make me slower. With my split-second thinking, I manage to pull even harder with my strokes as I become ever so slightly lighter. By meter 25, the only thing I have in common with the other swimmers in the pool is that I wear goggles.

My brain is laughing at me, but my body isn’t. I can envision the scene above me: my teammates, friends, and family laughing at the sheer absurdity that they are witnessing with their own eyes. This doesn’t happen when you watch the Olympics on TV, let alone witnessing it live at a swimming race from the stands.

I finally reach the end of the pool, tap the wall and my teammate jumps. As he dives into the water, I see the face of a man who isn’t competing for a medal, but the face of a friend who can’t contain his laughter after seeing the most absurd shape float in the water towards him. I smile back and sigh in relief as my part of the relay is done.

The walk back to the locker room was not any easier; passing the row of parents was intimidating. Laughs and chuckles, reassurances telling me ‘it's okay’ surrounded me like a Dolby Atmos 5.1. But, despite all expectations, even my own, I was laughing with them.

Any attempt to take oneself seriously by my teammates and coaches from this point on would fail repeatedly as they laid their eyes on me: the striking image of my bare bottom breaking their determined train of self assertions, invading their peace of mind.

To everyone’s surprise, all our races that succeeded my raunchy race have now been plagued with a contagious disease of laughter and inability to take oneself seriously. The built-up pressure from the insides and the voices in our head threatening us with victory or death have now diminished. Our muscles, once a tense tissue, after an endless stream of tension-releasing laughter, now a repose repository of energy ready to be released in the water. The laughter that was brought upon by my “Jupiter” and “Saturn” allowed my teammates to keep their minds off the victory and just focus on the objective that was the swimming pool wall. Because of this, my team managed to score a medal for at least one of each of their categories in this swim meet—our best performance to date.

This anecdote now serves as a locker room fairytale that I have told time and time again when meeting junior members of my swimming team. Aside from remembering to tie one's pants before one swims, I now always ensure that we don’t go off the deep end over the pursuit of victory before a heat. As humiliating as this experience was, I learned a lot about humility and taking myself seriously; while a necessity, an excess of it may not lead one to an optimal performance.

Even now, when my friends and I are drowning in the sea of physics formulas and trivial computer science lingo before our finals, I never hesitate to start singing the funniest song I know if I feel that the stress is getting to all of us; while many might say this is “distracting” and “unproductive”, laughter is the secret weapon that cuts through the pressure that we all face and reminds us that, sometimes, the best way to achieve our best is to embrace the joy and absurdity of the journey. Therefore, amidst the chaos of any daunting task, I believe that a well-dosed laughter in every journey can propel us towards success with a lighter heart and a smile on our face, enabling us to enjoy challenges.