

NIKE

Nike is the Greek goddess of victory, not battle or warfare (the role of *Ares*), but winning. In *The Iliad*, the first, the greatest, war story in Western Literature, *Ares*, the god of war, is the single most despised character in the Troad. No one wants him as an ally; neither the Trojans nor the Achaeans desire his patronage. Even his own mother cannot abide him. He is devoid of discipline, uncontrollable, unstoppable; he is havoc, chaos, annihilation, and indiscriminate destruction.

On the other hand, commanders on both sides offer fervent supplications to Nike. Who in battle does not wish to be favored by victory? Victory is always portrayed as female in classical art, a *kore*, a young girl, which is somewhat paradoxical, given that battle and warfare were considered almost exclusively masculine occupations. War is male; winning is female, no doubt to convey the spirit of lightheartedness and joy that accompany triumph. The most familiar representation of this spirit is commonly called Winged Victory; she is more properly known as the Nike of Samothrace. Her feet are separated, one in front of the other, as if in stride. Her arms and her head are, well, missing, but she has splendid athletic shoulders that support her surprisingly large, powerful, arching wings. A fly girl.

Like my girl. My daughter is a young adolescent, 13 years old. She swims butterfly, that most explosive, most exhausting, and most spectacular of all the competitive swimming strokes. When my daughter attacks her stroke and her arms arch out behind her, she looks like Nike herself flying through the water. And when she wins, which she does sometimes, the excited smile on her flushed face looks as intense and glorious as I imagine that beautiful *kore* herself must have looked. Victory—the triumph, the affirmation—these days we say that resounding “yes”: that’s who Nike is. She is welcome at any competition.

My daughter knows what it feels like to be inspired, possessed, by Nike. Skeptics would chalk it up to an endorphin release and an adrenaline rush, but athletes and competitors know a goddess when they see one. When my daughter was just 11, the bottom of a two-year age group that for girls represents the greatest physical discrepancy, she was to swim butterfly in the state championship meet. She was seeded third, not bad considering that some of the girls she was to swim against could be as old as thirteen. We discussed her chances; I tried to prepare her for the possibility that she might not medal, but that, as regional champion she was already a winner. All the positive reinforcement the psyche books tell us we should use to bolster a kid’s self esteem.

As if.

She swam the fly in the first event of the day, the medley relay. Her team swam in the lane next to the team whose butterfly swimmer was seeded first in the individual stroke race further down the program. When she entered the water her team was in third place; she handed the lead over to the anchor, who, unfortunately, could not hold it. But she made an impression: at the end of the race the rival team asked, “Who is your butterflyer?” When my daughter answered, her counterpart said, “You are awesome.” When she related this to me I told her she had the individual race won, because the girl who was seeded higher, who probably came to the meet expecting to win, now knew she could be beaten.

And my girl knew it, too. When the race, a sprint, just two laps of the pool, began, she was back in the pack. After the turn she poured it on, came from behind to shave three seconds (an eternity in swimming) off her best time, and, not only won the race, but set a new state record as well. Later she said: “I just decided—this race is mine.”

Call it what you will, I call it a visit from Nike. There at the finish Victory rested on my daughter's flying shoulders. They looked splendid together. And, as in the appearance of any goddess, there was an epiphany, a revelation. My daughter knows I love her unconditionally; she knows that there is value in the endeavor itself. She also knows there is no self-esteem enhancer that feels quite as good as winning.

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