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News for Swim Parents

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Please send comments or subscription requests to news@swimmingcoach.org

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Trust Your Instincts

A letter to the editor from Mike Fitzgerald

Mr. Leonard,

I have been a lifetime member of ASCA since 1996. I coached until 2003 but have every intention of returning to the sport. Over the years, I have enjoyed your letters on-line and in the ASCA magazines. The recent sexual abuse scandal at Pennsylvania State University has triggered memories of something that happened when I was a young swimmer. I would like to submit a letter I wrote on this topic a decade ago – within my thoughts on the current scandal.

May 2003

Dear Parents,

Trust your instincts:

It's again in the news. It happens everywhere. And it upsets and angers me when the name "Coach" is placed under spotlights of mistrust, again.

This time, it's at Kings West High School...the last place you'd expect a coach to misuse his/her position for personal satisfaction. The newspaper quoted the school's superintendent who said, "The coach is no longer employed. An explanation letter was sent out to all parents. A criminal background check before being hired turned up nothing."

Surprised??? Parents...are you surprised?

Criminal background checks are useless. These criminals are escape artists. And they do it under everyone's noses.

I've known a priest and a coach who remain unpunished for their abusive activities while under the umbrella of trust. Most get away with it. It touches me very personally as, perhaps, many of you.

Point #1: Children do not always volunteer information to parents concerning sexual abuse.

Point #2: You parents are the protectors. If something seems odd to you, pull the string and clear it up.

Trust and act on your instincts.

When I was 12 years old, deep down inside, I was screaming to my parents, "Do you really know these people you place so much trust in? I'm not going to tell you what's happening here. That would kill me! You should figure it out!"

Although I dearly respect and love my parents, today as a parent, I often wonder if I could be unaware as my parents were 34 years ago. Would it seem odd to me now (as a parent) that my child and other children would routinely go to a coach's home after swim practice? How about a 10-day houseboat trip with 10 boys and one coach? Perhaps the title of "coach" blinded even the smartest parents.

Trust your instincts.

Sincerely, Mike Fitzgerald"

With more reflection on the current Penn State scandal and my childhood experience with a pedophile coach, a common theme emerges...the unique coaching/parent/athlete relationship can sometimes blind one's instincts.

Penn State has a coaching program with unsurpassed coaching and student/athlete excellence. In 1970 - just prior to his arrest – my coach was given a framed picture with the words, "We Worship the Water You Walk On!"

Trust your instincts.

Sincerely,
Mike Fitzgerald