

Because They MUST Fail

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With fifteen years of coaching in this sport of swimming, I have come to notice a few things that happen on each and every team I have ever worked with. Parents and swimmers, regardless of their location in this country, have similar issues at specific points of their swimming careers. I would love to address the "First Swim Meet" issue.

The "First Swim Meet" issue has been addressed on every team I have ever coached. Swimmers and parents are uncomfortable when it comes to attempting their first swim meet. It is an unknown for both of them. Children tend to be so upset at the thought of having to compete, that they somehow convince their parents that they should not, or can not be competing at their level. What do I think? Attend the first swim meet offered to your child regardless of how you feel about your child's ability and how they feel about competing.

Here's why...Every person MUST FAIL in order to become better! Think about this for a moment. Would you be where you are today in your career if you would have only succeeded? I know that I would not. Some of my greatest professional successes have come through having what I would consider a "horrible season".

Children are afraid of swim meets because they are "scary". A new swimmer knows they are not going to win. They know that they may get disqualified. They understand that it is going to be hard work. They become overwhelmed with the anxiety of having to step out of their "comfort zone" and actually challenge themselves to a level they never have before. PERFECT! This is what it takes to become an outstanding individual. Not just in swimming, but in life.

A ten year old child knows very little about trial and error. They understand the school system and its grading process, but outside of this, children have had very little trial and error elsewhere. If they have played in a "team sport", then they have been judged on a "team level" and not as an "individual". Being ranked as an individual is "scary."

In basketball, if you don't get the ball at a time when you can shoot, then it's not your fault you didn't score a point. In football, if you do your part on the field as a lineman and the quarterback's passing is off, then it's not your fault. There are so many other avenues to place blame and accept the defeat in a form that allows you to continue telling yourself that you played a great game. In swimming, there are none. It is all up to them. They are the ones who either make or break their performance.

This is to me, the most perfect part of the sport. It makes young athletes look at their performance at practice and reconsider if they are doing everything they can in order to become better. Swimming encourages young children and young adults to actually look at themselves and re-evaluate themselves. How wonderful is that? It's also wonderful to hear from a child that they plan on listening better at practice because they really want to learn more about a specific stroke or race.

Failure....

- Leads strong-minded children into their success.
- Upsets them enough to make them take control of their own actions.

In swimming there are no guarantees. No coach can look at an athlete and say “You know what? You’re going to become a state record holder”, or “Pack your bags kiddo, ‘cause in four more years I know you’re heading to the Olympics”. Trust me, after all of the years I’ve placed into this sport, I wish I could do this. It would make life so much easier for myself, parents, and athletes.

What a coach can promise is that through hard work, dedication, commitment, perseverance and FAILING, your child can become a person who understands more about themselves than most individuals their age.

It’s taken me a long time to realize that one of the key ingredients to all of my past athletes reaching their potential is failure. All of them have failed more than they succeeded. Some failures were large, other were minor. Most children will fail, learn from their mistakes, and fail again, but with fewer mistakes and so on. The reducing of failures is their improvement, dedication, and perseverance. They should be praised for their efforts and encouraged to continue on their quest.

That’s what a coach does, they encourage young, learning athletes to strive for more and always push themselves. It is a coach’s job and duty to keep these children understanding why we strive and how great it feels to achieve.

So here’s what I have to say...

Let your child fail. Don’t encourage “failure,” but understand it. Understand that failing is a process that is needed in order to succeed. Encourage your child to step out from their “comfort zone” and challenge themselves to a level that they may not think they can attain. Why? Because once they push themselves to that new level, they may realize that they are much faster, stronger, and just plain old better they ever thought they could be.

Parents should...

- Assist the coach in getting all that they can from their young athlete and properly challenging their child.
- Realize that their children are afraid. It’s nerve-racking to try something new and have so many eyes on you.
- Comfort their children and continually reinforce the fact that “effort” is to be praised and that “failure” is part of the process of becoming great.
- Get their children involved. Drive them to the swim meet. Be their biggest cheerleader. Make sure you love them regardless of what place they take in their events.
- Reinforce the fact that doing something that they’ve never done before is wonderful and the chance they have been given to challenge themselves is a blessing in disguise.