

The following article was written by Michael Brooks. He is the head coach of the York YMCA Swim Team in York, Pennsylvania. He also coached for a number of years at the North Baltimore Aquatic Club while Michael Phelps was an age group swimmer.

-Dennis

York YMCA Swimming - Thoughts on Travel Meets

WHY TEAM TRAVEL MEETS ARE SO IMPORTANT

Meets are meets are meets, really. You get on the blocks and swim fast, whether you are at the Y pool, or F & M, or Penn State, or Santa Clara, or the Beijing Olympic pool a year from now. However, travel meets entail traveling across the country instead of across town, staying in hotels rather than at your own home, rooming with your teammates instead of sleeping in your own bed, eating out every meal instead of having home-cooked meals, riding in team buses or vans instead of your comfortable car, and racing people you've never seen before from teams you've never heard of. All in all, **you cannot control your environment to the extent that you can back home, and because your mom and dad aren't there making your decisions for you, you have to take much more responsibility for making good choices than you ordinarily do.** All these factors make travel meets a little different, and much more important.

One of the most important purposes of a travel meet is teaching swimmers to deal with challenges. They have to adapt or die (or at least, swim slow). A few are:

- Time changes: plan ahead, adjusting your living, eating, sleeping, even workout schedule.
- Traveling with the team on buses means that the usual format is: hurry up and wait. Everything takes more time, so expect the delays and learn patience. There is an interesting balance between planning for every contingency and being very flexible.
- Kids don't get their own room or their own beds. Teammates habits may irritate them, but they have got to learn to live together, respect each other's intention to swim fast, and when necessary stick up for their goals.
- Swimmers have greater opportunities to get to know their teammates. Kids will not be placed with their best friends; they must meet and get to know previously unknown or little-known teammates. We are one team, not five training groups.
- Kids are often left with a lot of free time, and have to learn (sometimes under duress) constructive ways of filling that time that will help their overall mission of swimming faster.
- Kids learn priorities. They're not on vacation; they're going to a swim meet. We're not traveling across the country to lie on the beach or shop til we drop.
- Kids must learn to protect their goals. Some kids are simply not going to be serious about swimming, and serious kids have got to keep anyone else from hurting their performance. It is ultimately their responsibility to stick up for themselves and protect their goals, forcefully if necessary.
- Since they are not racing the same old competitors, the same old pecking order is abolished for a weekend, providing new possibilities for breakthroughs.

- There are more opportunities than usual to be distracted, so kids get more opportunities to practice focusing and making good decisions.
- Meets important enough to travel to tend to be big and fast; what better atmosphere for swimming fast than getting a whole bunch of fast kids from a large geographical area together to race?
- Travel meets aren't normal, or predictable, or perfect. They tear kids out of the usual routine. This is a Very Good Thing.
- Swimmers have more freedom and hence more responsibility as they make many more choices than they usually do. They have to practice making good choices (with the coaches' help, of course). "What's going to make me swim faster?" should be in their heads constantly and guide their decision-making.
- With just the coaches and swimmers (and a few chaperones), travel meets provide wonderful opportunities for coaches to get to know the swimmers better, to see how they react in novel situations (and even everyday situations that the coach rarely sees), and to teach 24/7 the *way of a champion*.

All swimming meets present challenges; travel meets present more than usual. **Swimmers are going to be faced with challenging situations. How are they going to deal with those challenges?** Are they going to whine and complain and let the conditions destroy their meet? Or, like champions, are they going to let them slide off them like water off a duck's back, taking the measure of every curveball before knocking it out of the park?

Travel meets accelerate a swimmer's competitive development through their challenges and their lessons. They are MASSIVELY EDUCATIONAL. Team travel meets are the most valuable meets that swimmers can attend.

Note: Parents, who often underestimate the emotional strength of their kids, often want their swimmer to call home ninety-seven times a day, to let us know you're all right. Well, no. Kids learn independence by being independent, not by being connected by a technological umbilical cord to the mother ship. **One of the important purposes of a travel meet like this one is to make the swimmers more independent, to teach them to make good choices on their own. I want them to have to figure out how to solve life's little problems on their own, and not have to rely on their parents to live and think and act for them while they remain perpetual infants. Parents need to help their kids become more mature and independent** by not calling every five minutes, and by not answering if they try to call every five minutes. Allow them to become stronger.

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