
Novice Competitive Swimming

How to get them started

*By Pat Hogan – 1980 Dallas
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This workshop is entitled **Novice Competitive Swimming: How to Get Them Started**. Very simply, I am going to talk to you about recruiting new participants to competitive swimming. I will discuss ways you can market your program. I will give you specific ideas you can use to attract new swimmers. I will outline some things that we have found very helpful in keeping new swimmers and their parents involved in our program.

When I talk about a **novice swimmer**, I am referring to a youngster who is interested in competitive swimming and who is not currently a member of another year-round swimming team. I want to make it very clear that we do not condone raiding swimmers from other clubs. My primary objective is to give you ideas to recruit new swimmers to our sport, not encourage youngsters to change programs.

Many of you are probably already aware that over the last four years the number of registered swimmers in our country has dropped drastically. In 1979, our registrations peaked at 151,000 swimmers in the AAU program. In 1980, that figure dropped to 147,000; in 1981 it dropped again to 139,000; and as of August 31st of this year, we have 120,000 athletes registered in the USS program.

A number of reasons have been suggested to explain this decline in registrations. First of all, I think we suffer because of competition from other sports and activities. Obviously, swimming is not a glamour sport like football, basketball, or baseball. Swimming does not enjoy the same media exposure on television and in newspapers.

We also fight the recent and rapid rise of youth soccer. There are literally thousands of young people who participate in youth soccer programs during both the fall and spring months. These programs, typically, do not require as much financing as swimming, nor do they require the time commitment characteristic of most of our age group swimming programs.

In addition, competitive swimming is considered a **country club** sport. It is relatively expensive in comparison to other activities that young people can take part in. Given today's economy, I believe that it is absolutely imperative that we make a real effort to sell the value of our program versus its cost.

Finally, our sport has developed a **work ethic** image that is positive in most respects, but hurts us when it comes to attracting new swimmers. People have developed some amazing misconceptions about what is actually expected of nine-year-old Johnny. They think that he will have to practice in the morning before school and attend 11 practices a week. We spend so much time bragging about how hard we work and how much we demand from our athletes, that most people do not realise that this level of commitment is expected of only a small percentage of our team members and is certainly not required of someone just beginning in the sport.

For reasons such as these, we firmly believe that a well-organised recruiting program has become a necessity if club teams are to attract the quality athletes they need in the sport of competitive swimming. Let us now discuss how to lay the foundation for such a recruiting program.

In order to recruit novice swimmers to your program, you must first make people in your community aware that you exist. This awareness is achieved by marketing your program. Learn to take advantage of any means available to put your club's name before the public. This effort can have a dual benefit. Not only will it prove beneficial in attracting new swimmers, but it can also be a very valuable when it comes time to do some fundraising.

The first step in marketing your program is developing a team logo. A logo is a trademark that can assist you immeasurably in establishing an identity within the community. This trademark should be one that people learn to recognize readily and associate with your team. Think of the vast number of consumer products and national

companies that you recognize instantly by their logo. A perfect example is the “Golden Arches” of McDonalds the national sponsor for our Age Group swimming program. Everyone knows and associates that logo with the McDonalds Corporation. A logo has a variety of uses and applications. It can be used on a letterhead, promotional literature, posters, bumper stickers, team uniform and uniform accessories, swim meet awards, etc. It should be used in any manner that will help establish your program’s identity and enhance its image.

Let me give you a couple of ideas we have used successfully to obtain logos inexpensively. Most swimming teams do not have the money necessary to hire a professional firm to perform such a service. When I coached in Fort Worth, Texas, we approached the corporate art professor at Texas Christian University and asked for his help in developing a logo for our club. He very graciously made our logo a project for his corporate art class the next semester. We had a very difficult time selecting the logo we liked best from the six very professional and attractive possibilities that they presented to us. Our only expense was the cost of producing print-ready copies.

The Dynamo Swim Club logo was created for us by an advertising firm in return for free advertising in our swim meet programs. This is another very inexpensive means of obtaining a logo or trademark.

I strongly recommend that your second step in marketing the team should be developing some type of printed information describing your program. This can take any form and will vary in cost. You can have a one-page flyer, similar to the Dynamo brochure, or you can have a very attractive booklet such as many college teams use to promote their programs. There is some basic information which should be included in any type of promotional literature.

First of all, people will be interested in your team structure. They will want to know how the team is organised and what the objectives of each group are. Secondly, they will want to know the practice schedule. When mothers are planning their children’s activities for the coming year, they need to know what time swim practice will be and how often it will be offered. Parents also want to know the team fees and other costs involved with swimming.

In addition, I would suggest that you make sure your phone number is displayed prominently on the information and list the hours when you can be contacted. You can spend much time and money to make people aware that you exist, but if they cannot get in touch with you, your efforts have been to no avail.

Other information in the brochure can be ... Team accomplishments, team objectives, attendance requirements, a description of your facility and its location, the procedure for registering to join; biographical sketches of your coaching staff; the team’s history and competition program or meet schedule for the coming year.

Let’s discuss the various distribution points where you can disseminate this literature. In our area, neighbourhood summer clubs are the number one target. In addition to the numerous city and county recreational swimming centres, we are fortunate to have a tremendous number of private summer swim clubs throughout the neighbourhood areas of metro Atlanta. Most of these clubs have teams that compete in summer swim leagues.

You can distribute brochures at schools, particularly elementary schools near your facility. Ask the principals for permission to distribute your literature to the 3rd, 4th and 5th Grades, the eight, nine and ten-year-olds.

Doctors’ offices offer another excellent distribution point. Paediatricians and orthodontists, specialists who work primarily with young people, provide the most access to potential age-group swimmers.

Another thing we have done is disseminate our brochures to real estate agencies throughout the Atlanta area. We have tried to make the real estate agents in our city aware of our program so they can direct their clients to us. We often get telephone calls from agents requesting more information on our program or asking us to mail information to people planning a move to our community.

You may also want to take advantage of the excellent distribution points that shopping centres and malls offer. You may even want to consider distributing flyers or brochures on the windshields of every car parked at the local shopping mall. This idea

could be carried out by your swimmers on a Saturday afternoon early in the season. You may only attract a handful of new swimmers, but it is an excellent way of making people in your community aware that you exist. Establishing an identity will come back to help you many times over.

You should obviously make your promotional literature available at the facility where you train. Should a potential swimmer come by at a time when you are not present, that information will help answer at least some of the questions they may have about your program. I hope these thoughts will help stimulate ideas of your own which you can adapt to your particular situation.

One of the best means of creating interest in your program is a well-organised effort to publicise your team's achievements. This effort will also get some much-deserved recognition for your swimmers. There are some very obvious media possibilities. Everyone is familiar with the major newspapers, television and radio stations. All of us have tried, to some extent, to obtain some attention from these media sources for special activities involving our programs. Oftentimes less obvious possibilities are more accessible than the major media.

In Atlanta we are forced to compete with professional sports, college athletics and the myriad of athletic events that take place in a metropolitan area as large as ours. We have found it very difficult to stir up much interest from the major newspapers and television stations. However, we have been very successful in getting articles in the various weekly neighbourhood newspapers that circulate throughout the different communities of metro Atlanta. The sports editors of these publications are always looking for interesting information about the activities and achievements of people who live in their particular community.

We have also been successful in getting articles in publications such as corporate newsletters. Most of the giant corporations in your area probably publish some type of newsletter for their employees and customers. Interested in promoting the company's family image, these publications are usually very willing to feature the achievements of people who live in their particular community.

Another media source that we have is feature programs such as "PM Magazine." This is a nationwide program that produces feature stories of local interest. We were able to entice them into doing a story on our organisation shortly after we built our facility. One possibility that perhaps is not as obvious but makes a lot of sense is school newspapers. We always talk about how difficult it is for our swimmers to get recognition from their peers at school. What better way to solve this problem than to contact the editor of a school newspaper and try to interest them in doing a feature on one of your swimmers who attends that school.

There are probably other media sources that exist. I encourage you to search out these possibilities and take advantage of the opportunity they provide to further publicize your program and put your team's name before the public.

Two years ago, shortly after opening our new facility, we hosted a medial press luncheon at our Swim Centre. We invited specific individuals from every newspaper, television station, and radio station in Atlanta. The mothers prepared a covered-dish dinner and we put on a swimming exhibition. We tried to teach those in attendance a little about competitive swimming.

In general, newspaper reporters and TV personalities know and understand very little about our sport. It is very difficult to create interest in something people know little about. The major problem that professional soccer faces in this country is that most people our age know very little about the sport. Consequently, we have very little interest in soccer. The same situation is true of competitive swimming. It is difficult to create interest without first educating. We found that the medial press luncheon proved very successful in creating some interest in swimming and served to help us establish contacts we have been able to take advantage of ever since.

It would be possible to have an entire workshop devoted to the topic of organising a publicity program. I do want to make you aware that Randy Hart, the Media Services Director for United States Swimming, had put together a Medial promotion guide that should be received by every organization which joins United States Swimming. In this guide is some basic information about how to put together news releases, make calls

and other advice on publicising your team and its activities. If you have not seen this guide, contact the USS office in Colorado Springs and request a copy.

Delegating responsibility for publicity to a parent or committee of parents is an excellent way of getting a publicity program started. As swimming coaches, most of us do not have the time it takes to contact newspapers or TV stations to stir up interest. This activity can be delegated to a parent who has time, who may have some training in this area and who is willing to help. However, it is very important that the coach, the professional involved, take an active personal interest and be willing to make the necessary contacts to initiate and facilitate that publicity. The time you spend on such matters is time wisely spent.

A project which we are currently working on is the development of an audio-visual presentation we can use not only to promote our team and recruit new swimmers but also to help with fund raising. We found a corporate sponsor who is willing to bear the expense of producing a 15-20 minute program describing our team, its objective, its accomplishments, etc. We plan to show this program to PTA group foundations, fraternal organisations like the Rotary Club and at local recreation centres, summer clubs and schools.

I would also encourage you to take advantage of the various films which are available such as the Agree film, "A Winner is Waiting." This is an excellent piece on competitive swimming you can borrow at no cost thanks to the Johnson and Johnson Company. This film is very appropriate for orientation meetings the first week of practice or can even be shown to summer league swimmers interested in swimming year-round. Films such as this are available and provide another means of promoting your team and our sport in your community.

With regard to marketing, there is one last subject I want to discuss, advertising and public relations. I would strongly recommend including a line item for advertising in your team's annual operating budget. This money can be well spent to develop promotional literature, advertise in local newspapers or for any opportunity which will allow you to better market your program.

Most large communities have a welcome service that you might want to take advantage of. Here in the Dallas area, there is a Welcome Newcomer Service that a person new to this area can contact for information. These services usually send someone to the newcomer's home with a packet of information about their new community. This packet includes information on how to register to vote, where to buy license plates, the location and phone numbers of hospitals, banks, area schools, etc. Usually the packet will also have brochures of local businesses and activities that choose to advertise in this fashion. You might explore this possibility in your community.

A very obvious but often overlooked source of advertising is the local Yellow Pages. We think our Yellow Pages advertisement is one of the most valuable and effective things we do to market our program. We spend about \$35 per month for a ½ inch ad that we believe makes our program more accessible to the general public. You might feel that \$35 per month is very expensive, but the ad will pay for itself if you can pick up only one new swimmer each month.

There are also low cost or no cost means of marketing your program. One of the things we like to do each year with our team is attend public events as a group. We will contact the group sales office of the Atlanta Hawks or the Atlanta Braves and set up a **team night** at a basketball or baseball game. We encourage that as many swimmers as possible attend and ask them to wear team T-shirts, warm-up jackets, etc. Usually, in those situations, the announcer will acknowledge the groups in attendance. This is a great way to get your team's name before the public, and, equally as valuable, the swimmers have a great time.

You can also get involved in certain well-publicised community activities. I am aware of teams which participate in 4th of July Parades, operate booths at Oktoberfest, or even take part in a fund raising activity for a special cause like muscular dystrophy or leukaemia. Activities such as these are usually well publicised in the local media and, if your team gets involved as a group, you can take advantage of this publicity.

One other idea I will mention briefly is the Nashville Aquatic Club's relationship with

Colonial Bread. Not only does Colonial sponsor a meet for them each year, but in every loaf of bread produced in the city of Nashville they include either a pass to the Nashville Aquatic Center or a decal of the team. This is a novel idea, but again, it represents an excellent way of taking advantage of a community resource to get your team's name before the public.

These ideas represent some of the many ways you can lay the foundation for attracting new swimmers to your team. All of these marketing techniques help create an image in the community and establish your program's identity. Once you have accomplished that you are then ready to begin recruiting novice swimmers. Let us now consider some ideas for recruiting swimmers.

In our area the summer league programs are the number one source for new swimmers. We are very fortunate to have over 9,000 metro Atlanta youngsters involved in summer league swimming. Oftentimes I think coaches fight a situation like this rather than take advantage of it. Once you get swimmers from the summer program the tendency is to try to hang onto them and never let them go back. I did this early in my coaching career and I have come to realise it was one of the biggest mistakes I have made in coaching.

There are a number of ways you can take advantage of the summer league situation in your community, but the most important way is to encourage your swimmers to participate in the summer league program. Why? Because they are the very best selling point you have. We recommend that all our age-group team members also swim with their summer league teams. It would be difficult to attract other summer league swimmers if they knew we did not encourage and support the summer leagues. There are some youngsters who will get so turned on by competitive swimming they would come to your program anyway. But most summer leaguers quickly develop a loyalty to their summer club because that is their first experience in swimming. They would not be as anxious to join a USS program if they knew they could not go back to their summer club team. Our swimmers are the best selling point we have. People are always impressed, after a youngster has swum on our team all winter, with the tremendous improvement they have made. When they go to summer league meets we ask them to wear their Dynamo warm-ups, team cap, team suit, etc., to help our team keep a high profile in the summer league community.

In addition to encouraging our swimmers to participate in the summer league program, we ask our coaches to visit summer league dual meets two or three nights a week to scout potential talent, distribute brochures and talk to swimmers and parents about joining our team. We believe this person-to-person contact has played a crucial role in the success we have enjoyed in attracting new swimmers to our program.

We have found that people have many misconceptions about what is involved in year-round swimming. It is not unusual for us to approach the parents of an eight-year-old who have no intention of allowing their child to swim in our program because of what they have heard about early morning practices and marathon meets. We talk to them, explain our program, outline our philosophy and objectives, explain what is involved and how much it costs. Two weeks later at another meet, these same parents will approach us to find out how to sign up. The turnaround you can create by person-to-person contact is absolutely amazing.

One other thing we do to take advantage of the summer situation is encourage our parents who are certified officials to participate in officiating both dual and championship meets. The leagues in our area welcome our parents to work as starter or stroke judge. We ask our parents to wear Dynamo shirts and donate the officials' fee to our club. Thus, we not only keep a high profile, we also have a nice little fund raiser. This past summer we raised about \$700 for our program this way. It might also be possible for your senior swimmers to perform this service if it fits your practice schedule. One additional benefit offered by summer league officiating is providing our newly certified parents some valuable experience working in a low-pressure situation.

If you are not fortunate enough to already have a summer league program in your community, I strongly recommend that you organise one. In preparation for this talk, I spoke with a number of people around the country and one of the interesting facts I discovered was that John Ryan, who was recently named the Women's Coach at SMU,

organised a summer league in San Antonio to feed his Alamo Area Aquatics Association. When John first went to San Antonio five years ago there was no summer league program in that area. He had just come from Virginia where summer programs flourish. He had the wisdom and foresight to organise and administrate a league in San Antonio. Today that league has over 2,000 swimmers and serves as the primary source of new swimmers for Alamo Area Aquatics. It may take three or four years for a league to grow large enough to help, but there is no better feeder system for year-round swimming.

In many communities the city or county recreation departments provide some type of competitive swimming program during the summer months. If you are not already taking advantage of the opportunity these programs provide, I encourage you to try to do so.

A second idea we have found to be very successful in attracting new swimmers, particularly in conjunction with the summer leagues, is to hold stroke clinics or swim camps for non-USS swimmers in our area. Such clinics or camps can be offered to swimmers of any age or experience level. They not only provide access to new swimmers and an opportunity to attract them to your facility, but clinics are tremendous fund raisers. Last year we conducted two stroke clinics, one in the fall and one during the spring, which grossed nearly \$10,000 for our program. Each time we host these clinics we will attract between 150-180 youngsters at a charge of \$30 each.

Stroke clinics may also be offered free of charge if you are in a situation where that idea would be more acceptable. You can conduct a three or four-day clinic at no cost in order to attract potential swimmers, get them in your facility and create an opportunity for them to meet and work with your coaching staff.

In past years we have given T-shirts with our team logo to all participants in our stroke clinics. This not only serves as an incentive to participate, but it also advertises the stroke clinic and gets our name before the summer league community.

An idea that is also an offshoot of the summer league program is a coaches' clinic for summer league coaches. It is very important that you develop a rapport with the area summer club coaches. These people can have tremendous influence on their swimmers and can play an important role in influencing these youngsters to swim year-round. Summer league coaches often have very little background in competitive swimming and coaches' clinics provide an excellent opportunity for you to help them and at the same time sell the benefits of your program. It behoves the summer coach to get his swimmers involved in your program because they are much improved when they return nine months later and, consequently, so is the summer team.

The next idea is not original. I know it has been used successfully in many areas around the country. I suggest you consider hosting a summer league invitational or **all-comers** swim meet. You can charge a nominal entry fee if any at all, run 25 yard or 50 yard distances of each stroke, offer attractive awards and design the meet for non-USS swimmers.

Such meets are another excellent way of attracting swimmers to your facility. We try to take advantage of this by using all the bulletin boards and extra wall space to post newspaper clippings of our swimmers' achievements, pictures of our swimmers at the Nationals and Junior Nationals, etc. Very simply we try to **dress up** our pool to excite people about year-round swimming and demonstrate how much fun it can be. This is not a talk on fund raising additional funds for your team.

In Memphis, Dick Fadgen's team conducts this kind of meet each summer and invites the top three finishers in each event to swim on their team free of charge for two weeks. Again, just another way of encouraging new swimmers to join their team.

At our facility, the Dynamo Community Swim Center, we offer a progressive lesson program that, once established, we hope will prove to be a feeder program for our team. Although we offer a Red Cross curriculum, we try to gear it a little bit toward competitive swimming and try to educate our instructors to work on creating an interest in our team. It is also possible to offer a pre-competitive course on a regular basis throughout the year as a stepping-stone to the team.

Another recruiting device used by John Ryan in San Antonio was to offer beginning swim lessons to every 3rd Grade student in the city's Northeast School District. They would conduct these classes as a part of the school system's physical education

program, starting a new class every two weeks. At the conclusion of each session, they would identify people they thought had talent and send them an invitation to join the team.

Other recruiting ideas include ... Bring-a-Friend-to-Practice Day; Membership Drives, in which you offer a dues rebate for every new swimmer a family brings in, and Water Shows or Exhibitions that serve as another means of attracting people to your pool.

The job of selling your team does not end when the novice swimmer and parents actually join the program. Let's talk about things that you can do to keep them once you get them involved. In my opinion the key is communication. For new swimmers and their parents, competitive swimming is a very complicated and difficult sport to understand. We coaches take a lot of things for granted that new swimmers have never heard of and do not understand. In our program, we do a number of things that we think help in introducing the new swimmer and his parents to the sport. These things not only communicate our intentions and what is going on in the program, but they also facilitate their understanding of competitive swimming.

This year we will start our program on October 4th. On the following Tuesday and Wednesday, in the evenings during practice, we are going to offer orientation meetings for new parents in the program. In those orientation meetings, we discuss and outline practice schedules and attendance requirements, meet schedules and what we expect of them in terms of attending meets. We try to explain the classified age group program, the difference between "A" meets and "A-B" meets, "B" meets and "B-C" meets, etc. We explain meet entries and entry fees, USS registration and the insurance involved. We explain their role and responsibilities as parents in our program and we outline major team policies.

As a follow-up for the new parents and also for current members, each fall we publish a **Parents' Handbook**, which is distributed to every family on the team. The Parents' Handbook is 45-50 pages long and we feel that every question a new parent or swimmer might have concerning our program or competitive swimming is answered in the book.

I think one of the most effective things we do in our program is put out a **weekly newsletter**. If you don't have the time or funds to publish a weekly newsletter, you should consider a semi-monthly or monthly newsletter. It's a great way to keep the membership well-informed on everything that is going on currently in the program. Following this article is a list of 15 items we use in our newsletters on a regular basis. The more informed the swimmers and parents are, the happier they are going to be.

Another idea I have used in the past is a **Parent-Partner Program**. We assign a current member of the program to each new family each year to help ease their introduction to the team and USS. They can answer questions, offer rides to meetings and encourage greater involvement of the new member. They can even help them through their first meet. In our particular situation, we often take 100 new swimmers to the very first meet of the year. It's very difficult for our coaches to take care of all of the new people and make sure they know how to get to the ready bench, etc.

Another idea we have used is the **Dumb Question Lady**. As corny as that may sound, we have two or three ladies in our program we call the "Dumb Question Lady" whose sole purpose is to serve as a sounding board or answering service for people in our program who have dumb questions and are afraid to call the coaches and waste their time. We publish their phone numbers in our team roster and in the newsletter on a regular basis.

Finally, the idea of a parent-coach conference or that of a parent-coach-swimmer conference is very effective. It is a chance to get to know the parents and swimmer on a different level than you do in day-to-day contact on the deck, a chance to offer a progress report and explain training and diet requirements. It is also a perfect opportunity to emphasize the parents' role in helping their youngster make progress in the sport.

I feel the program structure is very important to the success of retaining new swimmers in the sport. How you organise your program can make a big difference. I recommend you have a team level designed specifically for novice swimmers. This group

should emphasise fundamentals and teach kids to love the sport and to have a good time. When you first attract a seven or eight-year-old swimmer to the sport, it is not important to their future success to train a certain amount of yardage every single day. I think it is more important to develop the fundamentals. They need to learn the fundamentals, the rules and stroke techniques in order to move on to the higher levels of the sport ... it's just like 1st Grade. You have to learn to read and write and learn arithmetic before you can move on in school. There needs to be a group in every program of every team in this country that is designed to teach the youngsters in that fashion. Once they get involved a little bit and get hooked, add more and more training and work.

I also encourage you to take a very careful look at the practice attendance requirements that you place on your youngsters. I think one of the biggest mistakes we in swimming make is to require nine, 10, 11 and even 12-year-old swimmers to come to practice five or six times a week. If you look at the variety of activities they can participate in and consider the time period those activities take place in, there is no other activity, except perhaps ballet or gymnastics that expects the same total dedication at that age that our sport does. I assure you there are a number of great athletes who might otherwise get involved in swimming who never consider it because they want to play basketball, football, soccer, belong to the Scouts, take piano lessons, etc. Often if they swim in our programs we don't give them an opportunity to participate in those other things. I think this is a terrible mistake.

In our program, we ask seven and eight-year-olds to come to practice at least twice a week at the novice level. I think this makes a big difference in helping people make the decision to join our program. Prospective parents hear stories about how often the seniors have to practice, before and after school, and they think their eight-year-olds will have to do the same. It is very important, in selling your program, that prospective parents understand that new swimmers do not have to attend practice every single day and that you encourage their children to participate in other activities.

I suggest that you take a very active interest in programs conducted by the USS local swimming committee (LSC). You should make sure that your meet schedule or your competition program is attractive to new swimmers. One of the biggest advantages sports like soccer and football have over swimming is that youngsters usually attend practice three or four, maybe five times a week at the very most. They can go to a competition for two or three hours on a Saturday afternoon and that is it. We ask our people to go meets Saturday and Sunday, in some cases all day. It is not attractive to someone who doesn't understand our sport.

Let's talk about the idea of motivation. Your ability to excite new swimmers and their parents and to make them feel at home is important if you hope to retain them in the program. One of our successful ideas is the **Dynamo Incentive Award**. This can be compared favourably with a high school letter award. Every youngster in our program who meets the minimum practice attendance requirements throughout the year receives, at our team banquet every fall, an award in recognition of their participation in our program. This award is usually some type of team apparel, a visor, bag, sweater, etc. This is a chance for that little nine-year-old "C" swimmer, who never got a ribbon in a meet or was never recognised for anything he did in competition, to receive some tangible recognition for his participation in our sport. We found this award system to be a very valuable motivator.

I encourage you to take advantage of the ASCA patch program. Talk to your youngsters about time standards and about the classified age group program. Use the time standards as motivating factors in your swimmers' day-to-day experiences in swimming. If they achieve a new level in the sport by making a "B" time or an "A" time for the first time, these ASCA "Achievement Awards" patches give them some immediate recognition, even though they may not pick up a medal or a ribbon at the meet.

It's also very important to develop team spirit and pride. This can be done in any number of ways. I know of a number of programs that give a youngster a team t-shirt when he joins the team. I think that is a great gift idea. As a part of our team banquet every fall, we have a little initiation ceremony for every new member of our team. This is a very simple thing, but it's a way to involve them in an activity in which they would not

otherwise be participating. As part of the ceremony, we give them a club lapel pin and mention the pride and tradition of our organisation.

Team activities are an excellent way of developing a feeling of belonging and some camaraderie with the older swimmers on the team. This can take the form of games at practice or special outings or a softball game on Saturday. These are all things which allow the swimmers a chance to interact in a different way than they do on a day-to-day basis in the pool and allow them to get to know each other and feel that they are more a part of the program.

An idea I know has been used successfully in the past is the **Big Brother, Big Sister** program. This is a program which pairs senior or older Age Group swimmers with two or three novice swimmers and on a regular basis in the early part of the season, the older swimmers work with their novice swimmers on stroke technique, starts or turns, etc. The novice swimmer has someone to look up to and to help them into the world of competitive swimming. The more you can do to include the novice swimmers as a part of your program and make them feel at home, the better chance you have of retaining them in the program.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: What do you do in your club in regard to the parent-coach- swimmer conference?

A: To be very honest, we don't have an organised program. We do not try to meet with every swimmer and parent in our program. We do try to foresee situations, such as a swimmer not receiving enough support at home. We might set up a conference with the parents of that youngster to discuss on a very positive basis things they can do to help support their youngster. One of the things I always do when I move a swimmer to my senior program is meet with the swimmer and his parents and outline specifically what I will expect of them in our senior program. We treat our senior program quite a bit differently than we do our age group program and we want to make sure they understand what is involved.

Q: Do you have a minimum standard that youngsters have to attain in order to join your program?

A: Yes, we have a minimum standard because of the summer league program which exists in our area. We expect swimmers who come to our program for the very first time to be able to swim all four strokes for at least one length of the pool. They may not be able to do those strokes very well but we expect them to be able to swim all four strokes in some form. We might make an exception in the case of a very young and small seven or eight-year-old who can do two or three of the strokes well but cannot do Butterfly at all.

Q: How do you go about actually organising or starting your own summer league program?

A: Talk to somebody who is familiar enough with your community to know the number and availability of neighbourhood pools in your area. In Atlanta, most of the newer subdivisions include a neighbourhood pool which the contractor builds as one of the incentives for people to move into that subdivision. When people move in, they pay an annual fee to belong to this club which is like a private club in their own neighbourhood.

If these subdivision type of pools do not exist to the extent that you need to start a summer league program, I would encourage you to go to the city or county recreation department to find out the availability of public facilities. You could work with the city or county organisation to initiate some kind of summer league program if one does not already exist. We do not really have much control over the summer leagues but by having members of your club involved in the administration of the summer league program, you can do a lot in terms of organising that league in a direction that will benefit your program.

Q: Do you have conflicts with summer league coaches concerning which practices and

meets the kids attend?

A: We do not have any conflict over meets because most of the summer league meets are normally held on week nights. There is a league on Monday nights, a league on Tuesday nights, two leagues on Wednesday nights and a league on Thursday nights. We allow our age group swimmers to miss our evening practices to attend these league meets. In terms of public relations, it would be foolish for us not to cooperate. Missing that one practice every week is worth more than gaining the enmity of the summer leagues.

We encourage our swimmers to practice with our team and compete with the summer league team. In most cases the summer league coaches are willing for them to do that because they usually have more kids than they can handle anyway. Some of the summer league coaches have regulations that they have to come to their practices once or twice a week and we usually cooperate with that. Let's face it, with 10-and-under kids it does not really make that much difference if they swim in those league practices. This is not going to affect their development as swimmers, it may affect how fast they swim as a 10-year-old but I happen to think that is not really important.

Q: Do you send information about coaches' clinic to the coaches or to the people who run the pools?

A: It is very difficult to communicate with summer leagues because they usually change presidents every year. Normally we send information about our stroke clinics and coaches' clinics, or whatever, to the past president of the league and ask them to forward it.

Q: How do you get new parents involved? Do you require them to do certain things when they join or do you ask them to do certain things?

A: We are very fortunate to have one of the finest parents clubs in the country. I communicate our needs with the parents' organisation and they handle getting the parents organised and involved.