

What is really important in swimming? What I have learned

We have been in the water for two weeks now and in order for everyone to know what is going on in the pool there are a few things that I feel are important for parents to understand. The first thing that is important is to understand my philosophy on swimming and coaching. It is also my goal to allow you to understand what I think is really important in this sport and what I have learned over the last number of years.

My philosophy has always been to provide a coaching/training environment that allows a swimmer to maximize his or her potential whatever that potential is, no matter what the ability level. I learned this philosophy from my college coach. It is a philosophy that I have taken to heart and has been my coaching mantra since the first day I walked onto the pool deck. I think this is a very important approach to take because we as coaches are just the facilitators in allowing a swimmer to achieve in this sport and the environment that they train in will ultimately lead to success or failure.

What I have learned is that it is no matter what we do as coaches and parents; it really comes down to what level of achievement the swimmer wants to reach. We can not achieve for them, they have to want it themselves. Sure it is ok to guide them along the swimming pathway, but I learned from my own years of swimming at the national level that in order to achieve at that level or any, I had to be willing to do the work that would make me successful...certainly not my coaches or parents.

The coaches who trained me could not get into the water and do the training necessary for me to be successful at the national level and as I look back that was true of every level of swimming. I had to come to that self-realization myself and then do the work necessary to achieve my own goals. All that those coaches in the past did was provide the environment to succeed. It was nothing the coaches I trained with did to me, but something that I had to come to a decision on and work toward.

This transfers to age-group swimming as well. I say this because we have to consider as coaches and parents what is important in the development of young athletes and allow the athletes to develop at a rate that allows them to make the decision to be good swimmers. This happens with our guidance of course, but not at the expense of long-term training goals, friendships, maturation, technical skills, and having fun.

The kind of training that is important at this level of swimming is basic training concepts. Concepts like technique, drills, endurance, and having fun. The most important element of training at the age group level, specifically the 6 – 14 year-old range is to have a great deal of fun. If the swimmers have fun, then they are more likely to stay in the sport and look towards loftier goals. When swimmers start having loftier goals, then we are able to encourage them to work harder on good technique and the drills that will allow them to improve their overall skills. This will also translate into a much more rounded swimmer that in the long-term will enable them to be even better swimmers.

I learned on the National Age-Group Planning Committee that we really only have 3 – 5 years to maximize the technical skills that a swimmer will need once they begin swimming. Obviously, the older an athlete is they more difficult this is, but younger athletes really do have an advantage over other swimmers. At this stage they have the ability to make wide-sweeping changes almost immediately without disruption of overall skill levels. That is why it is so important for young swimmers to really focus on technical skills rather than on how much 'yardage' they are doing.

Yes, there does come a time when yardage is important, but for the majority of swimmers on this team that is not the case. Our swimmers will improve more by improving their overall swimming skills than by how much swimming they are doing. I

know some parents over the years have concerns that their child is not doing enough swimming to reach their goals. If we are long-term thinkers then we will realize that an immediate goal sometimes has to be sacrificed for the long-term success of the swimmer. By focusing on technique we are enabling future success in our swimmers. Keep in mind something that one of the Univ. of Michigan coaches's told me when I was swimming for them. Technique is always important and will make them faster in the long haul. In the short haul, they are getting faster because they are growing closer to the other wall. So establishing those pathways coupled with growth will in the beginning of a swimmers career will lead to immediate successes.

However, after that the neurological pathways that enable the swimmer to move through the water are firmly established and become extremely difficult to undo. This does not mean that swimmers who have poor technique are doomed; it just means they will have limitations later on in their careers that may or may not hinder their abilities to maximize the swimming skills. That is why I have learned that it is important to take time early on in a career to develop technical skills over training, because in the long-run it will only make the swimmer more successful. That is why it is important to TEACH a swimmer how to swim rather than trying to get them to swim like college or the Olympic swimmers they idolize. They are not college swimmers and in many cases not even high school swimmers and training them that way will not make them faster, but may drive them out of the sport. So as coaches and parents we have to take special care to make sure that the training we do is very age specific. If we do this, we will always have the swimmers best interests first.

Once we have enabled them to be better swimmers and have provided them with the necessary training to improve aerobically, it is important to understand the influence that other people have on the swimmer. Friends in the pool have a tremendous amount of influence on what a swimmer does in the pool during practice. As coaches it is important to allow the swimmers to socialize and establish friendships, but it is just as important that parents understand that this is also important element is a child's swimming career. It helps them build friendships, learn communication skills, and respect for others.

Another group of individuals that have a profound impact on the swimmer are you the parents. As parents, you exert a great deal of influence on your children and what you say and do will impact what they do at practice and meets. That is why it is so important that as parents you step back and allow the coaches to do the job of coaching. This is very difficult to do because as parents we want our children to succeed and we want to help them achieve. However, while this response reflects our natural tendency to guide are children in making good decisions it does at times conflict with what a coach may or may not be doing. That is why it is so important to talk to your child's coach when you do not understand what is going on. Coaches have no secrets...or at least they shouldn't. Often times if you have a question and approach a coach at an appropriate time, they will be happy to discuss with you what is going on in the training of your child. That way you can allow the coach to do their job and you as the parent can be the supportive individual you need to be.

The final group of individuals who have a great deal of influence on the swimmer is the coach. Quite often we coaches spend more time with the athletes than the parents do. So, quite often we do find ourselves in the role of "parent". And as "parents" we have a responsibility to our "children" to help them make the right decisions when it comes to swimming. We do not cross the line of making life decisions, but like I said before. We are the facilitator for the swimmer to become the best swimmer they can be. If we do

become the facilitator then we will be allowing the swimmer to maximize their potential, whatever that potential is!

As coaches and parents we are in a leadership role whether we like it or not. We have the ability to exude a great deal of influence on the minds of young individuals. The influence that we have must be positive and always in the best interest of the swimmer. This is a God given duty and not one we should take for granted. Children are our greatest treasure and the life blood of this swim club. We must lead by example and our example has to be a reflection of what we would want those swimmers to be. Being a parent myself, I see this more clearly now because I know that the individual I was before I had children is a person who had weaknesses. Not that they were bad, but certainly not the reflection on children I would like to see now. We are by no means perfect, and at last count only one person ever has been. However, we still have that responsibility to make sure that when swimmers leave our presence they are a reflection of what we would want our own children to be.

What do we want our children to be? We want them to be the best swimmer they can be, but how long does that take? How good a swimmer becomes is driven by so many factors that to isolate any one of them would be impossible. However, over the years I have learned that there are three or four things that should happen within 3 – 5 years of the onset of a swimming career, but it is important to keep in mind that other factors can influence the pace of improvement.

First and foremost is good technique. If you don't have it you are unlikely to be as good as someone who does have good technique. Take a look at Michael Phelps. He has superior technique and that started at the age of eight. Second, is the maturation of a young athlete. Because of the variations a young individual experiences when they mature will often times dictate what level of success a swimmer has. We have no control on this so we just have to sit back and let nature take its course. Third is our ability to interact with swimmers and coaches. How well a swimmer interacts with other coaches and swimmers will impact a swimmers success so we need to work on a child's social skills. Finally and most importantly is to have fun swimming. If it is not fun to swim then no matter how much support parents, coaches, and swimmers provide to an athlete they will not be successful...so we must make it fun for them.

Those are some of the key ingredients in swimming success and what it takes to be a good swimmer. How we combine those ingredients often times determines how good a swimmer will be, but watching those ingredients come together is what makes this a fascinating sport!