

Showing Up...Trying Hard....Racing!

Our mission in the Cape Cod Swim Club is to prepare swimmers to be the best competitive swimmers they can be. As Coach Ron says on our web site, "They learn a lot of other things along the way too". But, it is competitive swimming. This article will be about racing both in workout and in meets. Most children return home after workouts and tell their parents that they tried their best. Most parents believe their children are working hard. Some years ago, we tried a survey with the kids in the National Group. We handed them a sheet of paper with everyone's name on it- about 18 swimmers. We asked each swimmer to rate everyone in the group including themselves on effort with one being the lowest score and ten being the highest. They put their name on the paper but no one else was going to see it except me. What we discovered was that every athlete in that group thought they were working hard. On their self-scoring, each athlete rated himself/herself high scores of 8,9,10. And, the kids were also very consistent on rating their teammates. Out of 18 swimmers, usually 15-17 swimmers agreed about the others. Taking an example of the biggest "slacker" in the group, 16 other swimmers rated that athlete low scores of 2, 3, or 4 on the effort scale while that athlete rated herself at nine. I also felt that swimmer was a 3 on the effort scale. Clearly, there were some people in the group who did not work hard relative to others. They just didn't know it. Their perception of themselves was different than the collective perception and my judgement.

When a swimmer is not doing well, or the parent believes the swimmer should be doing better, often the first thought is to question the Coaching or the training. What is the Coach doing wrong? What could the Coach be doing better? Maybe the parent feels that the Coach may be good for Susie

but "he is not the right personality for my Meghan". And, of course, sometimes this might be the case. But, when I met with my senior group at the beginning of each season, I would often stress the following concept.

There are three levels of effort that a child often makes in the CCSC. First, a child must "show up" to practice. Just being there with near perfect attendance goes a long way toward helping a swimmer improve consistently, at least at the twelve and under age level. But keep in mind the following about age group swimming as it relates to improvement. It's hard to gauge. Young children improve almost naturally the same way as they grow. In fact, they improve because they are growing both mentally and physically. So, when a swimmer is aged 8 through 12, it is easy to feel as a Coach that you are doing a great job. The Coach feels responsible for these improvements. And, as a parent, it is very positive too. A parent can come to almost any meet and see his child drop to new best times. Everyone feels good...swimmer, coach and parent.

But, that's the bittersweet part about age group swimming. The growth and maturity curve at the young ages may be masking real progress. That is to say that maybe those time drops are just the same as marking a child's growth on the door frame. It's going to happen whether or not the child is making real progress. Any child will go faster because he has experienced some meets at age 11 that he didn't experience at age 10. He will go faster because he grew 5 inches and put on 40 pounds. He will go faster because all of a sudden he "gets it" that he is suppose to race the other kids. But, real progress might be a little harder to see than just the results on the watch. Real progress might have to do with training discipline, with understanding about goals, with improvements on technique, with progress on workout aspects that are not measured at swim meets. Real progress is

often best measured by whether or not that athlete is a better workout swimmer.

Showing up is a good start and that can lead to the normal progress talked about above. But, the next level of a good swimmer is showing up and trying hard. Almost all children try hard in the CCSC. They are in the club because they want to be swimmers. Not every child tries hard in the same way and often children think they are trying their hardest because that is the only "hardest" they know. There can be many reasons why a child hasn't got a very hard "hardest". Sometimes it is because they haven't had a very tough life. They have been pampered physically so physical discomfort is a new feeling. Think about this comparison. A child of the 1950s might have shoveled snow, worked in a factory, been in fights on the playground without adults around, boxed in a ring, rowed, not motored, a boat out to the fishing spot, picked corn for 8 hours in the sun or rain, or just climbed trees and built forts in the woods all day. A child growing up in 2011 might have stayed in his room all day watching TV, been driven by mom or dad to his friend's house just two miles away, played X-box, sent some text messages, (ROLF-that may be the amount of physical activity today's teenager gets in one day) and worked on the computer. Which child do you think would be able to endure more physical discomfort to reach a goal both wanted equally? But, trying hard and enduring physical discomfort can be learned. One can get there with desire, good coaching and an open mind.

And trying hard in practice is not always just trying on the physical level. Good "trying hard" also includes workouts which are focused. Good swimmers know when it is important to go to the limit and focus on the

important aspects of workout which lead to improvement. And, they learn what they need to do to have good workouts on a consistent basis. Good workouts...hard workouts which are focused... require good athletes and good coaches and a relationship between Coach and athlete which is focused on goals.

Most CCSC swimmers show up regularly and try hard. Our final level of workout performance is that swimmer that shows up, tries hard, and races in every workout. Fewer swimmers do this. Racing...wanting to be at the wall first.. is the best way to practice and it is different than just trying hard. It is the most special and elusive quality of a great swimmer. What makes some athletes at age 12 want to get to the wall first on every swim and other athletes be content with being back in the circle? We have swimmers who will get in workout every day and tell other swimmers to "go ahead". They are content with the pecking order as it is. Now it is true that some swimmers can never lead a circle with the fastest swimmers in it. But, they can lead some circles at some times on some sets and they need to make an effort to "win" those sets as much as possible. If they train to always come behind other swimmers, then they are in some ways training to lose in a race. But, there are ways for every swimmer to win in practice.

Maybe that swimmer can win a kick set so, he/she dominates kick sets. Maybe he can win when the coach runs 4 x 100 quality from the blocks. So, that's when he dominates the pool or at least make every effort to do so. Maybe Susie will never beat Maggie on 8 x 400 I-M on 5:30. But, she can say, "o.k.- I'm going to beat Maggie on this first repeat even if it kills me". Or, "I'm going to beat Maggie today on #1, #4 repeats." That is a competitive athlete. That's an athlete that is teaching herself to get to the wall first. She is practicing getting to the wall first.

One might read the above and think that it doesn't sound very nice or very supportive. But on a good competitive team, it is just the opposite. Each swimmer has goals to improve and they need each other to help them achieve those goals. When a good swimmer loses a race in practice, he is gracious in defeat and can acknowledge the hard work of his teammate. But, he/she should also be plotting competitive revenge. "What race is going to be next? When will I have another opportunity to strike back and beat my opponent?" Win or lose, this is how one improves.

So...Swimmers...there is showing up, trying hard, and racing and racing is the best!

But, racing every day is more than just working with and racing teammates. It is also racing the clock. It is racing to achieve goal swims and sets. It is racing to do something faster or better almost every day. Racing can be the hardest thing to teach in swimming but, like everything else in life, it can be practiced and improved. Racing helps to make an athlete have a focused practice.

When a good young age grouper swims a slow race but wins without any competition, invariably I will hear from a parent, "Well, if Susie had a good race, she would have swum faster." Almost all parents think this at one time or another but it is not necessarily so. Good swimming often comes from good races, but it also comes from confidence and with being loose and relaxed. So, good swims often come when a swimmer is out in front of the pack. Almost every 1650 swimmer knows the feeling of a 1650 seeming like it lasts forever when one is well behind the field. And, when one is out in front in a 1650 it goes by more quickly, and is easier to swim...fast. Of

course, generally, the great races come when one is racing to win, has quit thinking altogether, and is just in the moment of the race. Or, in the zone. We can all relate to this feeling. When one is so engrossed in an activity that "time flies", one is in the zone. One is not thinking in an analytical sense. One is feeling and pushing physically, and living in that time only.

The greater a swimmer's confidence, the more likely that swimmer is to race well and do best times against tough competition. But, confidence comes from a swimmer doing the work, having confidence in his preparation and in his times from practice and experiencing racing at all levels. A parent or coach can't give a swimmer confidence just by saying, "You are great, Jimmy". Jimmy knows that is "baloney" unless Jimmy has done 6 x 400 I-M in workout, and kick set after kick set, and pushed and pushed, and a million more things, so that, when climbing on the blocks, he knows he worked hard. When Tobias Work climbed on the blocks at the Pan American Games he knew....he knew... that no one had worked harder than he had. When Al Roan stepped up to the blocks at Harvard in the 1000 free just before winning Speedo Championships and swimming 9:14 as a High School Senior, he knew that no one had done the workouts that he and Tobias had done. And, if they had...well so what because they were not in that race and he had done the best he possibly could in his preparation. That is the foundation for confidence.

If we have a really tough case of lack of confidence, for me, the best solution is to increase the intensity of swims in workout. If we get the intensity level so high that the swimmer is performing best times in workout, now we know and the swimmer knows that he can do it in the meet. To reach this intensity level with a mature swimmer often means that workouts

take precedent over meets for a while, but in the end we have a confidence that has an incredibly strong foundation for true belief in oneself.

But, let's go back to our age grouper at age 11. She hasn't done all those things yet so her confidence, while it can be strong for her age, is also fragile. She can get in a tough race and not do her best because that confidence and ability to swim her fastest back in the pack is still maturing. Her confidence, like everything else in her young life, is just beginning to blossom. It is in its infancy and can be snuffed out easily. The best course for our young swimmer is to experience all levels of competition. It's good to have easy races and tougher races and races which are impossible for her to win. In this way she gets to know herself, experience her feelings, and race under all conditions and all kinds of different feelings. It is only after doing this for years in a thousand different ways that a swimmer gets the emotional experience necessary to compete well.

On almost every American woman's Olympic swimming trials in my lifetime there have been several great young American girls ages 13-16 vying for a spot on the team. It doesn't happen in quite the same way with boys because the boys generally need to be a little older to compete for the team. Often, one such girl makes the team. The last year leading up to the trials is very scary for any experienced Coach of such a girl. The reason is that such a young athlete is so talented and great that she has rarely if ever lost going through the age groups. It seems like she can do "no wrong". She looks to parents and others like a sure bet to make the team. But the experienced coach knows that such incredible confidence is somewhat naive and fragile and it doesn't take much to throw it off. It could be a couple of pounds of weight gain during adolescence. It could be facing the greatest American swimmers for the first time or being in a race with 7 other girls

just as fast. If the Coach and swimmer can hold onto the confidence through the trials, that swimmer can make the team. But, almost inevitably, there will be a down period at some point wherein every great athlete has to renew her confidence after going through some different types of racing both winning and losing. Sometimes, but not all the time, great stars get through this period and emerge as mature athletes.

There have been times in my career wherein I took a very good swimmer to an away meet which was expensive and, on its face, seemed like a waste of money. I took a swimmer once to Tuscaloosa in the heat of the summer. It was a lousy pool, and a meet which was poorly run. The weather was burdensome. The swimmers were older and faster than my swimmer and she just squeaked into a few finals but didn't have very good swims. Her Mom and Dad questioned why we would go to that meet. Is it worth it to go to a meet wherein a swimmer doesn't have best times? Yes! We come to see each meet as stepping stones to ultimate success. My swimmer moved ahead in that meet in ways which we couldn't see at the time. It became part of her overall bank of experiences which finally led to great swimming. I'm not sure I could say that meet in Tuscaloosa wasn't just as important as the Speedo Championship Meet in Buffalo wherein she swam 8 best times and won the high point. Like money in the bank, that meet in Tuscaloosa was just as valuable a dollar as every other dollar in the account.

Racing well is an elusive quality and lots of different ingredients go into an athlete having the confidence to race well. And, that kind of confidence in an athlete is always fragile and must be nourished. Confidence is not something that, once we have it, we have it forever without further work. For most of us it comes and goes and depends upon all kinds of different

stimuli. For the great racers it is more solid, and it almost always sits on a foundation of the toughest preparation possible.

Many of you have read "Outliers" by Malcolm Gladwell. It is "The Story of Success" and Gladwell looks at lots of different successful people in varied walks of life. He has some original thoughts and observations. One of my favorites is the 10,000 hour theory which was first conceived by Dr. Eric Ericsson at Florida State University. Gladwell thinks that lots of luck and other factors go into success but the biggest single factor is not intelligence or talent. It is 10,000 hours of practice. And, this is across the board...with Bill Gates, Larry Bird, Bobby Fischer. It doesn't have anything to do with what discipline it is. It can be sports, music, business- to do something great takes about 10,000 hours of practice plus a lot of other factors as well including a little luck with timing. But, it is 10,000 hours of the right kind of practice. Let's test that out on our office manager's daughter, Claire Hawley. Claire had one of her greatest swims at Penn State at age 21 when she became a Division I All-American in the 1650 at 16:16. She had the 11th fastest time in the Nation that year. She started swimming at age 8 and got in about 200 hours before I got her at age 10. At age 10, she swam about 300 hours. At age 11-12 she swam about 500 hours per year. So, as she turned 13, she had logged about 1500 hours. From age 13 to Age 18, she logged about 1200 hours per year including swimming and dryland...at practice of her discipline. That gives us about 8,700 hours when she went off to Penn State. After two years at Penn State, she had put in about 10,000-11,000 hours of practice when she stepped on the blocks to swim the 1650 at NCAA Division I Nationals.

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