**Ethical Coaching: A Character Backdrop and True Success**

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For the American Swimming Coaches Association

***“Prepare the child for the path, not the path for the child.” unknown***

What is ethical coaching and why is it important? What role does ethical coaching play in athletic training and youth sports? Aren’t coaches recognized for athletic performance? Should there be some dual mandate for coaches? Can’t we leave the ethics to the parents? Are we even being paid for this?

***“The Big Picture” – our View***

As time and years go on, we become more convinced that what can and should be gained from sports is truly invaluable and can be life-changing. For the countless hours committed, the physical, emotional, and financial commitment, and the sacrifices made, there has to be more than a fast time at the end of this process. Every time we see a youth sports team, from T-ball to collegiate athletics, we wonder what will be the *real* reward from all of this. After thirty years, we have no doubt that sports do have the ability to stimulate extraordinarily positive changes in an athlete’s life. Too often in swimming, we see careers stray for the wrong reasons: overzealous parents, coaches with a single-minded focus on winning, kids obsessed with times or ego, and poor role models. Athletes become concerned more about who they beat in practice rather than whom they helped and seem to care more about their time and place rather than their effort and attitude (life skills). Energy and effort can flow into areas that actually break down a career rather than support its health and longevity. An environment driven by ethics can significantly mitigate this.

In a broader sense, coaching is much more a life process and a people process rather than an athletic process. Not only are kids wrapping their lives around a team, training, a process and a coach, but in many ways, their emotional development, college decision, and the person they become will be shaped by this process as well.

Our mission is to be more than a coach, but rather a partner with our swimmers on their athletic journey, and to a greater extent, partners on their life journey. Our ultimate goal is that four or eight years from now they are swimming at their very best, are loving the sport, are leaders on their teams, and most importantly, are better people. And there is no one meet or one success on that path that will define it more than the process reflected in the quote:

***“Great occasions do not make heroes or cowards; they simply unveil them to the eyes. Silently and imperceptibly, as we wake or sleep, we grow strong or we grow weak, and at last some event shows us what we have become.”*** Brooke Westcott, British theology professor

***Ethical coaching comes down to ethical living and purity of heart and intention.*** Ethical coaching is and should be all-encompassing. It should apply to every swimmer, every parent, every staff member, and every policy***.*** It should be an unwavering commitment and conviction to do the right thing in every area and any circumstance. Not only should ethical coaching exist, but it should be a cultural pursuit. This should be a lifestyle that defines the team environment *and* its success. Companies, organizations of every kind, and virtually every athletic team possess some kind of mission statement or value list, and ethics is always intertwined. It is to be what guides them, shapes their actions, and defines their environment. It reads well, sounds inspiring, and offers hope.

Too often though, organizations do not connect to this overriding message. Every day, we see ethical leadership break down in the athletic, political, and business arenas for reasons of ego, agenda, powers, greed, status, and money. There seems to be a departure from words and concepts to being and reality. How do you embed a few phrases or concepts into a large organization and hundreds of people with varying degrees of interest or participation? How much do athletes, or parents for that matter, understand the mission statement, embrace it, commit to it, and actually take ownership and pride of those very concepts: integrity, work ethic, respect, teamwork, and personal growth to name a few? This must be a top-down approach.

Some coaches struggle with balancing environment and success. Is a program driven by performance or experience? The greatest leaders in the world (many in coaching) are adept at not only focusing on the greater good but also creating the greatest achievement. They adhere to the highest ethical standards while achieving extraordinary results. Both culture and success are possible and we would argue the former enhances the latter.

***Ethical coaching must first be articulated as a vision and a mission.*** And it must be defined not by individual members, isolated actions, trends, or even success, but by a group with vision that knows well the constituency, the organization’s goals, the traits that it would like the organization to embody, and even the community and peripheral groups. That message must then be sold aggressively to everyone directly or indirectly involved in the group or process. It should be omnipresent, wrapped around the team like a blanket. It should become so prevalent that it is the only message seen, heard, offered, and accepted. ***Coaches must not only be the salesmen, but be the example as well.*** And if fully embraced, it should stay with the athletes beyond the athletic setting; in the locker room, at home, or a social setting. This will truly reveal an athlete’s connectedness.

And finally, the organizational leaders or staff must enforce it with vigor, tact, integrity, and enthusiasm. In our program, we use “we” in selling, promoting, *and* disciplining. To reinforce the mission and ethics, we state aggressively that “we *will* be a program driven by character” and there *is* no other option. When disciplining, we simply say, “*We* do not do that or represent that. You must embrace this concept or find another program. It is just not who *we* are.”

Addressing ethics on a case by case basis becomes problematic without a firm backdrop that has predefined a team’s position on sensitive issues. Your best swimmer comes to practice late regularly. A popular swimmer uses bad language. A Board member’s child is blatantly disrespectful. A “group” decides they don’t agree with a policy or coaches’ decision. The absence of a mission and an (ethical) cultural landscape can exacerbate issues or conflicts like these and complicate their resolution.

And *no*, we do not get paid for this, monetarily that is. Its compensation comes is the form of emotional dividends that changes lives (of coaches and swimmers) on a daily basis, forever.

**“This is the test of your manhood: How much is there left in you after you have lost everything outside yourself?” Orison Swett Marden**

There can be extraordinary and very tangible benefits to employing an ethics based/”Character First” environment. We have witnessed these firsthand over the past few decades. A few are; a positive culture driven by work ethic, humility, great and consistent role models, mutual respect, and team pride, less (or no) burnout, limited discipline issues, an extremely high percentage of swimmers swimming in college, and incredible team pride.

***Concepts we employ that support a culture of integrity and success are;***

***Eliminate Negativity and Complaints***

First, and obviously, if you want to be a high-level athlete, challenge is the only path to growth and development. Negativity is a cancer that has no place in athletics or in life. A saying we repeat often is, “If you complain about anything, you will complain about everything.” This is not and cannot be allowed.

***Service over Success***

A life of service is a life of sincerity and purpose. As intense or aggressive as a program can be, it’s fundamental root can be of service, for swimmers and coaches. Service is the key to humility, character, and ethics. It is found in the “daily duty” of supporting one another and giving back. We share a great article entitled, The Uncommon Professional, from Chicken Soup for the Soul, about a common man in a common job, doing everything with uncommon professionalism. For us, this attitude translates into being the first one to the pool cover reel, to helping set up, to cheering for teammates, to getting the equipment for your lane, and even picking up after others.

***People over Times***

If people feel and know that you care about them as individuals first, they will do virtually anything for you and the team. Unconditional *mutual* respect must drive the coach-athlete relationship. This eliminates lying, deceit, disrespect, etc. This relationship is and should be a true partnership.

***Humility over Ego***

An environment based on ego is toxic. We let kids know that if they have an ego, they have a problem (need attention). And without being a psychologist (although we play one on the deck), we let them know that their need for attention will not be satisfied or tolerated. This reason alone would prevent swimmers from moving up into higher training groups on our team. There is a quote that refers to two types of people, one who walks into a room and says, “Well, here *I* am,” and another who walks into a room and says, “Ah, there *you* are.” Needless to say, there should be room for only one of these two types of people on a team.

***Team over Individual***

Athletes must learn early, that the team always comes first. Swimmers must place the team above themselves at all times. We suggest this is analogous to having the wind at your back as you move through a demanding season. From a coach’s and an individual’s perspective, decisions and policies should reflect only one thing, the greater good, and the team as a whole. Sacrifices become easy and automatic when individuals care about the team (and their teammates) unconditionally. A phrase we use is, “Teamwork takes work. It is created *by* you, not *for* you.”

*I (Don) had a conversation with several senior (high school) swimmers recently. The conversation centered on choosing championship meet events. I posed the question simply, with no angle or supposition, wanting to hear from them what they felt their two best events were. I asked, “What would you like to swim at the League Championship Meet” (a shave meet for most)? Not one answered the question directly, i.e., “I want…”. This was the typical conversation.*

*Coach: “What would you like to swim at the league meet?*

*Swimmer: “What would you like me to swim?*

*Coach: “No, I am asking you what you feel your best events are.”*

*Swimmer: “Whatever the team needs.”*

*Coach: “No, again, what is best for you?”*

*Swimmer: “What is best for me is what is best for the team.”*

Each swimmer basically answered the question the same way. When kids feel one with the team and connected, sacrifices become welcomed opportunities.

***Owner/Partner***

Coaches *and* swimmers should take ownership of the program and the environment. They should feel and act as if they are a partner or a shareholder. We tell our swimmers that they are all co-owners of the team, like it or not, want it or not, “you are a stakeholder, and thus accountable”.

***Team Attire***

Team attire is and should be a statement of pride and not a policy in and of itself. Your team attire is your representation of the team. We believe there is a correlation between one’s commitment to wear team attire and one’s general feeling about the team. Our swimmers do not compete in a meet or travel with the team if they are not in team attire. It is not about the clothes, or the rule, it is about what statement they are making with their appearance. Coaches should lead the way in this regard.

***Build Leadership from Day One***

Ethical coaching should support the leadership process. Every team and athlete must know that the younger members are future leaders and role models. Therefore, from day one, we begin building future leaders. Swimmers are made aware of the standards and responsibilities and what is expected of them now and in the future***. Hazing*** or “tradition” as it is euphemistically put, that makes people feel less or inferior is not tolerated in any form and ***has no place in building young leaders***. It simply becomes a rite of passage that allows individuals to “give back” what they “took”. It is a cycle that builds on itself. It is a negative feedback loop that can be replaced with guidance, motivation, mentorship, leadership, and support. If we want extraordinary and inspirational leaders in the future, they must see that play out in front of them and aspire to be that. Through swimmers (captains, seniors, and anyone of influence), and coaches, young athletes must see role models and leaders. They must see a demonstration of work ethic, integrity, and a resiliency that inspires. We must develop in young athletes, the “uncommon professional”, and an understanding of the moral foundation that drives the culture, the day to day operations, and the success of the program.

***Travel Lightly - “Integrity has no need of rules.” Albert Camus***

That is, travel with the absence of attitude, ego, or indiscretion. Our travel policy is very simple. If you need to be watched (or babysat), you need another team. We fully expect that our swimmers carry themselves as mature, dedicated athletes (and individuals) on a “business” trip. They owe this to the rest of the team, the culture that defines us, and their parents who pay and support them. We would even say that neutral behavior is not acceptable. They must add value. And if they can’t do that, not only should they not be on the team, they really have no business being an athlete.

***Little Things are a Big Deal***

If one bad word is acceptable, then why not two? If one minute late is acceptable, then why not five? If one act of disrespect to another is tolerated, then why not to a group, or a coach? If it is acceptable to “cheat” on a lap, then why not a set, or a season? Ethics and character are black and white. There is no middle ground.

***Embrace Work***

Take the path of “most resistance” is a theme we ask the kids to embrace. They should *welcome* the most challenging aspects of swimming and their life, and reposition them as a positive, growth process. A quote that is relevant is, “Be aware when the going is easy, you may be headed downhill.”

***Embrace Academics***

Beyond the obvious need for an education, a diligent student represents a great deal more than his or her academics. We have seen academics and athletics work hand in hand and support and complement each other. The more an individual commits to either, the more the other is strengthened. Athletes that do not *embrace* academics are generally not leaders (in the student-athlete sense) and can become one-dimensional. Their lack of academic focus can open the door to less productive alternatives. Our process and objective is to foster and support student-athletes at the highest level. Our team *must* commit to both.

***Appreciation of Parents***

This is probably the most significant sign of character. As the saying goes, “Gratitude is the mother of all virtues.” A young adult that does not appreciate the unconditional commitment and support of their parents would typically be unappreciative of other key support functions and miss the broader parent-child connection. A sincere awareness and gratitude for that which supports an individual is a critical component to a well-rounded athlete, person, and team. We devote meetings to this topic and make it clear this is a part of our culture and mission.

***The Team Concept***

The team concept is a *life* concept and there is no better place to learn it than in an athletic setting. “Team” *is* family, friends, students, co-workers, community, and on and on. It is co-existing and co-producing. The ability to be a good team person or a leader can be developed in the pool and the locker room every day. It requires empathy, sacrifice, and an unconditional commitment to a greater cause. This ability and understanding will serve athletes long after their careers have ended.

***Don’t Push on a String***

As coaches, it can be easy to focus on the wrong thing; many try to win a battle when the “war” is not even understood. Rather than draw people into the process, we may actually create more separation by disciplining someone for poor behavior when they have nothing invested in the team. We try to fix a stroke in someone who doesn’t work hard. We condemn a parent without trying to bring them into the process. We try to win a meet with a team that has no identity, or criticize a group for not caring when they don’t know what to care about. It is critical to know at what level the individuals and the team resonate or connect to the mission of the team and the goals of the coach.

***A Puzzling Concept - Build a Culture (and success) from the Outside in***

The borders would be your vision. Then work your way in with philosophy, culture (a way of *aquatic* life), then add life lessons such as character, integrity, respect, humility and work ethic, along with policies and guidelines, which brings you to the center, revealing a picture of a strong culture with e*xtraordinary results.*

***A “Team“ Issue with an Ethical Response***

The following is a real life example of a situation that was dealt with aggressively, and in our view, ethically. In this situation, many would have seen no issue, simply “young adults being young adults” away from the pool. We saw the seed of a breakdown in a culture that we were committed to build and foster. Many years ago, we became of aware that some of our swimmers were involved in an incident involving alcohol (not a team event or a team activity). These were great kids, committed swimmers, great students, and always respectful individuals. We, as coaches, were very upset and had a firm meeting with the entire senior group of over fifty swimmers. Prior to the meeting, we became aware that a few of the kids involved didn’t understand why their social life (outside of OA) was any of our concern. One swimmer even asked, “If my parents are OK with it, why do you care.” This was our response in a letter to the group:

*“Let’s simplify the key issues for all of you to understand. We do not own your social life, nor do we want to. We do however own the team and have a responsibility to every member. That being said, ANYTHING that affects the team IS a team issue. Period. It does not need a memo attached or Board approval. One person or one action can become a “team” issue. Chatter in the locker room Saturday morning made it a team issue. If in your world, this is not a team issue, what is? Will you know when it is a team issue and when behavior threatens reputations, athletic careers, and even lives? We truly believe that we as coaches are infinitely better qualified than you to assess the effect on the “team”. You do not have to answer to parents, or rumors. You do not sit in living rooms defining our team and its environment to perspective members, or sit in Board meetings answering questions.*

*What you did was not legal, not right, not positive, not conducive to being a serious athlete, not responsible, showed no leadership, hurt parents, and deeply affected coaches that have unconditionally supported you for most of your swimming lives. It is not obvious to us why someone could think this is “OK”. And the fact that your peers or friends may have done this does not legitimize it but rather suggests that you need to find other friends and better role models.*

*We have seen, up close, every aspect of substance abuse from alcoholism to hard drug abuse to endless rehabs, an abyss of a mother’s pain, and even prison. Please don’t insult us by telling us it is “no big deal”. Wait until your daughter tells you not to worry, that, “it’s no big deal.”*

*About five years ago, a swimmer walked on the deck of this pool and told us he wanted to join our team. We knew he was a known drug user. We pulled him aside and told him that we were aware of his reputation and his social life and while we would allow him a trial period, if we heard one word related to drugs spoken in front of any member of this team, at any time, he would be gone and regret this meeting. He chose not to join the team. You were about twelve years old at the time and neither you nor your parents were ever aware of a two-minute conversation that put your safety and the protection of this team ahead of a new member, added revenue, and his “social life”. So you tell us where a “social life” ends and “team” character begins. We may not know the exact answer but we will always err on the side of caution, for you. And by the way, while some of you want to draw a line that separates this team from the rest of your life, we never have. We have never stopped caring about you or stopped supporting you when we leave the pool or take off our team jacket.*

*Some day you may have a thirteen, fourteen, or fifteen year old child and you will pray every time they walk out the door that they are safe and with good people doing the right things. You will pray that they can avoid drugs and alcohol, that they don’t lie to you, and that someone is looking out for them. You will also hope that they might find an athletic program that places a premium on character and doing what is right. While you would not assume it, you would take comfort in finding overprotective people that run the program, people who actually care about your child as a person, even when they are not at practice. You will be grateful for a second pair of eyes to watch over them. You will care less about their success as an athlete than you will about their safety and personal well-being. Ask any parent.*

*When we were kids, the most important part of sports was earning the respect of the coach, from an athletic and a personal perspective. Too often in this day, the coach is simply a spoke in the wheel of a teenager’s life, and not a partner. Today, focus is more about being happy and being “right” rather than being respected and doing what is right. We cannot, and will not, fit into that world. We want to be your partner and not someone who is dismissed when he is not in agreement with you. We are not administrators enforcing rules, we are simply people who care passionately about you bringing out the best that lies within you and those around you.*

*As for insight into our reaction, it is not when we care this much or get upset that you should be concerned. For this you should feel fortunate. It is when we stop caring that the greater loss and the greater problem begins. And if you are not into the whole “character first, do the right thing” thing, you should know that every college coach we talk to asks about it and praises us for emphasizing it.*

*Should you disagree with this, that is fine, it simply means that our priorities and our philosophies are completely opposed to one another and that this clearly is not the proper environment for you.”*

Following this communication and meeting, the ethical culture, which would have been considered extraordinary at the time, became even stronger. The athletes and parents knew clearly our position and the team’s mission.

*Orinda Aquatics is a Silver Medal team with 100 year-round swimmers. In 2010 the team qualified eight swimmers for Junior Nationals (men finishing ninth in Atlanta), had one Olympic Trial qualifier, thirty-five Sectional qualifiers, and traveled with fifty-three (high school age) swimmers to Clovis, CA with two coaches and no chaperones. On that trip, no one was ever late for a departure, there were no bed checks, everyone was in team attire the entire trip, and they cheered for their teammates throughout the meet, even in the rain. At Orinda Aquatics, you will never hear a word of profanity, see inappropriate attire, or see any swimmer disrespectful to a coach in the slightest degree. The average GPA of their sixty-five member Senior Group is 3.75.*

***Quotes and concepts that sell or convey the mission and ethics of the team***

* “It is good to have an end to journey toward, but it is the journey that matters, in the end.” U. LeGuin
* Be a difference-maker
* Empower people/change lives.
* “Find comfort in those who agree with you. Find growth in those who don’t.” unknown
* “The whole is the sum of the parts, be a good part.” unknown
* “Character is what you are in the dark.” unknown
* “When we dream alone it is only a dream, but when many dream together it is the beginning of a new reality.” F. Hundertwasser
* “No matter what you have done for yourself or humanity, if you can’t look back on having given love and attention to your own family, what have you really accomplished?” E Hubbard
* “Life affords no higher pleasure than that of surmounting difficulties, passing from one step of success to another.” S. Johnson
* “People with great minds talk about possibilities. People with average minds talk about things. People with small minds talk about other people.” unknown
* “The perils of overwork are slight compared with the dangers of inactivity.” Thomas Edison
* “Weakness of attitude becomes weakness of character.” Einstein
* "When wealth is lost, nothing is lost; when health is lost, something is lost; when character is lost, all is lost." Billy Graham
* “There is more hunger for love and appreciation in this world than for bread.” Mother Teresa of Calcutta
* We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools. Martin Luther King
* Champions do not become champions when they win an event, but in the hours, weeks, months, and years they spend preparing. The victorious performance itself is merely the demonstration of their *championship character*.” T. Alan Armstrong
* “When he took the time to help the man up the mountain, lo, he scaled it himself.” Tibetan proverb
* “Character is the indelible mark that determines the only true value of all people and their work.” Marden
* “In the final analysis, there is no solution to man’s progress but the day’s honest work, the day’s honest decisions, the day’s generous utterances and the day’s good deed.” Clare Booth Luce
* "The virtue of man ought to be measured, not by his extraordinary exertions, but by his everyday conduct." Blaise Pascal
* When wealth is lost, nothing is lost; When health is lost, something is lost; When character is lost, all is lost! German Proverb
* "No philosophy pleasure, no physical pleasure, no place nor power, no material success can for a moment give such inner satisfaction as the sense of living for good purposes, for maintenance of integrity, for the preservation of self-approval." Minot Simons
* Fame is a vapor, popularity an accident, riches take wing, and only character endures. Horace Greeley
* Success is always temporary. When all is said and done, the only thing you'll have left is your character. Vince Gill