

Curing Sprinter-itis

Early afflictions and the story of Tom Jager

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USA's Tom Jager at the Pan Pacific Championships in Atlanta, Georgia.

10/06/10

I only heard one side of the conversation. Didn't need to hear the other. It was an old story.

"Yes, I know she hates the 200 fly, Mrs. X," says our coach. Long pause as the concerned mom says her piece at the other end of the line. "I know she thinks she's a sprinter, but she's 13, it's still too early to tell." Another long pause. "Well, we feel strongly that all our swimmers need to swim everything. They are going to have an IM base." Pause, a bit shorter this time. "Mrs. X, did your daughter happen to mention the story of Tom Jager that we told the team last week?" She had not.

Yes, the Tom Jager Story... Another old one. Used for two decades now by coaches trying to shake early-onset Sprinter-itis out of their swimmers. It goes like this: Greatest sprinter of his generation, world record holder in the 50 free for over 10 years... Anyone know in what event he first made Nationals, back when he was a promising young age grouper growing up outside St. Louis? The mile. Meaning this ultimate sprinter of sprinters put in the work way back when, logged the yardage, and first made his mark as a D-man. Meaning, young grasshoppers, accept the 200 fly, the 400 IM, the mile... Accept these deep end trials of torture or don't dream of sprinting to glory later.

Seems our promising young sprinter had missed the message. She'd felt her first success in the 50 last year; she'd watched Pan Pacs in Irvine from the stands this summer, soaking it in, already dreaming the big dreams. (She was headed to Cal, for starters...) But she was failing to see all that ice beneath the iceberg.

Truth be told, it's not 'too early to tell', she's a sprinter through and through, all fast twitch and explosive power. But she doesn't need to know that. Not yet. If she wants to anchor Cal Berkeley's 200 free relay at NCAA's in 2016, she needs to log a few 200 flies in the meantime. At 13, it's time to lay down some foundation first.

Sprinters do not like to hear such things. Once they've tasted that special sprinter rush, it's all over. Like they say about Pate, how ya' gonna keep 'em down on the farm -- and doing the work? Because too often, sprinters of every age buy into that false devil's bargain. You know, the one about doing less work for more glory... How many guys have arrived on campus as promising middle distance freestylers, and instantly decided they were dropping the 500, and asked to swim the 50 instead? I remember one well -- he would have been an Olympian if he'd stuck to the 500...

Problem is, it's not yours to choose. In swimming, your event chooses you. It has nothing to do with free will. Your body was engineered to perform a certain stroke or distance at a higher level than others, and no matter how much you try to swim against that tide, you're fighting destiny. And until that path presents itself -- you won't miss it -- it's in every swimmers' best interest to swim everything. If Tom Jager could conquer the mile, then you will too, young sprinter.

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