

Having Fun When You're Not Swimming Fast

By Emma Foster, Swimming World College Intern

When I was a 13-year-old age grouper, bright eyed and full of excitement for the sport of swimming, my coach told my team something that struck me as very profound. He gathered us together before our state championship meet, and said "Swimming fast is fun. And this weekend, I want you guys to have a lot of fun."

In the moment, this statement struck me by how obvious it was. As an age group swimmer, there are often distractions at practice and swim meets that in the moment seem more fun than the training and racing that one is facing. A game of cards, or the chance to run around with friends from out of state can seem more pressing than adequately preparing for an upcoming race. However, I was struck by my coach's statement that while these activities might be fun in the moment, taking the time to prepare and be ready to swim fast creates a possibility of fun that was of an entirely different kind. Swimming fast was the kind of fun that lasted, a feeling that caused me to go to sleep with a grin on my face that couldn't be wiped off for weeks. I knew *exactly* what he was talking about.

I have used that mantra throughout my swimming career with a fair amount of success. Remembering that some things are worth temporarily putting off in order to give myself the best shot to train my body and mind has seen results that I am incredibly proud of. I will forever be infatuated with the amazing feeling that is born after swimming fast.

However, eight years later, in my third year of college swimming, I have been considering the other side of this statement. As one gets older, swimming best times in every meet is not something that is expected. You become accustomed to the understanding that good swims can also be swims that are far off personal bests. There is an acceptance that you might not see truly

incredible results until the end of the season, and sometimes not even then. It is a part of the sport, and one that successful athletes take in stride.

Yet, when swimming fast is fun, it is often hard to find the same amount of joy when one is not swimming fast. As undeniable as it is that every athlete goes through these slumps where one is just swimming off, it is equally true that these are the hardest times. When so much pride and happiness is born out of swift swimming, it can be hard to find the fun when you're not swimming fast.

So what does an athlete do when they are slogging through a plateau and trying to find the fun that generally comes from swimming fast? That is not an easy question to answer, and requires some individual soul searching. However, I am sure that my age group coach would agree that you do not have to go a best time to have fun in the sport of swimming. There are many things about this sport that one can find joy in, even if they are also struggling. I took some time to reflect on what some of those are for myself...

Your Team



I have been lucky enough to be a part of some incredible, diverse, successful teams, and I can tell you that no matter how you are swimming at a meet, watching your team be successful is one of the greatest joys one can find in the swimming world. One of my favorite swimming memories in the entire world comes from a meet where I performed horribly. It is undeniably tough to be at a meet where it seems like you are the only one struggling (although it is rare that you are actually the *only* one having a hard time), however, being wrapped up in the thrill of your team's successes can bring about a joy that no individual triumph could produce.

Watching my team throw down a relay that was so incredible that it brought our entire team to tears completely blotted out any feelings of sorrow for myself and brought me into a moment that to this day remains indescribable. Finding those moments and allowing yourself to be open to celebrating the successes of those around you, no matter how you are doing personally, offers the greatest chance to be wrapped up in the awesomeness that is our sport.

Creating Change



Photo Courtesy: Colby Mallett, Suzanna Olsen, and Isabelle Pabon

When you are struggling, it can be hard to find something positive to focus on. In my experience with plateaus, I have found that the most frustrating thing is to come in every day and feel like I am making no progress. Swimming is such a times-based sport that it can be impossible not to compare your practices to the fast swimming you have done in the past.

Finding something, whether it is an aspect of your stroke, turn, or attitude, which you can focus on changing, and getting better at, provides the mental stimulation that is so needed during a tough practice. You may not be on your typical pace, but you are making progress that will pay off down the road. This is crucial, and it is undeniably fun. I have had practices where I have jumped into the pool completely frustrated, and left feeling refreshed simply due to a stroke correction or change in attitude. These small changes may not lead to immediately faster swims, but they allow you to grab on to one of the aspects that makes swimming fast so fun: the focus on the process.

Reflection



Photo Courtesy: Robert Stanton/USA Today Sports Images

Perhaps the greatest thing a struggling swimmer can do for themselves is take a step back and consider what has brought them to this sport in the first place. When I am in the middle of a plateau and questioning why this just doesn't seem fun anymore, I typically return to the memories that have made swimming so great. And while the moments where I have crushed races and swam best times certainly come to mind, so too do the practices where I gutted out a set I didn't think I could finish, and the moments with teammates treading in the middle of the ocean between practices on a winter training trip thinking, "how did we get so lucky?"

Swimming fast is fun. That will always, unequivocally be true. But not swimming fast, and making it through those times, is part of what makes swimming fast so fun. The feeling of overcoming a plateau, or crashing through that wall you thought would never break, is one of the greatest feelings in the world.

I have come to realize that I am undeniably going to struggle in this sport. That is its nature. And there will be days where nothing feels fun, and I never feel like I am going to swim fast again. But I am also going to remember that even if I never swim another best time, the time I spend in the pool, surrounded by my teammates and overcome with the feeling of chasing a goal that just may be unreachable will forever be incomparable, and something I wouldn't give up for the whole world.

And in my hopeless optimism, I'm also willing to bet that that attitude is what's going to make the fast swimming come back around. And I promise you that when it happens, I'll be having a blast. But what I've realized is that until then, I'm still going to be having a pretty good time.