

# Lessons From The Pool: On Teamwork and Family

FEBRUARY 24, 2015 BY [JOEL WADE](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

***Dr. Joel Wade relates his own water polo team experiences to personal growth and development as a man.***

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I've played water polo off and on for most of my life, and I've had the privilege of playing on some truly excellent teams—including four national championship teams (one NCAA championship with UC Santa Barbara, one in the US Sports Festival, and two Masters national championships) and one Masters World Championship team this summer. I've also played on some not so excellent teams. The highs and lows of competitive water polo have given me perspective on what it means to be on a team, and how being a good teammate can have a positive effect on your personal growth and development as a man.



## **There is an / in Team**

Let's do away with one great big flawed cliché: "There is no / in team." Anyone who plays sports knows darned well that there is a great big "I" functioning within everybody involved. Being part of a team is not an act of self-sacrifice. Part of the meaning that comes from being on a team is the sense of glory and pride that comes with performing at the very best of your personal abilities.

To sacrifice is literally to trade something of greater value for something of lesser value. When we play or work on a team the success of the others becomes part of our greater values. When we are part of a great team, our personal goals are not somehow given up to some different and more important goals of the team; they are *integrated* with the goals of the team. What we want to accomplish can only be accomplished by our team doing well. So we bring our very best to the game, which includes bringing our very best to our team and our teammates.

An excellent team has excellent players, each one of which is there for his own personal achievement, *and* for the team's collective achievement. There is no contradiction between the two. When one of these two elements is missing, the magic just won't happen. When we have team members who are *only* there for themselves, and who don't know how to work together as a team, then we end up with a few stars, but we're not likely to get very far as a team. The team will not have the cohesiveness that it needs to succeed. On the other hand, if we have a team where nobody is thinking of their own personal exceptional performance, then we don't have that individual drive that has to be there for the chemistry to work.

*We need both for a team to function at its highest level. We cannot remove the ego from a goal. We cannot pretend that the individual can somehow just abandon his or her self to the group. If we try to do that, we get a mess, with nobody accountable, nobody performing at their best, and nobody paying attention to the real world consequences of this dynamic.*

When we have that combination of individual drive and ambition, integrated with an awareness and connection and ability to work well together collectively, we create something that is truly exceptional. There's really nothing else like it.



### **Team Commitment in Family and Life**

For a team, a work group, or an organization to function at their best, everybody needs to take full responsibility for their role; and everybody needs to see how that role integrates with the group's vision and goals. We need to feel that everybody involved is an ally. This is particularly important for marriage and family. As a couple, if we can cultivate that sense on the deepest of levels, that we are for each other, that we are each other's most profound allies, so that each of our personal goals are integrated and supported by our vision and actions as a couple, then we will have created a truly exceptional marriage.

We also, if we want to have a great relationship, need to be the kind of person that can make a great relationship. We need to bring the best that we have to our relationship. This doesn't mean that we spend our time judging whether our *mate* is bringing his or her best to the relationship – that's just blaming and projecting – like whining about the referees in a game – and it is the easiest and most common attitude that people bring. And it destroys relationships. Bringing your best to the relationship means that you focus on what *you* are bringing. When we create that same spirit with our kids, we give everybody the most profound of gifts in life: a sense of deep satisfaction and joy together as a family, with each person also feeling support and allegiance from the others for his or her personal vision and goals.

None of this is some idealistic, perfect vision. There will be fights, there will be arguments, there will be missed opportunities and regrets in every relationship. But to have as a general spirit and an overarching vision and commitment, this kind of individual drive integrated with a collective goal or vision is one of the greatest experiences we can generate.



### **Remember to Have Fun**

A common feature of all of the best teams I have played on is that we have fun together; fun playing, fun talking, fun spending time together. There is a sense of joy and camaraderie that creates the kind of positive emotional experience that brings out the best in everybody. It *is* a game, after all. What good is it if you don't *play*?

In Montreal this summer for the Masters World Championships, I got to play with a team of great friends, some of whom I've known, played and had great times with for over 35 years. Part of our success in winning the gold medal in that tournament frankly came from our friendship and the fun we had together. Camaraderie and positive feelings bring out the very best in us. This isn't just a rationalization for a party. Research in the field of positive psychology has shown, among other things, that doctors experiencing positive emotions are more accurate in making complex diagnoses. So if you're trying to get the most out of your own performance through joyless toil, you're missing a crucial ingredient.'



### **Grow Stronger Through the Power of Team**

Then there is the indispensable quality, without which we can never bring our best to anything we do: *total commitment*. Not just commitment, but *total commitment*. There is a big difference between somebody who comes to a workout or a game to just sort of have fun playing around, and somebody who brings the kind of intensity that is more like all or nothing; life or death.

In the martial arts and boxing, when you learn to throw a punch, you don't focus on hitting your opponent; you focus on hitting *through* your opponent. Your intention goes farther and is expressed much more powerfully by doing so than just striking the surface. In order to bring your very best performance, and to inspire the very best performances of your teammates, you need to bring a total absorption and commitment to what you're doing.

When you have this, you are able to tap into reserves and strength that you could never access otherwise. I once watched a former teammate of mine, Terry Schroeder, playing in the Olympics. There were just a few seconds left in a game that the US needed one goal to win. I watched him take the ball from half court, swim down with two strong defenders on him and literally, tangibly *will* the ball into the goal, to win the game.

It's hard to describe what this can feel like, when everybody is personally firing on all eight cylinders, and working together as a team. You can see it in the faces before a game. You can feel it between you, and you remember it for the rest of your life. Such times are truly peak experiences.