

CAN PRIVATE COACHING HELP MY CHILD?

As parents, we want the best for our kids. We want them to have great friends, a great education, and every opportunity to be successful.

Obviously, we can't buy our kids friends. Parents don't scour the playgrounds, looking for compatible playmates, and then draw up a quick contract to purchase the friendship of the other child. Well, I hope we don't, anyway.

However, in other venues, like education and athletics, it can become a buyer's market. For parents, if you don't like the teachers at your child's school, you complain, or change teachers. If that doesn't produce satisfaction, and if you have the money, then you go the private school route. Or, as many parents do, you solicit the help of a private tutor, in essence, a teacher for hire, in order to give your child the academic edge. The payoff can be dramatic, as the higher GPA or test score can result in the acceptance to a "better" school, or potential academic scholarship money.

In sports, this same desire has led to an emergence of a slew of private coaches. Well-meaning parents often look at their middle and high school-age athlete, and try to figure out a way to get their child that same "edge" in athletics.

I can't speak for other sports, but for swimming, the results of this private coaching are of little or no value at best, and disastrous at worst. Let me try to explain.

In our system (and all good USA club programs have a "system"), children are brought up through the different training levels with an eye on teaching strokes and increasing fitness, all in an environment that promotes having fun as the primary motivation for the child. When kids have fun, they stay in the sport. And by the time they get to me in the Senior Group or the high school team, they're ready to give their best, sustained effort for four years. However, when kids are pressured by their parents, no matter how subtly, they inevitably have a reduced shelf life in the sport. The best and most accomplished athletes that I have ever had in the high school years (and beyond) almost always came from low-pressure, laid back families. In contrast, the rising stars that burned out well before their time all had "pressure parents" as a common denominator.

Before I go any further, let me give you another "Ackerson Truth" about swimming: The very worst "pressure parents" NEVER acknowledge that they pressure their kids! They are convinced that when I talk about "pressuring" kids that I'm talking about someone else. Just to give you some examples, the following are some of the standard catch-phrases of the Pressure Parent:

- "Billy likes it when I (pick one) talk to him about swimming/ give him splits /talk about his races."
- "In our family, second best isn't good enough. We're result-driven, and we expect the best of our kids. They don't have to be champions, but, by God, they're not ever going to quit at anything."
- "I don't expect results, but I DO expect that my kid will give his best effort every day at practice and at meets."
- "If there's practice, then you go to practice, plain and simple."
- "My daughter likes it when I push her."
- "He really wants to swim in college." (spoken by an elementary school parent)

The Pressure Parent is drawn to the private coach like a moth is drawn to light. To the parent, the private coach represents something that the parent can buy, that winning edge for the child.

The private coach is usually a “private” coach for good reason: He isn’t a good enough coach to have his own program. Or, in some cases, he’s been removed from previous teams he managed for a variety of offenses. Whatever the reason for their career exit, these people market themselves as swimming gurus, stroke artists, and master motivators that can take your child’s swimming career to the next level. In reality, they are little more than charlatans that prey on overzealous parents with deep pockets.

Because coaches like myself understand the danger that outside coaching can pose, these outside, private lessons are forbidden by our team, as well as almost all other teams. Therefore, the only recourse that the private coach has is to sneak around to another pool, and meet the athlete on the sly. Money is exchanged, usually around \$100 an hour, and the “coach” runs through a dog-and-pony show that is both predictable and tired:

He’ll watch the swimmer do some easy laps, and likely record the swimmer both above and under the water. He’ll always find something “wrong” with some element of the strokes that he will attribute as the cause for the swimmer’s dissatisfaction. And he’ll eagerly tell the swimmer and parent that the child is an incredibly gifted young athlete that deserves better than to be ignored by the club coach. He’ll add that the club guy isn’t necessarily a BAD coach, “he just has too many kids to give them all proper attention.”

Along the course of the lessons, he will tinker with the swimmer’s strokes, starts, turns, finishes, and race strategies, inevitably contradicting what the club coach has done over years of working with the swimmer. After all, think about it: If the private coach were to say to the swimmer, “Hey, your strokes all look great, your coaches have done a great job. Trust your coaches and you’ll be fine!” he probably isn’t going to get very much money out of his mark. The private coach’s income depends on his being able to create doubt in the swimmer’s mind as to whether or not his club coach really knows how to train him. And this is the kiss of death to the young swimmer.

Now, when the swimmer returns to practice, when his club coach tells him something that contradicts with the private coach, what does he do? Ignore the guy that his parents are paying, the guy that is telling him that his club coach is training him wrong? Heck no. The swimmer tries, in vain, to follow two sets of directions, to please two people, and in the end, it ends up destroying him as an athlete.

To be successful in a program, ***athletes need an absolute buy-in to the whole program.*** The athlete needs to have 100 percent confidence that everything his coach tells him is gospel, whether it’s stroke technique, race instructions, or, most importantly, taper methods. When multiple people have the swimmer’s ear---former coaches, family friends, parents, or swimmers from other teams---the swimmer is set up for failure.

And when that failure occurs, the one sure thing is that you won’t see the private coach taking even a bit of responsibility. The private coach has the luxury of being able to take all of the credit for anything good, while laying the blame at the feet of the club coach for anything bad. And because all of the private coaching is done secretly---like most deceitful things are---the unaware club coach is left to wonder what went wrong.

The irony of it all is that if the swimmer were just left alone by the parents, and allowed to be happy and have total faith in his coach, the results would likely be completely different. Indeed, too many “cooks” really do “spoil the soup”.

When I think back to the most successful swimmers that I’ve had, the ones that left our program as high school All-Americans, State Champions, four year NCAA Division I scholarship athletes, or U.S. Olympic Trials qualifiers, they all had the same basic formula:

- Little to no parent involvement in their swimming.
- Happy, competitive demeanor at practice and in general.
- **Absolute** buy-in to our program, and a belief in our system.
- No wondering if the “grass is greener” elsewhere.
- Great social relations with teammates; they loved their team.

By contrast, when I think about the ones that were talented and successful at an early age, only to not make it in the sport long term (they either quit before their senior year of high school, or became slow and burned out before their time), there was another formula:

- Heavy, overbearing parent involvement. Their parents felt as though swimming was a “partnership” with their child, and results were very important to the parent.
- Kids were pressed to practice on days that they wanted or needed a break.
- Workouts taking place “outside” of our program (CrossFit, going to the gym with dad, personal strength trainers, and yes, private stroke work, done in secret).
- Often, there is a “distance” between these swimmers and their teammates, or the swimmer and coach and (not smiling in team photos, etc).

I often use the “bus driver” analogy now when I talk to people about the element of trust that has to take place in the swimmer-coach relationship, and it goes like this: Think of the coach as a bus driver, and the athlete is the passenger. The bus driver knows the destination, and he knows the best route to get there, particularly if he’s an experienced bus driver with a good driving record. The driver knows all of the best roads, but he also knows there are a few potholes along the way. The good driver can warn the passenger about these bumps along the route, and reassure him that there’s nothing to be concerned about. And if the passenger will simply sit back, look out the window, and *enjoy the ride*, the trip will be a pleasant one, and the bus will go exactly where it’s supposed to go.

Now, if the passenger worries or tries to argue about the best way to get to the destination, it’s probably not going to be a very enjoyable trip. And, if by chance, other hands end up on that steering wheel and try to direct the bus, there’s a good chance that bus is going to crash. However, before I were to ever let that happen, I would stop and ask the passenger to exit the bus, for the safety and enjoyment of the other passengers. That way, the other passengers will get to their destination on time. And it will be a sweet ride.

Not bragging, but I’m a really good bus driver.

Tony Ackerson
December, 2017

