



UNDERSTANDING THE SEMINOLE AQUATICS SYSTEM FOR AGE GROUP SWIMMING

I'm writing this from the perspective of wanting to increase parent understanding in terms of how we train our younger swimmers. I often think---mistakenly---that our parents at SA have an innate understanding of how the process works when they walk onto the deck for the first time. Especially to a new swimming family, the whole process can seem a bit overwhelming, so I'm going to try and explain it here.

We have a lot of swimmers in the Age Group ("AG") 1 through 5 groups, and I have another 50 or so in my Senior Group. The AG1 swimmers are typically just one step above basic swim lessons. AG2 swimmers know freestyle and are refining their free and backstroke, flip turns, and generally getting stronger in the water; breaststroke and butterfly are being introduced, but are typically very rough-looking. AG3 swimmers are polishing their four strokes while still getting stronger, and AG4 and AG5 are typically middle school students getting ready to begin training with me for their high school teams (I also coach both the Seminole High School swim and water polo teams).

I've been coaching high school swimming for 33 years, and I founded the Seminole Aquatics team in 2000, so this is our 20th anniversary in April. I began coaching in 1987 with Seminole High, fresh out of graduate school at UCF, with my Master's Degree in Exercise Physiology, where my emphasis of study was----go figure---how to swim faster.

I personally started late in the sport---11th grade---but I progressed very quickly under the tutelage of an excellent high school and club coach, and I went on to swim for four years in college.

So, with some 40 years of swimming under my belt, I have learned an awful lot about how to make swimmers go very fast. And at Seminole Aquatics and SHS, they have, and they do. We've had a slew of state and National-level athletes over the years, and the high school team is a consistent top-five team in the state just about every year for the last 15 years. Seminole Swimming actually *might* be the most consistently successful Florida public high school team during that time, now that I think about it.

I don't spend a lot of time thinking about individual awards, and I don't plan on ever coaching anywhere else. This is my first and last coaching job. What I do think about is

how I can help all of our children at Seminole Aquatics have fun while they're here, and become as successful in swimming as they want to become. That's about it.

While I've become very good over the years at finding ways to help swimmers become fast, more importantly, I've also learned how to keep them from becoming fast. And the single best way to keep them from becoming great when they're older, is to press them too hard when they're young.

For all of the fast kids I've had in club and high school, I've also had a few that were very good, very early. And sadly, some of them never made it past their 10th grade year before they quit the sport. Therein lies a great irony---in our program, the very fastest kids, the ones that become state champions, All-Americans, and college scholarship swimmers usually aren't very good when they're young. Very rarely do we have a swimmer that sets the world on fire at an early age.

There are plenty of clubs that will take their swimmers in the younger age groups and push them hard, with a constant emphasis on perfect technique, working harder, and pressuring them to sign up for meets. There is a constant emphasis on achievement, and for getting championship qualifying time "cuts". Parents often get swept up in this as well, and there is a constant mantra that you'll hear at swim meets from parents and some of these coaches that "all that matters is beating your time."

And folks, that could simply not be further from the truth.

The emphasis on time, more specifically, dropping time, destroys more young swimmers than just about anything else. Because when a young swimmer is told how important it is to drop time, and then, despite working hard, he actually increases time, swimming stops becoming fun.

If you ever stand near me at a meet when I talk with one of my Senior Group swimmers after a race, you'll likely hear a lot of talk about how the race looked, but you'll never hear me sound disappointed that my swimmer didn't improve or drop time. On the contrary, I'll usually laugh with them about how the time isn't a big deal at all. Not because I'm not competitive; ask any one of my swimmers, and they'll tell you that I obsess over the high school State championship meet, and if you really know me, I'm probably one of the most competitive people you'll ever meet.

But, dropping time isn't a byproduct of hard work, so much as it is the result of patience, persistence, and training over a long period of time. I tell my older swimmers all the time that the only time that I can predict them dropping time is October and November each year, at the end of the high school season. Only on rare occasions will my fastest kids swim well during the rest of the year, and that is by design.

What I've learned, over 40 years in this sport, is that a lot of teams and a lot of parents have gotten it all wrong; they push the kids way too hard, and way too early. I want my SR and high school kids to compete for state titles, and the simple fact is that you can't win championships in high school if you quit the sport in 7th grade. When swimmers do quit the sport, it's almost always for the same reason: "It just stopped being fun."

The question of why it stopped being fun is the greater issue.

When I see an age group parent, intently watching their child practice or compete, anxiously watching the scoreboard, or screaming encouragement, it concerns me. When I see the same parents lecturing their child after the race, it's troubling. And when I see children crying at swim meets, and parents looking stressed, it's only a matter of time before the child either leaves the sport entirely, or stops caring.

The best words a swim parent can say to their child after a race are these: "I love you, and I'm so happy that I got to watch you swim today!"

That's it. No commentary on the race, no mention of times, or how they placed. That's it.

Now, if your child is crying about their time, you'd better get introspective real fast and determine if there's anything that you've done to cause this. Because, if you take a 7 year old to get ice cream as a reward for going a best time, or for winning their heat, or if you brag all over social media about your child winning events at swim meets, well, you're going to have problems.

Raising a young swimmer the way I'm talking about---no pressure, no parent "coaching", no emphasis on times or places---will usually result in having a well-adjusted child that is happy at swim meets, regardless of time or place.

In contrast, the next meet you go to, watch the children that you see crying, and look at the entire dynamic with parent and coach.

The most successful swimmers I've ever coached---and that includes a long list of high school State champions, All-Americans, college scholarship athletes, two US Olympic Trials qualifiers, and even a National #1 athlete---came primarily from families that had a good perspective toward the sport. They dropped their child off at the pool, left the facility to run errands, get a coffee, or read in their car, and then came back to pick the child up. They rarely watched a practice, and they trusted our system completely. They never worried about times or progression, and they genuinely seemed to just be delighted that their child was doing something fun and healthy.

By contrast, the swimmers that didn't make it in the sport, the ones that quit before their time, had these things in common:

- Highly competitive parents
- Swimming was a common dinnertime conversation theme
- Parents that were highly involved
- Parents that were concerned that the child wasn't progressing fast enough
- Parents that were worried about their children's stroke mechanics in AG1-3

We don't have a lot of swimmers leave our program for another team. There's a strong loyalty bond within our program, and I do believe that kids see the success that the older kids have, and that excites them to one day be a part of that. There's no pressure from

our coaching staff, and most kids look forward to coming to the pool everyday to see their friends, and to have fun.

Incidentally, “fun” and “friends” were also the reasons cited in a USA Swimming survey that members of the 2008 US Olympic Team gave as to why they swam; when asked why they do it, these 20 and 30-something world-class athletes said that *the number one reason they continued to swim was because they had fun seeing their friends at practice.*

When we have lost a swimmer to another team, it usually hasn't worked out so well.

I recall two swimmers that swam in my son's AG2 group around 2008. They were relatively talented, and the same age as my son (8 years old at the time). Both boys had parents that were very concerned about their “progress”, and they would watch practices closely. After a couple of years with us, both families left for another club that they thought would offer more “serious” training. Within two years, neither boy was still swimming. Both boys could have been extremely good, college-level swimmers.

By contrast, that same AG2 group of “non-serious” swimmers ended up producing three State champions, four high school All-Americans, and two Central Florida Water Polo Player of the Year winners. They had two of my high school swimmers as coaches for their AG2 years. And none of these kids ever had a championship time cut until they were already in high school. How's that possible?

It's simple: We teach strokes to AG1-3 in an environment that is low-key and fun-oriented. There is no pressure on kids early. When they advance, eventually, to Coach Scott's AG4 and AG5, his job is to get them ready for high school and SR training with me. And by that time, the kids are still excited about swimming, and about high school training. And when I finally do get them, I work them harder than they've ever worked in their lives, six days a week for four years. But, they're ready to do it. They're not a group of former age group stars that are barely hanging on to the sport. They're a group of good kids that are starting to get really good just as the former age group big-shots are starting to go stale.

I had a little girl about ten years ago that started with me at age 10. She developed quickly, and won two FLAG titles by age 12, and was a National Top Ten swimmer. Her freshman year of high school, she broke two school records and placed in the top 3 in her specialty---again, as a FRESHMAN. Her future in swimming was very bright, and she was going to be one of those kids that ends up with 30 great colleges fighting over her.

She never swam again after that State Meet. She was completely done.

I can remember her at age 13, on a day when we had to cancel due to a tornado watch in the area. The weather was incredibly ominous-looking, with black clouds everywhere and lightning crackling all around. I was locking the pool gate, after I sent the lifeguards home, when the girl and her mom came up the sidewalk. The look on her face was the same that you'd expect of a child going to get her teeth drilled at the dentist. When I said that we were cancelling due to weather, the mother seemed disappointed, and she said how much “we” wanted to swim that day; when I asked the girl if she really wanted to

swim in weather like that, she looked down sadly and didn't answer. Her mom answered for her: "Of course she wants to swim today, Coach Tony!"

The mom knew every Florida Swimming time, she knew when her daughter's "rivals" were due to age up, what schools they were going to, and she kept notes on all of her daughter's times.

Another local phenom on another team in Orlando swam at around the same time, but was a bit younger. By the time she was 9 years old, she had re-written the Florida Swimming record book for the 10 and under age group. The Orlando Sentinel even did a huge, full page, color story on her, interviewing her overly-involved ("Our goal is the Olympics") dad, and her eager coaches. I saw her swim at plenty of meets, and yes, she was incredibly talented.

She was also 9 years old.

By age 12 she was no longer beating everyone with ease, as other girls began to catch up to her, in terms of body size and coordination. By age 13 she was going slower and slower, and at that point was crying at meets with regularity. By age 14, she had quit swimming completely, and only played water polo throughout the rest of her high school years. Mind you, this was the "real deal", the latest, greatest girl that was going to go to the Olympics, according to her dad and her coach.

This summer, during the Olympics, there will be plenty of stories featuring swimmers. Many will have interviews with the parents, and the theme will be how committed the swimmer was at an early age. And current swim parents all over the US will wonder if their child is working hard enough, or if the team is pushing their child toward achieving greatness. I ask you to keep one thing in mind: For every Michael Phelps, who legendarily never missed a day of swimming for over a decade, and whose coach sat down with Phelps and his mom at age 11 to chart a course for the Olympics, there are quite literally millions of other kids who were burned out way before their time by overzealous parents and coaches.

Keep in mind as well that Michael Phelps had legendary blow-ups on the pool deck with his coach, and that he has suffered from well-publicized episodes with alcohol, drugs, and DUI's, as well as severe depression. If you would want your child to experience EVERYTHING that Michael Phelps has gone through, you might want to re-evaluate that.

Now, you sure don't need to trust me, or to take everything I say as gospel. I'm just telling you what I've learned over a very long time in the sport. And that's led to the system that we have. Judging it just from the results we have had, year-in and year-out, it works extremely well for most of our kids.

The notion that you've got to make progress at ages 6 thru 12 in order to be elite in this sport is groundless. Many of the great State and National kids that we have now were mediocre at best until they began their high school training. The key to long-term success in the sport is having "hands-off" parents, combined with emotionally well-adjusted kids that look forward to having fun at the pool.

Parents, I strongly urge you to buy in to this. Your child will enjoy swimming more, and I think you'll actually enjoy it more as well. After all, don't most of us already have enough on our plates without having to worry about whether our seven-year old AG1 swimmer is working hard enough in practice?

Trust the system.

Trust the process.

There will be people that just can't trust, and that's perfectly okay. The key thing is to find a program that they do trust. But, I'll put my money on our system yielding the better long-term result.

Thanks for taking the time to read this. And thanks, as always, for supporting our program at Seminole Aquatics. If you want more information about being a great swim parent for your child, then I urge you to take the Parent Self-Assessment Questionnaire under the News tab on our website.

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