

Racing & Race Preparation

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December 15, 2010

Summary

- *The focus of this talk will be age group swimmers and what coaches can do to help them prepare to race their best more consistently. The talk has two parts. The first concerns setting proper expectations before a meet, going over the “rules for racing” so as to avoid common coaching nightmares. The second concerns proper behaviors during a meet, what I call “meet management,” to bring order, discipline, and consistency to swimmers’ races.*
- I want meets to be fun for me and fun for the swimmers. Consistent fast swimming makes everyone very happy. We train, develop racing routines, establish proper expectations so that this comes about.

Establishing Expectations: “Rules” for Racing

- Attitudes matter. Expectations matter. Actions matter. Coaches can instill and help swimmers build the right attitudes, expectations, and actions every day in practice. Teach these “rules” for racing, expect them to be followed, and prepare the team mentally and physically for the stresses and situations they will face, so that these expectations can be met.
- **Go to the meet to swim fast, to be a player – not to get a t-shirt, not ‘for the experience.’**
 - Make cuts early. Incentive programs can help bring this about.
 - Focus on preparing for the target meet for the last few months of the season.
- **Race your guts out, with consistent effort and quality of performance.**
 - No roller-coaster rides.
 - First or last, best or worst, favorite or least – prepare optimally, and leave it in the pool.
- **In any close race, get your hand on the wall first. Finish the job.**
 - The proper attitude is: No Matter What.
 - Don’t fall “just short.” Practice exceeding expectations and goals.
 - No “if onlys”: regret is a wasted emotion. If the strength is there, use it.
- **Swim fast in the morning and move up spots.**
 - If you are fast enough to final, then final. Again, “if only” is not allowed.
 - Local hero short-term pragmatism v. future star long-term perspective.
- **Always swim faster at night, and move up more spots.**
 - Swimming well in the morning is only half the job.
 - 6 of the 8 finalists will swim faster; to compete, you must be one of them.

Establishing Expectations: “Rules” for Racing

- **Expect to swim fast, decide to swim fast.**
 - Expectations are key to performance. No “wobble room”, i.e., convenient excuses.
 - Coach’s expectations are key to swimmers’ performance.
 - Swimmers can swim fast even when things are not perfect.
 - Coaches can put a meet in context to make it important.
 - **Corollary 1: Swim better as the meet progresses and others tire.**
 - Everyone is tired. Some kids swim fast anyway. Others bail.
 - Define reality “correctly”: whatever is, is right.
 - You do not have to feel good to swim fast.
 - Conditions do not have to be perfect for you to swim fast.
 - Take care of your goals with intelligent meet management.
 - **Corollary 2: Get tougher under tougher conditions.**
 - The worse the weather, the more the champions show.
 - The worse the weather, the more I like it.

Establishing Expectations: “Rules” for Racing

- **Learn from your mistakes; fix them. Learn from others’ mistakes; avoid them.**
 - Take stock after meets.
 - A willingness to confront weaknesses and correct them is key.
 - Keep things interesting by making different, more sophisticated mistakes.
 - Use meets as educational opportunities (esp. for “second tier” swimmers).
- **Cherish being on relays, and swim even faster on relays.**
 - ...or we’re not going to bother entering them.
 - The team concept in action. Coaches must value relays and show it.
- **Be self-reliant. Know how to think for and take care of yourself during a meet.**
 - Your mom can’t get on the blocks and swim for you. Depend on you.
 - Having a practiced routine for meet management helps.
- **Love to race. Enjoy the challenge to see how fast you are.**
 - Racing is fun.
 - It’s hard to get good by yourself. The Worthy Opponent helps you to expand your limits.
 - It’s all about getting better.
 - Racing every day all the time takes the fear out of racing: situation normal.

Establishing Behaviors: Meet Management

- **The Challenge: It is VERY difficult to swim well from start to finish of a big meet.**
 - Natural challenges: many races, long sessions and very long days, several days in a row, and weather indoors and out...
 - Poor choices make a difficult challenge practically impossible.
 - The human comedy of a swim meet.
 - The combination results in roller-coaster inconsistency.
 - Great, awful, great, okay, awful, awful, okay, great, etc.
 - This is not good enough.

Establishing Behaviors: Meet Management

We aim to create consistently good performances by creating good habits in the swimmers.

- Formulate and practice effective racing routines. “Meet Management.”
- How to do a meet: learning to take care of all the little details without anxiety, so they happen naturally, automatically, and habitually, and the swimmer can focus his mind on racing.
- Do “rehearsal” of meet sessions to practice meet management at workouts.
- Use early season meets as “rehearsals” of proper meet management.
- Patterns of performance emerge (without proper MM, performances seem random).

The Process and Parts of Meet Management

Bookends

- Don't self-taper by skipping practice the day before the meet (or the day after)

Calm Before the Storm

- Get a lot of sleep the 2 nights before the meet.
- Fuel adequately:
 - Eat a high-carb dinner the night before.
 - Eat a high-carb breakfast; stay away from the bacon and sausage.
- Wear your team uniform.
- Dress for the weather.
- Be on time, and check in with your coach first thing.
- Warm up with the team. Look like you know what you're doing.

The Process and Parts of Meet Management

Before Each Race

- Pre-race rituals are individual, but they need to get you READY TO RACE!!!
- Talk to your coach before each race.
- Warm up well.
 - Almost no kids do this well consistently.
 - Aim or purpose of warmup: physiology, technique, psychology.
 - Timing of warmup is critical.
 - At York Y, 23 minutes before race-time.
 - Figure out when by learning how to use a heat sheet.
 - What to do: enough, and hard/fast enough to serve its purpose.
 - Rule of thumb: 10 & U: 5/600; 11-12: 6/700; 13-14: 7/800

During Races

- Race your guts out. Leave it in the pool. Finish happy.

The Process and Parts of Meet Management

After Races

- Most common mistakes: not warming up properly, not warming down properly.
- The 2-minute drill: be warming down within two minutes of having finished the race.
- Warming down means swimming, not standing around chatting.
- What and how much to do:
 - Same distance guidelines as for pre-race warmup. Add a few hundred meters if this was the last event of the session or day.
 - First half: stroke just swum; second half: stroke about to be swum.
 - Respectable pace, not slow and sloppy.

The Process and Parts of Meet Management

Between Races

- Use the time between races to recover, not to mess around or get in trouble.
- Stay off your feet.
- Cheer for your teammates. There is a balance between this and the former.
- Keep warm and dry. Warm, relaxed muscles are fast muscles.
- Pay attention, and learn how to use and love the heat sheet.
 - Missing a race is bad form.
- Eat and drink appropriately.
 - This depends on how much time between races.
 - A little: sports drink.
 - Medium: sports drink and a snack.
 - A lot: a meal.
 - Junk food, candy, soda, etc. will be confiscated by the quality control director.

Special Considerations

- Prelims/Finals Meets
 - Long and hard and stressful; stresses are cumulative.
 - Consequences of poor choices (= MM) accumulate throughout the meet.
 - Between sessions: eat, rest.
 - Between days: eat, rest.
 - Remember why you came!!!
- No warm-down pool.
 - Make do with what you've got; something is better than nothing.
 - If breaks between events, use every second the pool is available.
 - If no pool available at all, find a way to get the heart rate up and body ready.

Special Considerations

- More Stress or Worse Conditions
 - Meet management becomes more important the worse the conditions.
 - Smart kids stay strong from start to finish of a long, hard meet.
 - Knowing your routine without having to think or worry about it helps keep you calm during a championship.
- Team Travel Meets
 - Challenges are ubiquitous: cross-country travel, rooming with teammates, team meals, team buses, unknown competitors, and no parents.
 - Swimmers cannot control their environment as they can back home; they are ripped out of their comfort zone.
 - Parents are not there to make all the decisions and smooth over every problem.
 - So swimmers must take more responsibility for making good choices.
 - “What’s going to make me swim faster?—the question that guides decision-making.
 - Travel meets are concentrated meet management: massively educational.

Thank You For Attending

Questions, comments, ideas?

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