

Purposeful Swimming

By Chris Swensen

The first sentence of the Age Group Handbook welcomes the swimmer to “the bridge to purposeful swimming.” Later, on the same page, while talking about Age Group Swimming, we once again state, “Swimming becomes purposeful!”, but what exactly do we mean by purposeful swimming? Purposeful Swimming is a term I heard from David Marsh, and I liked it so much, I decided to use it. After all, that’s what we coaches do. When we see something that works well, we use it. Purposeful swimming can take on a number of meanings. In 2005, I was swimming twice a day for one to one and a half hours each time. My morning swim was in the pool, to work on speed and power, and my evening swim was in the open water, to work on grinding out the distance. I was swimming intervals in the pool that I had not done since college, and one of my open water workouts consisted of a 12 mile swim in sea nettle infested waters, while another one had me swimming with pods of cow nose rays at the mouth of the South River. Why did I do this?...Because I had a PURPOSE. My purpose was to make an 18 mile swim across the Long Island Sound so I could raise money to support cancer patients and their families. Yes, I was inspired by my purpose to work hard. I didn’t only put in the time, I used it wisely and remained focused no matter what the challenge was for a particular workout or the final swim. Yes, even with the preparation, there were new unexpected challenges on the crossing, such as the GPS going out and, because of the haze and distance to shore, the necessity to keep swimming with no idea of whether I was going in the correct direction. Luckily, by the time a new GPS was up and running I had only gone about 90° off course and not 180°. However, I kept going, even with all of the challenges, because I had purpose.

Now, I don’t expect an Age Group Swimmer to swim across the Long Island Sound, but I do expect them to have a purpose behind their swimming. The purpose, which is also known as a goal, will help them focus through their workouts. It will help them want to go to practice, work hard, do the drills correctly, pay attention to the intervals, and learn how to read the clock consistently so they will know just how fast they are swimming during workouts and whether they are improving. Socializing is fun, but it will only be done during breaks or before or after practice. A swimmer who swims with purpose does not stop at the end of the pool during a set to carry on a conversation, and they definitely do not stop in the middle of the pool. A swimmer with a purpose will take on the challenges of taking 5 dolphin kicks off every wall in freestyle, backstroke, or butterfly. They will only breath every three or 5 strokes when told to do so, or not breath inside the flags on Tennessee Tumblers. It may hurt to work so hard, but they can do it because they have a purpose. Finally, the Age Groupers will achieve excellence by “Acting with high intention, sincere effort and intelligent execution.” - Aristotle

Rick Pitino put it another way in his book [Rebound Rules; The Art of Success 2.0](#). Pitino uses the term PHD for Passion, Hunger, and Drive. Be passionate about what you are doing, whether it is swimming, schoolwork, music, scouts, or, dare I say, another sport. No matter what you are doing, do it with passion, enjoy it, meet the challenges that it presents, and love what you are doing. Pitino used Tom Sawyer as an example of finding passion in what he was doing when he had to white wash the fence. When Tom became passionate about the chore at hand, the passion became contagious and his friends quickly joined in. Next, remain hungry. When you meet your goals, create new ones to move on to.

Start with a big bodacious goal, and have mini goals on the way to achieving it. When you reach one goal, don't become satisfied and content, strive for the next level of success. Sure, everyone needs a break once in a while, but don't make it too long, and don't let your goals get out of site. Lastly, be driven. Be organized and focused on your short term and long term goals. Short term may be making a State Cut at 11 years old, and long term may be swimming 8 seconds under the cut when you are 12. Being organized and focused on goals drives you to go to practice and work hard throughout the year. It also drives you to pay attention to details, such as how to do drills correctly, how to read the pace clock and stay on an interval, or how to count strokes and relate that count to how fast you are swimming. Finally, drive also keeps you learning, whether it is from your coaches, other swimmers, or videos. Passion, hunger, and drive keep you involved in your sport and help you achieve your goals.

I once read a book called The Purpose of Boys, by Michael Gurian. In it, he talked about helping boys become successful and build their self esteem by helping them find purpose. This is also true for girls, and I look forward to seeing all age group swimmers become successful as they become more purposeful swimmers.