

Parent and Coach...The Other Stuff

Coaching is about more than athletes, practices, and competition. As Mike Krzyzewski, Duke's hugely successful basketball coach said, it's also about "the other stuff." For coaches of club teams, that means parents.

By Tom Slear, *Splash* Magazine special correspondent

"All that craziness," is how Monica Teuscher describes the rituals of other parents who nervously follow their children's swimming development. Teuscher, mother of Cristina, a 1996 and 2000 Olympian, never owned a stopwatch and rarely bought a meet program. She didn't track her daughter's times, yell during her races, or seek out her coach after practices for private chats. During swim meets, she went off by herself to read or knit, only to be amused when other parents gave her a rundown on Cristina's swims, complete with split times.

"I thought it was important that I was there, but for support, not for coaching or to add pressure," Teuscher explains. "My job was to take my daughters (older daughter Carolina also swam) out for a good meal after they raced. The last thing we talked about was swimming."

Most coaches would agree that the best team to coach is one filled with parents such as Teuscher, who recognize the line between parenting and coaching and avoid it as if it were radioactive. They somehow manage to counterbalance their staunch support with a refreshing cluelessness. Years ago Debbie Phelps, mother of Michael, the world record-holder in the 200-meter butterfly, relocated the family so that her children would be closer to North Baltimore Aquatic Club's practice facility. Yet when asked about Michael's world record time, she can do no better than to say, "I'm not sure - 1:50 something?" (Actually, 1:54.58)

"The swimmers I've had who have had the most success were unencumbered by parents calling the shots behind the scenes," says John Collins, who has coached Olympians Rick Carey and Lea Loveless as well as Cristina Teuscher at the Badger Swim Club in Larchmont, N.Y. "These parents are very good about backing up their kids, but they are hands off when it comes to swimming business."

The Growing Intrusion of Parents

Most coaches will tell you that Teuscher and Phelps are hardly exceptions. The overwhelming majority of parents instinctively, or with gentle guidance, find their place in the background. A few, however, can't resist meddling, such as the mother who wrote Collins a five- or six-page letter every week for a year and a half. Rare is the swim coach who doesn't have a similar story to tell.

"So many," says Chuck Warner, the head coach at Rutgers University who coached club teams for years before entering the college ranks. "All filed away in a painful spot."

The effect of such parents is all out of proportion to their numbers. A survey by Dan Doyle, which will be published in his forthcoming book, *The Encyclopedia of Sports Parenting*,

found that high school coaches across different sports are convinced that the biggest change in their profession over the last 15 years has been the growing intrusion of parents.

"No other factor they mentioned even came close," says Doyle, the executive director of the Institute for International Sport.

The top issues raised when the development coordinators for USA Swimming solicit opinions from club coaches are "parent education" and "club governance," euphemisms for the difficulty of dealing with parents, whether individually or as members of the club's board of directors. (The coach-board relationship will be covered in a future issue of Splash.)

An Oasis

But a bit of perspective is in order here. While all coaches labor to properly shape the parent-athlete-coach triangle, some suffer more than others. Rick Wolff, chairman of the Center for Sports Parenting (www.internationalsport.com/csp), calls swimming "an oasis." Coaches of team sports have only subjective means to evaluate talent. Even at its best, the process is imprecise and open to question. How does a coach fix with any certainty which offensive lineman blocks better, or which outfielder offers the best combination of hitting and fielding?

Yet these judgements determine playing time, which is at the root of nearly all parental complaints. Coaches are forced to defend themselves armed with nothing stronger than an arbitrary standard. Who's to say a guard with a deft shooting touch should play more than a tenacious defender?

With swimming the only standard is time, so performance is entirely quantifiable, measured precisely by a stopwatch. And playing time is rarely an issue. The only barrier to entry at most age-group meets is the entry fee. Everyone who wants to swim can compete.

"When you compare what coaches of team sports have to put up with when they make decisions about who makes the team and who plays, coaches of individual sports like swimming and track are not even in deep water as far as their problems with parents," says Doyle. "They are barely in three feet of water."

Swimming's preciseness, however, comes with a price. In sports such as soccer and basketball, parents can judge their children's potential only against the players they compete against, which typically stretches no farther than adjacent counties. Not until the last two or three years of high school do they step onto a stage that provides statewide or national exposure.

Swimming, on the other hand, allows comparison between a 10-year-old breaststroker in Pennsylvania to one in California right down to the hundredth of a second. The temptation for parents to extrapolate is irresistible. If a son or daughter is among the Top 16 when they are 10, shouldn't they be in the running for a national championship when they turn 18?

In fact, quite the opposite is the case. Improvement is not a steady, positive slope, especially for prodigies. A study by USA Swimming using the All-Time Top100 swimmers in each age group through 1996 found that only 10 percent of the Top 100 10-and-Unders maintained their status through age 18. Only half of the swimmers among the Top 100 in the 17-18 age group had made any top-100 list when they were younger.

"Those winning races at 10 probably won't be winning races when they are 20," says John Leonard, the executive director of the American Swimming Coaches Association. "This is one of those things that is obvious to coaches but is a mystery to parents. Coaches understand the long-term nature of the sport, parents often don't."

This misunderstanding creates swimming's equivalent of playing-time disputes. As swimmers begin to slip in national, regional, and even local rankings, their parents scramble for solutions. Sue Anderson, a former world record-holder and one of USA Swimming's development coordinators, saw the pattern repeat itself many times when she was head coach of the Scarlet Aquatic Club in New Jersey during the 1990s. These "pressure parents," as she calls them, begin to micromanage their children's swimming by arranging for extra practices and seeking out meets not on the team's schedule. When expectations still aren't met, they invariably blame the coach, who is mostly defenseless because no one can say for sure why young, talented swimmers stop improving. Maybe it is the coach's fault, though the problem just as likely could stem from the swimmer's early physical maturation or a mindset that has become mis-wired because of parental pressure, or a host of other reasons. Regardless, the conflict heats up until the swimmer jumps to another club, which is often the first of several such moves.

"What the parents think is helping their kids is only putting them under a lot of pressure," says Anderson. "Many of these kids do very well when they are 10-and-under and 11-12, but eventually a lot of them they stop living up to expectations, and they fall apart."

The Other Stuff

Of course, not all disputes fall under the category of domineering parents and underachieving swimmers (though they tend to be the most intractable). A coach's personal style can cause problems, particularly if he focuses almost exclusively on the senior swimmers. There is also the matter of different outlooks. Parents see only their sons and daughters and the next few weeks and months. Coaches see the entire team and the upcoming years. Then there's the issue of how coaches are viewed. Many parents don't see a professional, but a former jock slumming between real jobs.

"It was amazing how differently parents acted when I started coaching at the college level," says Warner. "I knew nothing more than when I was coaching a club team, but the parents assumed that I did."

Mike Krzyzewski, who, over the last 20 years at Duke has established himself as one of the most successful college basketball coaches ever, once said, "The coaching I love. The kids I love. It's the other stuff you have to watch out for."

What often matters to parents is the other stuff, whether coaches are returning their phone calls promptly or thanking them for their volunteer work on behalf of the club. These small courtesies seem insignificant by themselves, but when taken together they acknowledge that the coach is meeting the parents halfway. They also keep disputes to a minimum. A meticulous plan handed out in March for the summer season will inhibit parents from overlapping family vacations with major competitions. Regular parent meetings run by the coaches and board members that both inform and educate will minimize rumors and alleviate concerns over the cyclic nature of competitive swimming. Set office hours for the coach will discourage interruptions from parents during practice.

The biggest courtesy of all, Leonard believes, is listening. A handful of parents are unreasonable. Others simply have healthy concerns about what's best for their children. Separating the two requires more than a five-minute conversation.

To make his point, Leonard refers back to his first coaching job, which was in Illinois during the 1970s. The father of a talented girl initially gave off all the signs of trouble.

"The classic horror story of a parent," Leonard recalls. "He was a trial attorney. Very pushy. His style of conversation was confrontational."

Yet Leonard endured and gradually came to realize that despite the father's bluster, he had a lot to offer. After two years, they were running together. Leonard would talk about his new ideas and the father would poke holes in all of the right spots.

"He'd question me on everything I was doing, which gave me a lot to think about," Leonard says. "Our relationship lasted for eight years and the daughter represented the United States on national teams. The mother and the father were the most active parents in helping to run the club. They were the best swimming parents I have ever known. It took me a while, but I discovered they were only interested in the best possible experiences for their daughter – both in life and in swimming – and they wanted to learn all they could about the sport.

"It just took a little bit of willingness to understand what they were after, and a little bit of patience to give them the opportunity to do the right thing."

Good advice, both for coaches and parents.