

Working WITH the Coach

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One of the most time consuming challenges a coach encounters is building a working relationship between himself, parents, and the Board of Directors. This is especially true when parents challenge the coaches' authority and ability to make coaching judgments.

From our vantage point of "hearing it from all sides" we have developed some thoughts for parents.

Be educated. Read all you can about swimming but remember, that there are usually many different ways to teach a skill, or plan a season, or set a race strategy, etc.. Your coach may use tactics you have not read about and are not familiar with but are never-the-less absolutely sound. Some very gifted coaches may use techniques that aren't well documented but may be a superior method. Your coach may be a pioneer! We don't think all coaches should coach using the same methods and are anxious to hear from coaches having success with new found methods.

If you are looking for this kind of information, the best place to start is the USA Swimming website (www.usaswimming.org). Take some time to look at the information specifically directed towards parents. Also, there are many places on the web but keep in mind the source – look for articles by successful and respected coaches. Also, there are dozens of books and DVD's out there written by accomplished coaches. www.GoSwim.tv and www.Championshipproductions.com are two good sources of DVD's and Human Kinetics publishes a number of excellent books.

Think before you ask. When you are concerned about a decision made by the coach it's fair to ask for an explanation but keep in mind two things. First, ask for an explanation at the proper time, preferably after practice or after the swimming meet. It is better to wait for a quieter time and it is better to think through your questions before approaching the coach.

Secondly, it is reasonable for a coach to give an explanation by simply saying, "I had a feeling it would work best this way." It's called intuition, and it is one of the most important ways a coach makes a judgment call. Let's not take this away from coaches.

Consider relays – one of the most contentious judgment calls a coach makes. Who should be on the relay and what should the order be? There are many factors that go into setting a relay line up and the guiding philosophy of the coach might simply be that he or she "enters the relay in the best interest of the team." There should never be a specific relay policy that will prevent your coach from using his or her judgment.

For example, the "fastest four" may not be the fastest four on THAT day. The coach may have an intuitive feeling that a given individual may perform faster than the "fastest four." There are also times the coach might feel that an individual needs the psychological boost of being on the "A" relay even though they are not one of the top 4, and if the meet is not of importance, may elect to move this swimmer to the "A" relay.

The point is, it is a coaches' call. She may make a judgment based on an intuitive feeling she has or other reasoning that you do not agree with or understand but it is within her area of authority to make the call and she needs the freedom to do it without undue critical challenges.

View the larger picture. There are three pictures, actually. One is the larger picture of the swimmer's swimming career. Early success (i.e. medals, ribbons, high point trophies, and national age group rankings) is not a requirement to career success. In fact, many times those successful early in their careers drop out before they have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Coaches are usually very patient with a swimmer's progress because they are able to see the larger picture. Try not to mistake a coaches' calm patience with non-caring.

Larger picture number two: "There's more to life than swimming." We're hopeful that all coaches and parents remember that the most important experiences gained in an individual's swimming career have nothing to do with flip turns or butterfly technique. Making friends, being part of a team, learning self-discipline, learning responsibility, setting goals, and working toward goals are far greater experiences than medals, ribbons, high point awards, and national rankings. (Just ask a retired swimmer!)

Larger Picture number three: The team! Remember that you and your child are part of the team and have an opportunity to contribute to team strength, team growth, and team unity.

Educate the coach. Does your club have a "coaching education" item in its budget? We think you should and it might be used for any or all of the following:

1) People Skills Seminars. In our office we regularly receive bulletins announcing various "people skills" or "management skills" seminars in the area. On your team there are surely people who receive the same kind of bulletins at work. Ask your Board to send the coach to a seminar.

2) Coaches' clinics. There are many throughout the year and throughout the country. The ASCA World Coaches Clinic is the largest with over 1000 coaches in attendance.

3) Senior Nationals. If the team does not have senior national qualifiers, give the coach the option of attending the senior nationals in place of a clinic. It's a great place to receive an education.

4) Purchase books, magazines, and memberships for the coach. All of these things are an investment in your team's greatest asset, the coach.

Recognize the coaches' experience and education. Your children are precious and turning them over to a coach, who oftentimes is a young coach, is sometimes unsettling. Coaches, however, have hours upon hours of experience working with young swimmers just like your child and will try to make their best judgments in the best interest of your child's long term swimming development. In addition, we're hopeful that your coach has attended clinics, frequently exchanges information with other coaches, and is involved with the ASCA certification and home study program.

Try not to take it personally. All parents want to see their children be successful, however some parents get emotionally involved in their children's successes and setbacks. Sometimes they love to win through their children, and they hate to lose. Let the child own their successes and failures while you are there simply to congratulate or console..

Be aware of the overzealous, know-it-all, win at all costs, swim parent. Unfortunately there are some parents who continually challenge the judgment of the coach. Frequently their opinions are based upon emotion, limited experience, and limited knowledge. Their motives are rarely in the interest of the team. They oftentimes try to gather support to change decisions and can wreck serious havoc in a program. What you can do is support the coach and Board of Directors, and try to educate the parent. One of the greatest untapped resources for parent education are the parents of children who have been through the age group program.

Remember all the different people a coach must work with. Be sensitive to the fact that a coach is under tremendous pressure to please as many people as possible while making decisions he knows not everyone will be happy about. A little support from a friendly parent can make a coaches' job far more pleasant than if he feels he is always alone.

Or not. Here is the time-saving, near effortless, and low stress alternative for all of the above: simply look for your child to be happy and improving. Entrust the coach with the technical details. Accept the success and setbacks in stride. Provide emotional support for your child. Volunteer for team meets or other activities. And on your car pool day if you get stuck at practice, take a good book, and look up once in a while at your lovely child getting a great workout.