

## **Practicing Excellence [By MICHAEL BROOKS; Coach Brophy East Swim Team (AZ)]**

Every single practice presents swimmers with thousands and thousands of opportunities to get better. And most of the problems that swimmers encounter at swimming meets can be solved at daily practice. At practice swimmers build the physical and psychological capacities, and create the mental and physical habits that they will show off when they race. Very simply, consistently coming to practice is essential for your continued development, progress, and motivation as a swimmer. You don't get better when you aren't there and you don't stay motivated when you aren't getting better.

While I have been impressed with the improvements we have made over the last couple of months, both in fitness and technique, certain things make me uneasy. Part of a coach's job is looking to the future and trying to prevent problems down the road. And lately I have become concerned that there may soon be several train wrecks as swimmers' stated goals run smack into their practice commitment levels.

### **Parts of a puzzle**

A swimming practice doesn't stand alone. It is one small part of an interlocking puzzle, with each piece dependent on the others. What we do this Tuesday is related to what we did on Monday and what we will do on Wednesday. Further, the particular physical adaptations our bodies make because of today's practice, and the size of those adaptations, depend on what we did yesterday and what we will do tomorrow. And this week's training block is dependent on last week's and next week's. In a good and well-designed training program, every part is determined by and is dependent on its relation to every other part. Daily attendance at practice is crucial: you cannot expect that the puzzle and its picture are going to be complete, perfect, and beautiful, if you are missing pieces here and there. Your training program lacks integrity—wholeness and harmony between the parts.

### **Accumulation: Little things add up**

Swimming practices are cumulative. The most important training adaptations are those made over the long term—not quickly after a day or two, but slowly after months and months of consistent training. Each day that you practice well you are adding a pebble to your pile, and after several seasons you have a small mountain. If one day you add a pebble and the next you skip practice and take one away, at the end of several seasons you have...not much.

### **Pleasure and fun**

The more you come to practice, the better you feel in the water and the more skills, both neuromuscular and physiological, that you develop, the more you will improve, the better will be your results, and the more fun swimming will be for you. Ask any kid about his favorite classes in school and why; as a rationale, just about every single kid will answer, "it's fun because I'm good at it, it's easy for me..."

### **One for all and all for one**

Successful swimming is all about setting and trying to reach a myriad of goals large and small, short term and long term. *You* should not be able to meet the high goals you have set for yourself without consistent practicing. *The team* will not be able to meet the high goals it has set for itself without your consistent, daily contribution. *Your teammates*, as individuals, cannot meet their individual goals without you at practice pushing them to excel. We need our teammates to push us to work harder and to swim better and faster. You should all be important parts of this body—a body cannot function properly if its spleen decides not to be a part of things today.

### **Improving absolutely and relatively**

Those swimmers who come to practice and do the program will likely maintain a fairly steady and quick rate of progress, which you are not likely to match if you aren't here, so you will be sliding backwards relative to the group: kids whom you used to beat are now beating you; you aren't able to do the intervals at practice that the other kids are; you are staying put while the others are being promoted to higher groups; you are staying home while others are leaving for championship meets that you don't qualify for etc. I have found from a number of years of watching kids in this situation, that it is VERY hard to stay excited or motivated when you are sliding off the back end of a group that is striding forward.

### **Progressing through the groups**

Lately a number of swimmers and parents have raised the "move-up" issue: if and when a swimmer will be moved from

one training group to a higher one. Training group move-ups will of course consider if you can train at the level of the higher group; but it will also consider if your commitment level is at the level of the higher group. For instance, if the group above you is expected to practice eight times a week and you are only training four or five because of outside commitments or other life matters, then you will probably be staying put, even if you could make the training sets. The BEST training progression demands not only that swimmers train faster and more as they progress from group to group, but also that they become more and more committed to their swimming as they progress.

### **Critical periods and the big picture of developmental training**

The BEST training program is developmentally planned: it is designed to take advantage of physiological "critical periods" when swimmers' bodies are especially adaptable. For instance, the 10 & under years are critical for developing good technique, for developing coordination and rhythm, and for beginning to build an aerobic base. [Note: watching masters swimmers or triathletes train, one can instantly spot those athletes who swam when they were young and those who didn't.]

The years from 11 to 14, which roughly coincide with our Red and Blue training groups, are crucial for continuing the neuromuscular control improvements from the earlier years, but most importantly for increasing the athlete's aerobic capacities. The growth in heart and lung size—cardiovascular capacity—that can occur with the right kind, intensity, and consistency of training is staggering. It is really these years—for girls from 11 to 13, and for boys from 13 to 15—when kids are determining by their training what level of athletes they will be later: these training years provide a technical and physiological foundation for future senior swimming. The foundation that you build will either bless you or haunt you from then on.

This biological "timetable" can be somewhat problematical, since sometimes biology outpaces psychology. When swimmers are younger they might not care that much about being fast, for whatever reasons. Many kids don't get the bug until later: as juniors and seniors in high school, they suddenly become motivated by the idea of making All-American, or qualifying for Nationals, or getting a college scholarship. But the training foundation they built for themselves during the crucial developmental years, when they weren't so psyched about working hard or coming to practice or working on their technique, is not deep or wide or stable enough to support those high performances that they are shooting for now.

This is very much like the process of building a house. The bigger and taller the house, the more stable the foundation must be. You cannot build a mansion on sand. The gist here is simple and clear: what kids do and how they do it when they are young matters A LOT—it raises or lowers their ceiling for performance when they are seniors. The thing you see them doing at seventeen were slowly created from ages ten to fourteen. Our White, Red, and Blue group swimmers are busily building the training foundation for their performances as seniors in high school or as collegians. How wide and how deep is the foundation you are building for yourself?

### **Choices matter**

Americans are wedded to the idea of the "do over": that you can always get another chance, that your previous choices can be made to have no consequences. A wonderful example of how our choices matter is Michael Jordan's aborted attempt to play professional baseball after his first retirement from basketball. Here was a consummate athlete—maybe the best athlete ever to play basketball—who was an astonishingly hard worker and highly motivated, yet who fell flat on his face trying to hit major league curve-balls.

Jordan had made millions of good choices for basketball and had developed the right skills to dominate on the basketball court, but his choices were not such as to develop his baseball skills, no matter how much he wanted to be a great baseball player later. He had simply missed too many of the steps along the way, too many of the prerequisites during his developmental years. He had trained his body to be a great basketball player, not a great baseball player—it didn't matter how much he wanted it.

Your choices catch up with you; they not only form who you are, but they also determine what you can become. Your current choices in the pool are determining what you can be and what you can't, and on what level you will practice your swimming craft in the future.

### **Leopards don't change their spots**

This is true psychologically as it is physically. By coming to practice, you are creating a mental habit of coming to practice; by skipping, you are creating a habit of skipping. Age groupers who have trouble committing to a full age group training program, and who are constantly missing practices, especially on weekends, become senior swimmers who have trouble committing to a full senior training program etc. It is a good thing to learn early on the virtues, rewards, and

pleasures of commitment.

### **The "just this once" pattern**

Missing practices and trying to be an elite athlete do not mix. It is normal that everyone considers his own reasons for missing practice reasonable and legitimate. "But it's special—it's ONLY THIS ONCE!" The problem is, it's never only this once; instead, it rapidly becomes a pattern of moving the bar downwards: more and more occasions and opportunities get defined as "special," more get defined as "can't miss opportunities," more excuses become redefined as "good reasons" to miss practice "just this once." Eventually almost any reason is good enough, and the integrity of the training program—for you—is destroyed. Biology, physiology, neuromuscular adaptations, and the swimming life do not take holidays every weekend.

### **The obstacle course of life**

Part of commitment is a willingness to overcome the little obstacles that clutter your path: to focus your energies like a laser beam and go straight to the goal. Think of everyday life as an obstacle course, with the goal being to get to swimming practice so you can improve. The more you take the attitude "I am going to swimming practice, NO MATTER WHAT," and the more you use your imagination and ingenuity to figure out ways to work around any and all of the little obstacles to this goal that get in your way, the farther you are going to go with your swimming, and the stronger your character will be. You are not committed if you only come to practice when it's convenient. The swimmers who improve the most and do the best always seem to be the ones who find a way to get to practice, despite the obstacles. Their lives are busy, too; they have things to do, too; they have families, too; but they find a way.

I am always flabbergasted at the ingenuity shown by some committed 9-year-olds in finding ways to work around conflicts, and just as flabbergasted by some uncommitted 14-year-olds and how more-than-willing they are to be stopped by the smallest bumps in the road. What distinguishes these swimmers most is their attitudes—not their ages and not the nature of the obstacles in their way. One swimmer wants to come to practice so badly that she will walk over hot coals to get to the pool (and get there on time); the other is searching so hard for a reason to miss practice that any old excuse will do.

### **The harsh reality of blocks and clocks**

When you are standing on the blocks, do you really think that your competitors care two hoots that you have "good reasons" for missing so many practices? No way. They will be more than happy to take advantage of all the compromises you made to your training program, and they will be laughing all the way to the podium as you eat their wake.

Is the electronic timing system going to cut you some slack because you had so many good reasons for missing so many practices? No. The clock is brutally objective. If you have routinely compromised the integrity of your training program by poor attendance; if you have failed to focus on your technical improvements and so are relying on inefficient strokes; if you haven't built your aerobic training base; if you have dogged it when we have done our speed-widths—all of this will show when you race and the clock tells your time.

### **The soothsayer**

As a coach who has kept his eyes open and paid attention, I know the end of the story, while you are hearing it and living it for the first time. I know what happens after a season, or a year, or several years of buckling down and doing the job. And I know what happens after a few seasons' worth of missing practices here and there for "very good reasons." You can only see right now, and you cannot understand why I am making such a big deal out of missing one tiny itsy-bitsy practice. But I can see years down the road. I know how these seemingly trivial, minuscule choices add up until they have HUGE consequences later on. And it's my job to tell you about those consequences, even if you don't particularly want to hear it.

This sounds stark, but swimming isn't unique in this regard. The same truth holds for any discipline and the developmental process of earning higher and higher levels of performance; violin, baseball, mathematics, the law, poetry, piano, soccer, etc. And the sooner you wrap your mind around this reality, the sooner you make a quantum leap in your performances.

Excellence isn't convenient, and it isn't easy. As Matthew Arnold wrote, we must "sweat blood to reach her." But the view from the top is breathtaking, and worth all the effort to reach the summit.