

Swaziland Swimming

ASCA Level One Clinic - Foundations of Coaching

I had the recent opportunity and privilege to present the ASCA Level 1/Foundations of Coaching Course to the coaches (all of them) in Swaziland, Africa. For them, this was the first connection to ASCA (The American Swimming Coaches Association) or USA Swimming in the country's history. We spent two full days reviewing course material in Power Point and DVD format, watching videos from Olympians to Dr. G analysis, reading articles, and discussing safety and child protection.

The clinic was attended by twenty-five coaches and four parent council members. The coaches included those running small, humble club teams, teachers who offered swimming in schools, learn-to-swim instructors, and even some who run an orphanage (with motto, *Orphans Today, Leaders Tomorrow*) that offers swimming. Each coach received a USA Swimming pin, sticker, and pencil, and a glimpse into a world that they had only heard about; America and USA Swimming.

The Meet (Gala)

We ran the course on Friday and Sunday because of a meet (Gala) scheduled for Saturday. The meet was one of the most endearing and precious experiences I have enjoyed as a coach. It was an early season relay meet and included the elementary schools. The meet had no timers, no officials, no "stars", only a few streamlines, but more spirit than I have seen in my thirty-five year career. There is truly something for all of us learn from this humble group with modest talent. There was a complete absence of anxiety, individualism, or apathy. These kids gave completely to a very simple and pure process that was in front them – swimming, friends, teammates, *and* opportunity. Everything mattered (except their time). It was powerful and refreshing and a stark reminder of the pure joy that can and should exist in sports – at all levels.

During one of the first races, I was standing on the side of the pool and was overwhelmed by very loud, intense, and rhythmic cheering. I turned and stared at the kids in awe. I have seen a great deal of cheering in my career, but nothing like this. I naturally assumed that the race in front of them was a closely contested heat of four or five teams coming into a photo finish. I turned to the pool to see five young swimmers, struggling with butterfly, spread out throughout the pool, in the *middle* of the race. They were cheering for the kids, not the race. It continued like this for the entire meet. During a later race, I turned to a woman next to me to comment on the excessive cheering but it was so loud, she couldn't hear me. When the race was over, I told her how I was very impressed with spirit of the kids. She almost embarrassingly said, "Oh, this is nothing. You should come to the meet at the end of the season."

The kids were adorable. One warm-up lane (see photo) had about fifty kids in it. No one complained or even knew it was too crowded to "warm up." The lane next to that one had less than five kids in it (one lane per school). No one asked to move. I think they liked it better "warming up" with their friends and classmates. And don't ask about the dive lane!

Realities and Reminders

A reminder and recap of the swimming backdrop in Swaziland is; no heated pools, one pace clock, one set of lane lines (the rest are ropes), and relevant to this course, no coach certification (i.e., no education, safety, background check, CPR, etc.). This course served not only as an opportunity for education, and exposure to USA Swimming, but as the beginning of a dialogue on a host of issues that can positively impact these children.

During the course, as we were discussing workout management and group organization, one coach raised his hand and asked matter of factly, “what do you recommend with eighty kids?” I asked how many groups – “one”, and how many coaches – “just me.”

Towards the end of the course, I was presenting the section on diet and eating disorders. I wasn't sure whether it was an issue there so I leaned over and asked the parent near me. Her response was, “the only eating disorder here is not enough to eat, otherwise, no, not a problem.”

A harsh reality to swimming in this small country (as I am sure is the case in most developing countries) is not necessarily a lack of equipment or staffing but safety. The afternoon of the exciting relay meet I attended, a nine year-old boy drowned in the same pool. I asked where the life guard was. The response was simply, “we don't have life guards. We can't get anyone to do it or pay them.”

As I have said before, these kids are painfully polite and humble, fit, eager, and content. There are truly inspirational. This always reminds me of the quote, *“I would rather be able to appreciate things I cannot have, than to have things I am unable to appreciate.”* E. Hubbard

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