

# Balancing Act

Parents article archive

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It should have been an ideal situation – every committed swimmer’s dream. Wake up in the morning, eat breakfast, train, sleep, eat lunch, train some more, eat dinner, watch a little television, and then off to bed for a good night’s sleep. No work, no school, nothing to clutter one’s head but stroke technique and repeat times.

As is often the case, however, perception is no match for reality. Michael Norment was twice in an all-swimming environment, first when he prepared for the 1996 Olympic Trials and then again prior to the 2000 Olympic Trials.

“I should have learned my lesson the first time,” he says.

Jeff Rouse, a 1992 and 1996 Olympic medalist in backstroke, found himself in a swimming-only situation late in 2002 when he moved to California to train at Stanford. When he began watching daytime television, he knew, as he says, “Things were not good.”

With little else to distract them, swimming became their lives. A sub-par training set during a morning practice would bother Norment the rest of the day. A bad race would weigh on his mind for a week or more. Ironically, both Norment and Rouse recall that they were more tired, both mentally and physically, than when they combined training with school or work.

“It was a constant grind of swimming, no break,” Norment says. “Sometimes swimming was the only thing I thought about. I needed a normal life.”

But that’s precisely the rub: How to have a normal life in an abnormal situation? Dan Gould, Ph.D., a professor in the Department of Exercise and Sport Science at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, has studied extensively the backgrounds and habits of elite athletes. “Not normal,” he summarizes. They are so committed, their focus so narrow, that it’s next to impossible for them to identify with their non-athletic peers. In this regard they are no different from award-winning scientists or world-renown concert pianists. They all aspire to such a high level of achievement that they can’t allow for any diversions.

“A normal person might have up to five identities,” Gould says. “A student, a family member, perhaps a hobby, all in addition to being an athlete. The elite (athlete) might have only two or three, but sometimes only one, and that can lead to real trouble.”

Gould uses the word “balance” to describe the state where these various identities juxtapose in such way that the pursuit of athletic excellence stays in proper perspective, which is to say, the athlete views himself as more than just an athlete. This notion of balance applies equally to a high school sophomore committed to making the finals at the state championships as it does to a post-graduate striving for Olympic status. But capturing its essence is akin to grabbing a fistful of water. Balance is like morality or justice – difficult to define, impossible to generalize. There’s no formula. One size doesn’t fit all. What works for one athlete might be inappropriate for another.

Staciana Stitts, who admits to periods of imbalance before and after she made the 2000 Olympic team in the 100m breaststroke, is training full-time for this summer’s Olympic Trials and has no complaints. She finds the relationship with her fiancé and the time she spends with her friends enough of a counter to the daily demands of swimming. Rouse, on the other hand, took a job for 20 hours a week working for a medical services company.

“If not,” he says, “I would be bored to tears. I need a distraction from the pool.”

#### MORE CANCER THAN COLD

The amount of time devoted to an athletic endeavor is certainly a factor in achieving balance, but not as important as many people think. Dave Feigley, Ph.D., chairman of the Department of Exercise Science and Sports Studies at Rutgers University in New Jersey, envisions a life out of balance even for an athlete practicing as little as 90 minutes a day, five days a week. If his parents relate to him only as an athlete, if the conversation at the dinner table revolves around swimming, if every family function is planned to accommodate practices and meets, then the athlete will inevitably begin to define himself as a swimmer. That, Feigley argues, is a life out of balance, even though training consists of a mere seven and a half hours a week.

“There is no set amount of time that’s right or wrong,” he says. “It’s pretty hard today to be a top athlete without specializing – not to have that intense focus - but if you want to maintain it over a long period, you have to define yourself in more ways than just the sport.”

The problem with imbalance is that it’s more like cancer than a cold. Once it sets in, it tends to feed on itself. This is what Thomas Raedeke, Ph.D., professor in the Department of Exercise and Sport Science at East Carolina University, calls “the sinister side of commitment.” Raedeke has done several studies of athletes, many of them swimmers, and has found their ingrained dedication can work against their best interests once their sport has become their identity.

“They continue to swim because they feel they have invested too much, or because they don’t want to disappoint coaches, or because other people make them feel that they must,” Raedeke says. “They don’t see what else they can do, even though the passion might be gone.”

As the situation spirals, quitting – or at least an extended break from the sport – is almost inevitable. This seems so obvious that one would think parents and coaches would carefully watch for early signs of imbalance and insist on corrective measures. But there’s an inherent paradox at work. Parents are

reluctant to discourage an all-consuming interest in an activity that is so healthy, particularly if their sons or daughters have experienced success. And few coaches, despite Raedeke's finding that they understand the danger of athletes too narrowly defining themselves, have it in them to tell a swimmer, "You're getting too wrapped up in this sport. You need to back off."

The situation is further complicated by the fact that improper balance doesn't always occur in the expected places. Kristen Diffenbach, a Ph.D. in exercise science and sports psychology, recently worked with a college soccer player who was second-string skill-wise but with an elite-level imbalance problem.

"He grew up hearing that if you wanted to play in college, you had to suffer," she says. "He didn't think there was time to be a college student, so he wasn't doing anything else. He forgot about the connection he needed with people. He was completely isolated. He loved to play, but he was dragging himself to practice."

His case, however, isn't as bad as some of the Masters competitors whom Diffenbach advises. Typically, they have succeeded in their professional careers and are looking for a fresh outlet for their competitive urges. They don't know how to go halfway at anything, even though their physical peaks are years past. What starts as a minor commitment soon grows to a 15-hour-a-week obsession that takes a serious toll on their families.

#### BOTH SIDES OF THE SAME EQUATION

Imbalance and burnout are so interwoven that sports psychologists use the terms interchangeably, as if they comprise both sides of the same equation. The general consensus is that burnout occurs after long-term exposure to stress, whether physical, mental, or emotional. Physical burnout is well understood and relatively easy to identify and correct. It's the mental and emotional stress that often grows unnoticed and untreated because the factors that feed them very often occur away from the pool.

Experts would like to offer a list, something like, "10 Rules for Balance and Happiness," but the process is not that simple. The needs of individual athletes vary as much as height and weight. What's more, these needs shift as athletes age.

"It's just like a training plan," says Diffenbach. "What you do when you are 15 isn't going to be the same as what you do when you are 25. You have to continue to pay attention because what works will change."

Adolescence and young adulthood are times to try on different hats. This healthy trial-and-error is crucial in determining genuine interests. However, when the desire to branch out butts heads with the constraining requirements of a sport, the inevitable outcomes are conflict and stress. Trouble can be minimized, Gould says, by careful attention to how free time is filled. Does the athlete have a diverse mix of friends or does he socialize with other swimmers exclusively? Is he watching television instead of pursuing another interest, such as music? Is he interacting with the rest of his family?

"Coaches have gotten smart with limiting the amount of work to avoid overtraining," Gould says. "Now we have to look at what kind of rest athletes are getting. Not all rest is the same."

Says Raedeke, “How you fill this time should be chosen carefully so that it’s a source of energy and not more stress. For example, an interesting hobby instead of a job that you really don’t like.”

As the athlete gets older, and self-awareness increases, the questions take on a more long-term perspective: Is he preparing himself for life after swimming? If he had to stop competing tomorrow, would he be ready? Is his self-worth based entirely on how he performs as a swimmer?

“You don’t want to get to the point where if you don’t swim well you are somehow diminished as a person,” says Stitts. “What you have to realize is that even if you achieve your goal, which for me was making the Olympic team, it’s not the answer. It doesn’t change who you are. You still have to make a life for yourself. Before the (2000) Olympics, every decision I made was based on swimming. I didn’t go out. I got plenty of sleep. I pretty much swam and went to school. Looking back, I would have done the same thing, but the consequences are so much (to deal with). I hit a real low after the Olympics. There was no balance.”

#### LEAVING IT AT THE POOL

Amanda Beard had swings in balance much as Stitts did. After she won three medals at the 1996 Olympics at the age of 14, she spent the next year trying to show she wasn’t a flash in the pan. Every race was a test to prove that she hadn’t lost her Olympic speed. This self-imposed pressure was enormous, and she had nothing to divert it. Swimming was on her mind constantly. A bad performance put her into a mental and emotional tailspin. It got to the point where she dreaded going to workouts.

Relief didn’t come until a couple of years later when she went away to college at the University of Arizona. There was no epiphany, no bolt of lightning, but rather a gradual realization that, as she says, “You can’t stick with swimming for any amount of time unless you have other things going on in your life.”

Immersed in the college scene – classes and social activities – she found that she was able to walk away from the pool after practice and forget about swimming. Gould calls this the bottom-line standard of balance, particularly for elite athletes. They are, almost by definition, perfectionists. They analyze and critique themselves endlessly. Left unchecked, they would physically train five or six hours a day and mentally work out another 10 or 12 hours.

“They have to come up with a means to leave swimming behind at the pool,” Gould says. “It might be another activity that gets their mind off swimming, or it might be a simple ritual where they tap the wall as they leave the pool and tell themselves, ‘I’m leaving it here.’”