

Questions Parents *Don't Ask* (the coach)



The one's that really matter

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For the American Swimming Coaches Association, May 2014

“We become just by the practice of just actions, self-controlled by exercising self-control, and courageous by performing acts of courage.” Aristotle

I was having dinner one night a while back, and at the table next to me I overheard two mothers talking about their children and the local swim team their kids were competing on. The conversation went on about all of the usual topics that surface with regards to kids and sports. You know them well: which group their children are in, how much they enjoy it, their times, their goals, who their main competition is, team activities, what their coach is like, etc. Most of these considerations are centered on the general contentment/happiness of the child, on the program “working” for them, on how they feel about things, and on their potential for success. I contemplated leaning over and saying something like, “you know, regardless of your child’s ability, place, or even the satisfaction they derive from the program, if they can fully embrace work ethic, perseverance, and unconditional team commitment, it can become a life-transforming process.” Realizing that might be a little overwhelming for the moment (pizza), I instead continued with my dinner, but did wonder what their kids really *would* get out of this sport and more importantly, what role these parents would play in either supporting or hindering their child’s personal growth and development, and even their athletic potential.

At our last team’s parent meeting, I decided I would pose some of the questions that parents don’t ask, but are in essence the ones that really matter. In addition to the things a parent needs to know (schedules, group structures, athlete expectations, team objectives, etc.), I talked about the things they *should* know, the things that may very well shape and define their children’s lives; not attendance (showing up) but *real* work ethic, not group guidelines but *unconditional* team commitment, not time standards but developing extraordinary *leadership* skills and becoming a true role model in sports and in life. In thirty-five years, no parent has ever asked me to evaluate these things with regard to their child.

It really is staggering to think that a parent will spend thousands of dollars and mold their daily schedules (lives) around practice sessions and competition, and know virtually *nothing* about what lies beneath the surface, so to speak, of the athletic process. Given the magnitude of the commitment made by both the athletes and the parents (hours committed, miles driven, the effort, sacrifices, opportunity costs, and financial commitment), wouldn’t we all hope and expect there will be some deeply engrained, lasting benefit; something we can actually take with us? And the true long-term benefit will *not* be the time achieved. While it may be a marker, for most, it will not change the way one lives their life, or the quality of it.

Of course we all want kids to swim faster, and as coaches, the faster the better – for the child, the resume, and the club. Although performance is the only quantifiable measure of success in swimming, any transforming benefit will only come out of a deep-rooted, substantive, process driven, daily pursuit; a pursuit of virtues that matter whether you are a swimmer (novice or elite), a young adult navigating a treacherous social landscape, college student, or a young professional. And more often than not, the lynchpin in that process is the parent,

more specifically, the parent letting go of the need for immediate success, constant improvement, and requisite comfort or enjoyment.

“The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched - they must be felt with the heart.” Helen Keller

The quintessential component of (youth) sports is that it is one of the very few, if not the best venue, to learn and acquire the cornerstones of a “good measured life”, a life rooted in work ethic, discipline, self-awareness, compassion, and fortitude, yet these are too often overlooked. They are not acquired by simply showing up and they do *not* come easy. When you ask a child what they reflect on a decade after their athletic career has ended, the response is rarely achievement. Yes, it is the proverbial journey and not the destination. Kids generally won’t remember their first JO time, the easy sets, random members of the team, or a coach who made no connection. They always remember the most challenging sets (a sense of pride), teammates that made a difference (compassion), and a coach who made them not only a better swimmer, but a better athlete and person. So why not pursue adversity and challenge every day? Why not be a better teammate every workout? And why not fully embrace all that your coach is asking of you?

History shows us that young athletes who work hard *are* happier, yet it is generally not on the parents’ need-to-know list. The ones that are more team-committed seem to be more compassionate and selfless in life, but this virtually never comes up in parent dialogue. And the ones that are more dedicated tend to do better academically, but many parents discourage practice while quite possibly breaking down the very self-discipline that their child needs to thrive academically.

“It is good to have an end to journey toward, but it is the journey that matters in the end.” Ursula K. Le Guin

But for many parents, they cannot see the “journey” unfolding. Unfortunately we see parents fighting battles and losing the “war” – battles of attendance, performance, groups, etc., with success and improvement trumping personal and athletic growth, when they should be byproducts of it. Too many young athletes feel extraordinary pressure and can’t even grasp concepts like work ethic and team commitment when they are singularly focused on the *next* race, and the next, and the next.

At the highest level of experience, parents just want their children to be happy. While it can manifest itself in overprotective actions, the essence of that pursuit is also inherent in a parent being happy. We all know that if the child isn’t happy, rarely is the parent. But if a parent had to choose for their child to be happier or “better”, what would they choose? What about being more content or more resilient, a better stroke or a better teammate, a faster time or a greater work ethic, what would they choose? I always wonder which a parent would prefer: to have the most successful swimmer on the team who is the least respected, or the weakest swimmer on the team who is the most respected. And why? And how does a parent reconcile success or lack thereof, with personal growth?

- A coach sees a child with limited natural ability but an extraordinary work ethic and great leadership traits who thrives in the athletic arena, while the parent sees the child as a failure for not performing at a higher level, or:
- A parent sees a child prodigy as scholarship-bound, while the coach sees a disconnected teenager who everyone (but the parents) knows is making self-destructive social decisions.
- And which would/should a parent be more proud of; a swimmer who anchors a winning relay at a conference championship with a poor split, or a swimmer who *gives up* a would-be winning relay anchor leg to the fifth swimmer because they do not feel at their best (when they had the fastest time going in)? Who is the true champion?

Many parents today unwittingly end up raising resumes as opposed to “great” athletes. It is certainly easier to manage academics rather than a child’s resilience or moral fiber, given the social pressures and exposure today.

It is easier to require daily attendance than to require that your child inspire others. We have all seen successful athletes that don't embrace the work or the team, and "non-successful" athletes leave the sport because they feel there is nothing there for them. Both are a loss that could have been avoided with proper perspective and focus.

It would be hard to dispute that a great work ethic, a more resilient will, and a more compassionate heart would be invaluable to anyone, yes, even a child, or especially to a child. That with these things almost anything is possible in life. But why don't parents look for it? Do they not care? Do they not realize that these things are *unfolding daily*? Do they not want to know? These qualities may not be overt at the dinner table, doing homework, or in common social interaction with friends, *but they are in the pool every day*. They are inescapable. They have little to do with intelligence, GPA, social status, and especially not ones level of performance. Parents may not know, but we do. We, as coaches, may actually have a keen awareness of the most important aspects of a child's life.

"Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds that you plant."
Robert Louis Stevenson

Let's Talk

The typical parent (post-workout) conversation is generally centered on one question: How was workout? To which the most common answers are, "easy" or "hard". What if questions on the ride home were more along the lines of, "did you give your best today" (work ethic) and, "did you help the team in some way?" (team commitment/greater good), two invaluable lessons and life skills. What if parents not only insisted on knowing these things, but demanded them from their children?

Wouldn't a parent like to hear something like this after asking their child how practice was?

"Mom, I really pushed myself tonight at practice. My goal was to make it my best practice ever, and I think it was! I also really tried to encourage and support my teammates. I think I made a difference. And David forgot his goggles so I gave him mine. And, I am sorry I am a little late but I stayed to help the coaches pull the pool covers."

"The best preparation for good work tomorrow is to do good work today."
Elbert Hubbard

Life vs. Laps/Activity vs. Impact

So, given this extraordinary life backdrop that every young athlete finds himself or herself in, what questions should a parent ask? What *should* a parent know? What should a parent support? What *should* a parent demand? These questions could offer a more tangible conversation than, "why is their time not improving?", "why does his arm still cross under his body?" or "why is she the last one off the blocks?" What about:

- How is my child's work ethic? And please be honest.
- How do they perform when circumstances are challenging?
- Are they resilient?
- Can you push them harder? Can you push them to a breaking point? That will happen in life and I would like to see how they respond.
- Do they remain positive at the most difficult times?
- Do they complain? I would prefer they do not, ever, and I support you to let them know it is not acceptable, regardless of the reason.
- Do they remain focused and not social or disconnected?
- Do they like this?
- Do they make sacrifices?

- If they are a leader, do they lead in the right direction? If they are a follower, are they following the right people?
- Do they volunteer to help?
- Do you respect them? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Do they support teammates in workout, not their best friends, but everyone?
- I would like them to do a disproportionate amount of work to help this team. Can you make sure they set up, clean up, and do more than any of the other kids?
- I know this is not your job as a coach, but I would like to be notified immediately if you ever see:
 - My child being disrespectful to anyone for any reason
 - Shirk any responsibility
 - Not be fully committed in workout
 - Seem distant or depressed for any reason
 - Them associating with anyone or anything that might be considered a negative influence
- My last question is, how can I support you and the team, in offering this incredible growth opportunity for these children?

“You will never be the person you can be if pressure, tension, and discipline are taken out of your life”. James Bilkey

There was a recent article about placing the *process* as the primary focus and not the goal (time). While I truly believe in goal-setting, if your first goal is not commitment to the process, the work, and the team, the time becomes irrelevant. I gave the article to our team at a meeting and offered a few suggestions for becoming process-driven:

1. Do everything *exactly* right. Become obsessed with being on time, counting repeats/laps, knowing times, stroke counts, executing drills, etc.
2. Work every wall – *every* wall. Make it a mission. No lazy, illegal, or poor technique turns or streamlines. Have a kick count and a distance underwater and commit to them.
3. Act everyday as if *you* were the leader of the team, as if the success and character of the team was solely dependent upon you.
4. Train like a warrior. Push limits. Inspire and motivate others. “If it doesn’t challenge you, it doesn’t change you.” Embrace the path of *most* resistance.
5. Touch one person with compassion, empathy, and support – every day. Care more. Be a *great* teammate and role model.

What would youth sports look like if kids and parents were *obsessed* with being great at the process?

“The whole is the sum of the parts. Be a good part.” Aristotle

The Meet Process/A Life Process

At a meet, too often the process is overly simplified and unfairly quantified. Parents drop the child off, unpack the gear, attend to needs, watch the race, look at the time, and evaluate quickly with limited or no data. End of process. Typically, if a child improves his or her time, all is well. The kids are happy (justifies the process) and the parents are happy (justifies the process *and* the kids are happy). But, what if the time was indeed better, and the child arrived late, was not in team attire, shortened the warm-up, spent most of the meet with their best friend (not the team), did not warm down, swam a *poor* race, and bragged about the swim to others?

What if a parent’s response to a race was something like this?

“Statistically, there are few occasions that you will perform at your best. I also know that, statistically, every time you step on the pool deck, you can grow and develop as an athlete, a teammate, and as a person. I know there are some things that you cannot control and some things that you can. The reality though, is that the

things you can control can change your life in profound ways. The things you cannot control have virtually no bearing on your development as a human being: natural talent, or your performance relative to the rest of the team. At this meet, I don't really care about your time. I understand that that is part of a complex and long-term process. I also understand that in most competitive situations, you will not improve your time. And while I do truly hope that you enjoy great success in this sport, I would prefer to see you fully embracing the athletic process and in doing so, improve your life and the way you live it. What I would really like to know is..." (good questions for parents to ask their children of the meet process):

- Were you on time for *everything* – arrival, warm-up, team meetings?
- Were you in team attire throughout the entire meet? And did you wear it with pride?
- Did you check in with the coach before and after your race?
- Did you warm-up and warm-down appropriately?
- Did you give your best in your races?
- Did you understand the technique and strategy that the coach prepared you for?
- And most importantly, if the swim was “good”, did you keep it in perspective, and if it was “bad” did you keep it in perspective?
- Did you find the value in every race?
- How were you in the team area? Positive, engaging, encouraging, supportive?
- Did you complain about anything, or did you remain positive in the face of any challenges (crowded warm-up, tired, hungry, poor swim, etc.)?
- Did you clean up after yourself when you left?
- I am sure there are new swimmers on the team. Did you take the time to meet them?
- I am sure someone could have used your assistance today; did you reach out to help anyone – coaches, parents, teammates?
- Did you cheer for your teammates?
- Would you consider your actions today those of a leader and a role-model?
- Do you think you made the meet better and the team better?
- If you did not do these things, why not?
- If you do not, who is going to do them?

Why can't a parent leave a meet with the feeling that their children were extraordinary, even *with* “poor” swims? Could a post-meet conversation sound like this?

“You were incredible today. You represented yourself as a great teammate and athlete. What you did today would make any coach or parent proud. You had swims that were not near your expectations but you remained positive and committed to the process. You supported your teammates and coaches at every opportunity. You were a great athlete today and it will serve you well in swimming and in life. Here’s twenty dollars” (just kidding, there is no pay-for-character here).

“No pessimist ever discovered the secrets of the stars, or sailed to an unchartered land, or opened a heaven to the human spirit.” Helen Keller

If only a different set of questions were asked by parents. If only priorities were different. I personally do not have children of my own, but for thirty-five years I have dedicated my life and work to other children. Although perhaps easy for me to say, if I did have children, I would insist that athletics be a part of their life, not so they could win or be recognized or even get into a better college, but to learn lessons that I know I cannot teach them at a dinner table, lessons that can and should become the foundation for their entire life.

I would ask that the coach push them to their breaking point. I would want them to know that place of deciding to give up or push on, to take a true measure of their work ethic. I would demand that every day they do something to make the team better, that they do things that others would not entertain, such as clean up the team area, put the equipment away, or reach out to someone they don’t know well. I would insist that they show compassion every day – to look for an opportunity to touch someone’s heart – a new swimmer or an introverted

teammate. And I would implore them to lead by example (not the lane, but the effort), and to inspire others to work harder and commit more. I would also ask that they show appreciation to coaches who chose a passion as a vocation, and to parents who work diligently behind the scenes to support a program.

Finally, I would suggest that the parent's focus and the questions asked, should apply to *all* ages, *all* levels, and all sports. This may be a leap of faith, but why not sell, if not insist upon, these lessons early, as the earlier these skills and traits are acquired, the better. Why not learn to take the path of most resistance and why not learn to put the team ahead of your own interests, from day one? There is no magic age where work ethic becomes material or team commitment becomes relevant. If it is athletic, these things should be inherent. If parents truly realized the power behind the athletic process and made their children accountable to these concepts, I have no doubt that performances would be better, teams would be better, and yes, lives would be better.

What do you reflect as an athlete, a teammate, and a person?



And what do you expect as a parent?

