



Parental Meet Etiquette

By Long-Time "Swim Parent" Cees Ablright

Meets are confusing, noisy places and it can be hard to figure out, among other things, what is the best way to cheer and encourage; what is the best way to promote the whole team; how can you help those hard-working volunteers to guarantee a smooth running meet and when is the right time to talk to the coach.

Cheering and Encouraging

It can be thrilling to watch your swimmer race. To see them achieve their goals, to watch the times drop as they benefit from ALL those hours spent training. Sometimes we parents get more excited than the kids. It's not surprising; considering the commitment it takes to be a swim parent. We drive them to the meets, pay the coaching and meet bills, sit for way-too-many hours, buy those fast suits and replace endless pairs of goggles and towels while trying not to nag them about proper nutrition and the need for sleep. But toughest of all, we try to provide the support and encouragement to be the best they can be WITHOUT dampening their enthusiasm!

With all that, it's sometimes easy to forget that it is their race and their achievement and that figuratively jumping into the pool with them won't help.

Cheering for your swimmer is perfectly fine and many of the younger (or newer) swimmers want their parents close and cheering loudly. However, mobile cheering should be avoided and circle cheering is definitely on the "no-no" list. Circle cheering is chasing your swimmer up and down the pool deck as they swim. This energetic type of parent blocks the view of the other spectators, becomes a bit of a spectacle and abandons all claims to coolness. Worse, they get in the way of the officials, lifeguards and coaches. If those folks can't see, they can't do their jobs and it possibly affects meet safety. We personally love to "circle cheer" our two swimmers because we like the exercise and get claustrophobic when we're pinned in by other people. Plus we are convinced it will help and they need us (it doesn't and they don't – sigh – so if you see Cees giving in please yank her back to sanity. Ignore Mark – as a coach he is supposed to be there! It's a "benny of long hours on the deck during workouts). A supportive parent cheers from their seat or stands and cheers. If your swimmer is young (8 and under) or very new then please check with the coach on where you should be – they may be able to walk your swimmer to the right lane or they may ask you to do it while staying well back from the blocks and officials. Just remember to leave the chasing to the swimmers in the water 😊.

FYI: As new swim parents; we were all of the above "don'ts" at some time, fortunately our kids made it through that phase of our education!

Team Support

In addition to encouraging and supporting your own swimmer(s) you get to support your team in your interactions with other parents and their swimmers (I know – it's a crushing burden but we sports parents gotta do what we gotta do).

The number one rule: Never (never-never-ever!) disparage another child.

- Not to their face – this can be annoying to some kids but devastating to others.
- Not to their parents – who will not appreciate it and may possibly remove you from their Christmas card list.
- Not to their teammates – who are struggling with their own issues of respecting others, not to mention the whole adolescence mess.
- Not to anyone with another team – which pretty well leaves you talking, very quietly to yourself (and this may label you “weird” so you might want to dispense with that last one too).

Civility is the oil that makes the machinery of society work. Put yourself in that swimmer's or parent's shoes and remember to encourage, not discourage. We need to make sure we don't pop anyone's balloons or burden any swimmer (even our own) with our expectations. Leave that hard stuff to the coaches. It's part of THEIR job description to tell the swimmers how their swim can be improved.

Along the same lines, it's the coach's job to pick the relays. Now there is a job no one should want. The coaches have the ability to make four swimmers and four sets of parents unhappy in a single event! O.k. it's usually not that bad but sometimes it is. More than once we've sat in a group of parents where we all wondered at the logic of a grouping. We've even asked a question (check out the next section for some advice on that one) when a swimmer is particularly distraught. The coaches have a purpose in mind but occasionally they forget that your swimmer can't do something because of an injury or a mental block. It is o.k. to ask but then you have to let it go and console yourself and your swimmer that it won't affect world peace or a cure for the common cold. Mark could fill a page with different reasons coaches fill a relay like they do, and (he says☺) not one of them is to upset a parent or swimmer!

Team Reputation

Every swim team earns a reputation. Every parent contributes to that reputation. Our bright red shirts (NOW WHITE 2013) with the bold white lettering make our affiliation obvious but even sans the uniform it isn't too hard to discern the team (which kids are you cheering for?). Our daughter, Taryn, loves to socialize with swimmers from all over.

And we love it when those kids' parents come over and tell us how much Taryn helped by being friendly and encouraging. Many of the kids were new to swimming and those parents left with a favorable impression of the StingRays and our program.

The second rule: Do not to impede the meet:

As parents we can build favorable impressions by:

- Remembering that the start is sacred. Swimming is a sport of tenths and hundredths of seconds. If you are talking too loud, standing in the wrong place on the deck, clapping or using FLASH photography you could distract the swimmers and be responsible for a slow start or a disqualified swimmer.
- Obeying the life guards, officials and sponsoring club. Yes, sometimes the rules seem onerous (or silly – take off my shoes? Why should I take off my shoes?), but the person asking has a reason based in logic or liability insurance or regional health codes.
- Capturing your swimmer on film and creating an obstacle to the coaches, officials and swimmers. Everyone wants pictures – for the team and for the family – but interrupting the process is poor form. Consider shooting your film during warm-ups, pulling your swimmers to the side for relay shots or checking with the officials about the best location (we keep getting a better telephoto lens to help here). Above all DON'T use your Flash – the Timers (and swimmers) are watching for a light to flash to start the race!
- Volunteering when the call goes out. If timing for two to four hours is too long find another parent (or two) to split up the time
- Keeping all your swimmer comments positive. The parents of that struggling swimmer could be sitting behind you and they will remember your comments...forever.
- Cleaning up after ourselves (and even others), this is really appreciated when we sponsor a meet and the “shoe is on the other foot”.
- Not taking up more room than we need – have you noticed that real estate is usually in short supply?

By helping out others we can build a reputation of good will.

Coaches Time and Attention

Our coaches take their responsibilities very seriously. They need to pay attention to the races so they can give the swimmers appropriate feedback. If you need to talk to the coaches, pick a time when they are not focused on our swimmers (pre and post comments) or organizing the events. During a longer event (400 IM or 500) you can quickly ask when they would be available for a five minute chat. Occasionally you may need to interrupt a coach with important information, anytime your child has to leave unexpectedly. This is critical if they are part of a relay! Try and avoid the start and end of a race when they are using their stop watches. Be considerate of the other swimmers' needs and if the chat isn't directly related to the meet than it may be better

to schedule it for another time. If the swimmer has decided they want to be somewhere - anywhere else! - rather than face their next race or be debriefed on their last not-so-great one, be encouraging and attempt to have them to see the coach anyway, the coaches are used to dealing with this and will have an appropriate response.

The Fine Line

Swimming is a significant commitment for most parents and it can be hard not to get carried away at times. Cees sat next to a couple (not from our team) who were explaining to their son how much money he got for specific times. She was a little appalled but we have to confess that we let our kids pick the post swim meet restaurant when they get all personal bests. There seems to be a moving target for the line between encouraging and being pushy, and we frequently miss it ourselves. That line is different for each swimmer and it changes as they age. It is usually better to err on the side of less "encouragement" and have your kid(s) come to you for support rather than the other way.

Swimming is fun and today we are going to have lots of fun!