

Why You Need to Go to the Top Meet You are Qualified to Attend

By John Leonard

This topic is one that I think 95% of coaches agree on. Also one that parents occasionally "don't get" intuitively. So let me explain, please.

Fact Number One: We only improve when we "stretch" or "challenge" ourselves.

That's why it's called *competitive* swimming. Competition...competitive...to "Strive WITH" a worthy adversary.

UNCOMFORTABLE FACT NUMBER TWO: The vast majority of athletes are successful at a competition *one level below* the highest level they have ever attended. That's the level at which they feel competent enough to relax and "just swim" without involvement in all the distractions of the "highest level meet." This fact is true for everyone up to and including OLYMPIANS, who are usually much more successful in their second Olympic Games.

Fact Number Three: If you *do not* attend the highest level meet you are qualified for, you will not benefit from the "next highest level" syndrome and no matter how many times you attend the same level of competition—High School States for example—you will experience the same overwhelmed feeling you had the first time. *However*, if you qualified for Junior Nationals and actually went and competed, High School States does not seem quite so imposing, does it?

Take the same logic to the local B Meet. Once you've been on a relay at JO's, the B meet isn't such a "big deal." The less the athlete perceives the competition as a "big deal," the more likely they

are to focus on all the *right* things and perform well. When it's a "big deal," the athlete generally is overwhelmed by the experience and performs poorly.

Sadly, lots of athletes and parents, think that they are an "experiment of one" to whom this experience does not apply. In my 43 years of coaching, I cannot think of more than a handful of athletes who succeeded at the highest level they qualified for, the first time. Those were the kind of people who were largely "unconscious" of what was going on around them; too ignorant to be overwhelmed (which can work sometimes). I don't think there are many exceptions to this rule.

Bottom line advice: when an athlete qualifies for a meet, attend and compete. It's in their best interest, both long and short term. **Exception:** lots of coaches *prefer* that an athlete qualify in one season and then WAIT and compete in that meet the *next* season, when they can be once again rested and tapered—a good strategy—but NOT ATTENDING that high level meet is bad thinking.