

## Let the Coaches Coach, and the Parents, Parent

By John Leonard

**A**ge group swimming began in the USA just after World War II. It is the single factor that has been the most important in making the USA the dominant nation in world competition since that time. Along with age group swimming, came confusion between the coaching and parental roles in the sport. This has been with us a long time.

Parents come to the sport with a limited perspective on both the process of becoming an athlete and a limited experience in parenting. Many of us who are parents will tell the younger parents that EACH CHILD is a new experience in parenting, so we are perpetual novices. Those with one child may reach that conclusion as child #2 comes along.

Coaches come to the sport (if they are not parents themselves) with a limited understanding of how different the world looks if you are a parent. A limited understanding of the pressures and needs of families. And a clearly limited understanding of how powerfully we are impacted, as parents, when our child first competes with others in a sport.

Throughout the six decades of age group swimming though, there have been marvelous parents who "get it" and try to pass their wisdom on. That wisdom is the title of this article.

First, children beyond the very early ages do not want the parent to be overly involved in "their sport." Children want parents who support, but do not interfere. This leaves the sport to be "owned" by the child, and is thus something they have autonomy within. Reading the personal bios of great athletes and their parents' comments makes this abundantly clear. Let the sport belong to the child. It is NOT something

you do together, unless Mom or Dad want to get in and train those 5-7,000 yards an afternoon with the child. If you want strong, independent children, let them own this sport for themselves.

Coaches, on the other hand, have no business in a variety of family decisions, such as when to go to church, what to eat, when to eat, what priority sports is in the family life, and a myriad related others. From time to time, in some cases, coaches may present some ideas for your consideration. (Diet comes to mind here.) But the wise coach recognizes that they are providing educational input, not making parental decisions.

Mom and Dad, if you don't want the coach telling your children that church on Sunday isn't as important as the swim meet on Sunday, you may also wish to remember not to tell your child how their turns need to be improved. Each part of the three-legged stool of Parent, Coach and Athlete has a role to play; and roles to stay out of. Wisdom consists of knowing which is which.

Of course, there is always plenty of gray area, which requires the most fun of all: some honest discussion with the best interests of the child in mind.