

Think Tank Tuesday: April Edition

Hello again, NAC family! Since the long course season is underway, we want to highlight where we are in our season and what that means for NAC athletes. In case you missed our last Think Tank Tuesday, we have been training long course for several weeks now as we begin the build-up phase of our training. What we do, how we do it, and why we do it is our mission. NAC's mission is to give each athlete the opportunity to go as far in the sport of competitive swimming as their talent and desire will allow. From time to time, we get lost in the chaos of everyday life and begin to question and wonder if the sometimes-inconvenient practice schedules, commitments, and meet schedules are worth the hassle. **Short answer: YES!**

Swimmers are getting back in the routine of school and practice after a much needed and well-deserved spring break and are now working to build back their strength and stamina in and out of the water. While NAC has a strong belief in Long Term Development, we also have a strong belief in focused and organized in-season development. There is a strong correlation between swimmers training well early in the season and swimming fast at the end of the season. To endure the race-specific and focused training that's planned later in the season, swimmers must build the volume and the intensity of their swimming over several weeks. Championship meets can last from 2 to 6 days, and early season training does pay huge dividends in helping athletes perform at their best throughout the duration of the meet! Swimming is a training-based sport, so the gains made early in athlete fitness can mean more opportunities at the end of the season and can also mean huge strides into the following season.

While swimming is a training-based sport, it is also a technique-limited sport. We consistently focus on technique throughout the season, but early season is always a great time to clean up any stroke deficiencies as much as possible. When it comes to technique, even the slightest changes can yield big results!

With our first meet of this season just around the corner, we want to highlight the importance of going to meets! During the long course season, the window to qualify for championship meets is much shorter (almost 2 months!), meaning long course meets carry a bit more weight. For our age group athletes, long course meets are a developmental stepping stone towards their overall swimming career. There are several reasons that every swimmer on the competitive team should attend scheduled swim meets whenever possible.

Meets are an opportunity for each of our athletes to set achievable goals and to set in motion a personal plan to reach those goals. Without competition, a swimmer is training constantly with no end goal. For any level athlete, it can be monotonous to practice and train without anything measurable or attainable! Swimmers who make this a priority and learn how to execute their personal plan throughout a whole season are learning and executing skills that will come in handy later in life too. The April meet is a starting point meet, and the coaches can see where the athletes are and make plans for the remainder of the season.

Competition is the greatest barometer for coaches to judge the effectiveness of each individual athlete's training. Seeing an athlete race - after weeks of training and working on certain specific skills - helps gauge what may or may not be working and what needs to change going forward for that athlete to become successful. For adolescent swimmers, coaches often see the kids pushing themselves harder than usual while racing. We spend a large majority of our time building the foundations and creating good habits, and the best measure of success is a swim meet for the athlete to be under pressure and still hold on to habits they have formed. If athletes are only in a practice environment, and never in a competitive one, it can be very hard for both coach and athlete to judge progress. Historically, the Summer Sizzler in June is a "fast" meet. Top swimmers from all over the country come to NAC to race, which gives our athletes a jump start on the stiff competition environment they will face at the Southeastern Championship meet in late July.

Competition allows swimmers to learn and deal with both positive and negative outcomes. Training hard all season and attaining goals is highly rewarding, just as training hard all season and underperforming is incredibly disappointing. Learning to cope with failure and the ability to keep your head up and trust the process is just as important, as well as, taking success in stride and not letting egos or temporary setbacks get in the way of progress.

Finally, competing at meets is important because it helps build meaningful relationships between teammates. The people that train together each day become family over time. Everyone is crucial to each other's success. Swimming on relays, breaking records, or just hanging out between events are the relationships made with your swim family that will last long after you've hung up your goggles!

