

## Coaching for the Moment

By Mike Wenert

Growing up, I always wondered what my job would be when I was an adult. All through grade school and high school, I thought I wanted to be a police officer. But when I hit my college years, that wasn't as appealing to me. I ended up graduating from college with a history degree with no long term plans. Eventually, being a part time swim coach developed into a full time job and I jumped at the opportunity. As a swim coach, there are most definitely highs and lows that I experience yearly. Getting to the highs of the sport as a coach becomes more challenging and infrequent as the swimmers you coach progress and get older. Fast swims may only come a couple of times a year. More often than not, coaching has many more challenging times than rewarding times. When times are tough, I sometimes find myself questioning my career choice. The hours are long and inconsistent, I work every weekend, it makes a normal family life nearly impossible, and I'm never going to be a millionaire. Saying that, there are many positives to coaching with the most obvious being I get the chance to work with young adults and lead. Being a role model for young athletes is very rewarding. I've worked with a number of athletes that I've coached as 8, 9, or 10 year olds who've invited me to their weddings. You can't imagine how much that means to me. But there are other, short term, and instantaneous reasons why I coach. I'm going to call that the "moment".

When I was the Associate Head Coach for the Cincinnati Marlins, I picked up an exercise from Head Coach Chris Wolford that he called championship finishes. It was a very simple exercise that we used to do whenever we were preparing for a championship meet. During a practice prior to their big meet, we had all of the swimmers move to the middle of the pool and individually, they would swim into the wall and finish a race they were going to be swimming at their championship meet. Once they touched the wall, each swimmer was instructed to look at the scoreboard and visualize a time they thought was unachievable. Once they saw their time, each swimmer was instructed to celebrate their accomplishment instantaneously in the pool. Celebrations had to be unique and have a level of sportsmanship. You can imagine all of the different celebrations I have experienced. I've seen simple, flamboyant, playful, funny, and inspiring celebrations. The basic premise of the exercise was to expect to swim fast and achieve something that seemed out of reach. It was also a fun drill that helped build confidence and ease any pre meet jitters.

I saw a similar exercise by a high profile NCAA basketball coach on the ESPN series 30 for 30. During the 1983 college basketball season, Head Coach Jim Valvano of NC State University had his players practice cutting down the nets. Cutting down the nets is a ritual for any college basketball team that wins an end of the season tournament. Prior to the 1983 season, the NC State basketball team was a very good team but it was not a team that was considered a national championship contender. Nonetheless, Coach Valvano had his team practice cutting down the nets to build their confidence and let them know that he believed in them. Cutting down the nets during practice planted the seed that the NC State team belonged with the college basketball elites. They had to think like a champion to become a champion. NC State went on to win both the ACC tournament (which they needed to do to make the NCAA tournament) and the national championship on one of the most exciting finishes in NCAA tournament history. They had prepared mentally for their "moment". If you haven't seen the finish, I highly recommend looking it up. Watch the celebrations by the players and the coach. Priceless.

I coached a swimmer about 10 years ago who was talented but lacked confidence in herself. Hanna always came to practice and worked hard. She was never afraid of any challenge I threw at her during practice and she often swam above her talent level and competed with swimmers who were older and more accomplished than she was. But as much as Hanna was great during practice, she never quite swam as well as I thought she could at her championship meets. She struggled with her confidence and didn't perform up to her potential in the big, championship meets. Nonetheless, I continued to work on her confidence. We had meetings, she was asked to do "get out swims" during practice (hit a time off the block at the end of practice and the entire group "gets out" of practice), and we also practiced championship finishes. I specifically remember Hanna's championship finish during practice prior to a big meet she was getting ready to compete in. After her championship finish, she got out of the water, looked straight at me, and saluted me. I've probably seen about 500 championship finishes over my coaching career and Hanna's was definitely unique. No one had ever saluted me before. Honestly, all I was looking for with the championship finishes was something fun to do a couple of days before the big meet.

Fast forward to Hanna's championship meet. It was a qualifier meet for the age group championship meet. It was a Thursday night and she swam in the first event of the meet, the 200 backstroke. Hanna looked confident but I honestly wasn't sure what kind of swim she would have. As always, I was confident in Hanna's training. She was physically prepared—there was no doubt in my mind about that. My only concern was her confidence. Not only was it her first swim of the meet, it was the first swim of the meet for my entire training group. First swims at championship are always important. A great swim can not only propel a swimmer but an entire group. Likewise, a bad swim can have a negative ripple effect for the swimmer and the entire practice group. In my mind, this was a big swim for the entire weekend. Hanna started her swim and looked great, splitting right at her best 100 time halfway through the race. During the second half of the race, Hanna got stronger. You could see the confidence in every stroke, turn, and breakout. Hanna touched the wall with about a :05 drop from her best time. The next part of the story is the most memorable part. I was standing between two 25 yard pools trying to watch races on both sides of the meet (I was pretty far away from Hanna). Hanna finished her race, looked at the clock, and waited for everyone to finish (she crushed everyone in her heat). Hanna got out of the pool, faced me, made direct eye contact, and saluted me.

There are many ways to prepare for a big meet, the most obvious being swimming miles upon miles daily. Dryland training and good swimming technique will also go a long way towards every swimmer's success in the pool. But one characteristic that all great swimmers possess is confidence. Confidence is something that some athletes and swimmers naturally have, but that is not the case for everyone. I've seen many swimmers like Hanna develop confidence throughout their swimming career. Hanna went on to have a very successful high school swimming career, routinely swimming fast at her championship meets. As her age group coach, it was rewarding to watch her transform herself into a big meet swimmer. Hanna learned she needed to believe in herself and have confidence. But it was more than just believing in herself. She believed in the plan laid out for her by her coaches.

I wish there was one simple formula that coaches could give to their swimmers to help build their confidence and help them swim at their peak, but there isn't. Each individual swimmer has a different set of traits that makes them unique. The challenge for all coaches is finding the correct formula for each individual athlete. This is one of the aspects of the coaching profession that I love. I love the process of putting a training plan together for a group of swimmers and individualizing it for

specific needs. I also love the process of helping swimmers gain confidence in themselves in the pool. I love helping swimmers achieve their dreams and accomplish goals they didn't know they had in them.

In conclusion, a big reason why I coach is to help swimmers each achieve their "moment". A lot goes into each swimmer achieving their "moment". Hard work in the pool, dedication to the sport, and confidence in the entire process are key traits that all successful swimmers possess. As a swim coach for high school aged athletes, championship meets are the most enjoyable (and also stressful) times in the season. Coaches want their swimmers to achieve their goals and accomplish impossible times. More than that, when a swimmer reaches their "moment" at a meet, watching their reactions is priceless. Confirmation from an athlete to a coach directly after a great race is an experience I cannot explain. It continually drives me to be the best coach I can be.