A Few Suggestions on How to be a Better Swimming Parent

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NOTA BENE

WE all want what is best for the child. That is sometimes hard for coaches to understand. That is also sometimes hard for parents to understand. Much of the historical tension between coaches and parents can be avoided if we agree on two golden rules: first, let's cut each other some slack and not jump on and over-react to the first unsubstantiated third-hand rumor that comes down the pike. And second, let's communicate, often, and not just when we may have a problem.

TEACHING VALUES

YOU are key to your child's swimming. A parent's attitude toward swimming, the program, the coach, and his child's participation, is key towards the child's attitude and success. The young swimmer takes cues from his parent. If the parent shows by word, deed, facial expression, etc., that he does not value swimming, that he doesn't appreciate having to drive to practice or sit in the stands during meets, that "it's not going to matter" if the child skips practice, that morning practices are just "optional" and that the child would be better off with the extra sleep, then the chances are very good that the child will lack commitment, have little success, then lose interest in swimming. Support your child's interest in swimming by being positively interested.

ALLOW your swimmer to be resilient. Failure, and facing that failure, doesn't cause kids to melt. Failure isn't such an evil thing that parents should try to shield their kids from it. Allow them to fail, then teach them to get up off the canvas and try harder to succeed the next time. If parents are continually sheltering their swimmers from the storm, cushioning every fall, making excuses for them, finding someone else to blame, the children never learn anything. Even worse, they never learn that they are responsible both for their failures and for their successes. Allow them to stand on their own, and you will be helping them immeasurably down the road.

MOLEHILLS really are molehills. At times I may appear unsympathetic or even harsh because I won't let kids stop for "emergencies": for leaking goggles, for kids passing them, for side-aches, for stretching, for repeated bathroom breaks, etc. Many kids think that the slightest obstacle is an overwhelming reason to stop and should be listened to and followed as the voice of God. I think not. I am trying to teach focus. When a swimmer is in the middle of a set, the only thing in life that matters or is worthy of attention is the set. Little "bothers" are to be overcome or ignored. And once a swimmer gets in the habit of overcoming these "little bothers," he finds that they aren't so overwhelmingly important after all. If we are continually stopping for "emergencies," we will never get anything done. If a study session is continually interrupted for sharpening pencils, then getting a better notepad, then getting a drink of water, then taking a little break when a favorite song comes on the radio, then answering the telephone, almost miraculously the math assignment doesn't get completed.

DON'T worry, be happy??? I don't want a swimmer doing cartwheels after an awful performance. It's okay for them to be upset about, disappointed with, even angry about having done poorly. Feeling lousy for a few minutes won't kill them, it won't forever damage their self-esteem, and if they are thinking correctly it will motivate them to try harder and do better the next time. I want to

teach them standards of good and bad performance, so that when they really do well, they will feel appropriately pleased. If they are simply showered with praise willy nilly, they never know the difference.

TEACH them to dream big – a world of infinite possibilities. If you try to temper your child's dreams, if you teach her to settle for the ordinary, you may indeed save her from many a heartache and many a failure. But you also rob her of the opportunity of achieving great things, and the opportunity to plumb her depths and realize her potential. Winning big means failing many times along the way. Each failure hurts, but these temporary setbacks create the strength for the final push. Instead of having children avoid failure by never taking risks, teach them how to think correctly about failing: risk-taking and failure are necessary for improvement, development, motivation, feedback, and long-term success.

WHAT success is. Only one swimmer can win the race. Often in the younger age groups, the winner will be the one who has bloomed early, not necessarily the swimmer with the most talent or the most potential to succeed in senior swimming. It is expected that every parent wants his child to succeed, wants his child to have a good and learning and valuable experience with swimming. Every child can succeed – only make sure you define success correctly: being the very best you can be, striving for improvement in every aspect of swimming. That leads to lasting success. And lasting enjoyment.

DON'T reward success by bribery. "Bribing" your swimmer to perform well by promising presents, money, special meals, etc. for meeting various standards is highly discouraged. While bribery may work in the short run – the swimmer may indeed swim fast this afternoon – the long term consequences are never good. You have to keep upping the ante, and you must ask yourself: why does my swimmer want to swim fast? What is really motivating him? Is this good? What is a twelve year old going to do with a new car?

FUN, fun, fun. If "fun" means mindless entertainment and sensory bombardment, then wasting hours playing Nintendo is loads of fun, and swimming is by definition "not fun." If "fun" means working hard and challenging yourself, taking pride in accomplishing difficult goals, and discovering talents you didn't know you had, then swimming is fun and Nintendo by definition is "not fun." The meaning of fun is very much an open question for children, and one where parents and coaches have much influence over their charges. Are we building a nation of energized achievers or lifeless couch potatoes?

WORK, work, work. Persistence and work ethic are the most important qualities leading to success in swimming and everything else. And if a work ethic is not created and cultivated when a swimmer is young, it very likely will never appear. It is so rare as not to be an option that a kid who is a slacker from ages seven to fourteen will suddenly change his spots and become a hard worker. Love for and pride in hard work MUST be inculcated early on, and again parents and coaches have much influence in creating this attitude.

NO little league parents. Kids sometimes make mistakes at meets. If your child is disqualified at a meet, don't complain, don't whine, don't make excuses. Your child's DQ is not a reflection of the quality of your parenting. The official is not blind, he does not have a vendetta against your child or your family or your team, and he is not incompetent. In fact, he has a much better vantage on your child's race than you do, and he is looking on dispassionately. You are sitting up in the stands where you can't see precisely, and you are paying attention to everything except the exact angle of your child's left foot as he kicks in breaststroke. If a DQ is questionable, as sometimes is the case, the

coach – and not the parent – will take the proper steps. And even then, DQ's are almost never over-turned, so don't get your hopes up.

By the by, most DQ's aren't surprises to the coach. If a swimmer rehearses an illegal turn forty thousand times in training despite a coach's remonstrances, then that illegal habit will likely show up under the stress of a race. As Joe Paterno said, "Practice good to play good."

BURNOUT is over-rated. So many times parents and kids will say, "I don't want to commit to swimming because I don't want to get burned out." But for every one case of "burnout" caused by a swimmer's spending too much time in the water and working too hard, we will see a hundred cases of "pre-emptive burnout": in order not to be burned out, the swimmer only comes to practice when she feels like it, doesn't work out very hard, skips team meets with regularity, and generally makes no commitment to the program or to the sport. Not surprisingly, the swimmer swims slow, makes little to no improvement, and sees her formerly slower competitors whiz right by her. Then we wonder why she "just can't get jazzed about swimming."

Sitting on the fence and remaining lukewarm on principle has nothing to recommend it. Discipline and commitment are good things, not things we should downplay, hide, apologize for, or (worst of all) stop demanding because it may be unpopular. If you want to enjoy swimming even more, commit more of yourself and swim fast! You do not become excited about an activity you don't do well at.

HOME and pool must dovetail. Traits of discipline, respect, high expectations, and commitment at home directly relate to the child's characteristics at practices and meets. This is yet another area where family support is crucial to the success of the swimmer. Parents should review, carefully, the Credo and other formative memos about the values the team espouses. **If the current at home is flowing in the opposite direction from the current at the pool, there will be big problems. If a family does not buy into the program, they will be very unhappy here.**

A JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES

THE patience of Job. Your swimmer's career in the program is a long haul, with many peaks and valleys. Usually, the new parent and swimmer come to the sport with little experience, so the first sign of a problem looks like the Grand Canyon, impossible to get across, and the first sign of success looks like Mount Everest – we're on top of the world. It's best not to get too worked up. You will see this again, over and over.

TAKING the long view. The training that will make an eight year old the area's fastest 25 freestyler is not the training that will benefit that swimmer most in the long run. Making decisions now that will benefit the swimmer over the long haul of a swimming career calls for prudence, and it means sacrificing some speed now for huge gains later. Now we make them beautiful in the water, now we make them fit, now we teach them to expect great things, and later we make them superfast. Our destination is not two weeks down the road, but several years.

McDONALDS v. Michelin Three-Star. The fast food mentality, the attitude that "I want it NOW!" (even if it tastes like cardboard) is anathema to what we are about. Think of the swimming program, and your swimmer's career in the program, as a fine meal in the very best French restaurant: more courses than you can count (phases and seasons), served in a very particular order (developmentally determined), each patiently savored (the cumulative effects of years' worth of daily training),

completed by dessert and coffee (Nationals). We are not in search of a quick Big Mac. We want the best, and we are willing to wait.

HOW KIDS WORK

KIDS are inconsistent. There is nothing that any coach or parent can do to change that. A ten-year old swimmer who knows better will in the pressure of a meet do a flip-turn on breaststroke. Another young swimmer will take twenty seconds off her best time in a race this week, and next week add it all back, with interest. One week it will seem that the butterfly is mastered, and the next week that we've never even been introduced to the stroke. A senior swimmer will take ten seconds off her best time one race, then an hour later add ten seconds in her next race. It's enough to make your hair turn grey. Learn to expect it and even to enjoy it.

SO you thought she was a backstroker. Age groupers change favorite or "best" strokes approximately every other day. A stroke will "click" suddenly, and then later just as suddenly un-click. There is no explanation for this phenomenon. A stroke the child hated becomes her favorite by virtue of her having done well at yesterday's meet. These are good arguments for having kids swim all four strokes in practice and meets, and for not allowing early specialization.

NO cookie-cutter swimmers. Kids learn at different rates and in different ways. One swimmer picks up the breaststroke kick in a day; it takes another swimmer a year to master the same skill. If you pay close attention, you could probably write a treatise on motor learning after watching just one practice of novice swimmers. Be careful of comparing your swimmer to others, and especially be careful of comparing your swimmer to others in her hearing. **Never never never measure the continuing success of your child by his performance against a particular competitor, who is likely to be on a completely different biological timetable from your child**. Doing so makes you either despondent or arrogant.

WHY doesn't he look like Ian Thorpe? Little kids are not strong enough or coordinated enough for their strokes to look like the senior swimmers, no matter how many drills they do or how many repeats. And parents shouldn't stress about a little thing that a swimmer struggles with for a time, such as a proper breaststroke kick. Kids seem to get these things when they are ready, and not until. We are winning the game if they steadily improve their motor control, steadily improve their aerobic conditioning, and steadily improve their attitudes. They will look like the Thorpedo soon enough.

HOW they do versus what they do. Especially at younger ages, how fast a child swims and how well he places in a meet have little significance for how that swimmer will do as a senior. Many national caliber athletes were not at all noteworthy as ten year olds. Competition times and places often tell you not about the amount of swimming talent a child has, but about how early a developer he is. **What is truly important in determining future swimming success is what happens everyday in practice: Is he developing skills and technique? Is he internalizing the attitudes of a champion? Is he gradually building an aerobic base and building for the future?** The work done is cumulative, with every practice adding a grain of sand to what will eventually become a mountain.

TIMES are the least of our worries. Many young swimmers spaz out when they swim, especially at meets when they race. But you learn technique and control best at slow speeds. Don't rush, take it slow, and get it perfect before you try to go fast. Even in meets, for the little ones I am much more interested in how they get down the pool than in how fast they do. Technique and tactics are more important than the numbers on the watch; if the technique and tactics are improving steadily, the time on the watch will improve steadily, too, and without our obsessing over it.

BUT he swam faster in practice!?!? Younger kids are routinely swimming as fast in practice as they do in meets. From one perspective, this makes no sense. Why should a swimmer do better on the last repeat of 10 x 400 on short rest, after having swum 3600 meters at descending pace, than she does when all she has to do is get up and race one rested 400? She swims faster when she's tired? Sometimes, yes. After all, in training she is well warmed up, her body has run through the spectrum and swum faster and faster, so her aerobic systems are working at full steam and her stroke rhythm is perfect and grooved, and she is energized from racing her teammates and shooting after concrete goals without the pressure she often feels in meets. Practice is much less threatening than meets.

NOT even Ted Williams batted a thousand. No one improves every time out. Don't expect best times every swim; if you do, you will frustrate yourself to death in less than a season, and you will put so much pressure on your swimmer that she will quit the sport early. You would think that if a swimmer goes to practice, works hard, and has good coaching and a good program, then constant improvement would be inevitable. Wrong. So much more goes into swimming than just swimming.

THE Rubber band effect. It would be easier for the swimmer, his parents, and his coach if improvements were made slowly and gradually, if all involved could count on hard work in practice producing corresponding improvements in competition every month. This "ideal", however, is so rare as to be nonexistent. Often improvements are made in leaps, not baby steps. Improvement happens by fits and starts, mostly because improvement results as much from psychology as from physiology. It is harder this way, because less predictable. Further, swimmers and their parents tend to become a bit discouraged during the short "plateaus" when the improvements that the child is making are not obvious; then, when the rubber band has snapped and the swimmer makes a long-awaited breakthrough, they expect the nearly vertical improvement curve to continue, which it will not do. Fortunately, because our program emphasizes aerobic training, the long plateaus common in sprint programs are rare here.

THERE is a lot more to swimming than just swimming. This will become especially apparent as the swimmer gets older, say around puberty. But even for the young kids, inconsistency is the rule. What's going on in a swimmer's head can either dovetail with the training or completely counteract the hours and hours in the pool. Again, if a swimmer has been staying up late, not allowing her body to recover from training, or if she's been forsaking her mother's nutritious meals for BigMacs, fries, and shakes, that swimmer's "hidden training" will counteract what she's been doing in the water. Again, if a swimmer is in the dumps and can't see straight after breaking up with his girlfriend, the best coach and the best program in the world will not save today's race.

TERMINAL strokes and "coachability". Often young swimmers, especially "successful" younger swimmers who are very strong for their age, have terminal strokes – i.e., strokes that are inefficient dead-ends, strokes that will not allow for much if any improvement, strokes that consist of bulling through the water and not getting much for the huge outpouring of effort and energy. For kids with terminal strokes, it is time to throw away the stopwatch, slow down, and learn to swim all over again. Often this adjustment period is characterized by slower times, which is difficult for the swimmer and for the parents. Difficult, but necessary, because this one step backwards will allow for ten steps forward soon enough.

Note that for the stroke improvement to be made, the swimmer (and parent, supporting the coach's decision) must be **coachable**: they must trust that the coach is knowledgeable and thinking of the swimmer's best interests, and they must be willing to trust that the changes that feel awful at first (because the swimmer's body is used to doing things a certain way, that way feels comfortable, and any other way is going to be resisted) will help him be a better swimmer. This coachability, this

trust, is unfortunately rare. Most kids choose not to change horses in the middle of the stream, and both the horse and rider drown. Terminal strokers are soon caught by swimmers who are smaller but more efficient.

BIGGER is better?? The subject of early and late bloomers is a sensitive one, but nonetheless very important for parents to understand. Early and late bloomers each have "virtues" and "challenges."

To begin with **early developers**. They get bigger and stronger earlier than the other kids, which means they are more likely to win their races. That early success is the virtue. However, because they can often win without having to work on their technique or train very hard, often they do not develop a solid work ethic, and often their technique is poor as they bull through the water. Note that from the child's immediate perspective, NOT working hard and NOT working on technique is a rational choice. After all, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it": what he has done has obviously been working, since he has been highly successful, so why should he listen to the coach tell him that he needs to work harder or change his stroke? He beats all the other kids who listen to the coach, work harder, and change their strokes!

So our pragmatist reaches the ages of thirteen to fifteen and suddenly the other kids whom he used to destroy in meets are catching up to him and even passing him. The size and strength advantage that he had relied on has deserted him, and he has no technique or work ethic to fall back on. He is not long for the sport: many early bloomers quit when their easy successes dry up. We avoid this future problem by not allowing the early bloomers to bask in the temporary limelight, but training them for their long run benefit, and educating them about how they should judge their own performances both in meets and in practices.

On to the **late bloomers**. They are smaller and weaker than the others, so they get crushed in swimming meets. If the coach, swimmer, and parent emphasize places and winning, then there is little chance that this late bloomer will stay in the sport. This, too, is rational: "Why should I keep swimming? I'm obviously lousy, even though I'm working my guts out and doing everything the coach asks. I'm still getting killed! Coach is a bozo and I'm just not meant to be a swimmer."

That is the obvious downside. However, if the coach and parents can help the swimmer find enough rewards from swimming, for instance improvement, meeting personal challenges, friendships, etc., to stick it out through the lean years, and if she relies on technique and hard work to overcome the temporary physical deficit, then she is in the driver's seat in a few years. It is usually the case that the late bloomers end up bigger and stronger than the others – it just takes them longer to get there. And the qualities in the water and in their heads serve them well in senior swimming.

Note well: it is <u>almost</u> impossible to tell how talented your swimmer is, or how much potential your swimmer has for swimming, by looking at 10 & Under meet results. Races will often just tell you who is bigger and stronger, and that probably won't last.

PUBERTY complicates everything. You would think that because they are getting bigger and presumably stronger, your swimmers would be getting faster. Yes, and no. Whether fair or not, in the end puberty is highly beneficial to almost all boys, but with girls can be more ambiguous. Boys lose fat and gain muscle, getting bigger and stronger; girls, too, gain in height and strength, but they also add fat deposits. With proper nutrition (that does not mean starvation diets or eating disorders) and proper training (lots and lots of aerobic work, consistently), these questionable changes can be kept to a minimum, with no long-term harmful effects.

In the short run, during puberty kids are growing, but they are growing unevenly. Arms and legs and torsos don't have the same proportions as they did last week, either of strength or length, so coordination can go haywire. Strokes may fall apart, or come and go. Also, various psychological changes are affecting swimming and everything else. Interests change and priorities are re-ordered. All these changes can cause the child's athletic performances to stagnate. It can be a highly frustrating time for all involved. Fortunately, it doesn't last long, and the swimmer emerges from a chrysalis a beautiful (and fast and strong) butterfly.

THE perils of getting older. Aging up is sometimes traumatic. Formerly very good ten year olds become mediocre 11 & 12's overnight. And often, the better they were in the younger age group, and the higher their expectations of success, the more traumatic the change is for them, because the more their "perceived competence" has suddenly nose-dived as they now race against bigger and stronger and faster competition. They are bonsais racing sequoia trees, and the standards of judgement have ratcheted up dramatically. The fastest kids are much faster than they are, to the point that they think they cannot compete, so they figure, "Why try? Working hard isn't going to get me far, anyway. I may as well wait until my 'good year.'" Often we see a tremendous jump upwards in practice intensity as swimmers approach their last meet in an age group (they want to go out with a bang), then a tremendous plummeting in that intensity as they become just one of the pack. This is in despite of the coach's discussing the matter with the swimmer.

A Special Note about Swimmers New to the NBAC Program. When they first join our program, no kids are hard workers. This sounds harsh, but it is true nonetheless. Compared with all other local swimming programs, we swim longer and harder and have much higher expectations. Swimmers have never really had to work very hard before, relatively, so they don't know what it's like. What used to be strenuous is now defined as easy swimming. Swimmers have never really had high goals before, relatively, so they don't know how to make them or how to bring them about. What used to be fast isn't any longer, and their new teammates are talking about strange things called "NRT's" and "Quad A's". It takes several months for a swimmer's body and mind to adapt to the new demands and new expectations. Often the initial shock to the system is difficult, but it is made superable by extra support and encouragement from parent and coach. And then they bloom. Many parents have remarked to me on the changes that the program has wrought in their children: we have a new child who is ready to take on the world, who is confident in his abilities, and who has new and much higher expectations of himself.

SUPPORT, NOT PRESSURE

THE Rock of Gibraltar. As they succeed then fail then succeed again, kids will ride emotional roller-coasters. One of your most important functions as a swimming parent is to provide emotional support during the tough times, of which there will be many. Let them know that they are still loved, no matter how poorly they think they swam. And don't let them get cocky when they win.

DON'T coach your kids. If the swimmer is hearing one story from his coach and another from his parent, we have one confused swimmer. A swimmer must have trust in his coach and in the program, and he will not if his parents are implicitly telling him that they know best. **If you have concerns about the coaching or the coaching advice, talk to the coach directly. If in the end you feel that you cannot support the coach or the program, your best course is to find a team whose coach you trust. <u>Your swimmer has a coach; she needs you to be a parent</u>**.

THE next Ian Thorpe?? No matter how good your swimmer seems to be as a ten year old, don't get your hopes too high. Don't <u>expect</u> an Olympian (you are allowed to <u>hope</u> for an Olympian), and

don't judge his every move (or swim) by Olympian standards. **In order to make it to the Olympics so many things over such a comparatively long time have to go right, so many decisions have to be made "correctly" (and can only be seen to be correct with hindsight), and so much plain good luck is required, that the odds are heavy against it. Further, many kids are physically talented, but few have the mental talent: the poise, drive, and persistence to develop the gifts they are given.** How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice. As psychologist Howard Gruber, who has made a life-work out of studying great achievers, has argued, the difference between the very good and the truly great isn't talent but much harder and consistent work.

IN praise of famous kids? Don't puff up a 10-year old, or we will end up with a monster on our hands. Don't get too impressed, don't praise too highly – leave room for when they get a lot better. No matter how fast a child swims, it is still a child swimming, and the level of accomplishment is very low compared to how high she will reach five or ten years from now. **Don't treat him like a superstar, because the more you treat him like a superstar, the less likely he will become one.** Pampered kids aren't tough.

Similarly, be careful not to brag about your swimmer to other parents. No one likes to hear continuous talk about someone else's kid, and if your swimmer is really good, it will be apparent to everyone without your having to tell them. Dale Carnegie said, "Talk about them, not about me." Translate this into: "Talk about their swimmer, not about mine."

EVERY Soviet victory a victory for Soviet socialist ideology? How your child swam in the 50 fly ten minutes ago is no reflection of your value as a person or as a parent. A first place ribbon does not validate your parenting techniques, or the quality of your genes. Alternately, a slow swim should not bring into question a family's commitment, financial and otherwise, to a child's swimming. Swimming is hard enough for a child without having to carry around her parents' self-esteem on her shoulders when she races. Also remember that what goes around comes around. The better you allow yourself to feel about a victory now, the worse a loss will feel next meet, or the next event.

JEKYLL and Hyde. Coaches often undergo miraculous transformations. It is always interesting to watch parents' changing attitudes and behavior towards the coach when their children are "succeeding" or "failing." When the child swims well, the coach is a good chap and everyone's happy. When the child bombs, the coach is an Untouchable who should not be looked in the eye. Sometimes this change occurs in the space of half an hour. Precious few parents treat me the same no matter how their children perform.

PROBLEMS, POTENTIAL AND KINETIC

UNEQUAL Justice for all? Sometimes parents ask, "Why don't you treat the kids equally, with one standard for all?" For the same reason that most parents don't treat their own children exactly the same: because kids have different capabilities, personalities, and motivations, and what works for one child doesn't work for all. Second, because with talent comes responsibility. When a very fast swimmer, whom the others look up to and follow, messes around in practice, he drags the whole group down with him. This will not be tolerated. Higher expectations accompanying talent should be taken as a compliment.

THE wisdom of Solomon. Coaches make many decisions. You won't agree with them all. For instance, relays. As a general rule, every parent thinks his child should be on the "A" relay. But only four swimmers can be on the relay team. The coaches will choose the four kids whom they think will do the best job today. That is not always the four with the top four "best times." Sometimes it

includes a swimmer who has been very impressive in practices, or someone who is on fire at this meet, or someone who hasn't swum the event in a meet in a while and so hasn't officially made a fast time but who has let the coaches know by practice performance and otherwise that he deserves to be in the relay. **Trust the coaches to act in what they consider the best interests of the team as a whole, and understand that this sometimes conflicts with what you see as the best interests of your child at this moment.**

MEDDLING isn't coaching. A lot of coaches, especially younger ones, will "overcoach" as a rule, especially at meets. "Overcoaches" are in the kids' faces all the time, giving them twenty thousand instructions before they race, timing them incessantly during the warm-ups of a championship meet, controlling every little thing. Many parents are impressed by this show of active coaching. However, overcoaching is destructive, at practice and at meets. At practice, swimmers need instruction -- that is agreed. But they also need to be allowed to try things, to find out what works and what doesn't, to watch other swimmers, with perhaps a few leading questions from the coach. You don't teach an infant how to walk; he watches you, he tries it, he falls, he falls again and again, and in no time he is charging around the house making mischief.

And when you get to a meet, the general rule should be, the less said the better. In a stressful environment, the more information you try to force into a kid's head at the last minute, the more likely you are to jam his circuits entirely (similar to "cramming" for an exam in school). He will head to the blocks not knowing which way is up. If a coach has been doing the job in practice, the swimmer will know how to swim his race before he gets to the meet. A couple of cues or reminders, and only a couple, and the swimmer can hop on the blocks without his mind cluttered by overcoaching.

TALK to the coach. Communicate your concerns about the program or your child's progress within it with the coach, not with your child. Never complain about a coach to a child. The last thing a ten year-old needs is to be caught in the middle between two adult authority figures. Further, when you have a problem or concern, please do not head to other parents to complain, head to the coach to discuss. There is nothing guaranteed to destroy a program faster, and to send good (even great) coaches running for the door quicker, than a group of parents sitting together every day in the stands comparing notes about the things they don't like.

SEMPER fidelis. Don't criticize the team to outsiders, don't criticize the coach to outsiders, don't criticize other parents to outsiders, don't criticize your own swimmers to outsiders, don't criticize others' swimmers to outsiders. If you can't find anything good to say, don't say anything at all.

LEAVE this campsite cleaner than you found it. Before you complain about any component of the program, ask yourself: what am I doing, positively and actively, to help the team function better?

DON'T try to be a swimming expert. With the internet rage, the amount of really bad information available at the click of a mouse is overwhelming. And not being a coach, not being immersed in the sport twenty-four hours a day, not having much historical perspective on technique and training, and generally not knowing where the website you just stumbled onto fits in the jigsaw puzzle of the sport, you are in no position to judge what you find critically.

THERE are no "age group parents" and "senior parents." There are only swimming parents. Once a portion of the team's parents begins to think of itself as having a different interest from that of the group as a whole, the team has begun to rip itself apart. The rose bud is not distinct from the rose in full flowering; they are the same things at different stages of development, with identical interests.

KEEP me in the loop. It happens quite frequently that I cannot understand why a swimmer is responding to the training as he is. It seems to make no sense, if we assume that the only variables are the ones that I am in control of in training. Why is he so tired? Why is he so inconsistent? It is easy to forget that everything happening in the swimmer's life during the twenty-one hours a day when he is away from the pool affects his swimming as much or more than the three hours of training when I am ostensibly in charge. Let me know if there are problems at home or at school that will affect your swimmer's training and racing performance. You don't need to give me all the details, but in order to coach your swimmer individually, I have to know what is happening individually.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

SWIMMING is a mystery. Most of the time only God really knows why a swimmer did so well or so poorly. Coaches can point to the easy answers, superficial indices (stroke count, stroke rate, splits, etc.), which are probably more often effects than they are causes. Who can explain why a swimmer whose workouts have been horrid and who hasn't gotten much sleep, will come alive at a meet and set the water on fire? Why a swimmer whose workouts have been wonderful and who has been doing everything right, will come to a meet and look like death warmed over? Or why a swimmer who has been a rock for years will come mentally unglued at the big meet? Sometimes hard work isn't rewarded with good performances. Sometimes lazing around and skipping practices is. This is hard for coaches, swimmers, and parents to accept. Not everything in life makes sense, and not everything in life is fair. It doesn't take a reflective coach very long to figure out that he isn't in total control here. Ponder the Greek tragedies.

A work in progress. These recommendations/suggestions may sound set in stone. But my thinking on most of these subjects is evolving, since these subjects are complicated and since kids are, too. These are topics that we should all consider as open to discussion. Being a good coach is just as difficult as being a good parent, and it involves thinking through and judging correctly about the same issues. Most parents are confused at least part of the time about whether or not they are doing the right things with their kids. And most coaches are equally uncertain about whether the methods that worked for one swimmer will work with another.

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