

Balancing Academics and Athletics - What your Coach is Really Thinking

by Braden Keith

We hear it all day and all night. ‘Swimmers are the best students,’ ‘Swimmers perform academically,’ ‘Swimmers learn time management and life balancing skills.’

As a coach, though, I fear that swimmers have heard these things *so often*, that they’ve begun presume that it’s a right. Great time management skills just come along when an athlete pays their dues to be on the swim team; that academic success begins the moment a swimmer jumps into the water. There’s somewhat of a sense of entitlement that has begun to form around these ideas, and let me tell you the truth:

This is making your coach pull his or her hair out.

When you are a young, healthy, able-bodied athlete, in *any* sport, there are very few good justifications for missing a practice, meet, game, or match. A death in the family, iced-over roads, these are excuses that are acceptable.

The reason, however, that swimming has garnered a reputation for producing the best time managers and the best student-athletes is because we don’t accept a broader range of excuses that might fly elsewhere.

As we are in the midst of final exams in the United States, it is an important time to step back and consider how you got to where you are.

The fact is that academics are a convenient excuse to miss a swim practice. Every student-athlete and every student-athlete’s parents know that all they have to do is tell a coach that “Johnny can’t go to practice, because he needs to study for finals” or “Susie can’t swim today because she needs to be well-rested for her test,” and the coach’s hands are tied. There is little a coach can say in response to the justification of academics over athletics, because in our hearts, we all know that yes: getting an A on a math exam *is in fact more important than swim practice*, and that a swimmer’s parents, frankly, don’t care what their swim coach has to say on the subject in most cases.

Here’s where student-athletes have a chance to grow

Everyone in the pool is in agreement that academics always takes priority over athletics. However, if for a young person, these two things are truly the top priorities (this is a matter of philosophy – but there’s a reason why the American educational system has chosen to integrate athletics so heavily into the school system) there are very, very few situations in which an athlete *must* choose between the two.

The questions that student-athletes need to start asking themselves are how they are *truly* using their time. If you went on a week-long family vacation over your Thanksgiving holiday, when you knew that your student was struggling with school, you have chosen that family vacation over athletic and academic success.

If you know that you’re going to be out-of-town for much of the winter break, and that you will miss a lot of practices then, and have still chosen to skip practice during finals, then you have chosen your winter break over athletic and academic success.

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If you have planned a holiday party prior to the end of the school year, and you have made your child's attendance at that event mandatory, but their attendance at practice optional, you have chosen that holiday party over your child's academic and athletic success.

Instead, we should be starting early, and teaching your athlete's strategies for dual athletic and academic success

Very rarely does anybody want to learn about time management skills before academics become a problem, and before the big-red-panic button is smashed, meaning that practice attendance goes by the wayside.

Here's the top strategies I can give to managing these things:

1. Learn what actually works - because it's probably not what you think. No, all-nighters do not work. No, coming home from school and sitting in front of your text-book does not work. No, saving all of your studying until the night before, or the morning of, a test does not work. No matter how long you've been trying these strategies, no matter what anecdotal evidence says, no matter how badly you as a parent or you as a swimmer want to enforce them, study after study after study shows that these are not the best strategies for test performances.

2. Learn from those who know - perhaps the most valuable thing that any swim coach can do, in terms of helping their teams succeed and balance, is to take a practice at the beginning of a season, and bring in a tried-and-true expert to give a seminar on study skills. Strategies like going home and studying the day you first learned something, rather than trying to do it three weeks later before the test. Strategies like taking breaks from studying (practice is a great chance for a mental break from derivatives and gerunds, especially if the coach is trying to work harmoniously and is giving credit to the fact that finals can be a stressful time for swimmers) can be a big win, and too many people assume they know the best way to study and learn without taking the time to read the literature.

3. Talk to your coaches before deciding - you will be amazed on what coaches are willing to do to keep kids in the water. Late arrival, let the swimmer get out 30 minutes early, letting a teammate who is excelling in that class get out 30 minutes early to help tutor them or help them work through a problem, coaching them on time management, helping to keep them focused. The problem is that too often, the coach isn't brought into the loop until a student is at the breaking point or in the danger zone. In the United States, athletic coaches, along with teachers, peers, and parents, are a part of a child's support system, and the fact is that because of the nature of what we do, coaches will often have a very different connection with students than any of those other groups. Coaches are able to give students a 'higher purpose' for their studying, coaches are able to connect with students on a different level, students are used to receiving constructive criticism from their coaches, and students are used to their coaches holding them to high standards. Therefore, a coach reminding a student to study and how to study can sometimes have a bigger impact than any of the other groups.

4. Understand your circumstances - Every sport has a different circumstance, and it's important to know those circumstances when planning your life. If your child's taper meet is in mid-December, then maybe your family tradition becomes grandma travels to you for Thanksgiving, and you travel to grandma for Christmas. If your high school season runs through February, make your big family vacation over spring break rather than winter break. Even different sports have different challenges and opportunities. Football players don't take Thanksgiving vacations, and so swimmers shouldn't take big vacations in the middle of their primary season.

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5. Respect your coaches, and they'll return the same - If you have enough respect to get your coach's input on your child's specific situation, then they will have the respect to be flexible and understanding about your child's practice attendance. When your coach really gets angry is when you come to them with a final decision before said coach has had any chance to proactively impact the situation. Coaches like to be in control, and often times, they are quite good at it. Give them a chance. Make it a conversation. The coach shouldn't dictate to the athlete or the parent, nor should vice versa happen, but there is usually a positive solution to a problem.

6. Hold yourself to a higher standard - as mentioned above, "school over sports" is an easy excuse to get sympathy for your decision to shirk responsibilities to athletics. Your parents will let you get away with it, your teachers will let you get away with it, and even your teammates might let you get away with it. To truly get everything out of the student-athlete experience, however, it is up to the *students* to hold themselves to a higher standard than that. It's up to the *students* to hold themselves to both their academic and athletic commitments. And it's up to the *students* to balance their lives.