Team Building and Team Spirit

The concept of team: why is this important? Many independent folks would prefer to "just do their own thing," but most of them miss out on an invaluable experience: being a part of a team and identifying with the group. Football teams and basketball teams are required to wear a common uniform and depend on each other for their group's final result in a competition. Swimming is a bit different, in that each participant performs as an individual although relays require a group effort and team scoring fosters team identity. Swimming is constantly searching for ways to bring more kids into the sport and to retain them once we get them. Recruitment and retention can be fostered through the concept of team.

Who builds the team? How is the team built?

The making of a team starts with the coach. What he or she does to make swimmers feel like a part of the group makes all the difference in the world. Not every swimmer can win the gold medal, but all can contribute positively to the team effort. Some do this through hard work, by challenging themselves and their teammates to improve. Others are great leaders, enthusiastic cheerleaders and "good sports." The more the coach can do to acknowledge and appreciate all positive contributors, the stronger they all identify with the team, even if they're not the ones scoring all the points!

Many coaches hate giving up water time for other activities, but team building is very important, even if it may occasionally cut into training time. Having meetings to discuss what makes the swimmers proud to be a part of the group is a great way to begin. Capitalize on these areas of strength and pride. Coaches should teach swimmers the history of the sport, the history of the team and how the current swimmers' contributions are making a difference for the future of the team and the sport. Understanding their involvement also gives the swimmers a greater sense of identity in the sport.

Team uniforming such as suits, caps, t-shirts, sweats, parkas, bags, towels, backpacks and even water bottles, helps build the concept of team. When the swimmers feel a part of the group, they are proud to wear the apparel. This also helps a club positively promote itself in the community. The more swimmers are out there showing off their team gear and representing themselves and the team positively, the more recognition the club gets!

Plenty of other team building activities can be found on the internet or in other published materials. Some clubs do ropes courses or other physical challenges to encourage the athletes to rely on each other and trust each other to accomplish tasks. Other clubs do "get to know you" activities, where the athletes talk about themselves, and get to know each other on a deeper level beyond, "Oh, she's a butterflier." They learn that this teammate has a great singing voice or that she wants to be an architect when she graduates from college.

How does a team build spirit/loyalty/enthusiasm?

Sometimes the coach has to lead, while other times outgoing swimmers take charge themselves. Team cheers, posters, big brothers/sisters, team parties, good luck cards and combined workouts are just a few of the ways the group works together to build team spirit. Some swimmers have to

be instructed to pay attention to how their teammates are doing, while others seem to get all of this intuitively. Some kids are the enthusiastic rah-rah types, while others are more introverted. All need to be taught the importance of a positive attitude, and what a tremendous impact it can have on other swimmers. And, the coach also needs to realize that his or her mood and attitude strongly affect the swimmers!

Loyalty comes from all of the above. When swimmers feel their participation is valued, they want to continue to participate. The stronger the team concept, the more swimmers want to remain a part of it. Coaches must teach the swimmers to be ambassadors for the sport and role models to the younger swimmers. "Giving back" is a concept that is somewhat lost in today's society. Our attitude has become "what can swimming do for me?" rather than, "What can I do for swimming?" (Thank you, JFK!) When a high school aged swimmer realizes how much the younger swimmers want to be like him or her, and starts to mentor the younger ones, it's a beautiful thing to watch. Whether by talking to the younger swimmers before races, or working with them on starts and turns at a practice, the older swimmer learns the value of giving back. The younger one, in turn, aspires to grow up to do the same, and the cycle continues.

Team spirit: the most successful programs have it. But it didn't just happen by itself. Someone worked hard for it, developed it and passed it along. Why not give it a try in our program?