

## From Age Group to Elite

By Jim Rusnak, Splash Magazine Managing Editor

For whatever reason, some clubs just have a knack for developing talent. They'll take kids who walk through their doors as age groupers, and a few years down the line have them standing atop the medals podium at Nationals, or donning the red, white and blue as members of Team USA.

Other clubs are left scratching their heads, wondering how they do it year after year. But it's no magic trick. The top clubs' ability to produce elite-level swimmers on a consistent basis is a result of a number of factors, including a solid coaching philosophy, patience and a little bit of luck.

Here's a look at why some of these clubs have been so successful, courtesy of the coaches from Dynamo Swim Club in Atlanta, Seacoast Swimming Association in New Hampshire, Desert Thunder Aquatics Club in Phoenix and the Kansas City Blazers.

### Build the Foundation

Believe it or not, Jenny Thompson's club coach, Mike Parratto of Seacoast, is not looking for the next Jenny Thompson when his age groupers jump in the pool for the first time. In fact, neither are any of the other coaches interviewed.

All of them, without exception, stress that the first few years should be spent educating age groupers, teaching them proper technique and fostering an environment in which they can have fun and learn to love the sport.

"I don't think the goal is to make them elite swimmers right away," said Alex Braunfeld, head coach of Dynamo's Alpharetta facility. "The goal is for them to have fun, have a good experience and work through the program. We just want them to have a good experience and learn the strokes, and hopefully they're still around when they're senior swimmers, and their techniques are good."

Enough can't be said about technique at this stage of the game, as it lays the foundation for more serious training down the line.

"We emphasize how to swim and then let them progress at whatever their own pace is going to be," said Stephen Schaffer, who, as head coach of Desert Thunder, now works extensively with the club's age group program. "As they master the skills, then we can start moving them forward into more training and pursue whatever level of success they want to pursue."

### Seek their Development

From there, clubs should have a long-term training plan in place designed to accommodate their swimmers' needs as their skills progress, and each club should have an established order of progression its swimmers follow as they advance from level to level.

At Seacoast, for example, there's a pre-competitive level, a competitive age group level, a junior level and a senior level. The other clubs offer similar programs.

Generally, the intensity of training increases at each level, as does the time commitment in terms of both frequency and length of practices.

But none of these clubs rush their swimmers' development. Each of their athletes must have mastered the previous level before moving on to the next.

"We want to design the program for the long run, so that they're able to be their best at high school age and college age," Paratto said. "We're not interested in having the best 10-and-under. If they're that talented, we're not going to hold them back, but we're still working on drills and skills and things like that. We're very interested in having fast swimmers at the high school age and college age, and we want ensure that by making sure it's done in progression."

Like Paratto, most of the coaches say they start training their swimmers at the senior level around the age of 13 or 14, maybe a little earlier for some girls.

"That's the breaking point where they decide whether swimming's going to be an activity, or whether swimming's going to be a sport," said Pete Malone, head coach of the Kansas City Blazers. "From that age, we try to identify those who want to pursue that level, but we never eliminate those who don't. Then we try to tailor their training and put them into an environment that is more conducive to their development."

#### No Pressure

There does come a time when these coaches identify certain outstanding swimmers as being on the elite track, but a swimmer's success in the 10-and-under age group rarely has anything to do with it.

Ed Spencer of Dynamo says he's generally looking for a senior swimmer with natural talent, leadership abilities, a strong work ethic and a real desire to compete. But there's more.

"I think there's a simple indication, where maybe they score at Nationals, that opens your eyes and gets you thinking that maybe this swimmer has something special," Spencer said. "But if you're too premature, it puts pressure on a kid that's almost overwhelming.

"I want to hear something and see something back from the kid that says, 'I really want to be here,' before I open my mouth and say, 'You're really going to be good.'" Also, coaches want to be cautious of dismissing late bloomers.

"It's really difficult to look at a kid and say, 'That's an elite swimmer,'" said coach Ray Grant of the Seekonk Dolphins in Seekonk, Mass. Grant recently worked with Parratto at a combined team training camp at the Olympic Training Complex in Colorado Springs. "You don't really know what that kid is going to do two or three years down the road. You might miss a golden opportunity with that individual."

#### Communicate

Coaches should communicate their expectations to the athletes and their parents at every step of the athlete's development. This is especially true once they've identified an athlete as being on the elite-level track.

"We need to get everybody on the same page," Schaffer said. "If the parents aren't willing to commit to getting them to the pool for the practice involved, or if they're not willing to commit to the level of competition and travel involved, then we need to know that. I'm not about telling people what they have to do. We're big on choice." Communication among the coaching staff concerning the swimmers' development is also imperative. All the coaches say having a solid, cohesive coaching staff has been the key in their programs' success over the years.

"I've had a very consistent coaching staff," Schaffer said. "Everybody knows what their role is, and everybody's on the same page, working in the same direction. We have a great group of people who communicate and do nothing but work towards helping the swimmers get better."

#### Have Patience

Elite swimmers are not going to develop overnight. The best thing for coaches to do is to stick to their philosophy and never rush a swimmer's long-term development in favor of short-term success at the age group level.

"Coaches need to avoid their personal ego and wait until the kids are developed," Malone said. "I've coached this way since I began, and maybe that's why I've had this success.

"I've always stuck to my philosophy, and I believe our success has come from the philosophy we've practiced over the years. That's how we've made a name for ourselves."

And try to keep it in perspective.

"Not everybody's in it for the same reason," Braunsfeld said. "Some people just want to be good high school swimmers, some people want to be elite swimmers, and

some people just want to be an "A" swimmer – it's all relative. I feel that everybody needs to work hard and be equally committed, whether they want to make their first "A" time or their first Olympic team.

"We try to create an environment, an atmosphere that anybody can be successful in and go as far as they can in swimming. That might just mean preparing them for college or something like that, but we try to develop them and get them as ready as anybody for the next step, whatever that may be."