

Lessons from a Son

JOHN LEONARD

Editors Note: The following two brief articles were written by my son, Jackson Woolger Leonard. I am taking "Dad's Pride" in their content. The first served as his college acceptance essay. I have edited both slightly to remove recognizable names who may not wish to appear here. The point that is being made in the first is one that all coaches are familiar with, but that is very hard to teach to young athletes....."the day after the big meet, it's easy to say "I'll be there next year." Everyone makes those vows. But the point of critical decision is the ability to persist WITHOUT saying "I'll work hard enough EXCEPT for this one Friday night i will miss for the party." There is no one "except" that works. As a dad and a coach, I am thrilled to see that Jackson learned this lesson and wants to pass it on.

In part two, Jackson notes that year after year consistency is what makes a champion.....and makes the difference between the champion (in this case, Mr. Phelps) and the ordinary swimmer. Two great lessons. Feel free to use these with your own athletes. As for Jackson, he'll be a freshman at Florida this summer, and I believe he will provide that "persistence without exception" in his efforts with Coach Troy.... *All the Best, John Leonard*

Persist Without Exception

BY JACKSON W. LEONARD

A common essay prompt I have seen for many years is "Explain a single pivotal moment in your life and its impact". After consideration, I have decided that prompt is a poor one. In my life, I have found that often a single moment does not alter one's life but one's actions and mental determination over an extended period of time are what really direct the course of one's life. This can be seen in my pursuit of a state championship in the sport of swimming and the training I have pursued throughout the 2008 summer.

I have spent four years swimming year-round for a club team and because of the demands of the sport, my life has begun to revolve around the pool. A swimmer's life is demanding and difficult. While swimmers work together in the pool during workouts, it is in actuality a solitary sport which demands mental strength and extreme physical prowess. Swimmers are a different breed of human, as waking up at 4:45 AM four days a week to swim in an eighty degree pool for two hours is not normal behavior. Two practices a day become a routine physical demand as swimmers progress in their abilities, while forgoing social activities due to practices and swim meets become the price of achieving one's goals. I have made it my mantra to work hard no matter the pain or the cost. Yet it is incorrect to say that I "sacrifice" my time as an athlete to swim and to practice daily, because it is actually a privilege. The ability to train everyday and push my body to its limit in order to swim quickly is a privilege that few have, and to call that activity a "sacrifice" is incorrect.

At the same time, there is a difference between those swimmers who

try and those who try harder. It became my obsession to be known by all who watched me as a swimmer who tried harder than anyone else. After placing 13th in the 2007 State meet, I resolved to make sure absolutely nothing stood in my way of placing in the top three in my final high school swimming season in 2008. My mind was set and no force in heaven or on Earth was going to break my will to succeed. I spent countless hours in the weight room alone lifting and working out until exhaustion. Countless hours were spent with no one there to congratulate me on my efforts or look on in admiration; only my desire to succeed stood with me during those hours. Morning practices became necessary, while extra dry land physical exercises also became increasingly important. My resolve and determination was exceeded by none of my teammates, as was my exhaustion.

As the school year ended and summer began, I became aware it was going to take even more to achieve my goals. I have spent the summer living with my father in another city 80 miles from my mother and my friends. My father is a legendary swim coach and has trained countless age group swimmers and several nationally ranked athletes. His workouts are known to be extremely strenuous and painful, yet they are what create champions. My days with my dad consist of the same routine. A 4:45 AM wake up, a two hour workout, several hours spent teaching children how to swim, a nap, dry land exercises, and another three hour workout. I thought before the summer that I knew what exhaustion was; I was wrong. I have now spent nine and a half weeks training to the absolute limit of my physical ability.

There have been nights I have not been able to get up from the dinner table to go to bed because my entire body was wrought with pain. Every morning begins with a groan of desperation and hatred for the cold pool I know I will have to get in within minutes. I fear the different types of workout sets I will have to perform in the pool everyday, as if they are torture instruments. And every night I fall asleep in complete fear and panic due to the possibility of failure. The possibility that I will not achieve my goal after the pain I have endured is the scariest concept I have ever known. It is only once every two weeks or so that I am reassured that I will achieve my goals no matter what stands in my way. It is after a great practice and after swimming with strength and confidence that I am bolstered by my father's words of encouragement. Knowing he believes in my abilities and determination only fuels me for another week of horrible, yet strengthening training.

It has been through these tough weeks that I have been hardened to perform at the necessary level to achieve the title of state champion. I have also learned the lesson that anything worth having is worth working for. I have additionally learned that it is the accumulation of my actions this summer and the months spent working hard before the summer that I am now able to attempt to complete what I originally set out to achieve. It is through my hard work that I have grown to understand that we are not handed anything in this life without a price and there are no free lunches, breakfasts or dinners. The only way to accomplish any feat in life is to persist without exception.

Part Two – Written several months later....

After reading more than half of Michael Phelps' "No Limits; The Will to Succeed," I have had several thoughts about his ideas. The most vibrant and striking thought I had though, only continues the idea of persisting without exception..only I feel like the concept of consistency needs to be added.

After 18 years, I still, sadly, cannot accurately describe what it is you do as executive director of ASCA. The

running joke is that you "feed the fish," but I guess the picture I create in my head of your job is that you are a teacher, of sorts, and you offer lessons to swimmers and coaches alike through writing..i.e., ASCA newsletters and pamphlets (which I have had the pleasure of becoming thoroughly familiar with while stuffing envelopes during the summer months). And after having my college essay's title "persist without exception" briefly mentioned in a newsletter, while I never intended anyone to really think about what I said, I couldn't help but finish that thought after reading Phelps's accounts.

In the first several chapters, Phelps alludes to the efforts he exerted to become the world class swimmer he is today. He gives exact details of certain sets he had to perform. He gives accounts of hardships faced with Coach Bowman. He explains the difficulty of getting started. The difficulty of continuing to work, AT ALL COSTS (mental and physical) during the tougher months of training. He relays the physical pain felt in the weight room, and the mental anguish of losing races. He explains his mental drive to succeed, regardless of the situation. He explains his determination to overcome obstacles. He simply refuses to be kept down. And then I realized something startling on my way to swim practice...I was absolutely, 100%, irrefutably IDENTICAL to the greatest Olympian in the History of the Olympic Games. I have never relished losing, to anyone, at any point in time. I have always been a competitor. I have learned to overcome all obstacles to accomplished a planned goal. After I decided Junior year to become an All American 200 freestyler, I was not ONCE outworked or out muscled or beat mentally in the subsequent months. I learned, just as Mr. Phelps did, to act like a "rhino" (as Mr. Edson once put it...A rhino does not deviate from a set path when charging full speed.)

So the question that remained in my mind that practice was simple....

What separates me, an 18 year old senior freestyler (who missed the All American CONSIDERATION cut by 19 one-hundredths of a second) from the Greatest Olympian of all time?

My answer was consistency. While the sets that Mr. Phelps repeated did not sound difficult (I, in fact, thought that I could remember sets that we did that were MUCH harder), it was the simple fact that for YEARS Michael has put forth the maximum effort. Looking back, I think to myself, "Well, if I had narrowed my life down to swimming and school and trained like a madman under the tutelage of a coach like Mr. Bowman, I would be an Olympian, too." WELL, DUH!! The problem is..very few are willing to commit to that type of consistency. All it comes down to is consistency. The phrase 'persist without exception' can be narrowed down to what should become the single most important word to any true athlete aiming at achieving anything: consistency.

I can't help but wish that I had learned earlier the importance of consistency. After having that thought, I strongly believe this is a point that all coaches should make at least once, twice, or a few hundred times to their athletes, regardless of the sport. And if anything should be transcribed into the ASCA newsletters to help up and coming swimmers, it should be the importance of consistency because it is consistency that produces results.

I distinctly remember when you told me that "swimmer X" had the capability to become an Olympic swimmer, yet she then broke that stride and disappeared for a long time. Again, I am told that "swimmer Y" will be ranked among the nation's top distance swimmers for her age group and can't help but wonder what amazing results may come from her one day..and I hope you can pass on my sincere hopes to her that she WILL PERSIST WITHOUT EXCEPTION AND TRAIN WITH THE UTMOST OF CONSISTENCY. Maybe with your more eloquent form of writing and ability to publish ideas of this sort, you can pass on some more ideas along these lines. I really think this is something everyone who wants to achieve anything needs to hear.

Love you,
Jackson.