The Fun of Hard Work

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Swimming isn't the easiest sport. No one gets into swimming because they want a vacation. It's not golf. There are no leisurely afternoons sitting around waiting for your chance to participate. Though it may not seem like it, swimming can seem as intense as the Kentucky Derby or as NASCAR: You hit the water at 60mph, the clock never stops ticking, and if your arms and legs aren't churning through the water as quickly as they can, you lose.

In other words: Swimming can be hard work. It's early mornings, it's long practices, and it's utterly exhausting. Swim an hour for one day then bike ride for an hour the next. Then, tell me which activity leaves you feeling like you've been body-whacked by a piano. (*I often finish a "swim practice" -- which is, sadly, me simply swimming through my old college warm-up -- and I get home and stare at the ceiling while my shoulders and body throbs*.)

But swimming is also incredibly fun. Sure, "fun" seems a bit distorted when you're in the depths of winter training, two-a-day practices and 400 IM repeat sets. But, as I've learned getting older, "fun" has different definitions as you age. Like any game or activity, your definition of fun changes as you get older. It doesn't mean it's less fun – it just means your definition of what is fun changes.

When you're just starting off in swimming -- when you're at the age when your nose has boogers and you actually consider eating them -- it's all about the cannonballs, the pool games, the underwater torpedo throws, and pretending you're a fish. I used to teach kids how to swim. If you ever want to witness the purest definition of fun, watch a kid morph from being terrified of water into absolutely enthralled by the water, all within one practice. The smiles on the faces of a small child as he discovers the weightless joy of swimming is "fun" in its purest sense.

As you get a bit older, "fun" transitions from an experience into a social definition. When you join a swim team, you meet friends. You suddenly have "teammates." You link up with the same people in the same lane each afternoon – kids you may not go to the same school with, but who quickly become your allies and cohorts in practice. You bond with them. You joke around with them. You swim alongside them, and you do belly flop contests with them.

Getting older still, "fun" becomes more meaningful. You get into competition. You travel to away meets with these same friends you've built long-lasting friendships with. Your teammates become something more: They become your best friends, part of your family, friends whom you share secrets with after practice, you talk about

your stresses with, whom share your dreams and goals and mischief. You also analyze your performances more. It means more. You're at the age when you're determining where your passions rest, and you begin to devote more of your precious time to fewer and fewer activities. Still, the process is fun.

Then you begin to get serious about swimming, and fun takes on an entire new definition. You begin to learn the fun of hard work. You drop time. Ever heard that cliché – *"He's dropping time like an age grouper!"* When you work hard, swim in a race, finish, and glance up at the scoreboard, nothing can replace that feeling seeing a shocking swimming time, a time you never imagined you'd swim. It quickly becomes, in your mind, a clear indication that your recent hard work has paid off. You're learning. You're growing. And your time may as well mean that you're an entirely different athlete, a different person. More than hitting a 3-pointer or tackling someone, when you finish a 200 freestyle and drop 7 seconds off your time, your jaw drops. That's how I remember feeling – I'd see a new, lower time and think, *"Wow, I'm totally different!"*

That is fun.

When you share these experiences with your friends and teammates -- the people you've grown up with and shared lanes with and learned flip turns with and played never-ending relay games with -- this idea of "fun" begins to transition from one of games and goofing around into a more mature idea of fun. An idea of fun that also embraces hard work. Because – more meaningful than a game of Monopoly or charades or video games – when you drop time, and you grow and learn about yourself and then learn that hard work really does pay off, I'd argue that process is *more fun*.

Learning that hard work can be fun is a unique maturation process that takes place as soon as you join a swim team … the best way to introduce kids to the sport of swimming is to make it fun. Teach them about the water, and let them enjoy it. Let it be fun, because it can be, and is.

Swimming, over time, teaches kids that "*hard work is fun.*" Dropping time is fun. Seeing definitive improvement is fun. That end-of-the-race moment of spinning around and seeing a new lower time in your 200IM, and those first few minutes after you get out of the pool and you think you're invincible, that you can do anything, that all it takes is some elbow grease, early mornings, and hard work? That's fun, too.

Swimming is a tightrope that constantly balances between fun and hard work. You want to work hard, and you want it to be fun. You want it to be fun, and you want to work hard. But oftentimes, these two notions aren't different.

Flying in the water like a superhero, and working as hard as you can to win a race. When doing it right, you're actually doing both.