

## **Practicing Excellence by MICHAEL BROOKS, Coach, Brophy East Swim Team (Arizona)**

Every single practice presents swimmers with thousands and thousands of opportunities to get better. And most of the problems that swimmers encounter at swimming meets can be solved at daily practice. At practice swimmers build the physical and psychological capacities, and create the mental and physical habits that they will show off when they race. Very simply, consistently coming to practice is essential for your continued development, progress, and motivation as a swimmer. You don't get better when you aren't there and you don't stay motivated when you aren't getting better.

While I have been impressed with the improvements we have made over the last couple of months, both in fitness and technique, certain things make me uneasy. Part of a coach's job is looking to the future and trying to prevent problems down the road. And lately I have become concerned that there may soon be several train wrecks as swimmers' stated goals run smack into their practice commitment levels.

### **Parts of a puzzle**

A swimming practice doesn't stand alone. It is one small part of an interlocking puzzle, with each piece dependent on the others. What we do this Tuesday is related to what we did on Monday and what we will do on Wednesday. Further, the particular physical adaptations our bodies make because of today's practice, and the size of those adaptations, depend on what we did yesterday and what we will do tomorrow. And this week's training block is dependent on last week's and next week's. In a good and well-designed training program, every part is determined by and is dependent on its relation to every other part. Daily attendance at practice is crucial: you cannot expect that the puzzle and its picture are going to be complete, perfect, and beautiful, if you are missing pieces here and there. Your training program lacks integrity—wholeness and harmony between the parts.

### **Accumulation: Little things add up**

Swimming practices are cumulative. The most important training adaptations are those made over the long term—not quickly after a day or two, but slowly after months and months of consistent training. Each day that you practice well you are adding a pebble to your pile, and after several seasons you have a small mountain. If one day you add a pebble and the next you skip practice and take one away, at the end of several seasons you have...not much.

### **Pleasure and fun**

The more you come to practice, the better you feel in the water and the more skills, both neuromuscular and physiological, that you develop, the more you will improve, the better will be your results, and the more fun swimming will be for you. Ask any kid about his favorite classes in school and why; as a rationale, just about every single kid will answer, "it's fun because I'm good at it, it's easy for me..."

## **One for all and all for one**

Successful swimming is all about setting and trying to reach a myriad of goals large and small, short term and long term. *You* should not be able to meet the high goals you have set for yourself without consistent practicing. *The team* will not be able to meet the high goals it has set for itself without your consistent, daily contribution. *Your teammates*, as individuals, cannot meet their individual goals without you at practice pushing them to excel. We need our teammates to push us to work harder and to swim better and faster. You should all be important parts of this body—a body cannot function properly if its spleen decides not to be a part of things today.

## **Improving absolutely and relatively**

Those swimmers who come to practice and do the program will likely maintain a fairly steady and quick rate of progress, which you are not likely to match if you aren't here, so you will be sliding backwards relative to the group: kids whom you used to beat are now beating you; you aren't able to do the intervals at practice that the other kids are; you are staying put while the others are being promoted to higher groups; you are staying home while others are leaving for championship meets that you don't qualify for etc. I have found from a number of years of watching kids in this situation, that it is VERY hard to stay excited or motivated when you are sliding off the back end of a group that is striding forward.

## **Progressing through the groups**

Lately a number of swimmers and parents have raised the "move-up" issue: if and when a swimmer will be moved from one training group to a higher one. Training group move-ups will of course consider if you can train at the level of the higher group; but it will also consider if your commitment level is at the level of the higher group. For instance, if the group above you is expected to practice eight times a week and you are only training four or five because of outside commitments or other life matters, then you will probably be staying put, even if you could make the training sets. The BEST training progression demands not only that swimmers train faster and more as they progress from group to group, but also that they become more and more committed to their swimming as they progress.

## **Critical periods and the big picture of developmental training**

The BEST training program is developmentally planned: it is designed to take advantage of physiological "critical periods" when swimmers' bodies are especially adaptable. For instance, the 10 & under years are critical for developing good technique, for developing coordination and rhythm, and for beginning to build an aerobic base. [Note: watching masters swimmers or triathletes train, one can instantly spot those athletes who swam when they were young and those who didn't.]

The years from 11 to 14, which roughly coincide with our Red and Blue training groups, are crucial for continuing the neuromuscular control improvements from the earlier years, but most importantly for increasing the athlete's aerobic capacities. The growth in heart and lung size—

cardiovascular capacity—that can occur with the right kind, intensity, and consistency of training is staggering. It is really these years—for girls from 11 to 13, and for boys from 13 to 15—when kids are determining by their training what level of athletes they will be later: these training years provide a technical and physiological foundation for future senior swimming. The foundation that you build will either bless you or haunt you from then on.

This biological "timetable" can be somewhat problematical, since sometimes biology outpaces psychology. When swimmers are younger they might not care that much about being fast, for whatever reasons. Many kids don't get the bug until later: as juniors and seniors in high school, they suddenly become motivated by the idea of making All-American, or qualifying for Nationals, or getting a college scholarship. But the training foundation they built for themselves during the crucial developmental years, when they weren't so psyched about working hard or coming to practice or working on their technique, is not deep or wide or stable enough to support those high performances that they are shooting for now.

This is very much like the process of building a house. The bigger and taller the house, the more stable the foundation must be. You cannot build a mansion on sand. The gist here is simple and clear: what kids do and how they do it when they are young matters A LOT—it raises or lowers their ceiling for performance when they are seniors. The thing you see them doing at seventeen were slowly created from ages ten to fourteen. Our White, Red, and Blue group swimmers are busily building the training foundation for their performances as seniors in high school or as collegians. How wide and how deep is the foundation you are building for yourself?

### **Choices matter**

Americans are wedded to the idea of the "do over": that you can always get another chance, that your previous choices can be made to have no consequences. A wonderful example of how our choices matter is Michael Jordan's aborted attempt to play professional baseball after his first retirement from basketball. Here was a consummate athlete—maybe the best athlete ever to play basketball—who was an astonishingly hard worker and highly motivated, yet who fell flat on his face trying to hit major league curve-balls.

Jordan had made millions of good choices for basketball and had developed the right skills to dominate on the basketball court, but his choices were not such as to develop his baseball skills, no matter how much he wanted to be a great baseball player later. He had simply missed too many of the steps along the way, too many of the prerequisites during his developmental years. He had trained his body to be a great basketball player, not a great baseball player—it didn't matter how much he wanted it.

Your choices catch up with you; they not only form who you are, but they also determine what you can become. Your current choices in the pool are determining what you can be and what you can't, and on what level you will practice your swimming craft in the future.