



The World Swimming Coaches Association

Tuesday, November 16, 2021

**CHARACTER AS THE DRIVER
OF CULTURE AND SUCCESS**

Don Heidary
don@orindaaquatics.org

“Character is the only secure foundation of the state.” Lyndon Johnson

The Ultimate “Art” Behind the Science



Developing Leaders



In sports and in society
50 collegiate team captains

Empowering Cultures



"To say that your fate is not tied to my fate is like saying your end of the boat is sinking." Hugh Downs

Changing Lives

"Come to the edge." "We can't. We're afraid."
"Come to the edge." "We can't. We will fall!"
"Come to the edge." And they came.
And he pushed them ...



And they flew.

Guillaume Apollinaire



**“Prepare the
child
for the path,
not the path
for the child.”**

Unknown

“Integrity has no need of rules.”

Albert Camus

Integrity-based vs. rules-based
Innate or contemplated

“There are too many people who think that the only thing that's right is to get by, and the only thing that's wrong is to get caught.” ~J.C. Watts



**“Don't try to be different. Just be good.
To be good is different enough.” Arthur Freed**

Background

Growing up - exploring/near obsession

Life commitment to coach

Saw sports as life's greatest learning ground

Life mission to work with youth in a moral/ethical backdrop

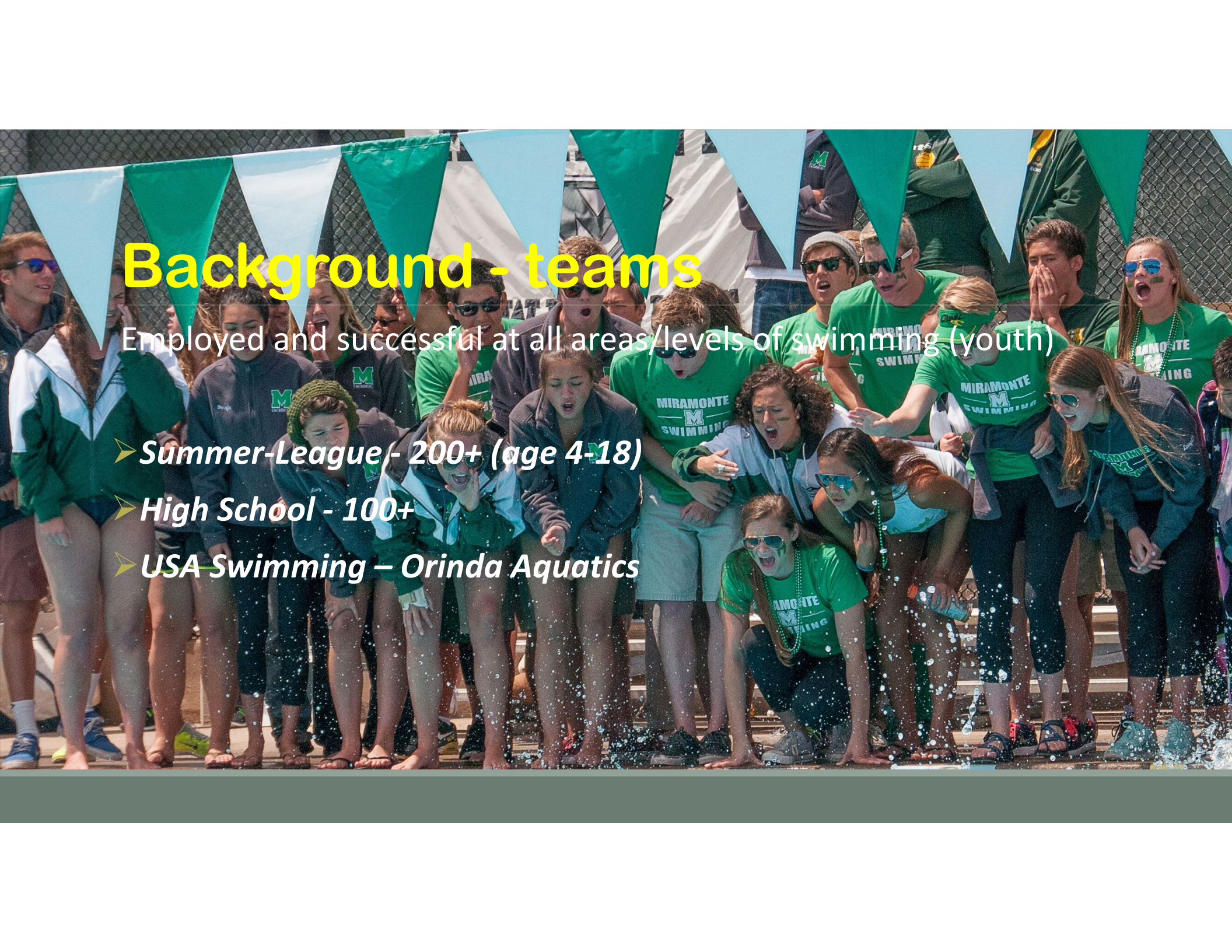
To change the moral and ethical trajectory of athletes (and teams)

The art of teambuilding/culture-building

The strong desire to be competitive (the best)

Ran "Character Camp" for 10-14 year-olds in Lamorinda





Background - teams

Employed and successful at all areas/levels of swimming (youth)

- *Summer-League/- 200+ (age 4-18)*
- *High School - 100+*
- *USA Swimming – Orinda Aquatics*

Character Recognition/Contribution

A six hour “Life Skills” presentations

A 385-page guidebook for ASCA (donated) on character development

Several articles on character development, culture, leadership, club development

Lectures at numerous World Clinics and internationally, as well as Leadership Conferences

ASCA Lecture on “The Art of Team Travel”

Orinda Aquatics is widely regarded as a model for character in swimming/youth sports

Don/Ron advise and support clubs and coaches on culture/structure

USA Swimming included OA as the character/culture example

Article – Questions Parents Don’t Ask, ASCA Newsletter, articulates this very foundation

Positive Coaching Alliance – Double Goal Award

The American Swimming Coaches Association

*Developing High-Character Athletes
and High-Character Teams*



***"Character is the basis of happiness and
happiness the sanction of character."***

Santayana

*Donated to ASCA
Purchased/utilized by many coaches at all levels*

**Don & Ron Heidary
Orinda Aquatics**

ORINDA AQUATICS

The American Swimming Coaches Association
World Clinic, Cleveland, Ohio 2015

The Cultural Headwind



“Stay ahead of the culture by creating the culture.” unknown



Don Heidary
Orinda Aquatics



ORINDA AQUATICS

Questions Parents Don't Ask

ASCA **NEWSLETTER**

AMERICAN SWIMMING COACHES ASSOCIATION

2014 EDITION | ISSUE 4



**QUESTIONS
THE PARENTS
DON'T
ASK**
(The Coach)

Coach Don Heldary

In This Issue:

Why You Go to the Top Meet / 08

Impossible is Nothing / 11

Thoughts for the New(er) Coach / 14

Going Cold Turkey on Sugar / 26

Lessons from Legends / 28

I was having dinner one night a while back, and at the table next to me I overheard two mothers talking about their children and the local swim team their kids were competing on. The conversation went on about all of the usual topics that surface with regards to kids and sports. You know them well: which group their children are in, how much they enjoy it, their times, their goals, who their main competition is, team activities, what their coach is like, etc. Most of these considerations are centered on the general contentment/happiness of the child, on the program "working" for them, on how they feel about things, and on their potential for success. I contemplated leaning over and saying something like, "you know, regardless of your child's ability, place, or even the satisfaction they derive from the program, if they can fully embrace work ethic, perseverance, and unconditional team commitment, it can become a life-

transforming process." Realizing that might be a little overwhelming for the moment (pizza), I instead continued with my dinner, but did wonder what their kids really would get out of this sport and more importantly, what role these parents would play in either supporting or hindering their child's personal growth and development, and even their athletic potential.

At our last team's parent meeting, I decided I would pose some of the questions that parents don't ask, but are in essence the ones that really matter. In addition to the things a parent needs to know (schedules, group structures, athlete expectations, team objectives, etc.), I talked about the things they should know, the things that may very well shape and define their children's lives, not attendance (showing up) but real work ethic, not group guidelines but unconditional team commitment, not time standards but developing extraordinary

leadership skills and becoming a true role model in sports and in life. In thirty-five years, no parent has ever asked me to evaluate these things with regard to their child.

It really is staggering to think that a parent will spend thousands of dollars and mold their daily schedules (lives) around practice sessions and competition, and know virtually nothing about what lies beneath the surface, so to speak, of the athletic process. Given the magnitude of the commitment made by both the athletes and the parents (hours committed, miles driven, the effort, sacrifices, opportunity costs, and financial commitment), wouldn't we all hope and expect there will be some deeply engrained, lasting benefit; something we can actually take with us? And the true long-term benefit will not be the time achieved. While it may be a marker, for most, it will not change the way one lives their life, or the quality of it.

Orinda Aquatics – 150 swimmers

One hundred teenagers
(Senior Group)

Extraordinary
environment – virtually
no discipline problems –
great relationships

No bad language,
respect, integrity, ego
issues

Incredible work ethic
and embraced approach
to effort and discipline

Virtually no parent
problems

Travel with 80+
teenagers – no
chaperones, bed checks,
no issues (see ASCA
World Clinic)

GPA for the entire group
is ~4.0; 9 Scholastic All
Americans was 4th in the
Western Zone

50 collegiate team
captains

Athletes will run
workout on own (at a
high level)

Self-run dryland and
workout (without a
coach)

No burnout/attrition

All know “dual
mandate”

Success



Won Junior Nationals (West) with 75 swimmers

Won Sectionals, Western Zone Senior Championships, Far Westerns, second at summer Juniors

Twelve swimmers at 2008 Olympic Trials – 27 in total

Multiple Silver Medal club

Average 10-15 Junior national swimmers/year

Has been top (or two) scoring team under 200 swimmers in USA Swimming Virtual Club Championships

80% of graduates go on to compete in college (all want to)

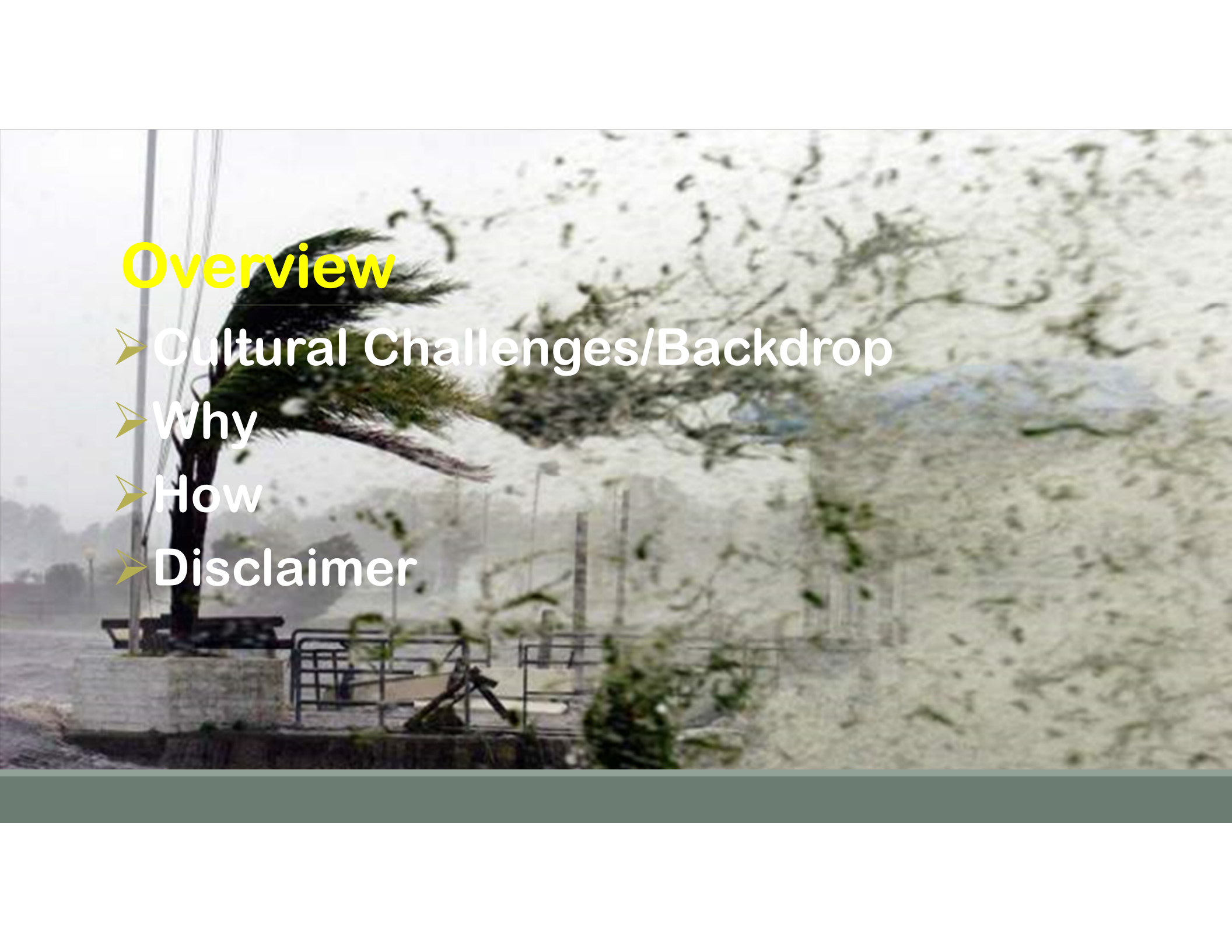
Current or committed college swimmers at: Texas, Cal (2), Harvard (2), Princeton, Brown, MIT, Vanderbilt



Success -

Is contestant because culture is constant –
With absolute expectation of behavior and purpose



A photograph of a tropical storm or hurricane. In the foreground, a palm tree is bent over by the strong wind. In the background, a city skyline is visible through the rain and wind. The sky is dark and cloudy.

Overview

- Cultural Challenges/Backdrop
- Why
- How
- Disclaimer

**Developing athletes
against a societal
backdrop that
challenges the very
core of our sport...**



and the essence of human development



Train children in
THE RIGHT WAY,
and when old, they
WILL NOT STRAY.

Proverbs 22:6, NRSV

(Concurrent) Challenges/Pressures



Drugs
Alcohol
Vaping
Bullying
Cheating
Lying
Language
Social Media
Peer Pressure
Self worth/Sense of self
Apathy
Work ethic



Challenge the (societal) Status Quo

Key to understand...

Where in our culture do we celebrate character and humility? We would argue that society is anything but character based.

How does one become humble, self-confident, positive, and selfless when marketing tells us that we are not good enough and society tells us success is the only measure of achievement? **It is either self-doubt (marketing) or EGO (winning to be fulfilled), and neither support a healthy athlete or team.**

Why are so many teens depressed? Were they at 6, 8, or 10?

The Future

Our children and our culture will always be under assault from forces that have absolutely no interest in our kids' emotional well-being, personal growth, or human potential, let alone athletic development.



Who can/will draw an integrity line in the sand?



“98% of teenagers lie to their parents.” ... why?

“Old” Masters (are out)

(not a religious statement)

Dalai Lama – insight

Confucius – truth

Jesus – forgiveness

Gandhi – tolerance

Lao Tzu – Leadership

Buddha – suffering

Mohammed – service

Mother Teresa - compassion

Aristotle – wisdom

Helen Keller - perseverance



New Masters (are in)

Apple

Facebook

Instagram

Tick Tock

Twitter

Reality TV

MTV

Kim Kardashian

Miley Cyrus

Abercrombie and Fitch

Kanye West (although he did refer to himself as Jesus)



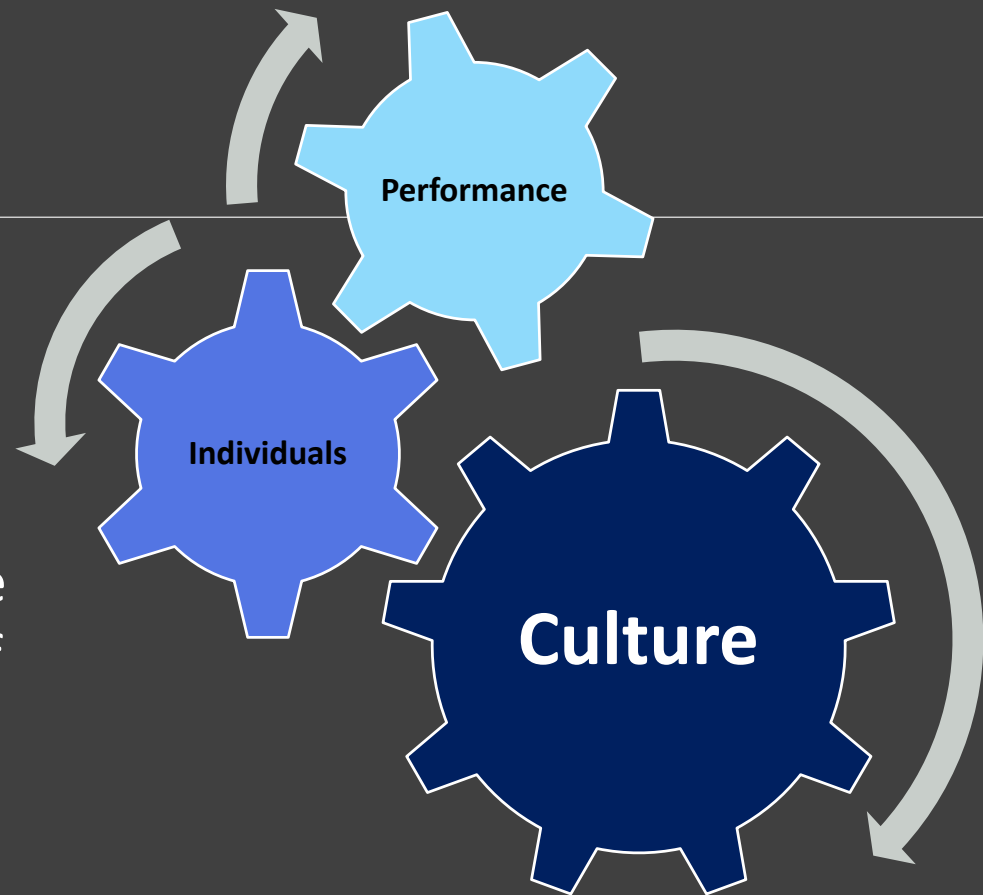
So what will be the driving influences of character and integrity?

- Luck
- Destiny
- Self-esteem
- Parents
- Siblings
- Social friends
- Community
- Teachers
- **Teammates**
- **Coaches**
- **Team culture**



Relationships

Environment is proven to be one of the biggest drivers of success, AND happiness.



Why Pursue This?



Where does character fit into coaching?

- You don't get paid for it.
- You don't get (professionally) recognized for it.
- You will get push-back early in the process from parents and the "ruling class."
- The time you commit to it will cut into pure coaching.
- For the most part, colleges don't recruit character.



So who really cares, and at what level does it really make a difference?

The real benefit may very well be in the unseen...

- Self-esteem
- Self-awareness
- Accountability
- Connectedness
- Improved academics
- Saying no to a drug, alcohol, or sex introduction
- Choosing role models over social models
- A better/healthier family life
- A more productive college experience
- Being a better employee
- Dealing with a life crisis
- Becoming a true leader
- Making a difference in the lives of others



And quite possibly in becoming a better swimmer and teammate.

And...

More drill focus/better technique

On time

Positive in the locker room

Train harder

Train with focus

Peer support

Positive workout environment

Better meet culture/team focus

More positive (and safe) travel

Better coach-swimmer relationship



Why not?

Quintessential Questions

Why can't the most successful people be the most humble, and appreciative?

Why can't athletes instinctively put the team first and look to ensure the success of others even ahead of their own?

Why can't kids welcome and embrace every challenge?

Why can't kids' best friends be their parents?

And, why can't a child dream of being a leader as well as an Olympian?



Key



Character/Values **can** be the hub or lynch pin to....
- work ethic, integrity, humility, compassion, etc.

Note



The vast majority of teams and athletes underperform (and under experience OR under grow personally).

Must be Who You Are

- Identify with values
- Use sports for human potential
- Be life-driven (consumed)



Can (want to) Connect...

➤ Values to athletics (and to life)

- ❖ *Work ethic*
- ❖ *Humility*
- ❖ *Gratitude*
- ❖ *Compassion*
- ❖ *Integrity*



We want...

Leaders

Elite “athletes”

People who put the team first

People we trust implicitly

Swimmers who maximize their potential and their careers

Healthier, happy kids

And better people

The Standard Model

Integrity and sportsmanship mentioned in Mission Statement

Coaches may talk about it at a higher level

It is generally absent in the daily process

Kids gravitate to social or athletic flow or status quo

Coaches (and boards) end up putting out fires of poor behavior, giving up, or looking the other way

No “lines in the sand”, or coaches are complicit

And, the ends justify the mean, IF you are successful



Character and Performance will ebb and Flow

With personalities

Social dynamics

Talent

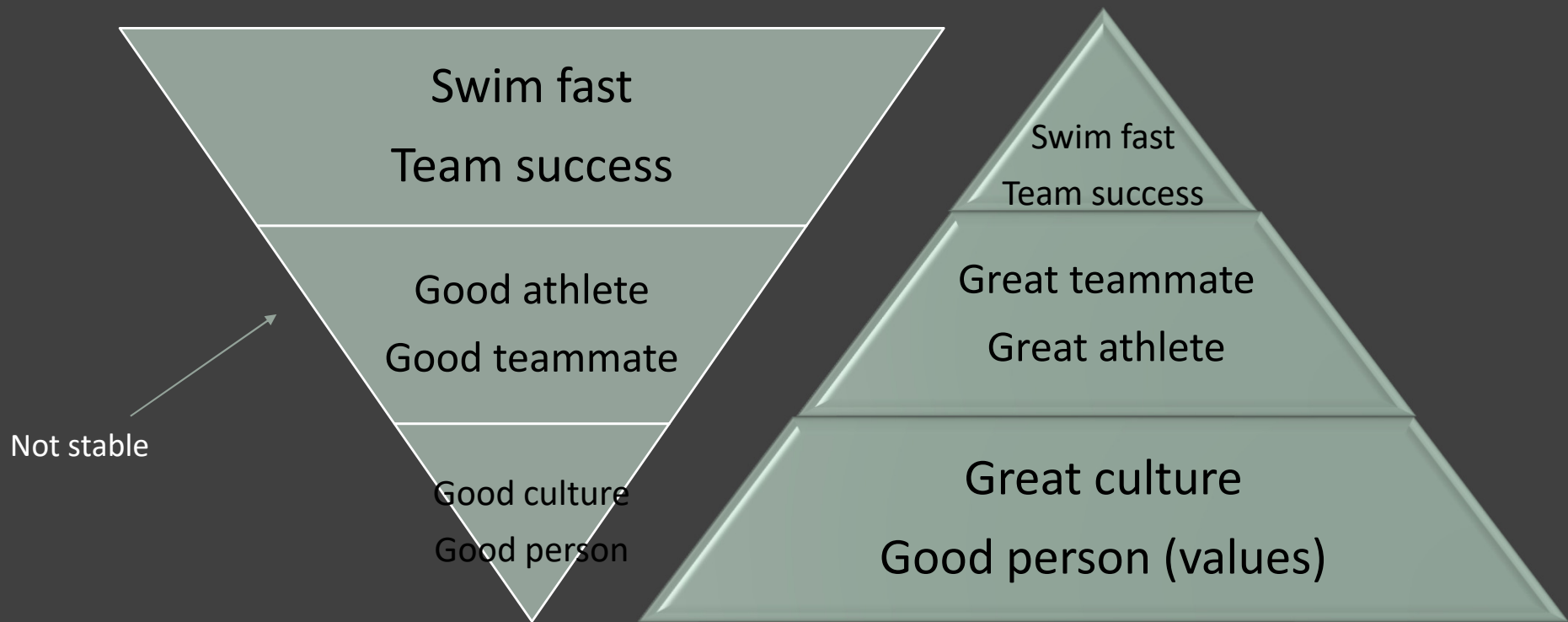
Staff focus

Board focus



They must be organizational mandates

Upside Model



Travel

Successful team travel is not a result of a well-planned trip

It is the direct result of a well-cultivated culture



Burnout

From Swimming Science - Why Do Young Swimmers Burnout?

Posted: 27 May 2013 12:30 AM PDT

CONCLUSION

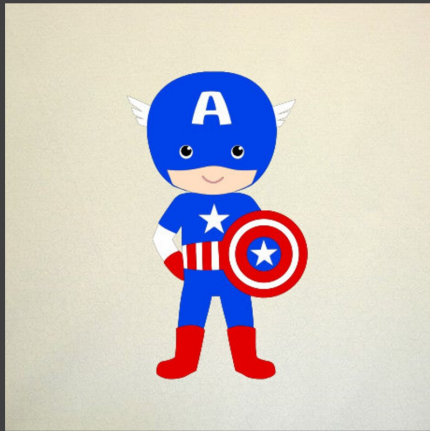
Unlike many football players or basketball players who won't retire "until they rip the uniform off my back", a more common refrain in swimming is swimmers never wanting to see a pool again. It's not an easy problem to solve. And if you have the answer, I'm sure USA Swimming would pay handsomely for it. This simplest approach is to admit we can all do a little better, which starts with an honest look at why many swimmers leave the sport long before reaching their potential.

By Allan Phillips. Allan and his wife Katherine are heavily involved in the strength and conditioning community, for more information refer to [Pike Athletics](#).

The easiest way to reduce or eliminate burnout is through a positive culture and team environment. Yes, consistent improvement will keep kids in the sport, but it does not always keep them happy, and improvement is not linear. Young athletes need to connect with something bigger and something meaningful, and have strong relationships based on respect.

“you are the last line of defense”

Said a swim team mother years ago



A Change in Culture, A Change in Life

(from a 17-year-old girl who changed teams and cultures)

“I think about where I would be had I not changed teams, and honestly its scary. I was becoming a person I did not want to be. I have learned what is truly important in life, and I am not sure when or if I would have figured it out. I never realized what it was like to be around negative people because that type of person was always me. Additionally, I dreaded swimming and now I love it again and it has been a rebirth.”

The team culture sways a social lifestyle

Dear Orinda Aquatics,

I can only imagine where I would be today, right now, if I had never joined Orinda Aquatics back in seventh grade. I see myself spending this Saturday night in my parentless house with a dozen members of my high school's top partiers, already a few drinks deep in my parent's liquor, behaving like a sloppy mess. I see myself dancing with boys I don't even like, breaking my mom's glass top coffee table, and getting into a car with a girl who swears she's safe to drive but clearly isn't. And I wouldn't even care. It would just be another typical Saturday night. Instead, I'm here sitting on my couch writing a letter to the team that changed the entire course of my life, the team that I owe everything to.

In middle school, I found myself, like so many others do, at a crossroads of sorts. The girls I considered my best friends were making choices that made me uncomfortable on all kinds of levels, but I could still feel myself slipping down with them. Looking back, I can see just how far I was about to fall.

Olympic “Toxic Environment”

Their London Olympics swimming team was beset by “culturally toxic incidents” including misuse of prescription drugs and bullying that highlighted a failure of culture and leadership, a report said. A culture existed within the team which “did not appear to assist or support high-level performance for most people.”

“There were enough culturally toxic incidents across enough team members that breached agreements (such as getting drunk, misuse of prescription drugs, breaching curfews, deceit, bullying) to warrant a strong, collective leadership response that included coaches, staff and the swimmers,” the report said. “No such collective action was taken.”

The review recommended creating an ethical framework of what the (Olympic) team stands for, updating internal codes of conduct and implementing better processes for managing issues around standards and expectations.

“It has been a time of reflection and review and a time to be honest and open about how we can take the right steps towards future success. Before we look at winning gold medals, we want to win back the admiration of the nation.”

Disciplinary issues affected the team’s unity in London and some swimmers were pursuing their own goals rather than those of the squad, the news paper reported, and that some swimmers behaved more like schoolboys than Olympians at a pre-games camp. (no team concept)

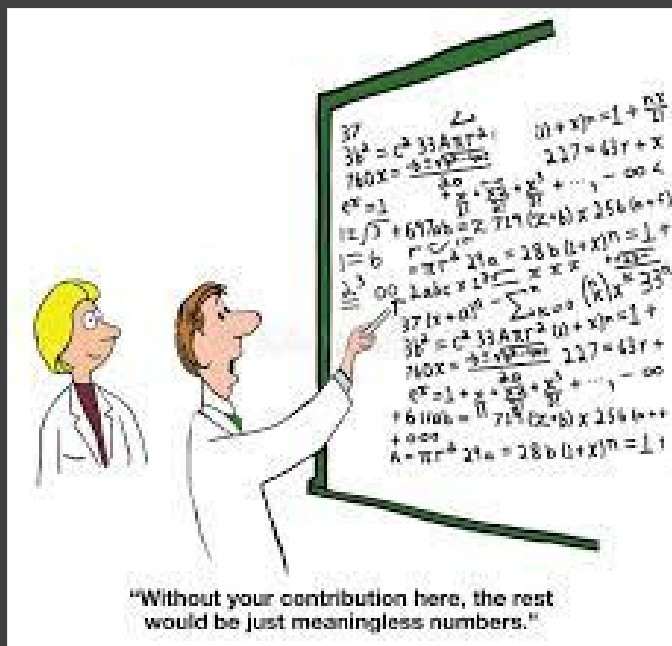
“Poor behavior and disrespect within the team were not regulated or resisted strongly by other team members, and it was left unchecked or without consequence by staff and coaches on a number of occasions,” the Review said. (no leadership)

This is not an “Olympic” issue. It is a club issue, an age-group issue, a societal issue, AND A CULTURAL/ETHICAL ISSUE.

How



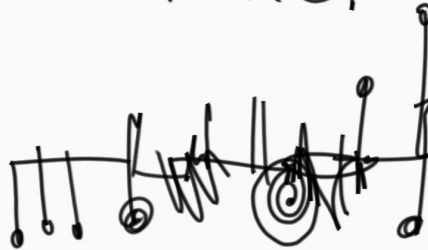
It is not easy



YOU must be a Culture Creator

Stay ahead of the
culture by
creating the culture.

©hugh



The Culture of Cultures - we must:

Understand your cultures (and subcultures)

Understand their affect

Redefine them in terms of what is:

- Right for humanity
- Right for athletics

Sell the benefits

Implement them

Change the paradigm

Change the world

Give kids and athletes back to themselves



Vision – for athletes, leaders, and team

“A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment a single man contemplated it, bearing within him, the image of a cathedral.” Antoine de Saint-Exupery

We did this with our team twenty+ years ago



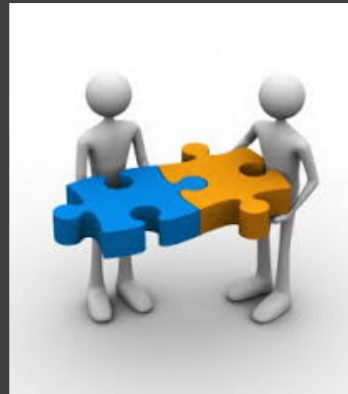
Organizational Alignment

Staff (Head Coach)

Board

Parents

Team “leaders”



CLEARLY defined mission with a dual mandate

Implied Consent

There should be implied consent for any athlete, at any age, to:

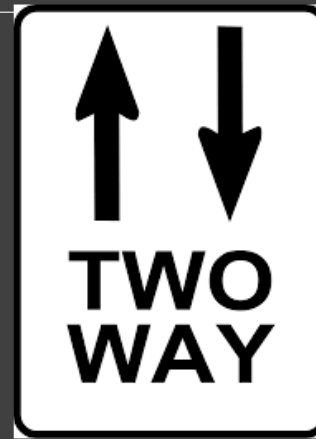
- *Be a good teammate*
- *To commit to the athletic process (work)*

This is where breakdown begins, only to accelerate.



Reciprocal Relationship

A two-way street – the basis of our relationship
They give everything – We give everything



Voicemail from Kevin Honey last week: “What you do is different because you ask kids to sign a 3–4-year commitment (agreement/contract) and you sign a life commitment (agreement/contract)”

Anchor

Culture must be an anchor in the organization

A blanket wrapped around the team

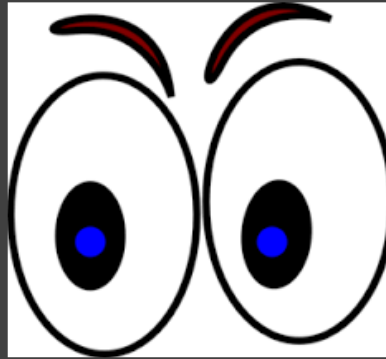
NOT driven by the “social elite” or “talent”



Be Watchful and Vigilant

Of everything –

- ❖ **At workout**
- ❖ **At meets**
- ❖ **At activities**



Set Aggressive Goals, for:

- ❖ Attendance
- ❖ Training
- ❖ Individual performance
- ❖ Team performance
- ❖ Travel
- ❖ Academics
- ❖ College
- ❖ Leadership/mentorship
- ❖ Etc.



Seek to be the best at what you do, in your area.

Junior Group/Age Group

Promotion of the bigger concept of “future leader” (learn it now) and avoiding teen traps and pitfalls (discussed)

Make clear that you cannot be on the team if you are not a good teammate (“helper”)

Weekly Meetings – articles, letters, discussion

Quotes on workouts

Examples of inspiration, leadership, challenging the social status quo (in middle school)

Coach vigilance (watching in all areas)

There is an upward to pull to leadership, values, and service

Senior Group

Sell/demand – “servant/leader”, role model as their role and responsibility

Weekly Meetings – articles, letters, discussion

Aggressive discussion about hard teen issues

Quotes on workouts

Examples of inspiration, leadership, challenging the teen social status quo

Coach vigilance (watching in all areas)

Perpetual Leadership Model

Seniors driven to lead

Integrity, humility, work ethic

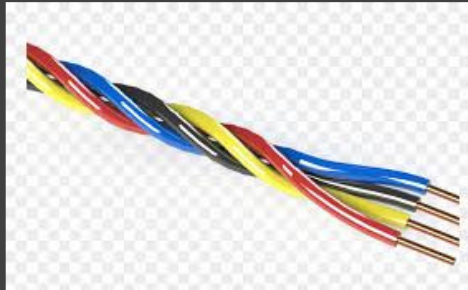


Junior Swimmers eager to learn (and lead)

Embed “Character” into program

Main criteria to move “up” is maturity, team commitment, etc. –

- ❖ Positive (always)
- ❖ Help/volunteer
- ❖ Work hard, etc.



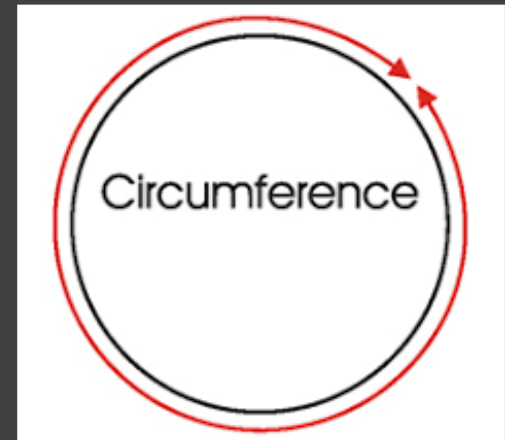
Banquet recognition, etc.

Make sure EVERYONE knows that without integrity (and service, humility, etc.) NOTHING else matters

Phase 1 (set perimeter)

Ensure team environment is constructive and respectful (lines drawn)

- Language (included in music)
- On time
- Respect/interaction (bullying)
- Etc.



Phase 2 (deeper team value set)

Focus on values that elevate team culture

No complaining

Embraced work

Selfless

Humble

Grateful

Phone use



Reposition Pillars of Success (and character)

- ❖ Work ethic/Resilience – butterfly and struggle
- ❖ Integrity/Trust – the foundation of all relationships
- ❖ Attitude – a choice in every instance
- ❖ Humility – ego is need for attention/approval
- ❖ Selfless - apple
- ❖ Compassion – humanities great need (and kids')
- ❖ Team – the concept is a life concepts (get good at it)

Phase 3 (life values)

Entertain living a life (outside swimming) with those values/virtues

Lying – never

Cheating – never

Drugs/alcohol – never

Self-worth based in internal characteristics not external



Parent Survey? Do parents really care?

If you asked parents why their children are doing sports, or what they hope their children would get from it, how many would say...?

Work ethic

Humility

Perseverance

Sacrifice

Team (first) attitude

(the most important life virtues)



How Many Parents Even Know if Their Child.... (or want to know)

Really works hard?

Really cares?

Respects others?

Is at risk?

Has any leadership skills?

Deals with adversity?



We, as coaches, do. We quite possibly have the most critical information as to their child's overall well-being.

Challenges

It is NOT easy. It is all encompassing and consuming.

Kids – being accountable (and honest)

Parents – defending kids to any extreme

For other teams - Boards (fire coaches)

“If you step in a puddle, don’t blame the puddle.”



**We, as coaches, can be the ones to
redefine youth culture.**



**It begins with sports
and it ends with life.**

Questions?



Thank you for attending.