

9 Ways to be a Better Teammate

By Mike Gustafson//Correspondent

In swimming, just because you're a good swimmer doesn't mean you're a good teammate. Being a good teammate is about much more than just cheering during races. Just like practice, being a good teammate takes hard work, practice, and a daily commitment.

Swimming is an unusual sport in that it is technically "individual" – meaning no one can physically help you swim down the pool faster. But when a team comes together throughout the season, motivates each other, pushes each other, and picks each other up when others fall down, each swimmer on that team will actually get better. Being a good teammate means, while you can't physically push someone down the pool to be faster, your presence almost can. (See: Pretty much any epic relay anchor.)

Here are 9 ways to be a better teammate:

1. Stand up when you cheer.

"Cheering" is actually kind of worthless if the swimmer about to race doesn't see you opposite the blocks or standing poolside. When you step up to race, 99% of swimmers look to see if teammates are there. It's a quick, fleeting glance, but it matters. Don't sit in the bleachers and passively whisper a teammate good luck. Stand, walk to the pool, and let them see you. They'll feed off your energy.

2. Create a culture of encouragement.

So simple. Just one sentence, "Keep it up!" is so effective when you're hanging on the gutters barely able to blink. It doesn't even have to be directed at anyone specific. I had a teammate who constantly shouted encouragements while we all rested on the wall. Over time, he created a culture of encouragement. Soon, 3 guys were shouting encouragements. Then 6. Then the whole team.

3. Pick someone up when they're falling down.

This part is tricky, and you have to be careful, but if someone (and they usually already know who they are) is skipping practice or slacking off or being disruptive or negative, don't be afraid to say something to that person. That doesn't mean yell or embarrass that person. Take him/her aside as a teammate and be direct, honest, and positive. You're a team, and part of being a team is not letting others fall behind. Everyone needs to be picked up, and as a teammate, that responsibility is yours.

4. Criticize in private, compliment in public.

If you ever need to approach a teammate about something negative, do so privately. But compliments should be public. In our team meetings, we did a round table where everyone had to point out something good another teammate did in practice that week. Look, swimmers aren't

blind. We see things in practice. When someone is truly bringing it that day, being positive or executing a dryland exercise right, let 'em know. And let everyone else know, too. If you don't compliment your own team, who will?

5. Know when to back away.

Everyone's had a bad race. Being a good teammate sometimes means knowing when to allow a teammate some private time if that teammate had a bad race. Let people have space to gather thoughts. I might be in the minority on this, but I believe you shouldn't say "Great race!" if it clearly was a swimmer's bad race. Saying "Great race!" after a bad race might actually make that swimmer feel worse, or angry, or upset, or defensive. Instead, if you want to say something, say, "It's OK, let's get 'em in the next race," or sometimes don't say anything except a hand on the shoulder, or simply allowing that person some temporary space.

6. Embrace when teammates swim fast.

We've all been there. So-and-so drops 6 seconds even though so-and-so doesn't train as hard as you. The hardest part of being a good teammate is realizing your teammates might beat you. That's OK – that's part of the sport. You have to control those feelings and focus on yourself. Nothing is more poisonous to a team's chemistry than envy or jealousy. Worry about your own performances and congratulate your teammates when they swim well. After all, the faster they are, the more competitive your practices will be, and the better you'll become.

7. Don't be afraid to get competitive in practice.

There are two types of teammates: Those who push others to slow down, and those who push others to go faster. Be the latter.

8. Don't ever say, "This sucks."

No it doesn't. It may be hard, or cold, or tough, but that doesn't mean it sucks. You knew this sport was hard work before signing up. Sports are about pushing yourself. When you mutter, "This sucks" you're actually bringing others down, too. When you're having a great practice, the last thing in the world you want to hear are negative comments from a teammate, so don't do it to them when you're having a bad practice.

9. Realize you don't have to be fast to be a good teammate.

In 50 years, people won't remember times. They'll remember teammates. In my opinion, it's better to be a good teammate than a good swimmer. It takes work, but the lessons you learn being a good teammate will serve you far better in life than swimming a 200 fly really fast. And the best part in swimming – and in all sports – is you don't have to swim a 200 fly really fast to be a good teammate.
