

TRAINING VERSUS LEARNING

By John Leonard

Last week I was speaking to a young coach who had just taken a new job.

His specific problem was that the coach that was there before he was, had everyone “training hard” and had done a great job of selling that concept. Everyone from 8 and unders to seniors was pounding the yardage daily.

The new coach wanted to spend 6 weeks or so concentrating on skills development, because in the first few days on the job, he noticed that many of the swimmers were deficient in the types of stroke, turn and start skills that would support them as they aged into older swimmers in the program.

He’d laid out that plan to his parent group, including cutting back practices from 2 and one half hours per day to just 90 minutes for the older swimmers and 60 minutes for the middle groups and 45 minutes for the youngest swimmers. This, consistent with today’s best advice to dedicate oneself to “*purposeful practice*” of new skills if you hoped for optimum learning....shorter periods of intense concentration, with little to interfere with the concentration process.

He immediately faced rebellion.

Moms and a few Dads, called him to complain that important swim meets were coming up and their little darling needed to “train” in order to be successful. Interestingly, more than 70% of the calls came from the parents of younger children. The coach asked my advice on how to educate the parents on this issue. Here’s my answer.

“Long practices, with high training volumes will make all swimmers VERY good at what they are doing. Repetition builds habit. Habit stands up beautifully under the pressure of competition...when in fact, nothing else does....as the pain of competition effort removes all traces of thought from the brain.....it becomes habit that the swimmer relies upon to get him home to the finish.

“Unfortunately, if they are practicing poor technique, that will be learned and habituated, just as well as good technique. And poor technique makes you biomechanically inefficient at the time of greatest stress. Hence you struggle more, go slower and your stroke collapses at the end of races.

“This makes swimming a technique limited sport. Your child will be severely limited by the degree with which they can perform the strokes with good habits, instead of poor habits.

“Lots of training with poor habits will make a very poor swimmer. A little training with good habits, will result in a good swimmer and one that is “unlimited” in their future.

“Which one do you want for your child?

HINT: Get the strokes right FIRST instead of purposefully practicing mistakes.

All the Best for Great Swimming Experiences!
John Leonard