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COACHES YOU SHOULD KNOW: MATT CRUM

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BY KELSEY REESE//USA SWIMMING COMMUNICATIONS INTERN

Editor's Note: Every Friday, usaswimming.org will publish "Coaches You Should Know" featuring some of the best age group and grassroots coaches in the nation. This week, we bring you ASCA's Oregon 2012 Age Group Coach of the Year, Matt Crum.

Matt Crum started racing when he was five years old and has since accumulated over 20 years of competitive swimming experience. Crum swam collegiately at Wheaton College and has spent the last six years coaching for the Oregon City Swim Team.

How did you decide to go into coaching?

I was a water baby so I was always near the water. Eventually I did lifeguarding and taught swim lessons and stuff like that. I love teaching and I love swimming so it just kind of grew from there. I had some really great coaches in my life and they set a great example but I think teaching is somewhat in my blood. My sister is a teacher, my brother coaches, my aunt was a teacher, and my grandma was a teacher. At one point my dad got certified to teach so I think it's in my blood, but ultimately I started coaching during summer leagues just to do something in the summer and I started teaching high school at the same time.

I taught high school chemistry and I coached high school swimming for a few years. And then the swim club at the local pool needed a new coach and they came and talked to me. I was like alright I think I can do this, let me check this out. It has been incremental but teaching and swimming have always been a pretty big part of my life.

Who was most influential on your swimming experience?

I had my college coach and one of my club coaches growing up. Alex Nikitin was one of my club coaches at the Multnomah Athletic Club. I left from a normal, regular team to a more athletic club and at that point in time they definitely had higher expectations. I started swimming with Alex and really bonded with him; he taught me a lot about coaching and had a lot of passion. He was always a great teacher and he's a consummate scientist, spending that time with Alex was awesome. Then there was my college coach at Wheaton College, Jon Lederhouse, he's an awesome person, coach, and leader. He was a great example too. As far as swimming goes, I had two outstanding examples in my life.

What piece of advice would you give to other coaches?

Find someone who has had success or has helped kids achieve their goals—because success is a pretty relative concept depending on the person you're talking to—find a coach that has helped developed a culture that you recognize as being positive, a coach that has helped athletes achieve at a really high level. Ask them questions and try and get that mentor-mentee relationship going. I would not be doing half the things I'm doing now without the help of other coaches. I talk to so many coaches all the time, asking questions, learning from them. When I came back to Oregon and Portland and started coaching club and even high school, Alex was always there to share information with me and help me grow as a coach, so that was huge. It's not just about being open, but actively seeking, calling them up, sending them emails, and hanging out with them. Definitely be conscientious about developing those relationships and asking those questions.

What is one of the memorable moments from your coaching career?

One of the best moments for me is every summer we go to this team meet in central Oregon, in Redmond, close to Bend. We do this team meet there and we camp out outside the building, there's a team potluck. The times are actually pretty terrible because they are playing all day and running around but it's just a great community building experience. The kids always come back so much tighter and closer for it; they come back stoked on swimming.

It started five or six years ago when I began coaching the team, most of our meets were in the Portland-metropolitan area and I wanted to do one meet like that. When I was swimming on another team we used to do this meet on the Oregon coast and it was always a strong team-builder. I wanted to do something like that. That meet in Redmond was not that full and pretty low-key and our team was pretty young and green so it seemed like a good meet for us to go to. We've pretty much been doing that since I started coaching here.

Everybody sleeps in tents. The times are terrible because we're camping out, but everybody has their camp stoves going and stuff, we have those canopy tents and camp chairs everywhere but it's really fun. There was one time when, maybe a month before this one family joined and things were kind of slow with them becoming a part of the team, then they went to this meet and, bam, they became a part of the team; it was engrained in the culture. That happens to a lot of the kids, they go to that meet and they come back and everybody is pretty tight. That's what I want the team to be, you have to recognize that it is first and foremost a community. Everybody is a part of the community, I want the team to be an inclusive community.

How would you describe your coaching philosophy?

For me, it's really teach, teach, teach. Whenever I think of something I want the kids to do, one of the first questions I ask myself is, "how am I going to teach them how to do that?" Be it nutritional, meet, training, or stroke oriented, with everything I want to try and find as many opportunities to teach these guys to be the best they can be. There's a book called "The Talent Code", by Daniel Coyle—it's a pretty broad simplification of things but basically he says things break down into skill and athletes learning skill. You have to have motivated athletes, they have to practice hard—not just physically pounding it but mentally too—and then master coaching was the third piece. He breaks down what creates a talent hotbed. One of my goals to some extent is to create a talent hotbed, this type of culture where success is inevitable and with fast swimming and great positive attitudes, everything is ultimately inevitable. Essentially my philosophy comes down to teaching everything and creating a positive culture where kids are going to love being a part of swimming—where they are going to love hard work, and love to learn, and hopefully love each other too.

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