

PICK YOUR



Goal setting. Commitment. Accountability. These three keys unlock every swimmer's potential for success. They may sound obvious and simple, but they are vital. So vital, in fact, that diving into the pool without them is like taking a drive without knowing where you're going.

This was the message Bob Bowman, men's head coach at the University of Michigan, gave the Ann Arbor Swim Club at its awards banquet in Ann Arbor, Mich., recently. Although his words were addressed to that particular group, they ring true for swimmers, parents and coaches of any club. As for their effectiveness, there is no better proof than Bowman's most famous swimmer, Olympic phenom Michael Phelps.

"Every swimmer needs three things to succeed in this sport. Ignoring them prevents athletes from doing what they are capable of," Bowman said. Embracing them, on the other hand, opens doors, overcomes obstacles and helps athletes soar to their full potential.

SET A GOAL

The first key is setting a goal. "Imagine if you got in your car and just started aimlessly driving. That's what not having a goal is like. Goals are the targets that direct your aim," he said.

The end goal is the big question that must be answered first. Where are you headed? Do you want a state cut? An Olympic gold medal? Once you determine your destination point, the other

stops along the way will automatically follow.

"When I sit down with my swimmers at Michigan, I tell them, 'Once you've answered the big question, the small ones are easy. You want to be an NCAA champion? OK, there are some things that go into that. You're not going to miss a practice, ever. Because on that level, everybody trains. You're going to get rested. You're going to eat right, and more.'"

Knowing where to set goals is an art that can be refined with the help of your coaches. Ask them, if you haven't already, because the stakes are high. Goals that are too easy remove the sense of challenge. Goals that are too difficult lead to discouragement. Either extreme produces the same result: swimmers who

TARGET

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GOAL SETTING PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE FOR SUCCESSFUL SWIMMERS

lose interest in the sport. Basically, goals should have enough risk so they are exciting, but enough chance of success so they are achievable, Bowman said.

The whole process is a bit like playing a game of ring toss. "If I gave you rings to throw at a target, there would probably be a group who stood right over it so they would hit it every time. And there would be another group who wanted to stand as far back as possible for the challenge. Then there would be a third group who would stand somewhere in the middle so they had a 50/50 chance of hitting the target. That's where you want to set your goal."

MAKE A COMMITMENT

The next key to success is making the kind of commitments that help you reach your goal. How many times a week are you going to practice? How hard are you willing to work? Don't make your commitments week by week. Make them for the long haul and make them ahead of time. Then stick with them.

While adolescent swimmers only need an occasional reminder, youngsters may need something more. "This is where parents come in," said Bowman. Their supporting role not only provides the time, finances and energy that drives swimmers to practice and equips them with goggles, fins and other tools of the trade, it provides the emotional backbone needed to keep commitments. Bowman spoke from experience.

"I remember times as a young swimmer when I would say, 'I'm not going to practice today.' My mother would tell me, 'You are going to practice because you made a commitment.' Then I would say, 'I'm going to quit.' And she would counter, 'You can quit at the end of the season.'"

But when the end of the season rolled around, Bowman found he had developed a very different attitude. "Because I went to all the practices, I always did better and never wanted to quit at the end of the season," he said, chuckling. "I'm no different than many of you. Everyone has times when they don't want to follow through. I'm here to tell you to keep going," he said.

BE ACCOUNTABLE

The third key is accountability. Once you've set your goals and made commitments, own up to them and take responsibility for the results. "Ultimately, it's you who is going to decide where you end up in this sport," Bowman said. "If something doesn't go right, claim it. Say, 'It's my fault. I'll do better next time.'"

Accountability can be discouraging when goals are not met and there is no one else to blame, or it can be exhilarating in the face of triumph. While the emotional responses vary, one fact does not: accountability is an essential part of growth. Owning up to your results cultivates a take-charge attitude that can give you a jump start on your competition.

"When my guys are getting ready for an international meet, I tell them: 'When it comes time to get on that block, it's just you. You better know who you are, and what you're all about.'" Swimmers who have stared accountability in the face without flinching, have developed that inner strength, he added.

Ann Arbor Swim Club head coach Dan Ohm agreed, adding that these practices benefit all aspects of life. "Setting goals, making commitments and being accountable are character-building traits that not only make you a better swimmer, but a better person," Ohm said.

AND...

There's more to swimming than fast times and momentary triumphs. The benefits extend well beyond the pool and into life. Just ask Bob Bowman, men's head coach at the University of Michigan.

Bowman had no idea, when he first got involved in swimming at the age of 11, how much it would positively impact the rest of his life. But it has, and it can do the same for any serious devotee, he told swimmers, coaches and parents at a recent awards banquet hosted by the Ann Arbor Swim Club in Ann Arbor, Mich.

When Bowman first joined a summer swim league in Columbia, S.C., his initial focus was on performance in the pool. Like many youngsters, he was impressed with fast times and records.

"I still remember attending my first big meet at the University of South Carolina in 1978 and witnessing a record-breaking swim. I thought, 'Wow, this is great. It must happen all the time.'"

His enthusiasm propelled him to practice harder, and he ultimately went to Florida State University, where teammates, inspired by his determination, made him captain of the swim team. "It was unusual because I was one of the slowest swimmers on the team," he said.

As he matured, however, his eyes were opened to the enduring value of swimming. "There's more to swimming than records and fast times. The ability to set goals, make commitments and be accountable for your performance benefits everyone. And unlike records, they last a lifetime."