

Creating an Environment of Excellence

Our aim is to create a certain kind of swimmer and culture. Everything about the programme should encourage some behaviours and discourage others, and those behaviours form a swimmer's character and the team's culture. We are creating an ethos of excellence, an expectation of success, with universal striving for high achievement.

We are consciously attempting to create a culture in which excellence can flourish and where national – level performance will be standard.

Therefore, if we want fast swimmers, we need to create an oasis where it's acceptable to be different – a place where excellence is valued, admired, encouraged, expected, rewarded, and emulated.

Parents matter

Parents have an enormous influence on their children's swimming. By setting high standards at home, expecting hard work and excellence, encouraging persistence, teaching accountability, and being supportive through the tough times and down to earth during the heady days, parents go a long way toward determining the basic mindset of their children.

Further, the parents must value swimming. They must be willing to make family decisions for the sake of the development of a child's talent. This may require rescheduling family holidays before or after major championships, constructing the family's schedule around daily training sessions, or spending weekends at long meets and waiting hours for a few minutes of racing.

With regard to the particular programme their children represent, parents must trust the coaches and value the long process of developing talents. It doesn't matter how good the coach and the programme are if the parents are continually undermining or second-guessing them.

Swimmers matter

Excellent swimmers are tough, they have a determination to overcome any obstacle or adversity. They are self – reliant, not depending on the coach or their parents to do everything for them or make all decisions. They are competitive and love to race, eager to take on anyone, anytime, anywhere. They have extremely high expectations of themselves and those around them. They are committed to their swimming. They pay attention; they have a laser- beam focus on what they are doing in training. They have a sense of craftsmanship, precision, and attention to detail. They continually strive for improvement. They are confident in their abilities, and they show that relaxed confidence under the pressure of important competitions.

Many swimmers talk about big goals, but far fewer are willing to do the work to reach those goals. Swimmers must realize that the more activities that occupy their time, energies, and interest, the worse they will do in each of them. We can't do everything, and if we try, something has to give. This is a matter of priorities. When music lessons, football, after school clubs and going out with friends conflict with swimming, or when swimming consistently loses in the competition for time and energy (especially when just this once becomes just about all the time), then swimmers need to re-evaluate. They must be honest about their commitment to swimming and set their goals accordingly because setting a goal without making a commitment to achieving it is worthless. Although I am in favour of well-rounded students, much that passes for being well rounded is simply a disguise for mediocrity and lack of commitment. Excellence in any field takes dedication and focus, choosing one thing rather than many.

Most people emphasize the sacrifice that it takes to be an excellent swimmer. They see sacrifice as a losing proposition, stressing what have to give up in order to be good. The excellent person reverses that thinking: He concentrates on what he is getting by giving up things that are not as important to him. In the long run, the satisfaction, self-confidence, sense of accomplishment, and firm friendships that a committed swimmers gain will far outweigh any momentary pleasures he or she foregoes.

Swimmers should move through the programme as they age and develop.

The distinct training groups have different kinds, volumes and speeds of training and different expected levels of commitment to swimming; all of these qualities are developmentally determined.

Decisions regarding squad promotions and/or the transitioning process must always be in the hands of the coaches. Coaches know their training squads and their demands, they know the swimmers and their daily performances and attitudes, and putting these two together, they know where swimmers would best fit in the programme. A coach's aim is to put swimmers where they belong physiologically, psychologically, and developmentally. Swimmers show which group they belong in not by what they say, but what they do every day in training. Their day-to-day practice performance is much more important than their race results in determining where they fit best. When considering transitioning and promoting a swimmer from one group to the next in the team progression, three factors are most important:

1. The swimmer is leading her/his current group
2. The swimmer is constantly training in the lower tier of the higher squad across the board - not just in one favourite stroke. The principle here is simple: a swimmer will not fit in with a higher group if he/she cannot train at its pace.
3. The swimmer has the commitment level of the higher group. Again, the principle is simple: a swimmer will not keep up with the progress of a group if she/he does not come to practice as much, work as hard, or go to the same meets.

Other factors that weigh in the decision for squad placement are the swimmer's age, psychological maturity, physiological needs, competitive maturity, independence and self-reliance, leadership abilities, coachability and willingness to be held accountable for training and racing.

Doing what is convenient is not the same as doing what is best.

Coaches matter

Coaches create the swimmers they coach through their coaching personalities or styles.

No two coaches are identical, but they all use what they have and fill certain necessary roles:

1. Coaches know swimmers' capabilities – most swimmers have no idea how fast they can be; they usually assume they aren't as capable as they really are. The coach teaches high expectations and high standards, acting as a "quality-control" expert. When swimmers aim higher, they achieve higher.
2. Coaches understand normal progress – because swimmers, particularly young swimmers, do not know what a normal rate of progress is. They do not know how fast they can expect to improve if they work hard.
3. Coaches have perspective – young swimmers have little experience in the swimming world, so they have little perspective. They don't know the various levels of achievement or what it takes to reach them, so they don't know how high they can climb. They will not aim to climb Mount Everest if they do not know that it exists.
4. Coaches help swimmers attain goals. Stating a goal without attaching meaning to it is easy. The coach can help the athlete take the goal and give it meaning with the splits along the way and the particular practice habits and performances that will lead to the goal time. The coach also continually reminds the swimmer of what is needed to reach the goal.

WSC Coaching Team

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