



SWIMMER RETENTION



photo by Peter H. Bick

by Laurel Hill

YEAR-IN, YEAR-OUT, AGE GROUP COACHES AND SWIM PROGRAM BOARD MEMBERS STRUGGLE WITH THE ISSUE OF SWIMMER RETENTION. IS IT POSSIBLE TO COMPETE WITH THE COUNTLESS NUMBER OF EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES OFFERED TO CHILDREN IN AMERICAN SOCIETY? EVERY ORGANIZATION, FROM CHESS CLUB TO KARATE TO LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL AND BOBBY SOX SOFTBALL, IS TRYING TO CAPTURE THE ATTENTION OF OUR COUNTRY'S YOUTH.

So what can we, as coaches and leaders in the swimming community, do to motivate our young athletes to choose swimming? Well, with a little patience and understanding, and a few clever tactics, we can keep children of all levels interested in swimming for a lifetime. And perhaps equally important, coaches can keep their swimmers' parents involved without making them feel "over-committed."

PARENTAL SUPPORT

Most coaches agree that in order for swimming to continue to grow, retaining athletes must be a priority. Pete Malone, head coach of the Kansas City Blazers, believes growth in retention rates starts with communication and education of both swimmers and parents. He found that new swimmers whose parents attended the team's "new parent education" meetings were far more likely to stick with the team past the first year.

"Generally, there is a 50-50 chance the swimmer will stay if the parents do not get involved. If they have demonstrated an interest in the program, by coming to the meetings and gaining an understanding of our philosophies, the retention jumps to 80-90 percent," said Malone.

Malone stresses the initial parental contact as a highly effective retention tool for novice swimmers. However, he also notes the importance of continuing education and communication with the 12- through 15-year-olds and their parents. "At this age, a lot of stuff is happening in their lives, and we try very hard to provide a framework within which these kids can function. We let them know 'hey, winning trophies and high-point awards is a bonus. Your participation is a key to interpersonal growth, improvement and victory in life.'"



Megan Oesting, USS Planning Committee member and UCLA swimmer, makes a salient point concerning the need for coaches and parents to build a young swimmer's self-esteem. According to Oesting, coaches need to "allow swimmers to make practices a low stress environment worth looking forward to." It is extremely important to teach new swimmers (and especially their parents) that involvement in the sport is not strictly an end to concrete successes and awards. It's an activity that is far more valuable than any ribbon or medal. Swimming teaches useful life skills such as time management, self-motivation and discipline.

PROPER GOAL SETTING AND PLANNING

Coaches should also acknowledge that swimming "seriously" may not be for everyone. This approach to training some athletes may also improve retention.

It is a coach's duty to talk with each of his or her swimmers, and know what the athlete expects from swimming with his or her club. With this knowledge, the coach and swimmer can develop a proper set of (short term) goals to train from. Goals "imposed" upon the swimmer by the coach can often lead an athlete to ask, "Why really am I doing this?" If a coach can recognize when this is happening and react accordingly, he or she may have saved a swimmer from dropping out.

Structuring training groups to cater to the abilities and desires of achievement, as well as the likes and dislikes of each swimmer, will help to foster a sense of team unity. Also, for most kids, having a sense of belonging is extremely important. It is unlikely that they would walk away from a cohesive group with similar goals and aspirations.

Goals do not need to be time oriented but can and should include issues such as technique and attendance. Dave Knochenhauer, coach with DeAnza-Cupertino Aquatics,



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knows that kids have other interests. But he, and the other coaches at DACA, insist that each swimmer communicate with them their weekly attendance goals. "We want them to commit to a set of practices that fits with their schedule and relates to their intended success."

FUN AND CAMARADERIE

Creating an aura of fun and camaraderie helps to keep swimmers interested in a program. "Attitude is Everything" is an adage Marvin Williams, Head Age Group Coach of the Glendale Gauchos, employs to help keep his numbers up. His plan for retaining swimmers at all levels of the Gauchos' program is to limit the number of swimmers per group. This, he believes, achieves maximum effectiveness from the coaching staff. By doing this he believes that he has created the feeling that swimming for the Gauchos is a neat thing to do.

Proof that his belief is working is in the waiting lists that have developed with athletes hoping to join the club. The swimmers know that they are welcome to leave for summer league and return in the fall, but their spots

on the roster may be filled by other athletes waiting and wanting to become a part of the exciting and fun atmosphere Williams and his staff foster.

Other coaches across the country are just as willing to let young swimmers come and go. Dick Hannula, Head Coach of the Tacoma Swim Club, says, "We don't care, when they're young, if they show up every night or not. The philosophy here has always been fun, instruction (and then) discipline. As the swimmer gets older there will be more discipline but no less fun and instruction."

The Mecklenburg Aquatic Club staff's philosophy is similar. "If you have a kid participating in several sports and avoid telling him he needs to be at swimming five days a week (or else!), hopefully when that athlete is older, he or she will decide swimming is the most fun," said Kathy McKee, Head Coach of MAC-Davidson.

THE EXPERIENCED SWIMMER

Communication, education, and a fun environment work well for retaining the novice swimmer. But for some of the more experienced swimmers, these



photo by AllSport



photo by George Olsen



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techniques may run their course and get stale. How can clubs retain swimmers who have moved on to higher levels within the program, yet have seemingly plateaued and are showing signs of burnout?

Some ideas that have proven effective include: designing attractive long-term plans, developing interesting and interactive training sessions, and using fun, fast-paced competition situations. All of these are practical ways to enhance the sport in the eyes of the older swimmer and his or her parents.

LONG-TERM GOAL PLANNING

It is important to think of long-range goals for both the team and each individual. Without a master plan and long-range goals, membership turnover is likely to increase. When this happens, a coaching staff must "retrain" a lot more parents and swimmers about their philosophies of the program, interrupting the continuity of the team concept.

Letting your swimmers and their parents know that you care about the individual's performances and progress, whether they're an "8 & Under" beginner or a potential college student-athlete, plants the notion that success in the sport truly can be enjoyed over a considerable period of time—even over a lifetime.

McKee notes that coaches need to look at swimming careers, not just at

the records achieved as a nine- to 10-year-old. The KC Blazers' staff has "forward vision" when discussing their team's master plan. Malone likes to use travel meets as rewards for long-term goal achievement. Positive group interaction, learning responsible behavior away from parents, and swimming well out of state are all benefits of reaching this goal.

Planning a travel meet in conjunction with a summer camping trip can be a fun way for entire swimming families to get together and show support for the team. It may take a little more planning, but it is well worth the time to see lasting friendships and memories created.

Another approach to retaining swimmers is to be genuinely interested in a swimmer's goals and desires away from the pool. Williams says being involved with our swimmers "off-deck" lives and getting feedback about their days at school or weekend family outings are effective ways to show you care, build bonds and keep swimmers loyal to the team and to the sport.

SPARKING INTEREST

Keeping practice sessions interesting, challenging, fun and productive all at the same time is sometimes tough. A detailed, yet simple, addition to your training program is including a quick game, relay races, or a water polo match at the end of many practices. This not only adds variety and fun to a practice, but also can be done constructively, such that the athletes are learning and enhancing needed skills.

Another popular technique to keep experienced swimmers interested is to use "test" sets—such as the T-30, or repeat fast 100s with long rest—that many programs are using to monitor in-water progress. By posting the results of each swimmer on a progress chart, coaches are giving concrete, visual feedback to the whole team.

Williams emphasizes feedback as a valid tool for retaining swimmers. His athletes have been doing the T-30 for



nearly six years, and he and the other Gauchos' coaches see breakthroughs where previously they were not sure any were possible. If a swimmer slacks off in attendance or leaves for a period of time, his or her test set results will fall off. And, even children know about keeping up with the Joneses.

"The kids keep coming back, they get into the competition and the posting of the results," says Williams.

WATERING DOWN BURNOUT

Burnout is often a very real reason swimmers offer for wanting to quit. Athletes may feel burned out if they believe they're not improving. Hannula relays to his swimmers that failure is temporary.

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Also, failure is relative. It is important for coaches to look for and relate the positives to swimmers on the verge of burnout, even if they appear insignificant. Simply by communicating that there are indicators of

success in swimming other than an improved time, may be enough to bring the swimmer back into focus.

Malone theorizes that oftentimes it is not the kids who burnout at all, but rather the parents who are the instigators of negative feelings toward the sport. When an athlete begins swimming, parents are generally excited about their child's interest and involvement. When they realize the time commitment or perhaps the reality that their child may not be Olympic material, parents sometimes lose interest. Young athletes don't value awards in and of themselves; however, they do understand mom and dad's adulation. When this wanes, they internalize it and look for other ways to win back the praise and atter-

tion. Again, with proper and long-term education, parents can be content with nearly all areas of being a swimming family.

DEFLATING THE TIME COMMITMENT

It's true that once a swimmer begins competing, the time commitment increases. Parents and swimmers quickly become wary of the three-day marathon meets. Many families become (at the very least) concerned about the time age group swimming meets take away from school, church, family, or other activities.

DACA has initiated fast-paced (2-1/2 hour) high school type meets into their competition schedule. They and other area teams try to duplicate the format and team oriented feeling found at high school and college events by incorporating dual meets between the three-day weekends.

Teams in Southern California try hard when planning a Friday through Sunday meet to keep sessions to a maximum of four hours per day.

By generating feelings of good will, communicating philosophies to swimmers and parents up front, and demonstrating effective and fun coaching techniques, coaches allow a positive relationship to grow with their swimming families that can bond an athlete to a program even during tough times and improvement plateaus.

As Oesting says, "The future of U.S. Swimming lies in the hands of young athletes, and it is up to the leaders of the swimming community and the coaches with whom they interact to devise a technique which will keep those athletes interested in swimming until they are old enough to realize the benefits that they are receiving from the sport."

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