

# Training the Club Swimmer

*Some guidelines on how to handle the age-grouper*

By Don Gambril and Alfred Bay

*(Editor's note: The following is an excerpted chapter from a forthcoming book by Don Gambril and Alfred Bay. The first chapter of the book, on organizing and starting a swim team, ran in the August-October 1984 issue (Vol. 21, No. 2). This particular chapter is on training as it relates to an age-group program.)*

I believe all swimmers should establish a sound foundation of correct stroke mechanics and middle-distance training when they are young. It is much easier to learn from the start how to swim correctly than it is to purge bad habits years later. It is important that the swimmer begin building stamina, increasing heart and lung capacity, and developing strength while he or she is still growing rapidly.

A case can be made that *more is better*. It is true that the young, growing body has amazing recuperative powers. This has been demonstrated many times. Forbes Carlile of Australia, for example, has had swimmers under 10 years of age training 50 miles a week. I believe it is possible that a 12-year-old be conditioned to swim 20,000 meters a day, six days a week (112 miles a week) without physical harm, but I would not endorse such training. I believe that psychological and

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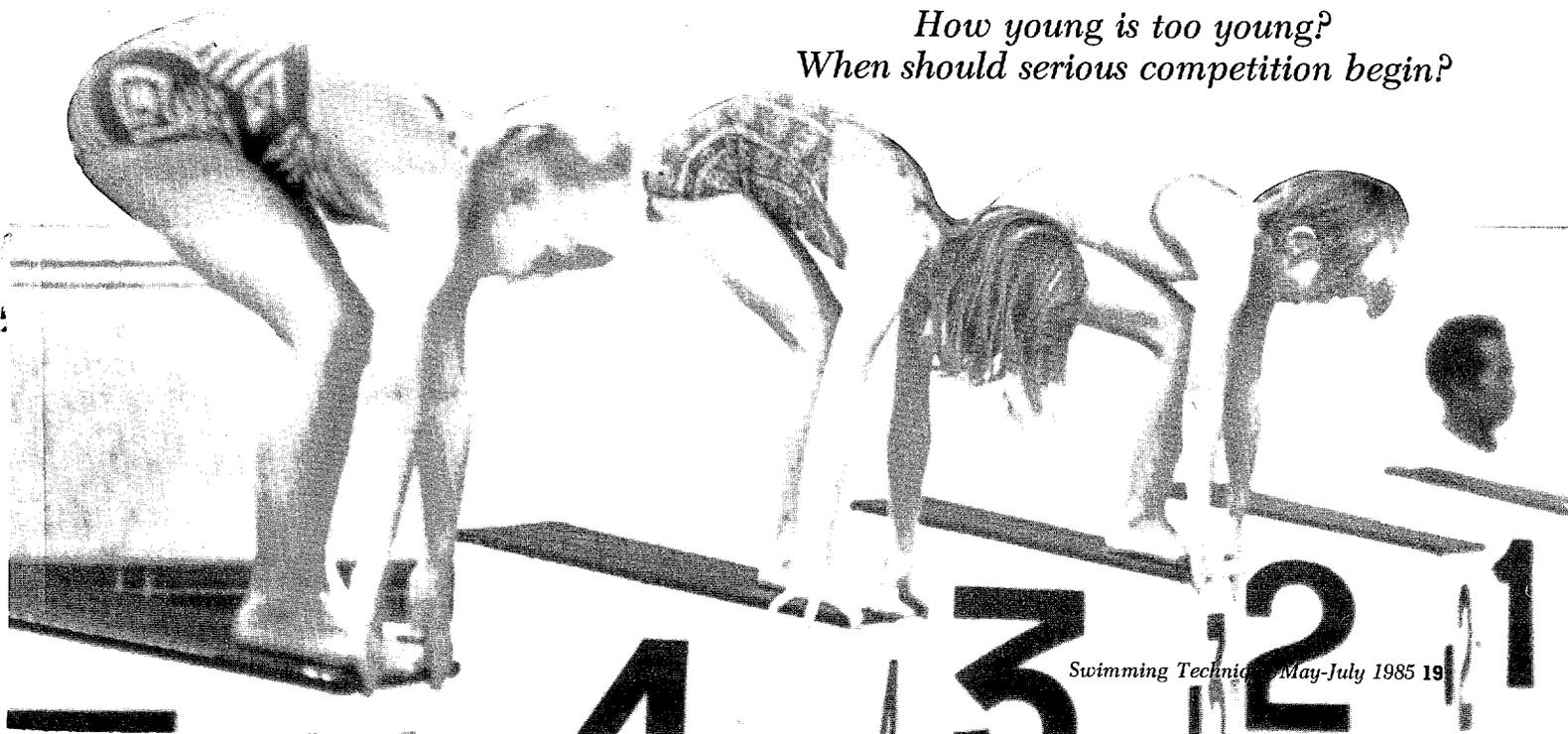
*Don Gambril is the head coach of the United States Olympic team and the University of Alabama swimming team. Alfred Bay is a freelance writer.*

social considerations should determine the limits of training mileage, not sheer physical capacity.

The typical young athlete is just not equipped to handle the tedium of long-distance training<sup>1</sup>. If training becomes too demanding—or just too boring—the swimmer will leave the sport. Anymore, few Olympic medals are won by swimmers younger than 17. In fact, the average age of world-class swimmers is increasing; some now are as old as 25. If a swimmer is to succeed in international, or even in national, competition, he or she will have to stay in the sport eight, 12, maybe even 18 years. It is the age-group coach's responsibility to consider the long-range effects on the training course and to allow each swimmer to develop in his or her own time.

Burn-out can be avoided. Ample time must be given for social and recreational activities—those connected with swimming, as well as those not. Mileage should be broken up with skill-improvement activities and concentrated work on technique. There is strong evidence from the most successful programs in the United States today that shorter (but higher quality) yardage supplemented with strength work, both in-water and dryland, is a more effective vehicle than the currently popular long-slow-distance. Some of the most successful coaches in the country are utilizing this method: Jonty Skinner, Jay Fitzgerald, Mark Schubert, Jack Nelson, Pat Hogan to name a few. Others will be quick to follow. ▶

*How young is too young?  
When should serious competition begin?*



## Club swimming

I endorse middle-distance, all-stroke training for age-group swimmers. Just what that means—how much mileage, in what manner, at what age—I shall discuss next. However, keep in mind that the actual content of training is not as important as the development of self-motivation and a good mental attitude. When to begin? At what age should a child learn how to swim? How young a child should compete? There has been much argument over these two questions. Babies are now being taught how to swim before they can walk. My daughter, Kim, learned when she was four. I didn't especially plan it; it just happened like that, but I think that was early enough. She didn't start swimming seriously or competing until several years later. She went on to rank in the top 25 in the world.

I have seen 5-year-olds competing in the 25-yard butterfly and have been amazed at how well they can do it. I question the wisdom of this, though. Seven or 8 seem to be better ages at which a child should start racing. Before that, a youngster should compete in no more than one or two 25-yard freestyle races. These first years are best spent having fun—enjoying the water and the other kids. The time in the water should be spent learning the basics of technique through water games, such as picking objects off the bottom of the pool or retrieving floating rings or balls thrown into the pool.

### Ages 7 and 8

Seven- and 8-year-olds need more structured practice. A tremendous amount of teaching needs to be done: stroke technique, body position, starts, timing, rhythm and turns (turns should be taught on both sides). All strokes should be taught and practiced, but until sufficient strength is developed through kicking and pulling drills, not much time should be spent swimming butterfly. And the drills must be repeated often. A coach should never allow the young swimmer to get away with sloppy technique.

Competition should be part of daily practice, but it should be fun, relaxed, and should have a social thrust; such things are relays: "Alligators" versus "Crocodiles." There should be little criticism; kindness goes much further with this age than hard discipline.

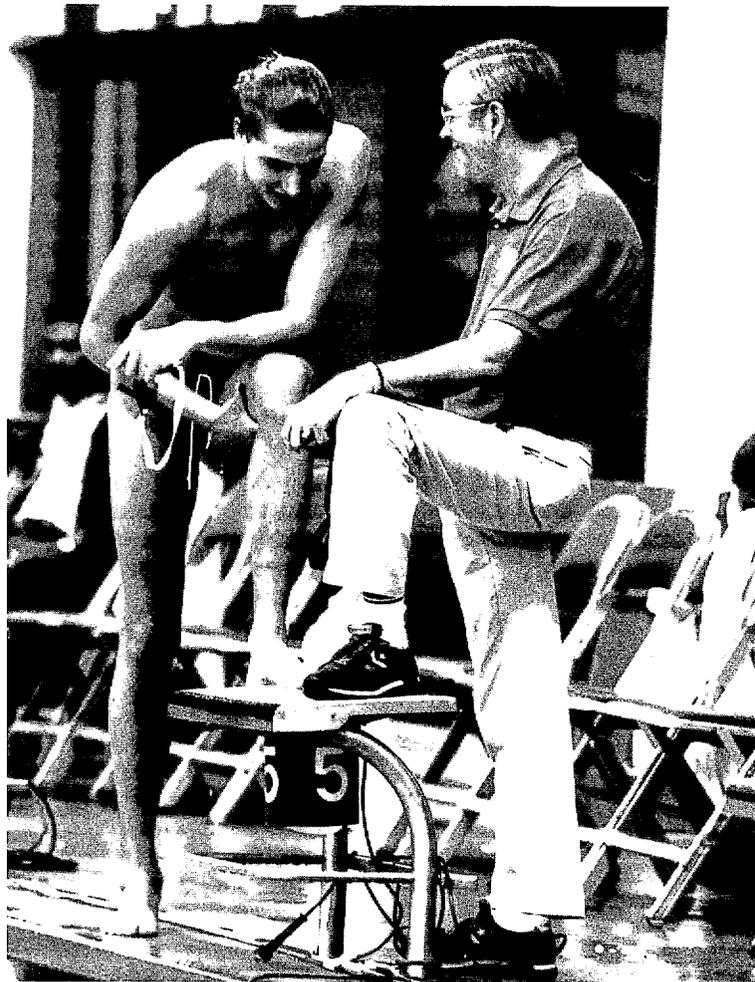
This is also a good age to introduce dryland work—no weight training yet, but flexibility work and conditioning exercises. People this young rarely benefit directly from the strength or flexibility work, but the exercises become part of the routine discipline that will be necessary when they get older. These exercises improve coordination and provide variety, which helps keep workouts interesting.

It is a good idea for swimmers of this age (or a little older) to start keeping a log book of workouts and weekly mileage totals. This gives them a feel for the content and rhythm of the training course and allows them to see documented improvement. It also develops interest in statistics.

The coach, of course, should also keep track of mileage. Seven- and 8-year-olds should be swimming no more than five miles a week, and spending no more than one and a half hours, three days a week, in the water.

### Ages 9 and 10

We hold five practice sessions a week for this age group, totaling no more than 12 hours (weekly)—meets, team meetings and social events inclusive. Absences should be permitted for involvement in other activities, such as Scouting.



(Photo by Tim Morse)

Don Gambriel and Jens-Peter Berndt: "I will hold a one-to-one conference with a swimmer at any time during the year. Motivation is the key to improvement."

Especially at this age, the swimmer should be encouraged to maintain outside interests.

The 9-year-olds work out from 60 to 90 minutes a day and cover a maximum weekly distance of 25,000 to 30,000 yards. The 10-year-olds work about two hours a day, with a commensurate increase in yardage.

Intervals should generally be kept short so that the swimmer can concentrate on good form and hard effort (though, once in a while, a long swim of a mile or more offers a challenging change of pace). At this age, work emphasizing forced oxygen debt is introduced. This work will continue through the age of 11 or 12 for girls, and 13 or 14 for boys.

At about this age, great disparities in the maturation levels of age peers develop. Some girls are fully mature at 11 or 12 and are ready for an adult training load. Some boys aren't ready physically or emotionally for that kind of work until they are 13 or 14. This should be taken into account, and training groups should be composed by performance, as well as by age, with time standards being instituted for each training lane. Remember that "late bloomers" frequently turn out to be the best swimmers when they get older; these more slowly developing swimmers must be given attention and encouragement. They should work more over-distance and do less sprint or quality effort.

For example, Tim Shaw, one young swimmer who was in my program from the age of 9 until he was almost 15, trained only one session a day. Yet less than two years later, when he was 16 and doing double workouts with Dick Jochums, he broke the world record in the 400-meter freestyle. He was the best in the world for several years. It is difficult to judge the future of a swimmer by his or her capabilities when young. Long miles and long hours aren't the best course for everyone.

*"Each practice session should include group activities that are fun, but also have conditioning value."*

The 9- or 10-year-old swimmer should have a sound grasp of style and of the mechanics of all four strokes, starts and turns. It is time to start teaching him or her the basics of training theory and practice: what the different types of training are, and the benefits of each; how to time splits, figure pace and monitor one's pulse.

Each practice session should include group activities that are fun, but also have conditioning value: water polo, tread-water tag, crazy medleys—arms only, legs only, one arm only, etc. Time should also be set aside for social interaction, but this should not be allowed to get out of hand. Swimmers this age sometimes have difficulties concentrating and getting down to work; a highly structured program, with some leniency but with ultimately firm discipline, seems to work best for them.

There will be great competition for these youngsters' attention: little league, band, Scouts, friends, school, church. The coach may have to make an attempt to sell the youngster and his or her parents on swimming. On the other hand, the coach must be frank and point out the amount of time and effort that will be required, as well as the commitment that will be asked of the young swimmer. Don't scare them with tales of sacrifice, but be realistic. Other activities can still be indulged to a degree, but at this age the youngster should start thinking about how much effort he or she is willing to put into the sport.

By the time the swimmer has been competing seriously for two or three years (age 13 or 14), he or she should have decided. The decision should be discussed with coach. If the swimmer has decided to drop the sport, the coach should not exert contrary pressure. If the swimmer has decided that he or she likes swimming, wants to continue training and competing, but is not willing to put in the effort the team and coach expect, the swimmer should seriously consider another program. If the decision is for swimming—serious swimming with a total commitment—goals should be set for the individual, and an attack plan developed and endorsed by the swimmer.

The talk, the plan, the agreement of the swimmer give the coach leverage and license to work that individual to his or her limits.

### Ages 11 Through 13

By the age of 11, most girls are ready for serious competition. They are ready to add stress work to their training regimen, and to train twice a day (10 or 11 sessions a week). The most mature girls can handle 60,000 to 80,000 yards a week at this age. On the other hand, boys tend to mature more slowly; most of them will not be ready for this level of work until they are 13.

We start our 11-year-olds (boys and girls) on an effective dryland program. At first, most of the work is light—body-weight-against-gravity work such as pull-ups, sit-ups and push-ups; or resistance work with devices such as pull buoys, drag suits, pull tubes, etc. (Be careful not to strain the young shoulders.) As the individual matures, and if facilities are available, we start him or her weight lifting.

Some parents worry about their daughters doing weight work (though, with the burgeoning popular appreciation of physical fitness and development for women, the numbers of the uninformed are decreasing). They think that the resultant muscular development will be unsightly and unhealthy, or even that the work will endanger the girl's reproductive capabilities. These fears are all unfounded. Weight training will not change bone structure—or increase the number of

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## Club swimming

muscle fibers in the body. All that happens is that the existing fibers swell as their work capacity increases. The typical female has much less potential for strength and muscle bulk gain than the typical male. And for both male and female, at this young age the increase in muscle bulk will not be that great. What usually results is general toning and an increase in definition.

There is nothing wrong with a girl developing her musculature; she will feel better, look better and certainly swim better. When the weight training ceases, the muscles will atrophy and return to their previous size. Further, there is no more danger of a girl injuring her reproductive organs by weight lifting than there is of a boy injuring his.

When using weights, precautions should be taken. The coach must make sure that *everyone* using the weights understands correct lifting technique, spotting technique and the proper patterns of breathing. Proper form must always be insisted upon.

### And Older

By the age of 14 (15 for slow maturers) the serious swimmer should be spending 20 to 30 hours training every week<sup>3</sup>, covering (at peak season) 60,000 to 90,000 yards, and handling a full complement of dryland work. The dryland work includes running, flexibility exercises and the following lifts with free weights on the pool deck: bench press, triceps press, half, squats<sup>4</sup>, and upright rowing. If Nautilus equipment is available and convenient, it is preferable to free weights, since there is less chance of injury with Nautilus.

The work this age group is doing is componently the same as the work done by my senior swimmers. The differences are: the overall mileage is less (though some 14- and 15-year-olds train like seniors and compete successfully against seniors); the strength work is not as heavy, and the long distance group is not separated as often.

Do not be discouraged if swimmers of this age experience slumps; it is quite common. Consider Linda Kurtz, who won her national medals at 15 and didn't win a race for our university team until she was 23.

### The Training Schedule

I have always encouraged my teams—age-group and university—to train year-round. The work is not of maximum load during the whole year—recovery time is needed during and after the competitive season—but is always enough at least to *maintain* conditioning.

Our training course begins in September. This is a time for regrouping, resting and planning for the coming year; in September we do little or no interval work and just enough mileage to keep in shape. The swimmers are tired and in need of a break after the hard summer course and the championship meets in August. We devote a good deal of time to team social functions: picnics, waterskiing, a day at the beach. This is the time to draw new people into the program and make them feel they are part of the team.

In September, I may hold a few seminars for the older swimmers to discuss training philosophy, program content and team structure. We hold a team meeting to map out the upcoming season, to predict who our toughest competitors are going to be, and to discuss what we are going to have to do to beat them. We also set team goals; these might be winning the city meet and placing at the nationals, or just placing



(Photo by Chris Georges)

*Fighting boredom is one of the most challenging tasks a coach is faced with. Each day must offer something new and interesting.*

a certain number of individuals. Or our goals might be presented in terms of time standards.

I like to have a conference with each team member individually at this time of year. We discuss the individual's strengths and weaknesses and define areas in which work is most needed. We set a personal goal (or goals) for the individual for that year. This gives me something to work with; it lends immediate purpose to the training, a purpose I can remind them of when they are discouraged. So if they ever ask, "How come we have to do that, Coach?" I can answer, "If you want to place at the regionals, you're going to have to swim a 3:50. If you're going to swim a 3:50, you've got to knock another three seconds off each of these intervals . . . So get going."

At these meetings, I also tell the swimmer what I expect of him or her in terms of hours in the water, total mileage, captaincy, etc. This is a convenient time to discuss long-range commitments, if such discussion is appropriate.

Of course, if necessary, I will hold a one-to-one conference with the swimmer (or a parent-coach-swimmer conference) at any time during the year. Remember, motivation is the key to eliciting improvement!

(Continued on page 32)