

HANDS-OFF APPROACH

WHY DO SOME YOUNGSTERS SUCCEED IN THE POOL AND OTHERS BURN OUT?

Paddy Hintz goes poolside to find out

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It's 4.30am and the alarm goes. You force yourself to get dressed and go in and wake up your son.

By 5.10 he's had toast, his bags are packed and you're in the car on the way to the pool. Every day except Sunday.

It's a big commitment, but his times keep coming down and he's making steady progress. He hasn't made any overseas teams yet, but he's not far off.

Then one day he comes home, throws his wet towel on the bed, eats his customary 12 Weet-Bix and says he doesn't want to do it any more. He's missing out on too much fun with his mates.

Do you...

- (a) Go completely off the deep end when you consider how much time and energy you've put in?
- (b) Seize him and his togs and march him down to the nearest pool, where he's forced to do a quick 10km?
- (c) Plead, cajole, beg and bribe him with the promise of a new car when he's 17, just to keep him at it now he's so close?

If you can empathise at all with the above scenario, count yourself out as the parent of a potential swimming champion.

The latest success story in Australian swimming, Chandler Swimming Club coach Shannon Rollason, says when a child suffers early burnout, it's usually the parents who are at fault.

In only nine years of full-time coaching, 16 of Rollason's swimmers have made Australian teams, defying the accepted wisdom that coaches need to spend a lengthy apprenticeship in the bush before they can coach at the top level in the city.

Since the 31-year-old former Breaststroker decided to concentrate on his obvious talent to train sprinters, his charges have smashed every Australian age record for the 50m and the 100m from 15 years to Open level, numerous Australian relay records and a world club relay record.

His top two swimmers, sprint queens Jodie Henry and Alice Mills, stunned everyone at the Manchester Commonwealth Games and PanPacs in Yokohama recently, with Henry breaking Susie O'Neill's Commonwealth and Australian records for the 100m Freestyle.

Rollason says one of the worst things parents can do is watch their children train.

"In all the years I have spent swimming and now coaching, I have never seen one success story come from the kids whose parents came to the pool and watched them train," he says.

"Kids don't want to be coached by their parents. Parents need to be neutral. That's good parenting."

The message from the country's top coaches is that if you want your child to be a champion, leave it up to them and don't take too much of an interest in who they beat and what times they do.

In an era when coaches are in the headlines often for the wrong reasons, it's also a message that some parents may not be too comfortable hearing.

But swimming, Rollason says, is only half of what children learn in a squad, and for that reason parents need to have a good relationship with the people with whom they leave their children, often for up to five hours a day.

Indoorpool coach Robert Cusack, a Mexico Olympics medallist and swimming teacher of 27 years' standing, says reaction to the message is mixed.

"Some parents are happy to learn," Cusack says. "But others definitely don't like the message. Having children is a learning curve. But a lot of people don't want to learn, they want to rule."

While Rollason tries to have twice-yearly meetings to instruct people on how to be a swimming parent, Cusack and his co-coach and son Simon go as far as issuing a leaflet of instructions.

Among the most important ... **"Don't come to training"**.

Parents, Cusack's instruction manual says, should not expect any return for the effort they put in. They should never push their child to excel, nor should they compare them with others.

"Often kids might be like sparring partners," Cusack says.

"They can urge each other on in training to do great things. Two competitive kids can be a great support for each other. But often the parents get in and cause a division – they want their child to beat the other one. Where once you had two kids working together, when the parents become very competitive the kids become arch-enemies and they lose something very valuable."

Rollason says while coaching is all about creating a team environment, it's also important to create an environment in which kids feel safe to excel. Parents, therefore, should resist the urge to reinforce what the coach is saying.

"If a child has a bad swim, I'll go through that swim with them and criticise it in a constructive way so they can learn from the experience," Rollason says. "Parent A will say to their kids, 'Good swim, good on you, and what did the coach say? Oh well, maybe you can try that next time.'"

"Parent B, on the other hand, will find out what the coach said and say it to them over and over again, constantly reminding them about it.

"When I know I've got parents like that, I tend to take the other role, saying 'good swim', because I know the parents will say all that other stuff. If a parent has three kids and one of them swims, they don't have to be at every meet.

"The rest of the family has to have a life, too. The important thing is to know when to be there and when not to be there."

Cusack says that if parents cannot support the coach, they should leave.

"Negative parents flock together, they sit together at carnivals talking about everything from the coach to the pool," he says.

"And their attitude pollutes the whole team. People don't mean to do it. It's just part of their psyche, I suppose. But negative people breed negative people and positive people breed positive people. It's a cycle we try to break, but it's very difficult.

"Behaviour that is imprinted is very difficult to break because people revert when the chips are down. When the crunch time comes, they're not going to have time to think so they just revert."

Cusack believes very strongly in the power of words. Signs adorn the side of his pool and the gym, pointing to the power of friendship and the value of traits such as loyalty.

They are sayings from the Bible.

Rollason says swimmers learn life skills, such as when things get tough, you don't just give up.

"Parents need to see the big picture," he says. "They want guarantees that their kids will do well. That's a defeatist attitude and you're beaten from the start.

“It’s all about allowing the kids to be the best they can be.

“I swam for 14 years and the best I ever did was to be a finalist in the Open Nationals. People used to say to me, ‘Gee, you must have been disappointed.’ But I was rapt.

“People think if you don’t win you’re a failure. I say if you don’t try you’re a failure.”

TIPS FOR CHAMPION PARENTS

Coach Shannon Rollason says junior swimmers (11 and under) need to swim three to four times a week.

From then on, boys need seven to eight sessions a week, girls six to seven. Once they get really serious they need to put in eight to 10 sessions a week. For girls, that starts at 13; for boys, 17 to 18.

Olympic medallist and Indooroopilly coach Robert Cusack and his son Simon, also a coach, issue these guidelines to parents...

DO

- Be willing to make personal sacrifices with no expected returns.
- Adjust meal times to suit your child’s training schedule.
- Congratulate them when they swim well – encourage them when they don’t.
- Be aware of their feelings (tiredness, nervousness, self-esteem levels) and show them, through your actions, that you are aware of them.
- Get them to training and pay their fees.
- Spend time with your other children who don’t swim.
- Let them make all the major decisions about swimming.

DON'T

- Watch training.
- Push your child to train harder.
- Pick up your child’s swimming gear after training.
- Get too involved, encourage your child to swim faster, compare them with another swimmer or try to back up what the coach says.
- Judge your child by his or her achievements.