

Getting Involved in Competitive Swimming

Families come to swimming in many different ways. A neighbor comes home from the pool with news of their child starting swimming, and the attraction moves from house to house. Your cousin has a child join the team at the local YMCA. Maybe one day a flyer came home from school that touted how “swimming builds strong bodies 164 ways”, or a local club coach visits your summer club team one afternoon and recommends that Susie or Johnny swim year-round. Or the learn to swim teacher tells you that Susie has some talent, and should try the swim team. Maybe you saw the Olympics, or the National Championships on TV, and thought to yourself... “what a healthy, safe sport”... or even your child came home from the pool and said, “Mom, I want to join the swim team.” Possibly you were even a competitive swimmer yourself, in High School or college, and know firsthand of the values to be gained from the sport. In any case, one thing is certain... another person introduces you to the sport. That’s important. Swimming has a lot of ‘salespeople’ out there, because it has captured the imagination of so many people.

Let’s talk for a minute about the values of the sport. We’ll list just a few...

1. Swimming is healthy. Injuries are few, and mild. The sport has been shown time and again to be the best sport for overall conditioning of the body. It provides cardiovascular fitness, muscular fitness, and increased flexibility.
2. Swimming provides self-discipline. No one can make a person swim. They must develop an inner sense of discipline to devote themselves to the sport. More about this later.
3. Swimming provides a sense of quality. The young athlete learns that success comes from doing things properly. Technique is vital. The ability to learn technique is vital. Learning is vital.
4. Swimming is a direct reward system. The better you work, the greater your reward. The time clock is an objective judge of the result. No judges with subjective scores, no dependence on the efforts of others, just you and the clock to evaluate your effort.
5. Swimming teaches the relationship between team and individual. Neither team nor individual can exist and prosper in swimming without the other. It teaches people to work with others.
6. Swimming teaches organization. The swimmer has to organize their day to fit in all the life activities they want. They learn to do so. (and in doing, usually become much better students. Swimmers are almost always better students when they are training and competing.)
7. Swimming teaches people how to win, how to lose with grace, and how to develop a personal philosophy that will make them long-term successes in life. They learn to evaluate their efforts, set goals, and achieve. They gain an athlete’s mind that says, “I can control my life, and the results of it. If it is to be, it’s up to me.”
8. Swimming is about values, and the learning of those values is why your child should be involved in swimming.

Now, why should you be involved? What is your role in all of this to be? It’s clear when you first visit a team that there are a lot of parents around swim teams. Most of them seem to already know what’s going on. Their talk is filled with terms like “splits” and “prelims” and “negative splits” and the always popular (and disturbing) “he died in that race.” Alarming. And what is this about 6 AM workouts? And we travel where for swim meets? What is the entry fund? Where do you learn about all of this, and in the end, is it all worth it?

Well, much of what your child gets out of all this will depend on you. As a parent, you are the child’s anchor, their stability. Over the years of your child’s competitive career, what you do and don’t do, will have a profound effect on the satisfaction they derive from the sport. As a coach, I

can assure you that you are critical to the quality of their experience. I can also assure that the happiness that you get from your child's experience in the sport will depend entirely on the approach and philosophy that you bring to the swimming program.

You need to examine your own motives periodically... and you can be sure that others will evaluate your motives as well! Swim Teams are a lot like small towns... part of the fun is relating to those around you. In this book, certain terms will be repeatedly used. Fun is one of those. You should have fun, and your child the swimmer should have fun. Sports in general should be fun. Almost no one makes their living by performing a sport... and certainly not by swimming (although "the times they are a-changin"). So there is a little economic pressure. You and your child participate in swimming for the pleasure it can give, and the great values and lessons it can teach. Keep that in mind.

Now back to fun. As a parent, one of your tasks is to guide your child through some of the types of experiences that will provide the growth and values that you want them to get from swimming. Fun can mean a lot of different things at different times, places, and situations. It can be "amusement park style" with laughter, excitement, and unbridled joy, or it can be a quiet satisfaction for a job well done, and an effort will made. Both experiences, and the full spectrum in between, are available in swimming. Part of what you will do in swimming is to help your child recognize the value of each type of fun.

The learning process that your child goes through will be key in their development. Swimming can help children learn to learn, and realize that they do learn, and make progress, due to their own personal effort. In this process, there are lessons that teach the value of persistence, courage and judgement, as well as direct lessons on the value of effort, and the cause-and-effect relationship.

Along the path that the athlete follows, is a sign that says, "Compete." This one sign is perhaps the most confusing part of the path for parents (though young people "naturally" seem to understand it better). The way to avoid the confusion, and prepare yourself in a proper philosophical framework for the sport, is to remember that the word "competition" comes from the old Greek that translates to, "STRIVE WITH." The words are important... "Strive"... to try hard... "With"... a cooperative image. And that is exactly what happens in swimming. The swimmers dive in, and swim side by side down the pool, each trying to swim faster than the other. It is not against anyone... like football, or basketball... it is with. Trying with. Striving With. Competing With.

Understanding the nature of true competition is a vital lesson in this book. In order for your child to reach their personal potential, they must be surrounded by people with whom they can truly "compete" (strive with). Without competition, it is impossible for a young person to push themselves to the true degree of their capabilities. The better the competitor, the more of themselves the young person must call on to meet the challenge and "strive with." Much more on this topic later, and some specific examples will follow. For now, remember that the ultimate value that your child will gain from the sport, has everything to do with the people around them, and the competition that engenders.

Many parents fall prey to the "competition urge." They misinterpret the word and think things like "compete against." But there is no against. "Compete against" is an oxymoron. The parents who run afoul of this are easy to spot... they are the ones concerned about "winning," and "beating so and so," or "Winning your race!" They say things like, "you have to beat so and so," or "you lost to Sammy," or "We won!" These are success seekers carried to an unhealthy extreme. Learning to finish first is only a small part of the learning process, as is learning to finish in other positions in the race. In all of youth sport, there are inappropriate role models in abundance. And all because they fail to recognize the meaning of the word, "Competition."

“Success seekers” miss the point. Success is personal growth for their child... not first place. And the “We” is a dangerous idea... they didn’t swim a stroke of the race, nor learn the flip turn, nor put their head down and drive the last five strokes to the wall. The child did that. The child has the learning process and deserves the praise. The parent provides the support to help make all this happen. And that is all.

There is an emotional roller coaster for swimming parents to ride. There is a great tendency to say “We” where the child’s name will suffice. There is a tendency to identify with child’s accomplishment. And it is a tendency that must be overcome if your child is to have a long and satisfying swimming career.

This brings us to an examination of: What is your role as parent in the “Parent, Coach, and Athlete” triangle? For that matter, what is the proper role of the other two? The answer simple, and direct.

The parent provides emotional support (an anchor) and physical support for the athlete. (Much more later)

The coach provides technical expertise that is unavailable anywhere else in the triangle, and to a lesser degree, motivation in the form of vision, and challenge, and emotional support.

The athlete brings the raw material... the eagerness to learn, to develop, to respond. The willingness to grow as a person, and later, the willingness to become an active contributor in their own development.

That’s really all there is to it. There are grey areas between these, and there always will be. If parents remember that they are in the sport for the values and development it can bring to their child, and coaches remember that they are dealing with a precious young life, the grey areas all work themselves out quite nicely. Let me close this chapter by telling you that as a parent, you need to relax, remember that both enjoyment and development are in the sport for your child to find, and keeping your sense of humor handy at all times will get you through it. Sounds just like being a parent at all other times and places, doesn’t it?

*Taken from the book Parent Coach and Athlete: A Hand-book for Age Group Swimming Parents
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