

News For

SWIM PARENTS

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The “Stroke Guru”

By John Leonard

Our old buddy Albert Einstein is credited with saying “*all things should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler*”. Occasionally we run into one of those situations in Swimming. I received a letter last month from a coach who said “*I discovered that a few swimmers on my team were secretly seeing a ‘private coach’ for stroke work. By word of mouth, one swimmer who had been taking lessons from this person did well at a taper meet and the word spread. The stroke guru got the credit for the improvement instead of the parents crediting the training in the club setting, or the effort of the child herself getting credit. Naturally, not wanting to miss a good thing, parents flocked to the guru, without telling any of the team coaches. We just noted people missing from practice at time to time.*”

My first thought was “can’t blame parents for wanting the best for their children”.

She went on, “*We weren’t happy with this situation because the guru taught the strokes differently than we do, and it was undermining our program, and besides, the coach started contacting the children by phone when they were at swim meets to ‘help them’.*”

My second thought was “well of course, you can’t have two coaches telling one child how to swim a stroke...all it produces is a confused child...and the phone thing...well, that’s just too much ego disguised as “caring”.

“Our facility and organization do not allow private lessons, and not one parent had approached us about work on a specific skill or technique before seeking outside help.”

Now my mind perked up. Why would an organization not want to allow private instruction? First of all, you can teach in a group, but correcting in a group is close to impossible. Taking the time for individualized feedback during practice to any real extent that is likely to be helpful, is “robbing time” from all the other swimmers. Of course you need private instruction time, and since its needed, it either has to be a part of the coach’s job description, or you have to allow the coach to charge some private and reasonable fees for private instruction.

The organization is asking for trouble when it won’t allow the expertise of its own coaches to be utilized to the fullest possible extent by members of the organization and it’s an open invitation to do something less desirable, like take a child to a “stroke guru” for outside help.

Talk about shooting yourself in the foot!

“I feel the parents are looking for a quick fix and are willing to pay anything to make it happen.....whether it’s a new tech suit or private lessons for their child, in order to “fast track” their swimmer. Am I crazy? Am I paranoid in my thinking that this is a bad thing for our program?”

No Coach, you’re not crazy and it IS a bad thing, both for the children involved, and the program.

1. Stroke technique is a critical piece of constructing a swimmer’s success. And the coach who works with the child everyday must be in charge of constructing and correcting that technique. Trying to do it once a week, without watching the child train daily, is like trying to cook a meal by telephone from 1000 miles away . Can’t be done. But what WILL happen is that when the child swims well, the parent and the child will attribute the positive to the guru...(because that’s what is different) and the guru will happily accept that applause....and when the child swims poorly, it will be the fault of the home coach whose training is “not correct.”. **Utter and complete nonsense.**
2. The reality is that swimming success is a complex interplay between technique and training and the two must be in harmony. Only the home coach can do that. The guru is ONLY looking at a snapshot in time when they work with the child and the home coach sees the whole, lifelong movie of the child in action and over time. Does a child need a great deal of technique work? Absolutely, and it must be completely integrated into the training program of the athlete...so the new techniques can be learned first by concentration and focus, then incorporated into some moderately stressful sets and finally into the crucible of competition. If you can’t do it under pressure, it is of zero value to the athlete.

3. Every coach needs to be a good teacher of technique. And every organization must realize that to be successful, they must provide all they can to enhance the success of each athlete...including supporting private correctional assistance as needed by the coach's judgment.
4. As a Parent, we all want what is best for our children. We should chose a swimming team based first on the character of the coach....if your child grows up a lot like the coach (and many will, since they spend so much time with them...) would you be happy with that? Second, based on the technical teaching and training skill of that coach.

While it is tempting to “go somewhere else” for an appetizer and then to the home coach for the main course and then somewhere else for dessert, it's a LOT better for the long term health of the athlete's swimming career, to have the “whole meal” in one setting.

Remember that the bottom line of performance is confidence in what you are doing and commitment to one team, one coach and one organization. Swimming is far too difficult a sport to be done individually...it takes a team.