

THOUGHTS ON AGE GROUPERS AND MEETS: ENGINEERING SUCCESS

Meets are fun when kids swim fast. Championship meets are especially fun when kids swim fast. I want to be happy/content at meets. I try to engineer things so everyone is happy.

The Big Picture: think several steps ahead of where you are now: give kids the tools to be successful down the road at the highest levels, not just today at this level. Kids with talent or with good training can get away with a lot locally when they are young. If they want to succeed as seniors nationally, they can't have those weaknesses.

Reverse engineering: figure out what you want in the end, and the common nightmares you want to avoid, then work backwards so that you create – somewhat systematically – the sort of age group racers that you want.

1. Go to the meet to swim fast, to be a player, not to get a t-shirt, not 'for the experience.'

Nightmare: swimmers whose goal is to “make the cut”, who accomplish their goal, attend the meet “for the experience,” swim terribly, finish 97th...

Much of the problem can be alleviated through **proper goal-setting**:

Step 1 (necessary but not sufficient) is to make the qualifying standard;

THEN comes step 2, which is to go to the meet and swim fast.

We talk about this ALL THE TIME.

Making cuts early in the season (see Goal #2) allows time for swimmers to re-set their goals, to refocus their expectations and intentions.

I compile and distribute GOAL SHEETS, not only with qualifying standards, but also with TIMES TO FINAL.

2. Make cuts early; don't wait until the last minute.

Nightmare: swim slow throughout the season,

=having to “over-race” their main events because they keep missing cuts,

=then making the cut in a “last chance” meet, the emotional high-point of the season,

=then attending the championship and swimming miserably.

I do not like kids waiting until the last minute to qualify for championship meets.

I want them **focusing their training and their expectations on their target meet from well in advance**,

Use incentive programs to encourage early qualifying: e.g., Missouri Grand Prix.

I post a list of championship meet qualifiers from the day after our first meet of the season, shout up the qualifiers at every opportunity, and be sure to update the list with each meet.

Swimming fast (enough) early means you have options: at meets we can swim what we want to, not what we have to.

It must be emphasized to the swimmers and parents how important regular attendance at the team meets is for a swimmer's progress.

3. Have options: be versatile (so your whole swimming life doesn't hinge on the results of one event).

Nightmare: spend five days at a meet for one swim, then going too slow in the morning and being finished, disappointed. We came all this way for that!?!?

This is a training program goal rather than a strictly meet goal, but it has huge implications for how meets will go.

Train for everything; be good at everything. The more versatile a swimmer, the more choices and options available.

Also, the more events, the more the pressure is spread out and the levels of stress are manageable.

4. LEARN to and practice swimming fast in the mornings, so you can swim at night at the championships.

Nightmare: the problem of the local hero: establishing habits physical and mental of swimming slow in prelims in local P&F meets because they can, doing the same at nationals where they cannot, and watching finals from the stands.

What kids can get away with locally they cannot nationally, so DO NOT LET THEM locally.

The coach must emphasize morning swims: they are IMPORTANT! Just because you made finals doesn't mean it was good enough!!! [Coaches are often complicit in the problem: "good for a morning", "nicely done, you made it back..."]

Swimmers and coaches must set standards over and above local expectations. If necessary, put teeth into these standards: The Julia Game. [I would prefer to watch mistakes during the season than at the championships]

Use local invitationals as practice for nationals.

5. Swim fast all season long, and fastest at the end. I want frequent best times, with planned “bumps”.

Nightmare: beat them down all season, swimming slow and expecting to swim slow, putting much too much pressure on their last meet to salvage a season of work, swimming fast once a season or once a year.

=Train fast. Tie practice performance to meet expectations.

=Meet performances are largely a function of swimmers’ expectations. They must expect to swim fast or they will not; they will expect to if they are swimming fast in practice and you tell them they will swim fast at the meet.

=Swim fast, even with little to no rest.

=They swim fast all season, not just once at the end. Progress is continual and cumulative.

No “in season” slow swimming then expecting “taper meet” speed. Even when this “works,” they swim fast once a season, so they make progress once a season; most of the time they are treading water or moving backwards from where they were six months previous!

Planned Periodic Bumps: plan the meet schedule well: the right meets at the right time so as to make little to mid-sized jumps all season long.

Bumps are psychological and physical leaps forward. “Bump” meets are practically built for swimming fast:

- good teams from a wide area,
- kids they haven’t raced before (so no established pecking order),
- a fairly high level of competition,
- a prelims and finals format with pressure to swim fast twice.

Training + raised expectations = a bump in performance: best times and nice steps forward, = a rearranging of goals and expectations for future training and racing.

Bumps keep the swimmers moving forward, meaning motivated.

6. Give a consistent effort and quality of performance, especially throughout a long and hard meet.

& 7. Create self-reliant kids who know how to think for and take care of themselves during a meet.

Nightmare: Kids who are wildly inconsistent from event to event; kids who fade badly during the course of a long meet and who are good for nothing by the end.

Nightmare: Kids who have no idea how to get ready for their races; kids who expect me to hold their hands or baby-sit them through a meet.

The goal: **creating consistency by planned meet management;**
 creating self-reliance by teaching meet management.

Simply, meet management is planning ahead, creating a mental and physical routine for consistent peak performance that is practiced at every meet, before and after every swim, making every decision during a meet based on what is going to help you race your best, maximizing the recovery after each race so as to prepare for the next one. It means making good choices about how to act at a meet, so that every time you step on the block, you are fully prepared mentally and physically to give a maximum effort/peak performance. Learning how to do this is an important step towards elite level performance.

=There are a myriad of things that are involved in swimming fast at a meet:

 dressing for the weather,
 eating and drinking the right things in the right amounts at the right time,
 paying attention to what race is in the water and when your next race is,
 warming up with the right things at the right intensities at the right times,
 mentally preparing for each race,
 talking through your races with your coach, etc., etc.,
 warming down with the right things at the right intensities at the right time,
 spending your time wisely between sessions and between days.

There is a lot to think about, meaning a lot to stress about, unless it has become a habit.

The worse the conditions and the longer the meet, the more important meet management is.

The greater the stress and more important the meet, the more important both the routine and the self-reliance become.

Each meet becomes an exercise in taking care of your goals, in learning to take care of all those little details so that you don't have to think about them: you do them naturally, automatically, and habitually, so that you can free your mind to focus on the racing.

Expect kids to get better at this throughout the season.

Once swimmers are well-rehearsed in meet management, **their performances are much more consistent** than when "nature takes its course". **Patterns emerge** (which they do not when performances are essentially random), **allowing the coach to see the results of his program.**

Before races

=Talk to your coach before every race.

=Laser-beam focus. 'No matter what' attitude.

=Warm up.

 Purpose thereof

 Content and intensity is key

 Timing is key: 22 minutes before splash.

=A race warmup done too early is worthless; a race warmup that doesn't warm you up and prepare you to race is worthless.

[“When do I warm up?” My answer is: “Warm up when it is appropriate to do so – and if you do not know when that is, Caleb or Julia will help you figure it out.” In this way, the older kids have the responsibility for helping the younger kids figure out how to be self-reliant tough racers.]

After races: the 2-minute drill

- =Finish your race.
- =Talk to me, briefly.
- =Warmdown. *At most two minutes from race finish to splashdown in warmup pool. SWIM!!!*
- Don’t stand around and chat.
- =Warmdown is the beginning of the next race.

Between races

- =Relax and stay off your feet. Cheer for your teammates. Keep warm. Eat & drink appropriately.
- =*Pay attention* to what’s going on; know the order of events, know what race is in the water now, know how many heats of your event and the ones before yours, know when you race, and make sure you plan out your preparation for your next race. The heat sheet is your friend.

8. Obey the ‘Rules for Racing’.

- = Race your guts out.
- =Get your best time in the morning, and move up spots.
- =Always swim faster at night, and move up more spots (unless qualified first, then hold).
- =Swim better as meet progresses and others tire.
- =In any close race, get your hand on the wall first.
- =Get tougher the tougher the conditions. Enjoy the challenge. NO WHINING!
- =Expect to swim fast; decide to swim fast – every time.
- =Learn from your mistakes; fix them. Learn from others’ mistakes; avoid them.
- =Cherish being on relays; swim even faster on relays. (or we’re not going to bother entering them)

Note: our training prepares swimmers so that they can “obey the rules,” we talk about this all the time, and we practice obeying the rules from the first meet onwards every season, so that they expect to succeed.

A MEET MISCELLANY

CHOOSING WHICH MEETS FOR WHICH KIDS: HORSES FOR COURSES

It is easiest and by far most convenient to find meets where the whole team can attend. But there are certain performance drawbacks:

Any given meet will represent very different psychological climates for kids of different levels (and even for different events for a single swimmer):

- chance to win?
- chance to podium?
- chance to final?
- chance for a second swim?
- mired at the bottom?

Each of these situations has **very different attendance pressures/expectations for the swimmer. THIS MATTERS!!! Under what circumstances will each swimmer have the best chance of swimming well?** And, despite what we coaches say about “doing your best”, results matter to the kids, both before (the psychological climate of a swim) and after (evaluating a swim). There must be a chance to “succeed” if the swimmer is to pull out all the stops. **It’s hard to think like a winner if you’re getting seventy-third.**

Therefore, the question: do we treat groups too much as a team and not as individuals with very different needs? And by doing so, do we stunt the progress of most of our swimmers?

Practically, do you send a swimmer to a meet that she just qualified for or just barely qualified for (to finish last or near the bottom; no hope of a second swim), or do you have her attend a lower level meet where she can be a player and is expected to do well, where a good morning swim gets her a second swim. The latter route probably results in much faster meet performances, where the swimmer progresses to the level of being a player in the upper level meet much faster. She doesn’t attend meets “for the experience” [read, “for the experience of swimming slow”], but to swim fast.

Note that this works both ways: teams can generally choose low level “take all comers” meets which often do not challenge the top end, or higher level meets where the bulk of the kids are barely qualifying and getting crushed. Both decisions have consequences for your program as a whole and for the progress of the individuals in it.

That said, it is important that kids see faster swimmers (e.g., Grand Prix meets where an up-and-comer gets to see and compete against Michael Phelps or Natalie Coughlin), learn by watching how these elite performers do their job, and get motivated by being in an elite atmosphere. This can be extraordinarily educational and provide a boost to the next level. But perhaps this is a mid-season experience, not a season-ending championship one.

CHOOSING WHICH EVENTS FOR WHICH KIDS

=The overriding principles here are:

You only have so many bullets in your gun.

Keep getting faster, by planning for getting faster and by intelligent choices.

=The coaches enter the swimmers; not the swimmers, not the parents; we know what the swimmer's need better than they do, and we take the long range view of this meet and how it fits into the bigger picture of the season and year. Controlling events means controlling progression.

=Choosing events intelligently requires **planning** and foresight. Figure out which meets you will attend, what level of competition each is, and find out what will be offered (and what Q standards!) at those meets. Have the entire season in front of you and PLAN, in particular for your stronger kids. (Note: you will probably be thrown some curveballs, both by the meet directors and by your kids' performances, so you must be adaptable.)

=With the whole season in mind, decide **when will you have a swimmer swim his big events.** **The rule is: not often; make each time special, with high expectations.** In particular with distance swims, you only have so many bullets in your gun, especially for the kids who give their all. **Don't overswim an event and allow a swimmer to bore himself into a coach-created plateau.** (I see this all the time: a player swimming her best events every single meet, on teams where they race often. It is almost always the case that by mid-season the swimmer has flatlined.) Note that, since we race about once a month, kids may only swim their best events two or probably three times a season.

= Another rule: **rotate away from success.** After a breakthrough or big time drop in an event, they will almost never swim that event at the next meet (unless absolutely necessary, as for example at a championship), as the likelihood of another improvement is almost nil. But the swimmer (and his parent, and sometimes his coach) will extrapolate from that recent quantum leap and expect another huge gain, which will not happen, resulting in a huge deflation where you want motivation and excitement. Instead, wait for a while, until she is ready to improve. **Give her time to get better!!!**

=**Avoid events where the swimmer is not ready for an improvement** (based on his practice performances). The coach should take preventive measures and, when at all possible, not allow plateaus to happen. **Find events where the swimmer is ready for a bump.**

=Note that for the most part we are trying to set the swimmer up for success. **There are times, however, when we need to purposefully set the swimmer up for failure, when a lesson badly needs learning for a swimmer to continue to develop.** When you do this, you must be sure that the lesson gets learned. Make it explicit. The pain of taking one step backward is well worth the pleasure of taking several forward as a result.

“JUDGING” PERFORMANCES

What standards do you use to evaluate:

- best times (often old, and not representative of current ability)?
- how the time was arrived at (splitting, racing, technique)?
- where achieved (the psychological climate of that swim for that swimmer)?
- the swimmer’s potential in that race (as determined by practice performance)?

You show them what is important to you by what you talk about & how you do it.

What is the purpose of talking to a swimmer after a race: to unloose your feelings about what you just saw, or to get her to race well the next time she gets on the block?

- =The more your post-race talk can be planned and strategic, the better.
- =The key factor here is the psychology of the swimmer, not the emotion of the coach

Beware of breaking a swimmer’s spirit, if your standard of evaluation isn’t hers. If she comes back overjoyed, be overjoyed, and save the criticism for back home on Monday.

PATTERNS

Look for *patterns* to the swims, and use the results to tweak your training program. A pattern means your training (physical, technical, psychological) is producing certain tendencies. This requires going over hitek printouts very carefully. (Note that patterns appear more when swimmers are practicing good meet management; otherwise you often see random results which are impossible to use.)

A huge question: when you watch a swimmer race, are you seeing psychology or physiology or technique? Be open and intelligent and wise and perceptive enough to look for the reasons behind that swim for that swimmer; if you find yourself saying the same thing to everyone, or evaluating every swim the same way, and always blame them, the chances are good that your perception is tightly circumscribed and that you are probably missing a lot.

I sometimes think that many of my kids were put on this earth to confuse me: there is no seeming pattern to their behavior. This is probably my problem rather than theirs: I am missing something important.

TRAVEL MEETS

Prepare your kids to meet the special challenges of travel meets.

Meets are meets, essentially, but travel meets are special:

- =Swimmers cannot control their environment to the extent that they can back home,
- =their moms and dads aren’t there making their decisions for them and smoothing over every problem,
- =kids have to take much more responsibility for making good choices than they ordinarily do. They must PROTECT THEIR GOALS.

=coaches have a captive audience and can use the time to educate swimmers in The Way of a Champion, and in dealing with challenging situations.

=coaches can watch their kids in new situations dealing with more and different stresses.

Swimmers must remember what they came for – to swim fast.

Swimmers must practice making good choices. The question “What’s going to make me swim faster?” should be in their heads constantly.

One of the most important purposes of a travel meet is teaching swimmers to deal with challenges. They have to adapt or die (or at least, swim slow).

Travel meets accelerate a swimmer’s competitive development through their challenges and their lessons. They are MASSIVELY EDUCATIONAL.