

**The York Y Rambler**  
**By Coach Michael**  
**25 March 2009**

***THE END OF ONE, THE  
BEGINNING OF ANOTHER***

We have finished our flurry of weekends with multiple championship meets: Y Districts and Junior Olympics piggy-backing, then Y States and Middle Atlantic Senior Champs and the 10 & Under champs meets all piggy-backing. That leaves only one: the YMCA Nationals meet in Fort Lauderdale for our top seniors.

So, most of our swimmers have already started their summer season, as of this Monday. The intensity is perhaps dropping a little, as we refocus on stroke technique – body position, pulling and kicking efficiency, distance per stroke, and timing – and long kicking, to make sure our foundations are strong for the “harder” swimming to come.

This is an important phase of our summer season, even though it’s still March. I know that several kids have already taken a break this week, or are planning on doing so this coming week. Not such a good idea. We will be taking our team break next month, and taking multiple breaks – your own self-directed one now, and the team’s later – results in your losing more fitness, and having to spend more time later catching back up, than is good.

As a reminder, our official team spring break from training is:

For swimmers not attending the YMCA National meet: Sunday 5 April to Tuesday 14 April; back in the water Wednesday the 15<sup>th</sup>.

For swimmers attending the YMCA Nationals: Friday 10 April to Wednesday 15 April; back in the water Thursday the 16<sup>th</sup>.

And as always, a break from swimming does not mean a break from staying fit. You should be running, bicycling, wrestling, climbing trees, playing soccer or ultimate Frisbee, etc. Wii and other “virtual activities” do not count. Get out and sweat.

***GOING CAMPING***

Toward the end of April, we will be starting our spring/summer series of stroke technique and educational MINI-CAMPS. This series of camps is a major recruitment tool for our team, as we introduce our teaching system and coaching staff to the York competitive swimming community, which goes a long way towards dispelling many of the misconceptions that people have about us.

I will be leaving several copies of the Mini-Camp flyer in each family’s mailbox, and there will also be a large pile of flyers on the team table. Please take and distribute them to swimming families in the area who might be interested in learning about swimming and getting better.

***TO EACH HIS OWN***

Lately we have had a little problem in not having enough common training equipment for our younger swimmers to use during practice: not enough pull buoys, not enough kickboards, not enough fins. And lately we have also had many of our kids, in particular our seniors, taking home the team’s common training equipment in their bags, in order, presumably, to ensure that they will have equipment for practice every day.

I think these two problems are related, and there is one solution to both: **NO ONE TAKES HOME, OR PUTS IN THEIR BAG, OR PUTS IN THEIR LOCKER, ANY TRAINING EQUIPMENT THAT DOES NOT BELONG TO THEM. PERIOD.** Seniors need to have their own personal equipment; they should never need to use the common equipment, and they should never ever take it with them when they leave.

If you have your own equipment, please put your name on each piece, several times and prominently, so that your stuff doesn't get mixed up with others'. And when you leave the pool at night, take your stuff with you, but only your stuff.

### ***BECOMING OFFICIAL***

Both the competitive program and the Tidal Waves have seen a nice influx of new swimmers recently. For those of you who are new, **WELCOME TO THE PROGRAM!!** For those of you who are veterans, please be good resources of information and wisdom, and help our new folks get up to speed as quickly as possible: the swimming culture feels second-nature once you are indoctrinated in it, but when you are new to it, it is like learning a foreign language.

For the new folks, many of you have not formally registered for the team. You need to, and you need to immediately. We need to get you in the system, both of the team and of the Y, so that you are helping pay the coaches, the pool bills, and the team's bills generally, and so that you are receiving team information and can be entered in team meets. Most team information is communicated through email, and if you are not entered into the system, you will not be receiving these emails, nor will you have a family folder in the team mailbox.

It is also important to remember that members of the competitive program must become members of the Y, whether with an individual youth membership or as part of a family membership. We have had a number of folks registering for the team who did not also register to become members of the Y, and that has thrown the folks at the front desk of the main branch into a confused tizzy, so that we have a number of registrations now in limbo.

### ***CHOICES & CONSEQUENCES, NATIONAL & LOCAL, GREATNESS & MEDIOCRITY***

Recently we have had York Y swimmers compete in a variety of season-ending championships, from Divisionals & All-Stars, to the Junior Olympics, Y Districts & States, and the MA Senior Championships. And in a couple of weeks the seniors will finish their season with Y Nationals in Florida.

It is well known that on this team we push and give priority to the Junior Olympics meet for our younger kids, and to the series of USA Swimming invitationals leading up to it. For our older kids we push and give priority to the Y Nationals, and to the USA invitationals and national Grand Prix meets leading up to it. That means, practically, that we "overlook" while still attending the Y Districts & State meets for our younger kids, and that we completely ignore those two meets for the large majority of our older kids. Further, most of our faster swimmers do not participate in the local dual meets or the league championships. This obviously affects our place in the team standings, to our detriment.

The question brought up recently is, **WHY** do we not focus on the Y District and State

meets, attend as a team, and try to dominate? WHY don't we dominate the local leagues and show the neighbors how fast we are? After all, this would be good for local p.r.: we could shout it out on our website, and that would help the team.

This is a good question, and the answer is important for understanding what our program is all about.

Swimming teams are very different. Their priorities are very different. Their underlying philosophies are very different. Their aims and purposes are very different. Their cultures and "feels" are very different. Their visions of the long-term development of their athletes are very different.

Sometimes these philosophies, aims, cultures, etc., are explicit, purposeful, well thought out, and publicized; often they are haphazard and accidental. Either way, a team's real priorities can be inferred from the meets the swimmers attend, the meets the team targets, the kinds of training the swimmers do and the events they focus on, the level of the expectations and aspirations of the swimmers, etc.

These are all choices, and these choices have consequences for the performance levels of the swimmers, both now and years down the road. It is interesting that of the thousands of swimming clubs around the country, only a relatively minute number consistently develop their teenage athletes to the national and international levels. The large majority of programs either never produce athletes at these levels, or only do so once in a blue moon when they stumble on a supertalent.

The commonalities among the best clubs are: they think big, they teach their kids to think big, they measure themselves against the very best, and they have long-term systems of training in place that prepare their

swimmers physically, technically, and mentally, and that allow them to reach as high as they can dream.

Which brings us to us. What do we really want to be? Do we want to be the big fish in a tiny pond, or do we want to measure ourselves against the best and see how good we can be? For example, with our age groupers, do we focus on a meet where we can race at most two sprints in a timed finals format, or do we focus on a meet where our swimmers can race up to ten events over the full array of strokes and distances, and where they can compete in races they actually train for, and where they can have the experience of making or trying to make evening finals, and where they can race against swimmers from Parkland, Jersey Wahoos, Germantown, and other clubs that develop kids to nationals? Do we sell our athletes' talents short and go for the easy win, or do we really stretch ourselves and challenge ourselves against nationally-oriented competition?

We could choose to focus our entire team on competing in and winning the Y District and State meets. Or, taking a step down, we could choose to focus on winning the CASL and CPAL dual meets and championships. Chances are good that if we made these choices, we could carry banners and trophies home in triumph every season. But where would our swimmers be in the end? They might be state champions or local heroes, but the likelihood that they would reach national performance levels, when their expectations and aspirations are so far below those levels, is very small.

I think that the potentials and talents of our swimmers are poorly served if we focus on the local scene and aspire to be the king of the county. I think that there are many many swimmers on this team who can reasonably expect to reach a national level of performance, but IF AND ONLY IF they are

steered in that direction and if they are trained accordingly and raced accordingly. If they think small and only compare themselves against local competition, then they never truly learn “what fast is” and they never aim as high as they are capable of reaching. Talent is not developed by tamping it down. We are chasing true excellence, not merely local notoriety.

I think that what makes us special and unique in this area, is that we don't sell our kids' talents short by thinking small. We have faith in their abilities, and we show them what is out there for them to achieve. I don't think we should want to be like everybody else, or let everybody else decide what our priorities and aims should be. Somebody needs to aspire to greatness.

### ***THE FORK IN THE ROAD***

In a recent parents' club meeting, I spoke of the upcoming summer meet schedule, and my preference for swimmers to choose one “track” or the other – either the USA Invitational track, or the local dual meet league track – in order to keep the number of meets reasonable and to ensure that both swimmers and parents are not “meeted out” and are firing on all cylinders by the season-ending championships.

There are several swimmers who are USA registered but who are considering choosing the “dual meet track” for the summer. But the dual meets do not begin until mid June, and they do not want to wait that long to race. This is understandable. For folks in that position, you are welcome to swim in the early season long course invitationals, then jump tracks when the dual meets begin. Having the information provided by the long course meets, in particular for those swimmers who have never raced long course before, will help you make a more informed choice regarding tracks, also.

### ***THE WONDERS AND PERILS OF GETTING OLDER: AGING UP & THE AGE GROUPEE***

It is interesting that very often we will see a huge push just before swimmers “age up.” In the several weeks or few months before their birthdays, they will come to practice much more and work much harder than usual, as they gear up mentally and physically for their last meet, when they want to go out with a bang. And quite often we do see major time drops in a swimmer's last meet in an age group.

Then, the birthday. Lots of presents, but the feeling is bittersweet, as the gifts are accompanied by a promotion to the older age group. Getting older is often a huge shock to the system of younger swimmers who have been very successful: suddenly they are not the superstars, suddenly they aren't winning, suddenly they aren't even making it back for finals, suddenly they aren't feared as one of the ‘fast kids,’ suddenly they are smaller and weaker and slower, and they feel like they are racing in a land of giants. This can be quite a comeuppance.

And it often leads to several negative results. Kids put things into cruise control, because they cannot visualize themselves being successful (where ‘being successful’ is defined as winning, placing top 3, finalling, etc.). With their reduced expectations, kids' commitment changes, they stop working as hard, stop coming to practice as much, stop setting goals continually, stop coming to the meets that the coaches want them to compete in. Generally, they stop doing the things that made them successful before they aged up. They tell themselves, “It's my bad year, and I'm not going to do well against the big kids anyway, so why bother? I'll work hard again when I'm 12 (or 14), when it matters and when I'm one of the big kids.” Essentially,

they lose a year of development, and improvement, and motivation, because they've decided beforehand that an entire year doesn't matter.

Parents often collude in and support this attitude and behavior, for the sake of lessening the disappointment of losing. Talk of "bad year" abounds: you don't have to go to practice, this is your bad year after all; why don't you take up seventeen different sports, and next year you can concentrate on swimming again, when you're at the top of your age group again; you don't have to go to this meet, because you won't be competitive anyway; you should stay home from JO's or Far Westerns, because this is your bad year and you won't be able to final against the fast kids anyway...

If the only point is to win, and if the pervading message is, if you can't win then don't try, then I suppose all this makes perfect sense and is a reasonable tack.

But, if the point is to get faster and to get better, a swimmer's "bad year" is just as important as his "good year," and the six months after a birthday are just as important as the six months before. Further, if placing and competition are important, and if you suddenly find yourself dropped way down the standings, you are not going to improve your position and get competitive again by taking the year off while other smarter, more clear-thinking kids get better.

One helpful means of getting over the age-up slump is to practice the "pre-emptive strike." If you will be aging up mid-season or toward the season's end, then look ahead. Pretend that you are already 11 (or 13), and judge your performances against the older age group's standards (A, AA, AAA, etc.). When you are at meets, check the results for the older age group: see where you would have finished, and see what it takes to win, to

place top three, to final, to make top sixteen. Try to qualify for the major championships, whether JO's or Far Westerns, for the older age group before you age up. Think like you have already had your birthday, and become accustomed beforehand to the increased expectations and higher standards. That way, you are continually looking forward and continually moving up the ladder.

Another way to slingshot your development is to have a proper understanding of expected progress. One year after aging up (e.g., on your twelfth birthday), I want you to have reached the same level or higher than you achieved in your previous age group, and in a broader range of events. In other words, if as a 10-year old you were AA level in your best stroke and A in others, then when you turn 11 I want you at least a AA in several strokes. If you can do this, and with good and consistent training you should be able to, then by the time you are at the end of your 12 year, you will probably be a AAAA swimmer. You will not only have gotten faster from 10 to 12, but you will have gotten better.

By setting proper expectations, and by steering your behavior by these expectations, you set yourself up to be a better and more versatile swimmer as you get older; you are not simply satisfied to reach the same level you reached before. Here, your "bad year" is instrumental in getting you back to your previous level, and your "good year" vaults you into the next universe of performance.