

The Importance of great Masters Swim Coaches

By Danielle Newton

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Have you ever watched a young child take swimming lessons for the very first time? Maybe you have children and you've witnessed this scene first hand? If not, we can walk through a typical scene:

A young child, around 3 years old, walks into a pool with their parent. There are 15 other children there that are his same age and 3 swim instructors holding clipboards. The young child clings to his parent and says, "I want to go back home. I don't want to stay here!" The parent says, "It's OK, you're going to be fine. I'll sit right here and watch you the whole time!" The young child says, "No, no, no! I don't want to. Swimming lessons are scary!" and begins to cry.

Let's pause here for a moment. What's going on with that 3 year old right now? He's experiencing fear of the unknown and clinging to the thing he knows best: the parent. This is completely normal behavior for most young children taking swimming lessons for the first time. There are many explanations and/or bribes that a parent can give a child to lessen the anxiety of starting swim lessons, but perhaps the best solution to a scenario like this one is in the actions and words of the swimming instructor. Visualize this:

The instructor sees the young child clinging to his parent and comes over with a warm smile on her face. She says, "Hey there! I heard your name is Max, is that right?" The child pauses, tears streaming down his face, and directs his attention to her. She is kneeling on the floor at Max's level, extends her hand toward his and asks, "How would you like to go with me and the other kids to play in the water? It will be so much fun! I have lots of toys you can play with and you can splash me!" Max is a little unsure, but looks towards his parent for final approval, who nods and gives Max a gentle nudge towards the instructor. Max grabs the instructor's hand and walks slowly towards to the area where the other children are congregating before the lesson begins.

Let's pause again for a moment. What just happened? How did the child go from crying and scared to acquiescing, walking away from what brings him comfort and accepting the challenge of something new and scary? What was the catalyst? The answer will not surprise you – it was the Swimming Instructor, of course!

The swim instructor in my scenario above is equivalent to any great Masters Swim coach. I'll tell you why the instructor was so successful at capturing fear and transforming it into an attitude of "okay, I'll try it out. I won't be scared." It was the promise of fun. It was the promise of allowing the child to splash her as a reward for accomplishing the scary thing. It was the fact that the instructor got down on her knees and talked to Max at his level. There are many parallels I can make here between this instructor and a great Masters Swim coach:

1.) A great Masters Swim coach knows his/her team members by name. He/she addresses them by name at each practice.

- 2.) A great Masters Swim coach knows how and when to challenge the swimmers on the team, whether individually or as a whole team or group.
- 3.) A great Masters Swim coach will ask swimmers what their goals are, and checks up on the status of these goals on a consistent basis.
- 4.) A great Masters Swim coach will strategically design practices to include sets that both challenge and reward swimmers as they strive towards achieving their goals.
- 5.) A great Masters Swim Coach will know when an individual needs a little extra encouragement or guidance – when they need to “get down on their level”, reach out their hand and say “C’mon, this is going to be fun. I’ll be here watching you the whole time. You’re going to do great!”

When was the last time you felt like that 3 year old at swimming lessons for the first time? Was it at a meet, an open water race, or triathlon? Did you have a great Masters Swim coach who helped you face that day, that event, that scary thing? I hope your answer is yes! It’s hard to do new things or reach scary goals without the help of a coach. Our swimming friends, co-workers, spouses/families can fill these shoes in the absence of a great Masters Swim coach, but ideally, a well-trained and well-paid coach is the best person to fill those shoes!

We grow (emotionally, professionally and athletically) the most when we are faced with challenges in our lives, and that growth can begin from just a few minutes of conversation with a great Masters swim coach. In 2007, I met a fellow coach at the United States Aquatic Sports convention during one of the Coaches’ Clinics who told me about a Postal event he promoted called the Brute Squad. You may have heard of it: You swim a 1650 Freestyle, a 400 IM, and a 200 Fly in one day, and you submit your overall time. Sounds like fun, right? I certainly thought so, at least for the DAMA team I coached. But this fellow coach, Doug Garcia, thought that I should participate in it, too, even though I told him that I really don’t train as a swimmer anymore, and when I compete, I do it for fun and to score points for my team. I confided in him that I had never swum a continuous 200 Fly ever before. So I tried brushing it off, saying, “Nah...I won’t do it, but I’ll get some of my team to do it!” Despite my opposition, Doug said, “It’s not as scary as you think. You’ve done 4 X 50 Fly sets before, right? (Yes) You can do this. Just think of it as 8 lengths of the smoothest, easiest Fly you’ve ever done. And before you know it, you’ll be finished!” Well, to cut a long story short, that small amount of encouragement was what I needed. Doug had changed my mind and I decided to give it a try!

The Brute Squad swim was one of the most fun things I’ve ever done with my swimmers. (Except swimming in Bermuda – nothing will top that experience!) The 200 Fly was easier than I thought it would be. When I finished the Brute Squad swim, I was exhausted but was smiling from ear-to-ear. It was so much fun to tackle a challenge like that! I’m so glad that Doug had talked me into doing it.

If you are a Masters Swim coach and reading this article, I hope that you are encouraged to keep chugging away at being the best leader and coach you can be for your team. If you are a Masters swimmer who swims on your own, I urge you to seek out a local team to join. If you are a Masters Swim coach who is currently unemployed, I further urge you to seek out a team to work with, or seek out a pool to start a new NC Masters swim workout group. If you are a newer or less experienced Masters Swim coach, and you want some mentoring and/or education to become better at what you do, please visit www.usms.org/coach and check out all the resources available to you. And finally, if you are a Masters swimmer who does swim on a team with a well-trained and well-paid coach, I hope that this article encourages you to go to practice tomorrow, and give your coach a hug/handshake/high-five and tell them thank you for all that you do.
Coaches are so very important to the growth of Masters swimming!