

Working WITH the Coach

By Guy Edson – American Swim Coaches Association

One of the most time consuming challenges a coach encounters is building a working relationship between himself, parents, and the Board of Directors. This is especially true when parents challenge the coaches' authority and ability to make coaching judgments.

From our vantage point of "hearing it from all sides" we have developed some thoughts for parents.

- Be educated. Read all you can about swimming but remember, that there are usually many different ways to teach a skill, or plan a season, or set a race strategy, etc.. Your coach may use tactics you have not read about and are not familiar with but are never-the-less absolutely sound. Some very gifted coaches may use techniques that aren't well documented but may be a superior method. Your coach may be a pioneer! We don't think all coaches should coach using the same methods and are anxious to hear from coaches having success with new found methods.

- Think before you ask. When you are concerned about a decision made by the coach it's fair to ask for an explanation but keep in mind two things. First, ask for an explanation at the proper time, preferably after practice or after the swimming meet. It is better to wait for a quieter time and it is better to think through your questions before approaching the coach. Secondly, it is reasonable for a coach to give an explanation by simply saying, "I had a feeling it would work best this way." It's called intuition, and it is one of the most important ways a coach makes a judgment call. Let's not take this away from coaches.

- View the larger picture. There are three pictures, actually. One is the larger picture of the swimmer's swimming career. Early success (i.e. medals, ribbons, high point trophies, and national age group rankings) is not a requirement to career success. In fact, many times those successful early in their careers drop out before they have the opportunity to reach their full potential. Coaches are usually very patient with a swimmer's progress because they are able to see the larger picture. Try not to mistake a coaches' calm patience with non-caring. Two: "There's more to life than swimming." We're hopeful that all coaches and parents remember that the most important experiences gained in an individual's swimming career have nothing to do with flip turns or butterfly technique. Making friends, being part of a team, learning self-discipline, learning responsibility, setting goals, and working toward goals are far greater experiences than medals, ribbons, high point awards, and national rankings. (Just ask a retired swimmer!) Three: The team! Remember that you and your child are part of the team and have an opportunity to contribute to team strength, team growth, and team unity.

- Recognize the coaches' experience and education. Your children are precious and turning them over to a coach, who oftentimes is a young coach, is sometimes unsettling. Coaches, however, have hours upon hours of experience working with young swimmers just like your child and will try to make their best judgments in the best interest of your child's long term swimming development. In addition, we're hopeful that your coach has attended clinics, frequently exchanges information with other coaches, and is involved with the ASCA certification and home study program.

- Try not to take it personally. All parents want to see their children be successful, however some parents get emotionally involved in their children's successes and setbacks. Sometimes they love to win through their children, and they hate to lose. Let the child own their successes and failures while you are there simply to congratulate or console..

- Be aware of the overzealous, know-it-all, win at all costs, swim parent. Unfortunately there are some parents who continually challenge the judgment of the coach. Frequently their opinions are based upon emotion, limited experience, and limited knowledge. Their motives are rarely in the interest of the team. They oftentimes try to gather support to change decisions and can wreck serious havoc in a program. What you can do is support the coach and Board of Directors, and try to educate the parent. One of the greatest untapped resources for parent education are the parents of children who have been through the age group program.

■ Remember all the different people a coach must work with. Be sensitive to the fact that a coach is under tremendous pressure to please as many people as possible while making decisions he knows not everyone will be happy about. A little support from a friendly parent can make a coaches' job far more pleasant than if he feels he is always alone.

Or not. Here is the time-saving, near effortless, and low stress alternative for all of the above: simply look for your child to be happy and improving. Entrust the coach with the technical details. Accept the success and setbacks in stride. Provide emotional support for your child. Volunteer for team meets or other activities. And on your car pool day if you get stuck at practice, take a good book, and look up once in a while at your lovely child getting a great workout.