

PARENTS / ATHLETES

"Practice is Too Hard!"

Yes, sometimes some of the things we do are "hard." We prefer the word "challenge." Part of what we do in practice is to challenge swimmers to extend themselves beyond what they thought they are capable of doing. We do this with care and in a systematic and progressive manner. We do not attempt to drive weaker swimmers from the sport. Nor do we attempt to make each swimmer an Olympic swimmer. We have long term patience for each swimmer's development and abilities.

How much "challenge" is enough? The answer depends on the age and level of the swimmer. In our program on a weekly basis we set aside time for "challenge sets." We record and track times on these test sets and coach the athletes to higher levels of performance each week. For some swimmers with the desire and ability, challenge sets will eventually make up 30 to 40 percent of the available workout time. It may take some swimmers a season or two to get to this point.

All the facts and figures do not matter to a swimmer who says "If it is too hard." This is where helpful support from parents can be of great assistance. Parents can remind athletes that some exercises push the athlete into zones of uncomfortableness with good reason. We do not adapt without some workout overload or stress. It is a basic principle of training applicable to all ages. It is also a basic principle of life that sometimes things get uncomfortable and we work a little harder to bring about a change.

With the change in coaching and in coaching styles the practices are indeed very different. We do far more stroke work now and we also challenge a bit more. With patience and support we are hopeful that all the athletes will adapt and eventually enjoy the

Practice session. In my 40 years of coaching I have rarely lost an athlete from the program because they did not have fun or felt it was too hard. Indeed, in the past the most common complaint about our program has been that we did not give enough work and that we were holding swimmers back. (We are guilty of preparing swimmers for time in the future rather than our own and the parent's own immediate gratification.)

At this group developmental level our primary goals are to teach swimming skills, learn good practice habits, expose the athlete to life skills, set the aerobic conditioning foundation for senior level swimming, introduce competition opportunities, and to have fun.

"Fun" is an interesting word. One day at practice we asked 12 very exhausted swimmers "How many of you had fun today?" This we asked after they had completed their first ever 3000 yard workout in a 75 minute period. Of course we were expecting none of them to say they had fun what we were hoping to do was create a teaching moment where we could talk about the difference between fun and satisfaction. To my surprise every athlete wearily raised their hands and said that they had had fun. When I asked them to explain, they all said they felt that way because they had never done 3000 yards before. All those swimmers are still swimming and still loving the sport because the challenge is the fun and the fun is the challenge.

It is amazing how learning about the journey toward a goal breeds success and satisfaction. Especially, when the athlete looks and thinks about the workout. They then do it most of the time grudgingly; but, in the end, there is a tremendous satisfaction of enjoying the fact that they faced a challenge and did what they did not believe they were capable of doing.

Coach Tribendis