Team Motivation & Psychology in Swimming

Peter Daland, USC and Dutch Boy Swim Club

1979 ASCA World Clinic

In coaching our sport most of you are team oriented. However, we recognize the fact that there are many successful coaches who work on more of an individual basis and pride themselves on developing individual stars, as opposed to working with the team concept. So, when I speak about the team ideal and the team concept, I recognize the fact that it isn't the only way to go. For me, it is the only way to go, and I feel it is the best way to go, but I do recognize that there are other viewpoints.

Team spirit is certainly a big factor in USA swimming success. In high schools, colleges and many clubs, our individual sport has become a team sport. I feel very strongly that this has much to do with our success as a nation in the sport of swimming. As an example of the team ideal, about seven years ago a boy on my team said, "I would rather that we would win the NCAA1 than that I would qualify to go to the 1972 Olympics." Tragically, we didn't win the NCAA and he did not go to the Olympics. This was a very surprising statement and it was picked up by our campus newspaper; they were amazed that a person in a sport like swimming, which they conceived to be an individual sport, would feel so strongly about the team concept.

Another example that comes to mind was in 1978, when we were having our disaster in Long Beach at the NCAA meet, when we did everything wrong. Bruce Furniss, who is a totally team oriented individual, had one of the best meets of his life. At the end of each day he said, "I don't know how much longer I can keep going in this meet, I have a terrible feeling that I am all by myself." I said, "Bruce, for the moment you are all by yourself, but somehow you've got to keep going." It was really a credit to him that he was able to keep going and have a great meet with everything collapsing around him. The point is that Bruce did it, not for himself, but he did it because he felt he was all that was left of the team effort. His effort saved us from total disaster. It is really exciting to deal with people who care that much about your team.

On recent Olympic teams we have seen the same thing. In 1972 we had team meetings and decided that we were going to go out and win ten gold medals out of the fourteen events. Jim Counsilman did an even better job in 1976, when his team won all but one first and 79% of all medals in men's swimming. There was a very strong team spirit on that 1976 team. My swimmers told me that it was very exciting being on that 1976 Olympic team because everyone worked together and they were really a team. I was very pleased to hear of this high level team spirit.

How is group unity or team spirit developed? There are many ways. First of all, I think it is important to let every squad member know that he has the same chance as every other squad member. In other words, no favorites, no prima donnas, everybody gets the same deal. Now I don't mean that your seven and eight-year-old will have the same number of hours or the same coaches as your seniors, but they still have the same rights and they are still an important part of the same team. On a high school or college team, the Junior Varsity is also part of the "team." You should make them feel important, let them be a part of the team. If there is a J.V. meet, ask the varsity swimmers to go to the meet and support them, the attitude is that, "the members of the J.V. support you, you go support them" It is amazing how appreciated this is by the little people, when the big people show up in the stands. On my teams, we do not have any stars, we have only squad members. When John Naber was on our team, he was only going to do his best for the team. The only stars we have ever had are our alumni. As soon as a person becomes an alumnus, be becomes a star.

The second way to engender the team ideal is through pep talks. First, there is the positive pep talk. This is usually for the person who needs more confidence. "You are a good swimmer. You will do well. You have worked hard. You deserve a good result. You are big and strong." Or, "you are small and have no resistance to the water. You can twist it anyway you want it. A really positive talk, where you reinforce the swimmer, is a positive pep talk. The second type is what I call "the negative talk," but that is a poor name for it. This talk is for the person who is over confident and a little behind on the amount of work done during the season. "Up to this point, you have done a very poor job relative to your abilities. You have not done the work, you have not put the time in. You know it as well as I know it. You are not where you should be at this stage in the season. But, the day can still be saved, we still have _____ weeks, or _____ days and this situation can be turned around. You are holding out the ray of hope, "now you owe it to everybody, particularly since you've done such a poor job up to now." You load the person with obligation, you show him the light, and you say, "you have no choice, you've got to do it." I call this the "Negative talk," because you start out with very critical attitude. The third one I like to use is the comparative talk. You talk about the athlete or the team and another athlete or the team. You tell them that they are bigger or they are stronger, or they're better looking. "Our program has done more mileage," or "our program has worked more speed," or, "we have done more weights." You tell them that the other person has a tendency to have bad habits, etc., "but a clean person like you is going to beat someone like that." You continually compare in every respect and show them on every point how they are better. "Here we are the mighty Spartans, we are certainly better than the Wolverines. A Wolverine is a smelly little animal running around the north of Canada. A Spartan is one of the most gallant warriors ever to come out of ancient Greece; certainly it is more nobler to be a Spartan than a smelly little Wolverine running around northern Canada." You make these comparisons, and you may laugh, but it sinks in. You must understand that I am not really talking about any two teams in Michigan. Then there is the fourth type of pep talk which I call "Queen and Country." This is when you get out the banners and the flags, and tell them they are going to do this one for the great traditions of the _____. They are going to do it for the big _____ and they are not going to let those little _____ come up here and do us in. We are going to do it for America, and for God. You use all of the sources of might and power that is going to come into the swimmers' minds. In New Haven they say, "for God, for country and for Yale." It is amazing how effective this can be with young people. We laugh because we are a little older and more cynical, but young people absorb this. Every successful dictator has used this type of thing with great effectiveness, and coaches are dictators. We are not running a democracy, if we are, we are all finished. We are running a dictatorship and we should study the propaganda methods of the great dictators of history. It pays to be a history major.

Another way of engendering team spirit and ideal is through team traditions. At USC we use the captain's election. We make this a very big and serious ceremony. It comes at the end of our team banquet, which we make a big deal, with 200-300 people at the banquet. The last thing on the program is the old captain introducing the new captain. Nobody knows, except the person who counted the votes and the old captain, who the new captain is. I do not know, I have nothing to do with the counting of the votes, I don't want to know. This is a tradition that has gone on for many years and makes being captain a very important honor. Pre-meet rituals are another devise. How many of you have seen one of our better southern college teams go to a meet and pour liquid into the pool before

the meet? Tennessee started doing this and people laughed at first, but for that team it has become a very important ritual and has helped make them a team. They were the only group in the pool that believed in what was happening, it made them different and it pushed them together. It was a very smart idea. Ray Bussard has a lot of good ideas on this subject.

We also have labor details. This may sound foolish, but we have records for how fast the freshmen put the lane lines in and out. Putting the lane lines in and taking them out of the pool is a responsibility of the freshmen, and we keep records on how fast this has been done. Our assistant coaches not only coach swimming, they also coach lane lines in and out of the pool. The new coach at Princeton, Rob Orr, is the greatest lane line coach we have ever had; the record his freshmen set has never been bettered. This is a big deal, a lot of work gets done, and they become part of a team. We have a nine-man record and an eleven-man record.

It is also important to relate the present to the past, even if your past is very brief; honor the heroes of yesteryears, talk about the people you have had in the past. If you were at Indiana, you certainly would want to talk about Mark Spitz and his seven gold medals and all the other incredible things he did. If you are at "Joe's Swim School" you can talk about the great ten-year-old you had three years ago, who still holds most of the club records in his age group. You might even have him come back as a fifteen—year- old and talk about his ten-year old records. You can be sure that I am very happy when John Naber comes back to the Campus. Honor the people from yesterday, tie the past and present together and you have even more people behind you.

Then there is the idea of team projects, whether it a fund raising or whatever; the whole team does it together. Last year our girls' team got involved in a jog-a-thon, and they made a lot of money. The project tied them together, they were proud of what they had done together. Then they went off to Hawaii for the Christmas holidays to train, and this made them even closer.

Plan team functions such as the banquet, team parties, go to the beach, go to the mountains, go anywhere as a team and do something. We go to Disneyland together once a year as a team. Then there can be special meetings, aside from the regular meetings, where you might just have a friendly get together.

Team meets, dual meets, in my opinion, constitute the greatest difference between college and scholastic swimming as opposed to AAU swimming. The biggest problem we have in our competitive programs at the club level, is that almost all of our meets are the open invitational type of meet. Here it is very difficult to get the team spirit going, when there are twenty to a hundred teams in the meet and the first swimmers swim only every tenth race. It is much easier to have team spirit in a dual meet, where your people are swimming in every race against the opposition. If you want to build team spirit, having dual meets is the fastest way I know to do this. In my summer club, Dutch Boy Program, we have four to six dual meets because it is quick and painless, and it also makes it a team project.

Then there are relays, everybody loves relays, except those who do not make the "A" team. Parents can create problems over relays when they feel their kids should have been on the "A" team. I am sure you coaches have had this problem. In our area we have a college relay carnival put on by Jon Urbanchek at Long Beach. Everybody swims for his university, about sixteen or more colleges swim in this relay carnival and everyone on the squad swim. This is a great thing for team morale.

Another thing is to ask each squad member to make a commitment of some sort for the team, giving up one of the pleasures of life, whether it's eating candy, or going out on week-night dates, or whatever. The squad member sacrifices something for the good of the team. This makes their commitment for the team much stronger because they have paid a price to help the team.

Finally, utilizing group as opposed to individual training in workouts. Today in this country, most training is group training, but years ago there were many people swimming individual workouts from those posted on the bulletin board. Today the group idea of everybody banging heads has certainly helped the team concept. I believe it is important to use both competition and cooperative swimming methods. In other words, part of the time people banging heads against each other, but with the idea of not doing it to build up Bob and tear down Jim, but doing it to make both better. One swimmer on my team said he was happy that so-and-so will be there, because it is going to help him to be training with him.

The other side of the coin is for the swimmer to be afraid that the other swimmer will beat him out of a place on the team. Incidentally, one of the great advantages to American swimming is having people from other Countries coming here to train. A lot of the critics say we are the losers because Par Arvidsson is training here and is going to go back to Sweden a better swimmer and is probably going to win the Olympics. Wrong! Wrong! One Par Arvidsson got better, and probably fifty American
swimmers got better as a result of facing the challenge that he produced. So we are the ultimate beneficiary of good swimmers coming here to train. The same applies to your team, the good swimmer isn't just going to beat the others, he is going to help them, because as he competes against them he is going to force them to get better.

You also need some cooperative training, where swimmers work together and help each other and not just beat each other. During our taper period we often have swimmers working in pairs. They will swim alternately, with one timing the other, and he looks at his stroke, looks at his turn, encourages him and announces the times to the coaches and the rest of the team. This is sort of a buddy system. This really helps, because in the taper period when the individual needs a lot of support, he gets an extra coach and a very good friend.

Now what difference can team spirit make? The things I talk about help, but what does it really do? First of all, for the individual the workouts have more purpose. Re is not going through hell just for himself, he is doing it for the entire team. There are a lot of swimmers who go through a lot of pain for the team that they would not go through just for themselves. So, it makes workouts much more meaningful for the individual. The meets also become much more exciting. As I pointed out, the most exciting meets are dual meets. There is nothing like a dual meet to breed wild-eyed enthusiasm and team fanaticism. You have all seen it even with teams that are not very good at swimming; it is exciting because of the competition and the team spirit with which each member can identify.

The self-confidence of the individual swimmer is raised tremendously by the team spirit. Even the shyest person becomes much more confident because he has all those other people behind him. He can take great confidence and gain courage from the fact that the stronger swimmers are his friends and teammates.

Many swimmers will stay in the sport, and many are in the sport in the first place, because of the team concept. I have had a lot of people who swim only because of the team; if you took the team thing away, and try to get them to swim for themselves, many swimmers would stop swimming all together. It would not be of interest to them because they are team oriented and as long as the team ideal is there they will swim. They want to swim for some reason bigger than themselves. So, the team idea is keeping many swimmers in the sport. I have had many come to college with no idea of swimming because they had had early experiences in age group and had given it up. But because of the team they have stuck with it.

The coach's work is made easier by the team concept. Many problems never arise or are quickly solved because of the team concept. A lot of kids will bypass things they might do

because of the team idea, and they will shape up if it is for the good of the team. So, a lot of the coach's dirty work is resolved as soon as the team concept is established. Not only that, a lot of the disciplinary problems will be solved by squad members, because they are interested in the team and they will take care of it. They will say, "you can't do that because it is not in the best interests of the team." That is a tough argument and one that is tough to beat. So a lot of the disciplinary work is being done by squad members and by the individuals themselves, through the realization that if they persist they are betraying the team -- which no one wants to do.

The team spirit makes it very worthwhile for the supporters of the team, parents, people putting money into the program, etc. When they see the team spirit, they will be more willing to con tribute. This applies if it is "Joe's Swim School," the University of Southern California, or the U.S. Olympic team. Someone has to go out and raise money and that is really only fun when they see something coming back, and the thing they see coining back is the development of the individual through the team ideal.

How do we apply this team orientation? How do we put it into action? How does it all work out? First, we establish long-term team goals, to achieve a certain place or result in the champion ship or the final meet or just during the season itself. A continual propaganda must be maintained toward this goal. At this point you may use music or banners or pep talks, or any of the things I have talked about earlier and put them into action. The first year I had Dutch Boy, I coined a phrase, "Top Ten." I said it every day and finally all the kids were saying, "Top Ten." We wanted to be in the top ten the first year with this club, and I thought we could do it. They all started saying it. We looked at what it would take to be in the top ten and they agreed they could do it. Then we went to work and came in sixth. The next year we said, "number five." So we came in fifth, now we are saying, "number four." This is a sample of the type of goal setting devise you can use. I am showing you the kind of little phrases that we used in our program.

In this continual propaganda toward your final team results, you need to develop personal and statistical information on your own team, best times lists, all sorts of things. If you are coaching a high school, college or even a major club, you can develop a press book. Anything like this is going to help the team and this information can be passed out to the team supporters. Then you should develop the same personal and statistical information about rival teams. One year, Willis Casey said to his brother Ralph, "for all the studying I do of your team and all the studying you do of my team, why don't we just change teams?"

The more information you have on your opponents, the more alive they become in the minds of your team. On the day of the meet you almost know the rival swimmers, because of the study that has been made of the opposition.

Then we need the acceptance of each individual member of the team as to their responsibility for what they are going to contribute to the team goal. For example, the places that they need to achieve in their events to contribute to the desired final outcome. These are commitments that they are making to themselves and together for the team. Once a person makes a commitment they are a lot more dedicated. The commitment must be realistic, and, of course, they don't always achieve the individual goal. At least, if you can get the commitment, you will have a much more unified team, and a harder training team.

We have to strive in our propaganda for the total concentration of all mental and physical powers of the swimmers for top performances in the championships, or whatever the big goal is. At the same time we must not allow this meet to become too important. If it is overplayed, Certain squad members will feel that they have only one important meet this year and are not going to worry about any other meets. The result is that they swim very poorly for a long period of time then begin to wonder if they can do it after all - confidence drops away. There is also the high- strung type of swimmer who is going to collapse psychologically if you make the contest bigger than they are. The competition must never be bigger than the psychological strength of the athlete. The Olympic trials are a great example. At the Olympic trials in Austin next year, a certain percentage of great favorites will not make it for psychological reasons - because the trials will be more than they can handle mentally. With these people the trials have to be treated as just another meet. We have all seen these little tragedies take place and many of us have been responsible because we did not play down the meet. Don't let the meet get too big for the team members. We also need short-term goals as stepping stones for the team and for the individual in order to have the great final success. Most coaches make a formula, they might say that at the league or regional level my swimmers should be half-way from their early season performances to their ultimate goals. They establish some sort of simple formula to give the swimmer a stepping stone program so they know how they are progressing. They know that if they have their times within the formula at a certain meet, they know that they are on schedule and this gives them confidence.

Another little point is a little philosophy of mine and I think it helps my team. You may not like it, but I do and I think it helps. Rotate away from success in swimming whenever possible. For example, if in the first meet of the year, Mary has a great success in the 100 freestyle, my suggestion is that she does not swim the 100 in the second meet because by the laws of probability she may do worse. The odds are heavily against her doing better in the second meet after doing so well in the first initial swim. So I suggest rotating to another event in which she has not had success. Then instead of having one win and one loss, you have two big wins. Remember, if we are building up the mind, the psychology of positive thinking, then we want to stay on the victory trail. If your team needs to have Mary in the 100 free in the second meet in order to win, then you have to prepare some kind of an out for her in case she does not go better the second time. You cannot let the good early swim work against you, you have to make it work for you.

To sum up, swimming team coaching is nothing more than aiding individuals to work collectively to achieve goals which they would probably not have achieved on their own. That is the way I view the coaching of swimming. That is what I try to keep as my guide line, to have them do as a group under the direction of our staff, what they wouldn't do if they were working individually.

Questions and Answers

Q. How do you deal with individual goals that do not fit into the team goals?

A. I think you are talking about an athlete in an Olympic year and how you can get him excited about a scholastic or collegiate program which has meets which the Olympic athlete does not regard as being in his best interests. This is a problem that will be faced all over the country this year, because there are a number of athletes who feel they want to get ready for the Olympics and not worry about high school or college meets, or even local AAU meets. I think there has to be some sort of compromise. I told my team that I want us to do well as a team and as individuals during the university season. Equally important, I want as many of you as possible to be as successful as you can and make the Olympic trials and the Olympic games. We are all going to have to play that situation by ear. A number of good swimmers will not return to college this season so they will not get sidetracked by the college competition.

Q. Do you hold up the faster repeat swims for the others who are not achieving the same level of result?

A. I would do so only if the slower group had the same ability and could do as well, if they couldn't, I would try to get them to work at a higher level of potential.

Q. What did you say to your team when you came in fifth after thinking you could come in first?

A. We had a meeting at the end of the pool and we sat there and I made them watch everything the University of Tennessee was doing at the other end, throwing the coach in the water, cheering, shouting, etc. and I said, "I am sorry that isn't us, but please look at that scene and remember it so we can do better next year.

Copyright of ASCA Newsletter is the property of American Swimming Coaches Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.