Growing an Age Group Program

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Wednesday, April 16, 2014
Strategy for building a successful age group program

- This can help you to plan for increasing number of swimmers by 50% in three years, and consistently doubling the number of swimmers at the State Championship Level

Growth defined two ways:
1. Increase in team size / numbers (and therefore profit)
2. Increase in achievement, or percentage of qualifiers at high level meets

- Mostly just talking about the first kind of growth here today. However, these strategies are meant to bring about the 2nd kind of growth, and at a minimum will maintain swimmer quality through the growing process.
Growing your program by 50% or more and improving swimmer quality can be done in three years

- Lasting growth is intentional, not accidental
  - You must make it happen!
In the past 14 years, NOVA has grown from 250 to 850 swimmers using eight principals to be successful.
To get started, first identify your goals for the program—what kind of growth are you aiming for?

- Do you want to be a club of 200, 400, 600, 800 swimmers?
- Do you want to have an A and B relay for 10&U at the State level?
- Do you want to be the best small team in the state?
- Do you want to score at the National level every year?
- Do you want to improve your USA club ranking?

- Long Term Goals
- Short Term Goals
- Seasonal Goals
When you know where you want to go, next assess where you are now

Determine your program’s strengths and weaknesses, and figure out which areas need the most immediate attention

NOVA assessment in September 2000
(big thank you to Leigh Robbins Peterson!)

- Strengths: head coach/ founder in same position for 16 years
  Senior Team producing new National qualifiers every season
  built and owned one 10 lane training pool
  good lessons program

- Weaknesses: Age Group program had no structure, not producing consistently
  multiple problems associated with growth
  coaching staff spread too thin
  poor management of business and finances
How does a program grow?

Retention (80%) + Recruiting (20%)

Ideally, you want to aim for the pyramid structure of numbers distribution in your organization.
Once your goals are established, focus on the following eight principals to hit your target

- Principle #1 – Know where you are losing swimmers
- Principle #2 – Make Novice groups a priority
- Principle #3 – Growth requires re-structure and re-organization
- Principle #4 – Have clear standards for every level and enforce them
- Principle #5 – Establish specific retention strategies for boys
- Principle #6 – Choose meets that keep swimmers and parents in the sport
- Principle #7 – Having a feeder program must be a priority for team growth
- Principle #8 – Deputize people who can influence recruiting
Principle #1 – Know where you are losing swimmers

Evaluate any swimmers who quit or don’t return the next season

WHO: Noticed we lost a large group of boys out of our age group program who are potential scorers.

WHY: When asked why they stopped, found that they were multisport athletes who didn’t want to quit, but practice times conflicted.

HOW: by offering a later age group practice time, we could accommodate these boys and keep them in the program

Caution: this is not always straightforward and may require some creative thinking and investigation!
Principle #2 – Make Novice Groups a Priority

- Allocate experienced staff to younger age group levels and entry levels of your program
- NOVA’s Senior and National team coaches also coach 200 of our Novice Gold & Silver 6-10 year olds for two hours every day.
- Create a good environment (temp, in / out of water)
- TEACH, and have FUN
- Establish technical principles for entire program
Principle #3 – Growth requires re-structure and re-organization to meet new goals

- Nova’s 2000 structure vs. 2014 structure

2000
Novice Geoff
Novice Jay
Age Group Development
Age Group
Senior Development
Senior

6 groups

2014
Novice Bronze
Novice Silver
Novice Gold
Age Group Development Silver
Age Group Development Gold
Age Group Bronze
Age Group Silver
Age Group Gold
Senior Development Silver
Senior Development Gold
Senior Bronze
Senior Silver
Senior Gold

10&U

11-12

13&O

13-14

15&O

13 groups

6 groups
For next stage of growth, here is what we want:

Continue to restructure around our team philosophy and beliefs

- Keep kids with their peers 100% of the time
- Keep swimmers with their ability level
- Clearly define the steps to get to the next level
- Stay under one roof
- Stay focused on results and retention
- Offer several commitment levels to allow multisport athletes
- Avoid burnout – always something new to add in each age group
Principle #4 – Have clear standards for every level and enforce them

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Plan Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Novice Bronze</td>
<td>10 &amp; under</td>
<td>2 x week 45min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novice Silver</td>
<td>10 &amp; under</td>
<td>2-3 x week 60 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novice Gold</td>
<td>10 &amp; under</td>
<td>2-3 x week 60 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Group Development Silver</td>
<td>10 &amp; under</td>
<td>2-3 x week 75 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Group Development Gold</td>
<td>10 &amp; under</td>
<td>3-4x week 90 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 BB’s/ coach rec/ meets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Group Prep</td>
<td>11-12</td>
<td>3-4x week 90 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Group Silver</td>
<td>11-12</td>
<td>3-5x week 105 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Group Gold</td>
<td>11-12</td>
<td>4-5x week 105 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Development Silver</td>
<td>13-18</td>
<td>2-6x week 105min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Development Gold PM</td>
<td>13-14</td>
<td>5-6x week 120min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Development Gold AM</td>
<td>15-18</td>
<td>5-7x week 120 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Silver</td>
<td>14 &amp; over</td>
<td>7-9x week 120 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Gold</td>
<td>15 &amp; over</td>
<td>8-10x week 120 min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It may seem to work backwards, but in the long run growth will be better if you DO NOT make placements based on convenience! Must stick to your set and published standards.
Principle #5 – Establish specific retention strategies for boys and identify your potential scorers

• No boy is going to stay in a sport where they get beat up by girls five times a week
Retention: problems with boys aged 10-13

Boys ...
- Do not pay attention
- Do not need to work as hard / swim as much as girls
- Thrive on competition
- Need to be with other boys
- Will be disruptive and rowdy

Fixes
- Give them tasks that come with simple and quick explanations
- Put boys together, practicing with just boys whenever possible
- Allow for fewer practices per week, esp. if playing another sport
- Pick your battles – allow them to be wild, but controlled
- Let them RACE!
Principle #6 – Choose meets that keep swimmers and parents in the sport

• 8 & under meets
• team travel
• Dual meets
• qualifying meets other than nationals
• Open water
• select meets

Don’t get lazy!
Every year your staff should review the season’s meets:
What worked?
What can be better?
What needs to change?
Principle #7 – Having or partnering with a feeder program must be a priority for growth

- Grow your own swimmers and have an input in the skills being taught
- Use your Senior swimmers as teachers, you don’t want to lose them to summer or weekend jobs that interfere with training.
- Invest the same three years into growing your feeder
- NOVA lessons grosses over $100,000 a year with limited schedule!
Principle #8 – Deputize people who can influence recruiting

- Current swimmers and parents are your biggest marketing tool!
  - Word of mouth from family to family
- High School coaches
  - Do they push new potential your way?
- Summer League coaches (incentivize).
  - Do you have any pull on who is hired?
  - College swimmers from your team
- Team Parents assigned to each summer league team
- Clinics
  - Done by your coaches, keep an eye out for talent
LOOKOUT! You can get trapped into thinking growth is something you can’t control or that you might not want

“If you build it, they will come” is a line from a movie not a growth strategy
What you can do next week to begin growing

• Strategic growth is like starting a garden, if you want to see fruit in two years, you need to start tilling the soil now.