Coaching Swimmers With A Disability

Disability Swimming Committee: USA Swimming

in collaboration with

Challenged Athletes Foundation
Introduction

**Topic:** Coaching Swimmers with a Disability

**Speaker:** Kyle Smith
- Associate Head Coach, Duneland Swim Club (IN)
- Member Disability Swimming Committee, USA-S
Terminology

Abbreviations:
- SWAD … swimmer with a disability
- USA-S … USA Swimming
- CAF … Challenged Athletes Foundation

Definitions:
- Disability is “a permanent physical or cognitive disability that substantially limits one or more major life activities”
  
  Article 105, USA-S rule book
- Inclusion refers to the participation of SWAD, together with swimmers who do not have disabilities, within USA-S clubs, swim meets, and related opportunities
The first four recommendations focus on coaching swimmers with a disability as you coach other swimmers on your team

1. Get to know all swimmers on the team
2. Have the same expectations for team involvement and swim meet participation
3. Use the same principles of stroke technique and training
4. Provide quality coaching to all swimmers on the team

DisAbility:
Travis Mohr’s best 100m backstroke time is 1:10.15
11 Recommendations

*Recommendations 5-8 focus on effective communication*

5. Facilitate understanding, friendships, and sportsmanship
6. Use a variety of communication methods when coaching swimmers
7. Use a variety of communication methods when sharing team information with swimmers and their families
8. Develop consistency across members of the coaching staff with respect to communications with swimmers
11 Recommendations

Recommendations 9-11 are concerned with disability accommodations at practices and meets

9. Provide disability accommodations that facilitate participation and safety

10. Inform the meet host in advance of the competition about facility concerns

11. Discuss needed accommodations for the conduct of swimming events with the meet referee

Accommodations during swim practices (not meets) may include equipment such as this modified swim fin for amputee swimmers

The 11 recommendations are discussed in more detail on subsequent slides
#1 - Get to know all swimmers on the team

**Suggestions:**

- Learn about the swimmer’s reasons for swimming
- Observe the swimmer’s technical skills, fitness levels, communications skills, and maturity level
- When appropriate learn about the swimmer’s disability – ask the swimmer or parents to teach you

Kelley Becherer is a visually impaired swimmer who competed in the 2004 and 2008 Paralympic Games with goals set on London. She also swims for Northeastern University.
Another suggestion: Use simulations to help coaches and swimmers develop a better understanding of disabilities. Here are a few examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>Simulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vision loss</td>
<td>Place waxed paper inside swim goggles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing loss</td>
<td>Wear ear plugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of leg function</td>
<td>Hold a swim fin between the legs above the ankles – increase difficulty by wearing long pants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of arm function</td>
<td>Hold a swim fin between the upper arm and chest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
#1 - Get to know all swimmers on the team

Interview Quotes:

- “Swimmer first, disability second!” Swimmer
- “Always look for what an athlete can do.” Swimmer
- “Do not assume anything. If you do not know, ask.” Swimmer
- “Learn about my disability so the challenges are achievable.” Swimmer
#2 - Have the same expectations for team involvement and swim meet participation

Suggestions:

- Include the SWAD in all instruction and activities, making modifications as needed – do not exclude – just get creative!
- Expect the SWAD to comply with all expectations regarding team policies and meet participation
- Challenge the SWAD to perform in practices and meets just as you challenge other swimmers – don’t coddle them because of disability

USA Swimming offers meets that accommodate swimmers of all abilities
#2 - Have the same expectations for team involvement and swim meet participation

Interview Quotes:

- “We are all equal in the water.” Swimmer
- “Don't expect any less from us than you would from any of your other swimmers.” Swimmer
- “Push your SWADS - they have abilities.” Coach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Green Team</th>
<th>White Team</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>2+ senior cuts or 2+ CAN-AM cuts</td>
<td>2+ “B” times or 2+ CAN-AM cuts + 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meets</td>
<td>At least 5 per season</td>
<td>At least 3 per season</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
#3 - Use the same principles of stroke technique and training

**Suggestions:**

- Use experimentation and your coaching expertise to determine:
  - Best head/body positions
  - Effective propulsion techniques
  - Ways to decrease resistance
- Use the same principles of training as you do for all swimmers (e.g., improving fitness, energy systems)

Paralympian Cheryl Angelelli training in the weight room
#3 - Use the same principles of stroke technique and training

Quiz:

1. How should you train a swimmer with severe disability whose best time in the 100m freestyle is 3:58.27?
   a. As a sprinter
   b. As a middle distance swimmer
   c. As a distance swimmer

2. Should a swimmer with above-knee amputations of both legs be expected to flutter kick when the team does a kick set?
   a. Yes
   b. No
#3 - Use the same principles of stroke technique and training

Interview Quotes:

- “Coaching is coaching.” Coach
- “Enjoy it, do not be intimidated or fearful. Be creative with your workouts.” Coach
- “Try to understand the effect of disability on swim technique. For example, I have trouble with head position because I can’t see what the coach says to look for.” Swimmer who is blind
- “Distance per stroke is important for dwarf swimmers, but it also may be necessary to increase stroke rate.” Coach
#3 - Use the same principles of stroke technique and training

*Technique - streamlining*

5 x 100

USA swimmers at the 2007 Shanghai World Special Olympics Games practicing streamline drills during warm-up
#4 - Provide quality coaching to every swimmer on the team

**Suggestions:**

- Pay attention to every swimmer
- Provide coaching to every swimmer
- Make efforts to ensure the safety of every swimmer

Give individual help when needed
#4 - Provide quality coaching to all swimmers on the team

Kayla Wheeler has benefited from her coach's acceptance and creativity

Interview Quote:

- “If you were in my situation, what would you want a coach to do, and how would you like to be treated?” Swimmer
- “Don't be afraid to challenge yourself and the swimmer when working with a disabled athlete.” Swimmer
- “Be creative, you never know what will work.” Coach
#4 - Provide quality coaching to all swimmers on the team

Provide quality coaching 1

Provide quality coaching 2

Roy Perkins’ stroke techniques have been modified to accommodate his abilities as a quadruple amputee
#5 - Facilitate understanding, friendships, and sportsmanship

**Suggestions:**

- Set an example of acceptance and understanding
- Team meetings should include topics such as acceptance, respect, responsibility, and sportsmanship

“Value isn’t measured in the awards you win or how fast you are. Value is determined by your work ethic, attitude, and the interest you show in others and they show in you. Every person’s individual personalities and characteristics go into forming the team. You can either add or detract from the group. I feel I add.”

*Sarah Ely, swimmer with dwarfism*
#6 - Use a variety of communication methods when coaching swimmers

Suggestions:

- Effective communication requires a variety of methods
  - Verbal communication refers to speaking and sign language
  - Non-verbal communication includes gestures, demonstrations, signage/white boards, etc.

- Remember that communication involves more than one person
  - Talk and listen and observe
  - Check that swimmers understand
  - When appropriate, ask teammates to help each other understand and follow coaching instructions
#6 - Use a variety of communication methods when coaching swimmers

**General Hints**
- Get swimmers’ attention before speaking
- Check that swimmers understand
- Listen to swimmers

**Physical Disabilities**
- Move/kneel so that you are at the swimmers’ eye level, especially when speaking with wheelchair users or swimmers with short stature

**Cognitive Disabilities or Autism**
- Use simple vocabulary
- Use few words
- Use 1 or 2 part instructions
- Use written instructions
- Follow a routine

**Blind**
- Use rich verbal descriptions
- Physically assist swimmers to achieve correct technique
#6 - Use a variety of communication methods when coaching swimmers

**Deaf**
- Face the swimmer
- Use normal voice
- Use gestures or sign
- Use written instructions

Go to the articles section of [www.usaswimming.org/disability](http://www.usaswimming.org/disability) for a video on learning swimming signs

It is difficult for deaf swimmers to lip read when coaches have moustaches, use cell phones, or move their hands near the face when talking
#6 - Use a variety of communication methods when coaching swimmers

Interview Quote:

- “One, show. Two, describe. And if they don't understand that, take their arm and move it in that motion.” Swimmer

Variety of communication methods

Coach Jim Wood discussing goals with Lauren Reynolds
#7 - Use a variety of communication methods when sharing team information with swimmers and their families

**Suggestions:**

- Be aware of the communication preferences of swimmers and their families – SWAD may not get messages home to parents in the same way as other swimmers.

- Use multiple methods of communication when disseminating information such as team policies, practice schedules, and meet announcements – examples include written handouts, club website, social networking web sites, telephone trees, email, twitters, etc.
#8 - Develop consistency across members of the coaching staff with respect to communications with swimmers

Suggestions:

- Communicate regularly amongst your coaching staff – swimmers become frustrated when their coaches are not on the same page.

Interview Quotes:

- “GREAT communication amongst staff members can lead to new ideas and methods that will improve training and development” – Coach
- “Network with other coaches who have been there and done that. What might have worked for others can work for you.” – Swimmer
#8 - Develop consistency across members of the coaching staff with respect to communications with swimmers

Staff communication
#9 - Provide disability accommodations that facilitate participation and safety

Suggestions:

- The term *reasonable accommodations* means practical, effective, common-sense ways to help swimmers with a disability
- Collaborate with the SWAD and family to identify and provide appropriate, no/low cost, low-hassle accommodations that work
#9 - Provide disability accommodations that facilitate participation and safety

An accommodation could be a personal assistant who helps at meets or practices by:

- Helping swimmers enter or exit the pool
- Assisting swimmers with cognitive disabilities to understand meet routines or coaches’ instructions
- Tapping blind swimmers prior to turns and finishes
- Using alternate methods of communication for deaf swimmers
- Helping swimmers with autism spectrum or behavioral disorders to cope with challenging situations at practices and meets

Note: USA-S rules specify that personal assistants may not coach unless they are coach members.
#9 - Provide disability accommodations that facilitate participation and safety

Interview Quotes:

- “Even before I stepped on the deck he was like, okay, I don't know how accessible this building is. So the first night we'll kind of feel everything out. And if you need help, here's a phone number. Call me, and we can get you where you need to be.” Swimmer

- “My coach makes accommodations for me by learning sign, and mostly he remembers to face me when giving instructions.” Swimmer

- “Because I can’t kick, I sometimes use a pull-buoy to improve my speed during practice.” Swimmer

Starts
#10 - Inform the meet host in advance of the competition about facility concerns

Suggestions:

- Examples of facility accommodations include on-deck wheelchair seating, permission for the use of service animals, nearby accessible parking, etc.
- Meet hosts appreciate the courtesy of advance notice

Sample passage from a meet announcement:
Swimmers with a disability are welcome to enter this meet. The swimmer’s coach is responsible for notifying both the meet director and meet referee in advance of the meet if disability accommodations are requested.
#10 - Inform the *meet host* in advance of the competition about *facility* concerns
#11 - Discuss needed accommodations for the conduct of swimming events with the meet referee

Possible accommodations:

• SWAD competing in time-appropriate events such as swimming the 50/100 during a 200 event, or the 500/1000 during a 1650

• Special seeding arrangements
  • A deaf swimmer may see the starter and strobe light better from certain lanes
  • An outside lane may speed up getting into and out of the pool
  • A single non-SWAD swimmer should not be disadvantaged by being assigned to the slowest heat with two SWADs who are swimming a different distance or stroke

• End of the pool for the start of a 150 meter IM
#11 - Discuss needed accommodations for the conduct of swimming events with the meet referee

Possible accommodations, continued:

- Personal assistants who help with meet routines, tapping, interpreting, water entry/exit, etc.
- Visual starting signals or alternate strobe light placement for deaf swimmers

Article 105 in the USA Swimming rule book includes information about rule modifications and related topics
#11 - Discuss needed accommodations for the conduct of swimming events with the meet referee

Advice from officials:

- “We can do that.” Official

- “I start using the visual hand signals a few heats before the deaf swimmer races so that she or he can get used to my timing.” Official

- “I highlight the athlete’s event, heat, and lane in my copy of the heat sheets so that I can make sure not to rush the swimmer at the start, and so that I can allow some time for him or her to exit after the race has ended.” Official
#11 - Discuss needed accommodations for the conduct of swimming events with the meet referee

More advice from officials:

- “When deciding whether to permit a SWAD to have a personal assistant, I think about whether the personal assistant is needed for safety and performance, as well as the athlete’s need to be or become independent.” Official

Coach/referee meet accommodations
Conclusion – Inclusion of SWADs has many benefits for the swimming community

*Swim clubs* benefit

- More dues-paying swimmers
- Added publicity opportunities
- Inclusion helps to make an argument for more pool time
Conclusion – Inclusion of SWADs has many benefits for the swimming community

**Coaches** benefit

- Develop or refine skills that help them become more effective at coaching all swimmers
- Opportunities for selection to coach national and international teams
Conclusion – Inclusion of SWADs has many benefits for the swimming community

*Teammates* benefit

- Greater appreciation of ability and effort
- More acceptance and greater tolerance of diversity
- Friendships with SWADs

Friends for life
Conclusion – Inclusion of SWADs has many benefits for the swimming community

**SWADs** benefit

- Quality coaching
- Challenge of training with non-SWAD teammates
- More opportunities for competition
- Friendships with teammates
- Fun, excitement, and belonging

Mallory Weggemann of Twin Cities Swim Team won the 2010 USA-S Disability Swimmer of the Year Award

Relay team celebration
Questions and Answers

Questions and answers:

Future access to this webinar:

- http://www.usaswimming.org/disability
- http://www.challengedathletes.org

The End
Resources

USA Swimming

- http://www.usaswimming.org/disability for articles and videos related to disability swimming, disability swimming awards, Article 105 rule interpretations, and much more!
- USA-S rule book – Article 105
- Randy Julian, staff liaison to the Disability Swimming Committee, (719) 866-4578, rjulian@usaswimming.org

Challenged Athletes Foundation

- http://www.challengedathletes.org
Contributors

- **Disability Swimming Committee of USA Swimming:** Linda Conger, Priscilla Davis, Jack Dowling, Gail Dummer, Lee Gibbs, Jeff Gudman, Glenda Orth, Erin Popovich, Wayne Sherman, Kyle Smith, Mary Jo Swalley, Donald Watkinds, Joanne Weeden, Mallory Weggemann, and Randy Julian (Staff Liaison)

- **Challenged Athletes Foundation:** Melanie Benn, Roy Perkins, Sr., Travis Ricks, Alison Terry, and Alan Voisard

- **Colleagues:** Jeff Creese, Michael DeMarco, Cesar Garcia, Shawn Kornoelje, A-Lisa Miles, the Greater Toledo Aquatic Club/U.S.Paralympics (interview access to swimmers/coaches), and all of the swimmers who agreed to have their photos and video images included in this webinar

- **Videographer:** Melvin Stewart aka Gold Medal Mel (http://www.goldmedalmel.typepad.com)
Thanks!

Roy Perkins, Sr. – Senior Director for Programs and Strategic Planning, Challenged Athletes Foundation

Randy Julian – Sport Development Director, Liaison to the Disability Swimming Committee, USA Swimming