Being A “Young” Coach

Coaching Young Athletes

Nicole Harmon
Head Age Group Coach
The FISH Swim Team
Introduction

- Coach at the FISH in Northern Virginia
- Middle of my 5th season
Introduction

- Grew up in Scarborough, Maine
- Swam for Coastal Maine Aquatics
Introduction

- Completed my undergrad at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA, where I swam on the varsity team all four years
- Graduated in 2012 with my B.S. in Exercise Science
Today we’ll discuss

- My background
  - How I got here
  - Why I’m here
- Working with the young athlete
- Being the young coach
How I Got Here

From small town athlete to “big time” swim coach
How did I get here?

- Growing up in Maine, small swimming state
- Traveled up and down the East Coast for Zones
- Knew I wanted to end up in the Middle Atlantic/Potomac Valley area
- Looking at colleges ended up at GMU
How did I get here?

- Coached summer league/winter conditioning
- Met Coach Ray Benecki through swimming at Mason and coaching winter conditioning for the FISH
- Took the job at FISH in November 2012
How did I get here?

- Lots of swimming experience (age 7 to 22), but fairly little coaching experience
- Decided to use my experience as an athlete to relate to my swimmers
- Fresh off my retirement, I knew exactly what they were going through (swam at the meets they were attending, had done the same drills and similar sets, etc.)
- I could sympathize with them
- In the beginning, this helped the swimmers to embrace my arrival on the coaching staff
- Has allowed me to do things my coaches never did and not repeat their “mistakes”
Our Team – The FISH

- Northern Virginia/PVS Swimming very competitive
- Limited pool space makes for limited group availability
- Because of this, try-outs must be conducted for every swimmer before they are invited to the team
- Not only for the good of the team, but for the good of the swimmer
Our Athletes: Practice Groups

- **Mini FISH**: 8 & Unders, need to be able to swim Free and Back, and dive in head first, still learning the strokes, very hands on.

- **Age Group**: Swimmers with all 4 legal strokes, working towards tightening up stroke technique and learning the basics of the sport

- Both groups practice either 2 or 3 times a week, for 1 hour
Our Athletes: Practice Groups

- **Advanced Age Group**: All 4 strong legal strokes, ready to push themselves and take their swimming to a more serious level, hoping to gain cut times for qualifying and championship meets – Junior Olympics, Zones, NASA Showcase Classic

- **Terrific FISH**: Elite age groupers, expected to qualify for and attend championship meets and qualifiers – Junior Olympics, Zones, NASA Showcase Classic

- Both groups practice 4 or more times per week
Our Athletes: Practice Groups

- **Incredible FISH**: First “senior” level group, serious swimmers with a demanding practice regimen – Senior Championships, Sectionals qualifiers, some Junior National qualifiers (6+ practices per week)

- **Awesome FISH**: Top level, very serious and elite athletes. Trials qualifiers, Senior and Junior National qualifiers, Sectionals (8+ practices per week)
Disclaimer

- These thoughts and ideas are based on my personal experiences as a swimmer and as a coach
  - Through working with my colleagues, other coaches, and the swimmers I have worked with
- Learning and growing every day as I come into contact with more coaches and athletes
- Feel free to ask any questions throughout the presentation
  - I will also leave time at the end for questions and or discussion
Why I’m Here
I’m just like you...

- Before today you had never heard of me
- I’m not a “big name” coach working with “high profile” swimmers
- But, I have helped hundreds of swimmers to surpass their goals and create new dreams
...so what makes my swimmers different?

- I could tell you the ins and outs of our training
- The drills, the sets, the times they hit in practice
- I think there is more than that
- My swimmers are successful because of their love of the sport
- And the support and investment I make in their swimming
Advanced Age Group

- My primary group
- Made up mostly of swimmers between the ages of 9 and 12
- Some outliers – 8 year olds, 13-15 year olds
- Four strong strokes, ready to take swimming more seriously
- Aim to qualify for their Junior Olympic Championship Meet
Advanced Age Group

- About 60 swimmers in the group (40 at one site, 20 at the other)
- 4 Practices per week, with option for more
- Two afternoons (1 – 2 hours) and two weekend mornings (2+ hours)
- Optional LC morning practices and additional SC morning practices
Young Athletes
Coaching “Puppies”
Young Swimmers are like Puppies...

- Fun
- Energetic
- Sweet
- Growing and changing every day
- Need structure
- Need love and attention
- Not going to get it on the first try
- Each “breed” needs something different
- Can’t help themselves

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Fun

- This is a fun age
  - Literally applies to any age
  - The point is to appreciate that they will only be like this for so long
- Enjoy the funny things they do and say
- It’s okay to be silly with them
Energetic

- Try to match their energy and enthusiasm
- The more energy you give them, the more you get out of them
- You want them to come into practice excited to be there!

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Growing and Changing Every Day

- Their bodies and their personalities are constantly changing
- Stroke technique changes
  - Can be for the better or for the worse
  - Might be stronger and able to do more
  - Or their new body might throw them off
- Mental outlook or attitude
  - More nervous before races
  - Juggling more in their lives outside of the pool
Sweet

- Surprisingly thoughtful
- Can be great teammates
  - Derek’s sprained ankle
- Respectful and appreciative of what you do for them
Need Structure

- They will act as if they don’t like the rules and boundaries you set for them
- There is something comforting about knowing what the expectations are
- Allows for more fun and silliness if they know when it’s time to get to work
  - Omaha
Need Love and Attention

- Aim to please
- Hearing that they are doing a good job is so important
  - Celebrate the little victories
  - Peer recognition
- Love rewards and recognition
  - Bag of mysteries
  - Piggy Bank
Not going to get it on the first try

- Or the second...or the third
- Sometimes you will have to repeat yourself
- Practice the same skill multiple times
- But when they finally get it, there is nothing more gratifying
Each “breed” needs something different

- Even though they are in the same group, they all have different strengths, weaknesses, goals, and needs
- Be aware of that and celebrate that
  - Emma vs. Maddy/Yuto vs. Caroline
    - Emma (Age 9) – Goal: Final at NASA every day
    - Maddy (Age 12) – Goal: Qualify for J.O.’s
    - Yuto (Age 10) – Goal: Final at J.O.’s, qualify for NASA
    - Caroline (Age 14) – Goal: Make high school swim team
Can’t Help Themselves

- At the end of the day...
- They are just KIDS!
- They are going to have “off” days
  - Behavior
  - Energy Level
- It’s easy to forget how young they are with the incredible things they are able to do/we expect from them
Young Coach
The Advantage of Being Green
The Advantage of Being Green

- I transitioned from athlete to coach relatively quickly
- Came in with a very open mind
- Learned so much from my senior coaches who were there before me, and from the newer staff who have joined us
- Still learning how to be a better coach every day
- From my previous experience as a swimmer and my experience as a coach I’ve created my own strategy to help my swimmers
- It has brought me success, and keeps me excited for the future
Think back...

- Can you remember your worst swimming moment with your Coach?
  - 10 years old, Maine State Championships, March 2001.
  - 100 Backstroke

- Can you remember the best?
  - I can remember a few, but not necessarily as clearly as my “worst” memory
Relating to My Swimmers

- 16 years ago, but I can still remember it as if it just happened.
- I keep that in mind when I talk to my swimmers (at practice, at meets, at dry land)
- Do I say the right thing?
  - Sometimes not.
  - But I try to be conscientious of how much what I say and do effect them
  - I try to explain what went well/what didn’t/why things matter
  - Remember how I felt and what I needed from my coach
So, what do you do?

- I’m a Swim Coach
  - Doesn’t quite cover it
  - The jobs we take on that aren’t listed on the job description:
    - Teacher
    - Role Model
    - Disciplinarian
    - Shoulder to cry on
    - Therapist
    - Doctor
    - Cheerleader
    - Life Coach
    - Advisor

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What do your swimmers need you to be?

- Patient
- Teacher
- Compassionate
- Strict
- Good Listener
- Flexible
- Fearless
- Be aware of what they need
Patience

- Something I struggle with
  - “Passionate” and “expressive” coaching
- There are only so many minutes in each practice
- I am lucky to have assistant coaches to work with me
- Step in when things get rough or when someone needs extra help
Teacher

- The difference between coaching a practice and coaching the athletes is in the teaching
- Explain what are doing wrong and how to fix it
- Start with the basics
  - “They should have already learned that”
    - Their bodies and minds are growing and changing every day
    - They might pick up on a small detail of a stroke that they didn’t understand before or couldn’t “feel it”
Teacher

- Use different “learning” techniques
  - All kids learn differently.
    - Auditory
      - Verbally explain what it should look like and what it should feel like
    - Visual
      - Watch a teammate
      - Watch themselves (video taping)
      - Watch a professional
    - Textile
      - Out of the water
      - In the water
Compassionate

- Kids are under more stress now than ever before
- They are their own worst critics
- Over scheduled and high expectations
- Many outside stresses that they might be dealing with
- Let the pool be a sanctuary away from all that
- You can show compassion without getting walked over
Strict

- Amazing ability to rise to the standards you set for them
- They are capable of more than they realize
- I expect them to abide by certain boundaries
- I show them respect and they respect me
  - The “look”
Good Listener

- Allow time before and after practice to talk with your swimmers
- Invest a smidgeon of interest in their life outside of the pool
  - Show interest in their other interests – ex: gymnastics, piano, ice skating, robotics club
- You want them to be comfortable coming to you
- You might be the only person they have to talk to
Flexible

- Practice won’t always go as planned
- Be able to change what you had wanted to do for what your swimmers need to do
- Moving on and skipping over things that may need more work leads to swimmer and coach frustration
Fearless (Trial & Error)

- There is no shame in trying something new
  - Morning practices
- Many of the best practices have come from taking a risk and trying to do something a new way
  - “Doing it live”
- Sometimes it may not work
- But sometimes you might get something amazing out of a “mistake”
Being Aware

- Give off non-verbal cues
- Can be very important in figuring out what they need
  - The “I’m hurting”
  - The “crying face”
  - The “I’m disappointed/frustrated with myself” face
  - The “I know you explained the set 4 times but I am still confused” face
  - Ex: Liam’s lost suit
- It’s easy to be dismissive of these cues
- Learning what they mean leads to a stronger bond and trust with your athletes
  - “I got your back”
In Summary

- I don’t know if I will ever coach an athlete to the Olympics
- But I have an opportunity to influence hundreds of swimmers and help them reach their goals right now
- My focus and my own goal is to do so in a positive way

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