

10 ways to Sabotage a Swimming Career

From John Leonard, American Swimming Coaches Association

(written with tongue firmly in cheek)

After thirty-three full years of observation, it has occurred to me that some parents must internally delight in the idea of sabotaging their child's swim career. They must for some perverse reason WANT to do this, since they work so incredibly hard at it and are so remarkably successful. Hereafter, my top ten list of means and methods. (And more seriously, some clear examples on positive alternatives.)

1. Start out making sure the child will get a material reward for good performance.... at age 8, a stop at McDonalds for a 100 IM done without disqualification. At age 10, a five-dollar bill for a new "A" time. At age 12, a trip to Disney World for a high point trophy in the JO's. At age 14, a party for child and friends at an amusement park, complete with LIMO ride, for qualifying for state high school champs as a freshman. And, if still around in the sport, a new Mercedes or Jaguar for a state high school championship as a senior.

If you can't see what's wrong with this, you're the problem. The approach that works best? Let the rewards become internal. Let the sport "belong" to the child, not something that "Mommy wants me to do." Get them to understand the value of working hard to improve themselves EVERY DAY, and allow them opportunities to "prove themselves" through THEIR sport.

2. Demand that the child keep up with Fred's kid, from work, who always wins at least one event in any meet they go to. Fred's kid is 8, stands 5 feet, 5 inches tall and had his first shave last Friday. Face shave, not swimming shave. Demand that your child stays close to, or "Right with" those early developers in your club

Reality? Children develop at different rates, in terms of size, strength, coordination, emotional and intellectual maturity and just about everything else. Allow your child to compete ONLY against itself, and measure them against only their own best efforts.

3. Coach your child part time, "when you're available". If you're rarely available, show up after practice with a stopwatch and "help" Susie by timing her for 50 meters "to see if she's getting any better". Encourage her with "kick, Susie, Kick!" screams from the side of the pool. This will nicely balance out the fact that all your 10 and under age group coach does is ask them to swim correctly and SLOOOOWLY so they learn their strokes.

You're just encouraging them to swim Faster, right??? Right? Right? Huh? What should you do? Just about ANYTHING except coach. Parents are for unconditional love and support. Coaches are for critical analysis of performance and developing skills physical, emotional and tactical. STAY AWAY from any coaching. If you doubt your coaches' ability to coach, talk to them about it, at last resort, go somewhere you have enough faith in the coaching to stay out of it. No mistake is worse than trying to be both parent and coach to your child. It's guaranteed long-term relationship disaster.

4. Insist that your child swim the race the way YOU want it swum...."like I saw them do in the Olympics" or "like I did, when I was in college in 1975" when you're at the meet on Saturday, after not having seen your child swim in practice for 6 months. After all, swimming's swimming right? It doesn't change. Does it? Does it? Huh?

Reality? Techniques and thinking on how to swim races change all the time. Swimming for a ten year old is not what it might be for a 20 year old, or an Olympic Swimmer. Allow your coach to select the race strategy that they deem age appropriate and developmentally proper for your child. If you doubt the coaches ability to do this, talk to them about it, until you are reassured.

5. Go get 'em a nice candy bar, mom and dad, just before they swim, so they'll have some "quick energy" just before they dive in. Or, bring in some nice fresh Crispy Crème donuts just after the warm-up and before the big meet. That'll give them a lift and cheer them up. Psych them up. Yeah. Good. Ugh.

Well, for those who don't know, Sugar is the Great Satan of physical performance. It creates an immediate "sugar high" in the bloodstream and then immediately thereafter, a HUGE dip in the blood sugar, so just about the time your child gets up to swim, they'll feel like they are wilting and just want to go lie down and rest. Not exactly "race ready". And don't try to figure out how to "time it" for the sugar high, either ... it won't work, its not that predictable in timing... except exertion will immediately trigger the sugar low. What instead? If they must eat between races and meals, have a bagel or non-sugar carbohydrate snack.

6. Tell your early developed 15 year old, "But you were SOOOOO good, when you were eight!"

Wow. Nothing heavier than a great potential, according to Charlie Brown. If you have an early developing child, stay away from past results comparisons. Just look at your own child's best times, and encourage improvement. And if the times aren't improving as they get older, and thankfully, they still enjoy swimming, just keep your mouth shut and be pleased that they enjoy the exercise and training. Great friends to be around, great role models. If you have trouble keeping your mouth shut, go look around at the mall to see whom your child COULD be hanging out with. It should inspire you to keep bringing them to the pool.

7. Go to the side of the pool each time the child swims, to "support them", with wild cheering, screaming, trembling and generally demonstrating your emotional involvement in your child's swim. The child will swim REEEAALLLY fast the first time you do this, (which will encourage you to do it ALL the time...) since all they want to do is get out of the water so you'll stop embarrassing them. Then they'd prefer to NEVER race again rather than see you like that.

Reality? Sit down. Smile. Cheer internally. When your child comes back, ask the child what they thought of their swim. Listen. Be quiet. Learn. Then cheer wildly for your child's best friend. That'll make your child happy, not embarrassed. (And hope your child's friend's parent is cheering for YOUR child!)

8. Spend your time in the car pool dissecting the workout your child just did. You can dissect the work given (critiquing the coach), or the child's performance (critiquing the child) or best of all, OTHER people's children's performance. The more critical you can be, the more knowledgeable you will appear. The door you hear slamming is your child leaving swimming.

What to do after you watch practice? Go Home. Feed your child. DO NOT TALK ABOUT PRACTICE UNLESS YOUR CHILD WANTS TO DO SO. This is all about letting the sport belong to the child and not to you. Critical.

9. When your child has an improved swim, faster than ever before, jump up and down, demonstrate your enthusiasm with words like WONDERFUL! FANTASTIC! INCREDIBLE! UNBELIEVEABLE! And generally behave as if you can't believe that a child with your pitiful athletic genes could actually do something worthwhile. This will ensure that your child will believe that they have accomplished something akin to finding the Holy Grail and will ensure that they cannot even REPEAT that performance, much less improve on it, for another two years when they finally forget your performance.

Reality? We all get excited when our child performs well in any way. Try your best to be restrained around your child. Making a big deal of a best time

makes it seem like you are SURPRISED that they could do so. Like you lack confidence that they could actually do anything worthwhile. Instead, play it cool. Express your confidence that the wonderful thing you just saw is an everyday event for a child as dedicated, hardworking and talented as yours. In the words of the football coach trying to diminish the "celebration factor" - "ACT LIKE YOU HAVE BEEN IN THE END ZONE BEFORE." (And expect to be again.)

10. Tell your child that they "HAVE TO/MUST" make this "time, time standard, place, final, or medal "Right Now". That should be crushing enough pressure to debilitate most anyone...except you of course, who can sit in the stands or at poolside, with a cup of coffee and a bun while you emote, rather than swim, the race.

What's the right language? Each swim is an opportunity to go fast. Just another opportunity. If you miss on this one, you'll get another chance shortly. The more important we make something, the more the pressure load to perform under. Everything is "just another swim meet". Everything. Even the Olympic Games. Our Olympic Coaches tell our Olympic Athletes regularly ..."what do you do in a regular meet? You try to go a best time. This is the same. Go a best time here, and you'll be fine." No one swim meet is "make it or break it" for an athletes career. Don't artificially try to make it so.

And now, in the spirit of Equal Time, here's ten ways swimmers find to sabotage their support systems in Swimming.

1. Want something for which you won't make any sacrifices. 'Those who want to go to heaven, have to be prepared to die.'
Reality: pay the price for the privilege you want.
2. Tell yourself "if I don't do IT by such and such a time, I'll give up". People who dream properly, don't set time limits, they set goals. Timeless goals.
Reality: Just say, "I will accomplish it" No time limits. Then set out to do it.
3. Don't live like an athlete away from the pool. Let your lifestyle choices as a young adult ruin your in water hard work. Burn the candle at both ends...see how long it can last.
Reality: Proper rest and taking care of your body is almost as important as proper training in improving performance.
4. Bribe your parents.... or your coach...by negotiation..."I'll do that if I can just do THIS, for the next five repeats". Compromise yourself to mediocrity.
Reality: Achievement means doing something better today than you have ever done before. Something little or something big. But do Something Better.
5. Stay up till all hours before a meet, for the social fun that can be had in that setting. "I DESERVE to have a good time, I work so hard at this". Yes, you work hard.
Reality: The reward is good performance, not outside entertainments.
6. Don't listen and learn good technique from coaches trying to help you. It's a technique-limited sport.
The Reality: Without great coaching, none of us go anywhere in any area of life. Learn to be "coachable."
7. Don't be honest with yourself about when you are working and when you are cruising.
Reality: Swim Meets and the timing clock always expose our real work habits.
8. Don't thank your teammates for all they bring to your enjoyment of the sport and your improvement. Think that you did it all by yourself.

Reality: We all get where you do because good people surrounded us and support us and lead us onward. Say thanks. Often.

9. Don't thank your coach for their support in your sport.

Reality: The best reward a coach can get is when an athlete says thank you.

10. Don't thank your parents for their support in your sport.

Reality: Be mature enough to recognize and say thanks to your biggest fans.

And finally, the Top Ten Things Coaches Do to Sabotage their athletes...(by accident, by accident!)

1. Allow them to talk you into compromising the training.

Reality: You can't compromise your way to great.

2. Allow them to overcome your willingness to coach with their unwillingness to learn. (Keep talking, keep teaching, and keep trying.)

Reality: It's the thousandth time you say something that it may penetrate. Don't quit on 999.

3. Fall into the trap of trying to make them "feel better" after a swim in which they did not perform correctly.

Reality: Young people need "truth tellers". Not people who know how to blow smoke at them. Tell them where they are, and what they need to get better. They need coaching, not just kind words. Tell them how to get BETTER; don't just commiserate. Be direct and blunt in your assessments. The feather touch does not create change.

4. Coach for the short-term reward rather than the long term good of the athlete. Allow parent pressure to influence you in this regard.

Reality: if we all 'coach as if the child will be with us forever", then all the children will be well cared for.

5. Fail to get the athlete's parents educated on the sport. Nothing will fail faster than undereducated sport parents.

Reality: Take the time to educate parents. It will pay off!

6. Worry about "getting speed" into the 10 and under athlete. (11 and 12 athlete, 13 and 14 athlete). Endurance based training has a 60 year history of success. But you want to be an experiment. Hohoho. You'll look like Santa Claus, of course "bringing more for less work", but then a day of reckoning will show up around age 13-15.

Reality: our goal should be speed at later mature ages. To do so requires endurance based training. Give it to them.

7. Argue with the athletes parents about what diet the child should be on. Or whether they should go to church on Sunday or not. Or whether a family vacation is more important than the Fairport "A" meet.

Reality: How would you like every parent on your team to provide his/her input on your training plans? They have parental areas, and you have coaching areas. Allow them domain over their areas. Discuss the "gray areas" with the child's best interests at heart.

8. Fail to "Listen" to...the athlete...the parent... other coaches.... just fail to listen, period.

Reality: You can only learn with your mouth shut. Seek to understand first, and then be understood. (Apologies to Steven Covey).

9. Copy someone else's coaching.

Reality: You can try. Most fail. Develop your own style.

10. Reinvent the wheel and fail to learn from anyone who coached in the 60 years of age group swimming before you started.

Reality: Honor all that has been learned about age group swimming before you came on the scene by learning about it. Learn from experience, your own and that of other coaches.