

SUMMER LEAGUE SUCCESS

for the Scott Sharks

by Michael Winton and Matthew Shirley

Here are a few notes and observations from a couple of rookie swim coaches. Although we both have significant competitive swimming experience, this was our first year as coaches. We live near Scott AFB in Illinois, which has fielded a youth swim team in the local summer league for years. We both had thought about coaching before, but we got involved last summer as volunteer coaches because we heard the Director of the Base Youth Center was not sure who he was going to get to coach the team or whether they could even keep it going.

Our coaching philosophy was similar to that of what we thought of as enlightened little league baseball coaches we'd observed. **We had a brief, two-month summer season, Memorial Day to the last weekend in July, during which we wanted to stress fun, learning and the chance to race, and let conditioning happen as a by-product of the time we spent teaching and practicing good stroke mechanics.**

We sold this concept to the parents and swimmers at pre-season meetings, and encouraged them to invite their friends to join us. We continued to accept new swimmers up to the end of the dual meet schedule, and welcomed those with no prior experience. We made a commitment to all of our swimmers that everyone who comes to practice, and is ready to swim, will swim in every meet, including League Championships. We didn't realize until the day of the big meet just how unusual that commitment was.

Ours was a typical summer league with short events. All age groups had one race for each stroke—25's for 10 & unders, 50's for 11-12, and 100's for 13-18 (except fly which was a 50). There was also a 100 IM for everyone but the 8 & unders. We had a schedule of 10 dual meets plus League Championships.

We had a wide range of swimmers, from 6 year olds who could barely finish a lap (or not at the start of the season!) to experienced swimmers who swam year round with their clubs. **As with many summer league teams, our most crowded age groups were the 9-10 boys and the 11-12 girls, with far fewer 13 and over swimmers.** Coach Matt is an active U.S. Masters Swimmer, and had been using *Total Immersion™* methods in his own training since 2001. <http://www.totalimmersion.net/products.html>

He and Coach Michael thought that this approach was the best method for creating a skill-focused program. Thus, **the early season focused on explaining the philosophy, and teaching the drills to the swimmers. We planned to work on starts and turns early and often.** With this basic outline in place, we began the season.

The first order of business was to break-out the team into manageable groups. We decided not to do this with traditional age group divisions because we wanted to focus on mastering the skills inherent in the TI drills. We were also aware of having only two of us to run practices, and would have trouble keeping too many different groups focused on task, and we wanted to avoid running more than one workout session per evening. **We decided on dividing the team into three groups: the "1" group including those swimmers who could complete a lap (25 meters) and that was about it; they lacked fundamental skills in any and all strokes. The "3" group included experienced swimmers with good mastery of 2 or more strokes. The "2" group contained swimmers best**

described as capable of finishing a lap or two of freestyle, but still needing many stroke refinements and an introduction to the other strokes.

At the first practice, we asked each swimmer to swim a lap of freestyle, and if they felt comfortable with any of the other three strokes, to do a lap of one of those as well. We found that was enough for us to judge pretty well their skill levels, and we found that dividing the team into those groups was a useful tool that served well for the rest of the season.

In keeping with our Little League coaching style, our workout routine was much more laid back than what some of our experienced swimmers had come to expect. **We worked on drill mastery early, particularly the basic balance drills with the younger, less experienced swimmers. We worked on starts nearly every day.**

Initially we did this because the race distances were so short. However, we continued because of two unexpected benefits: **it reduced the fear factor for new swimmers who had not used starting blocks by making it a routine activity, and the kids had fun enjoying the chance to dive and frolic. We worked on turns somewhat less, and that is an area we plan to address more systematically next season.**

When we moved into the meet season (2 weeks after the first practice!), our focus on skills bore immediate fruit in longer races. A significant number of our swimmers were taking the lead or pulling away from their rivals in the second half of their races, particularly the older swimmers racing 100's. It seems we were enjoying an unexpected "endurance gain" from the skill focus. We hadn't trained enough to improve anyone's conditioning, but we had already reduced energy-waste noticeably.

We also noticed that some of **our less experienced swimmers, who had been working mostly on basic balance, would look good the first half or so of their races, but their form would deteriorate when their heads began to come up for breathing. This seemed to validate Michael's approach of moving through the drills more expeditiously to reach the point where we could mix drills and swimming** over Matt's more deliberate approach of getting the early drills exactly right before moving on.

Having meets scheduled so soon after our first practice, felt as if it added some pressure to rapidly progress through the drills to get a serviceable stroke, and then return to basics for polishing. Matt also had a sense that he needed too many words to express a concept, and got puzzled looks from the swimmers. **We frequently used demonstrations of the drills, whether TI videos before going into the water, or the coaches demonstrating the drills. These methods, particularly the coaches in the water, seemed to help understanding,** although there still seemed to be a disconnect between what the kids saw and described, and what they would actually do. This perhaps indicated that **they would learn better with more doing and less talking, and perhaps more whole stroke swimming to practice the skills they'd use in the race.** We plan to adjust in this direction for the coming season, and also plan to use videotaping as a teaching tool.

That said, the overall approach to the team generated far more success, in every way, than we ever anticipated. During the 2001 summer season, we had fewer than 50 swimmers, lost all of our dual meets, and finished last at Conference Championships. In 2002, we started with 50 swimmers, and eventually topped out with over 70 as more kids wanted to join the team mid-season. We believe **the fun-and-learning focus in practice had a lot to do with making the swim team a more popular activity.**

We've already planned how to make the 2003 season even better. **We suffered last year from having three groups** (which was a handy way to divide the team), **but only two coaches**. Each group really did need a different practice, with a different coach fully focused on their needs.

Recruiting and retaining older (13+) swimmers is a challenge in this league. We were typical in that we had few. Even though we will remain non-traditional, we hope we can add a more demanding edge for the swimmers that desire it, so they feel that they are part of a program they can take seriously.

For most of our kids, **we will remain a fun program emphasizing improvement without struggle. The key will remain on drills and good mechanics. We will use fins as learning tools, rather than traditional equipment like kickboards or pull buoys.**

We will likely revive the tradition of playing water polo on Fridays during dual meet season. We will keep our commitment that every swimmer will swim every meet they wish to attend, including League Championships.

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