

Working Successfully with Seasonal Swimmers

by John Leonard

Working with the talented, committed athlete is a "no-brainer". You work cooperatively with the club coach, work on the principle of "the athlete first", and things kind of take care of themselves. At the next level, the serious swimmer, you do a lot of quality coaching to take care of their needs and the needs of the team. **At the lowest end of the spectrum, that of the "high school swimming only/summer league" athlete, you find some remarkable challenges.**

The first question to ask is Why is this person out for the swimming team? What do they care about? Why is this something they want to do? The answers likely will revolve around their personal need to "belong" to the experience of a team, their interest in doing something fun with their friends and "staying in shape".

The second question is What does this person do for the team? Hopefully the answer is They can do a number of things. First, the more the merrier. It is always, without exception, more fun to have more peers involved in any activity. There is more in common between a swimmer who trains three times-a-week and a swimmer who trains 11 times-a-week than there is between a non-swimmer and a swimmer. The more swimmers on your team, the more it's the "cool place" to be. The fewer, the more your athletes feel like a freak - and hanging out with little kids is plenty freaky in high school!

Second, young people with an interest in learning mastery of any new skill are inherently fun for you, and fun for those who already value the sport - their friends - your more committed swimmers. Helping others learn a skill is reward enough, don't you agree?

Third, in many teams, the high school only/summer league athlete can fill out the team and give it competitive depth. This is important to the success of the team.

Fourth, in any championship meet, the earliest heats in the meet are typically the slowest swimmers. If your "slow swimmers" are good swimming students, have learned well, worked hard, etc., then they will perform well above expectations. Nothing helps get your championship meet off to a great start more than seeing your least accomplished swimmers do fantastic performances for them. Everyone on your team gets psyched! Everyone takes pride in their new teammates efforts, and the deal becomes, "Wow! If *David* can swim like that, I can't wait to see what I can do!"

Legendary NCAA Coach Peter Daland of USC would always make sure he entered a slow swimmer who was training well in the early heats of the 500 free at the Conference Championship to get his team "Up" and "Psyched" when that guy blew out his best personal time by 20 seconds to win the opening heat of the PAC 10 Championships with his whole team cheering for him.

What constitutes doing a good job for these athletes? Go back to why they wanted to be a part of the team - to belong. Nothing in swimming says "belonging" more than a few simple technical things. You have to **first teach these athletes to START AND TO TURN!** Nothing differentiates them faster, nor separates them more, in a more obvious way, than not being able to start and turn like their peers.

While you as a coach know that their fastest way to IMPROVEMENT is to develop their swimming strokes, **what THEY care about most, is looking like the other kids!** The wise coach eases their minds **by teaching that visible set of skills, starting and turning, FIRST.** Then **they are more psychologically comfortable and ready to concentrate on your development of their strokes.**

What's next? Select some events in which they can help you and be happy. The easiest events in which they can help are the 50 free, 100 free, and the 50's of stroke for the medley relay. They need little aerobic background to create a certain level of success - and technique and good walls can go a long way! **So forget the long training sets. These folks need two things to contribute - stroke work and speed training.**

My experience has been that with novice high school age swimmers, **a one hour training session properly constructed, is BETTER than 90 to 120 minutes of "survival swimming".**

My recipe:

- About **10 minutes of warm-up** swimming,
- **20 minutes of stroke skill** development,
- **15 minutes of start and turn** development,
- **10 minutes of speed training**, and
- **5 minutes to cool-down.**

My idea of skill development is concentrated drill work of 12 ½ to 25 yards, **teaching 3 drills for each stroke**, and teaching them to do each **perfectly**. ("Any drill done 99% correctly is done 100% wrong," Coach Bill Sweetenham.) To accomplish this, I **spend an hour early in the season teaching them my terminology** of the stroke, so I can do corrections in five words or less each time they come to the wall, then off again on a drill. I teach one new drill a day until I have them all done (call it 2 weeks) and constantly review and refine each drill.

By going very short distances of the drill, the tempo of the practice is fast and interesting. No 100's 200's etc. and fatigue does not become a factor except for those in absolutely abysmal condition.

Start and turn development, once the skill has been taught, takes the form of repeats of just 8 yards into the wall, turn and 8 yards back, repeated many times at full speed. You can see there is some training included here as well. I teach one new start or one new turn each day. The 4 starts, with 7 turns, plus relay starts, makes 12 technical elements, so 12 days into the season we can practice multiple starts and turns each day.

I am a big believer in speed training for novice swimmers. **You don't have time in a summer league season to do endurance and aerobic training, so focus on getting them to move** their arms and legs and bodies **FAST**, so that they can contribute to your depth in the relays, the 50, and perhaps the 100.

My concept of **speed training is going slightly faster than what you expect as race tempo, for short distances**, 12 ½ or 25, extending out eventually to a few repeat 50s on 3-4 heats. The key is to be moving body parts at faster than they will move in the race, so the race pace will feel "slower" and more comfortable. Typical sets would be 12 x 12 ½ free, no breath, with an easy 12 ½ recovery (We flip at the mid-pool and cruise back to the wall.), or 12 x 25 the same way, or 5 x 50 back on 3 heats, moving as fast as you can! Remember that **this is going to only take 10 minutes of your hour**. It is fatiguing work and useless if race tempo is not maintained or exceeded on every effort!