

I Am Not A Jock – But I was a Swim Team Coach!

I am not a jock. I was never a jock. When the team captains chose their kickball team mates on the playground, I was always the last kid chosen. I have never been able to dribble a basketball while moving forward. Have never, ever, hit a ball with a bat. I actually played volleyball once, in a “fun” league. The ref blew the whistle every time my hands touched the ball. Every time. *Every time*. After that first game, I became the team manager.

But somehow, I could swim without drowning. Since my dad enjoyed swimming, I spent a lot of time in the water. When I was in college, I took some Red Cross courses and became a life guard and a swimming instructor. I loved children and teaching, and so it was the perfect summer job for me.

Then my college roommate convinced me to join the Holy Cross swim team. I came last in every race I ever swam, but I still enjoyed swimming, so I stuck it out. The team had 20 slots, and fewer than 20 tried out. I wasn't hurting anyone by being on the team... plus I think I raised the self-esteem of every swimmer there. Just by my mere presence! Each real athlete could say, “I may be slow, but I'll never be as slow as Lisa!”

When I was a senior, there was only one other senior on the team. For some reason, she dropped out during the year. That meant I was the only one eligible for the “Most Outstanding Senior on the Swim Team” award. I actually was given a watch that says, “Holy Cross Crusaders.”

If you were a Bible-quoting Christian, you might be tempted to say, “The last shall be first!”

I loved that watch! It allowed me to pretend I was a jock. And then something happened that made pretending even easier! I got a job coaching a swim team.

I was in my mid-twenties, and I was working as a school teacher in Alabama. They needed a coach for a YMCA summer-league team. Nobody on this team had Olympic dreams. It was just basically something for the kids to do all summer. Parents wanted their sons and daughters to become safe swimmers, and the kids just wanted to have fun.

Since I had been on a college varsity swim team, I apparently had more experience and knowledge than anyone else around. Besides, no one else would do it for such a meager salary...

So I took the job, and knew I had a lot of learning to do. Thank goodness there was an assistant coach who seemed to know everything about coaching and running swim meets. He really was a jock, so I pretty much did whatever he suggested.

The second year was similar. We won about half our meets. Not terrific. But not too bad, either. It was decent. And I was learning the basics...

During our third summer, the assistant coach moved out of state. I was going to have to be the real coach, not just the one who did the paperwork. I would have to make real decisions about who was to swim which event... how to run each practice... how to train this group of youth (boys and girls, ages 7 to 17) in those fine skills such as flip turns and starting dives!

Turning to the Experts – Leadership Top and Bottom

I really didn't know how to proceed, so I turned to "the experts." The 18-year olds who had been on the team the year before, a couple of the 17-year olds still on the team, and a couple of older siblings who were just interested in coaching. We had a "leadership meeting" and talked about what they loved about being on the swim team, and what they hated about it. What they thought would make it more fun, and more effective.

First of all, the meets were very long. We didn't just have a butterfly race. We had "Boys butterfly, age 8 and under." And we had "Girls butterfly, age 8 and under." And we had "Boys butterfly, ages 9-10." And of course, "Girls butterfly, ages 9-10." You get the picture. That's why our swim meets took all day.

We talked about how the little kids would get bored, lose track of time, and forget to show up for their race! Or sometimes they would get in line, and wait and wait, and eventually forget which stroke they were swimming. They didn't pay attention to the announcement before their race, so they would dive in and start swimming free-style when the event was breast stroke!

Mentor and Peer Support

This was our first idea: We re-structured the team so that every swimmer had a buddy. The 8-10 year olds partnered with 13-14 year olds. The 11-12 year olds partnered with the 15-17 year olds. Everyone had to know their partner's events at every meet. If your partner was swimming the 50 yard backstroke, then you were there at the side of the pool as your partner lined up, and you cheered as your partner swam.

This had effects we hadn't even dreamed of! We just wanted the younger swimmers to have someone to track them down so they wouldn't daydream and forget to show up for their race. Or forget what stroke to swim.

But these partnerships really built relationships among the swimmers! At the first meet, the older swimmers would be standing in line with the younger swimmers, reminding the younger swimmers what their event was, and what its particular rules were. For example, picture this:

Older swimmer: "So, what event is this?"

Younger swimmer: "I don't know..."

Older swimmer: "It's the breast stroke."

Younger swimmer: "Oh! Right! The breast stroke!"

Older swimmer: "So what do your hands do for the breast stroke turn?"

Younger swimmer: "I don't know..."

Older swimmer: "The two-hand touch."

Younger swimmer: "Oh! Right! The two-hand touch!"

See, for the breaststroke and butterfly, you had to do a "two-hand touch" on the wall, touching with both hands simultaneously or you would be disqualified. We had a lot of "D-Q" races, simply because the younger kids forgot. So this kind of review, right before the race, made a huge difference right away!

Then the older swimmer would watch the younger swimmer during the race, cheering him or her on. At the end, the older swimmer would give the younger swimmer a hug with a towel, and say, "Good Swim!" no matter if he or she won or lost. It was really sweet to watch.

At that first meet, we were not prepared for what followed next.

When the older swimmers' turns came to swim, and they lined up, guess who went over to stand with them? Their younger buddies! Sure enough, they wanted to be just as helpful! So picture this conversation happening:

Younger swimmer: "So, what event is this?"

Older swimmer: "Um, it's the breast stroke."

Younger swimmer: "Very Good!"

Younger swimmer: "So do you your hands do for the breast stroke turn?"

Older swimmer: "Um, the two-hand touch."

Younger swimmer: "Very Good!"

It was so adorable! And at the end of the older swimmer's race, the younger buddy was there with a towel and a big hug, saying, "Very good swim!"

Just that one idea made such a difference for our team – not only at meets, but also at practices.

Older swimmers started acting more responsibly, because they had to be role models for the younger swimmers. Younger swimmers wanted to impress the older swimmers, so their behavior improved as well. And having a personal cheerleader really helped everyone's attitude.

In fact, older teammates started watching their younger partners more carefully and began to give them pointers. "Don't hold your hand like that. Do it like this. Kick this way, not that way." All the swimmers were more committed to coming to meets, because someone else was individually counting on them. Parents didn't have to nag their children any more.

Same Goal, Same Direction

But that wasn't the only idea our "leadership meeting" surfaced. Here was another terrific idea: stop stressing the winners of a race. Instead, focus on each swimmer's "personal best time." In other words, the winners get ribbons in a meet. Everyone knows who won the race. There's no need for us as a team to reinforce who beat their opponent. So let's actually ignore it! After all, what really matters is this: did that swimmer beat his or her own self?

That changed every race they swam! No longer was a swimmer competing against the person in the next lane. It didn't matter how fast the other team

was, or how intimidating they looked on the starting blocks. No need to worry! Just beat your own previous best time!

So because of this change, everyone was now just trying to become better swimmers. Therefore, if a person came in last place, but shaved five seconds off a previous time, that was cause for a celebration! “Good Swim!” were meaningful words... even when a swimmer came in last place!

The old way took a race of eight swimmers and produced one winner and seven losers. This new way took a race of eight swimmers and could actually produce eight winners! What a grand concept!

And because they were young and just learning, and because they had at least a week in between the swim meets, they almost always beat their previous times!

Diversity and Creativity in Learning

But that’s not all! Here is their third idea. Since swimming practices tend to be boring and hard, the swimmers often skip practice. When they come less often, their skills don’t improve, and so it’s even more hard. It won’t become easier unless swimmers improve, and they won’t improve if they don’t come often. So here was their idea: More fun at team practices.

Drills and skills were only for the morning practices. During the afternoon practices, we played bizarre games we invented to increase strength and endurance. It worked! Practices became much more fun. The swimmers were skipping practice less often, which meant they were becoming stronger swimmers. And then the morning sessions of skills and drills weren’t so difficult any more. Plus, having all the buddies as extra coaches meant more attention and more fine-tuning for the younger swimmers.

The fourth idea involved having more fun at the actual swim meets. We started writing up cheers for our team, and we made up songs about whatever team we were meeting. Nothing nasty – just funny stuff. The swimmers carpooled with parents, and pads of paper and pens were given out to all the cars, so they could think up words for cheers during the drive.

We were the Maxwell Seahawks. I had found a stuffed animal seahawk, and we hung it from a pole. So when we had a meet against the Selma Gators, I

sewed an alligator in the talons of the seahawk. When we had a meet against the Stingrays, I sewed a stingray in its talons. We had a giant banner we displayed at every meet. When we traveled, we took a bottle of water from our home swimming pool, and poured it into the pool of the visiting team, thus making that pool “our own.” Those silly rituals became very important.

None of this stuff was rocket science, but it made us a better team. And our membership increased. Our team was growing bigger and bigger, because the kids would talk about it, and others found out this was really fun, so they wanted to join! We even had swimmers writing articles for the local paper about the team!

At the end of every year, we always had a swim team banquet. Families brought food, and we gave out goofy awards. Every swimmer got at least one award; many received more than one. The awards were printed on parchment paper in calligraphy. But they were *really goofy*. That’s what made them fun.

For example, one year, there were three girls on the team named “Jennifer.” Each of them got the “Most Common Name on the Swim Team” Award. One of them was named Jennifer Pool. She got the “Best Name on the Swim Team” Award (since her last name was POOL!). She also got a third award: the “Most Name Awards Received In One Year” Award.

One year, we had a swimmer who actually missed every single swim meet! He received the “Marinara” award. Why? Because marinara sauce is tomato sauce with “no meat.” (Get it?)

Service by walking the talk -- Integrity

The team became so much fun, that more youth joined up, and our roster grew. There were so many swimmers, that we needed the older and most experienced swimmers to act as assistant coaches during the practices.

Yet, they were still on the team, and they needed to do their daily laps and practice their dives and flip turns as well. So we all showed up an hour before the regular practice, and we had our own practice. All the coaches, including me! As the swimmers and their parents showed up for practice, they could see that we were right in the pool ourselves, doing the same

things that we expected them to do. In fact, by trying out our drills and activities on ourselves, we were able to make them run more smoothly.

We could serve the team better this way, and both parents and youth could see how they needed to follow our example. Those who were the fastest swimmers on the team didn't become arrogant and set apart with privileges. They actually gave twice as much time to the team.

Our Fourth Season – when it all came together

So... the strangest thing happened our fourth season. Half way through the summer, it occurred to me that we hadn't yet lost a meet! We were actually undefeated!

I talked with the assistant coaches. We were all wondering... Now that were getting really good, should we change our method? Do something different? Look more closely at our opponents? Use more deliberate strategy when placing swimmers in events, based on our strengths and the strengths of our opponents? Maybe we should use this new competitive edge to our advantage... maybe we should really try to craft a championship team...

Nope!

We decided not to. We decided that it was too much fun being a “non-competitive” team. Everyone's times were improving, the team enjoyed each other, parents were happy, and honestly, we just didn't care about the scores at the end of the meet anymore... we cared, but not enough to change the focus of our team. In other words, if we suddenly became too focused on winning, we might lose what we had worked so hard to create.

So we made a deliberate decision – to stick with our game plan. At the beginning of each season, I never promised the parents we'd end up with Olympic athletes. But I did give them our three goals:

- (1) To learn basic swimming skills
- (2) To learn about teamwork
- (3) To have fun

I never even made “To win swim meets” a goal. It wasn't part of our mission. And even when it seemed we could finally be a “winning” team, our group of coaches took time out, reflected, and returned to our goals. We decided to stick to what we said we were all about... but that group meeting

was important. It was necessary for all of us to be on the same page and to project the same message and to pull our team in the same direction.

What happened? After we choose fun over winning, we kept winning!

In fact, we went all the way – we were undefeated – and we won our division championship. It was 1985. What a meet. What a year. I'll never forget it. But more than that championship meet, I remember that team. I remember those assistant coaches. I remember how a team stopped obsessing about winning meets, and started winning more meets!

Why were we so successful?

That's the question. For over twenty years, I have gone back to that question. How could such a mediocre team, dedicated to fun and relationships, become a team of champions? OK, besides the fact that it existed in a mediocre swim league?

I now have the language to explain what happened to us – and how we became champions that season. It's all about transformation. Without knowing it in 1984, I led our team by the same five principles that my own research study would reveal to me in 2002. And both times, it was a small group of teenagers who taught me these principals.

You know that sports are a metaphor for life! And if a non-jock like me can coach a swim team to such an unpredictable victory, then there's hope for lots of "non-experts" to excel in lots of areas...

Are you glad you dove into this concept of transformation?
I invite you to please keep swimming...

For more information about transformation and research, visit
<http://www.tomorrowspresent.org/research/index.php>

