

Real World Feedback

By John Leonard

I was thrilled to find the following article in USA Today on February 16. It validates one of the things I have been telling both parents and their athletes for decades now. Which is, that one of the things you will gain from swimming is a realistic view of your strengths and weaknesses in the world. And that you'll grow strong in your conviction that you can overcome difficulties through the experiences that make up the sport of swimming.

Did any of you go through a life without difficulties? Me neither.

That depends of course, on the coach giving honest feedback. Swimming is a technique limited sport. You'll only get as good as the technique you develop and the attention you continually pay to it. And that technique does not come naturally to 99.9% of the population. So coaching, good coaching is vital to an athlete's success.

If the coach "blows smoke" at the young person with "this is great, that's great, you're wonderful, blah, blah, blah", nothing is going to be gained.

Good coaching consists of quality feedback. "Your head needs to be lowered 2 inches, your hands need to enter outside the shoulder line, the palm needs to be pitched outward, your hips need to move faster" etc. etc. etc. Endless feedback from age 5 to forever.

Occasionally, children being children, they need to be refocused. That's a nice way of saying they need their attention brought back to task. That's a nice way of saying, "give 'em a shout"...

I regularly, when the occasion demands it, yell at young athletes. Not all the time, but quite regularly. (Multiple times each practice.) None of my athletes mistakes it for my "hating them." None of them goes home with permanently bruised little egos. My "leave the sport" rate is just about negligible. Caring enough to yell is very obvious to children. Children don't leave a sport because you're hard on them. They leave because the coach doesn't appear to care about them. When you care enough to correct them, especially with some passionate loud appeals to their better nature, they know you do in fact, care about them. Neglecting to correct them, tells them volumes about how little you care. False praise tells them that you are a phony.

Be honest. Say it properly. The child is not an idiot, but the child may do some acts that are pretty dog-gone stupid, or inattentive. You need to convey the message that "Jackson, that's not like you. You're a smart guy who has shown me before that you can figure things out. Now fix it!"

When you express disapproval, disapprove the act, not the person.

Children are very intuitive and very smart. They read people very very well. Tell the truth. Trust them to recognize it. Tell them when they do things well; tell them when they do things poorly and what to do to fix it.

That will be exactly like real life. None of us are perfect. Those of us that thrive are those who can recognize our mistakes, pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and go back at it. When we succeed in correcting the problem, we truly build onto our self-confidence and our self-esteem. In that case, our ego feeding is valid and appropriate. Take pride in what you overcome.

But Overcome.

Which means that parents have to accept, indeed, embrace, controlled opportunities for their child to fail, be corrected, stand up to it by looking the coach in the eye, and then improving. Otherwise, as a parent, you're just raising a hothouse plant that will fall apart in the first rain and windstorm.

Finally, since I like stories, a quick story... Years ago, I had a very aggressive and smart swim family, the Cassidy's, who had a young lady swimmer named Stacy. One day, Mom Sue asked Stacy, "What do you like about this guy? (JL) all he seems to do is yell at you all day?"

Stacy's response as reported by Mom Sue is a classic. "He believes in me. If he didn't, he wouldn't demand so much of me. I appreciate him yelling at me. When he yells, I hear what he wants and I also hear "Stacy, you can be better." So I always know he thinks I can be better. I need that."

Stacy went on later to the great honor of representing the USA in international competition. At the time Mom Sue asked the question above...Stacy was 10 years old.

Children are very smart.

In summary:

1. Parents, allow the child the opportunity to be a hero. Fail, rise, learn, and overcome. If you don't, the child will really face it later in life without the real self-esteem necessary to succeed and move on.
 2. Coaches, give honest feedback. Don't be afraid to criticize, as long as it is followed with explanation of the problem and the solution.
 3. Coaches, it's all in how you say things. Criticize the problem, not the person. Tell 'em something they are doing right, how to improve and make them do it again until it is right.
 4. Coaches, reasonable challenges tells the athlete that you believe in them. Challenge 'em every day in some way.
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