

# News For SWIM PARENTS

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## “Practice is Too Hard!”

Yes, sometimes some of the things we do are “hard.” I prefer the word “challenge.” Part of what we do in practice is to challenge swimmers to extend themselves beyond what they thought they are capable of doing. We do this with care and in a systematic and progressive manor. We do not attempt to drive weaker age group swimmers from the sport. Nor do we attempt to make each swimmer an Olympic swimmer. I have long term patience for each swimmer’s development.

How much “challenge” is enough? The answer depends on the age and level of swimmer. In our age group program less than 15% of the available time (on a weekly basis) is set aside for “challenge sets.” (Three 15 minute blocks of time per week.) We record and track times on these test sets and coach the children to higher levels of performance each week. For some swimmers with the desire and ability, challenge sets will eventually make up 30 to 40 percent of the available workout time. It may take some swimmers two or three years to get to that point.

All the facts and figures do not matter to a swimmer who says “It’s too hard.” This is where helpful support from parents can be of great assistance. Parents can remind children that some exercises push children into zones of uncomfortableness with good reason. We do not adapt without some workout overload or stress. It is a basic principle of training applicable to all ages. It is also a basic principle of life that sometimes things get uncomfortable and we work a little harder to bring about a change.

With the change in coaching and in coaching styles the practices are indeed very different. We do far more stroke work now and we also challenge a bit more. With patience and support I am hopeful that all the children will adapt and eventually enjoy the practice session. In my 27 years of coaching I have rarely lost children from the program because they did not have fun or felt it was too hard. Indeed, in the past the most common complaint about my age group programs has been that I did not give enough work and that I was holding swimmers back. (I was guilty of preparing swimmers for the future rather than my own and the parent’s own immediate gratification.)

At the age group developmental level our primary goals are to teach swimming skills, learn good practice habits, expose the children to life skills, set the aerobic conditioning foundation for senior level swimming, introduce competition opportunities, and to have fun.

“Fun” is an interesting word. One day at age group swim practice I asked 12 very exhausted swimmers aged 10 through 12, “How many of you had fun today?” This I asked after they had completed their first ever 3000 yard workout in a 75 minute period. Of course I was expecting none of them to say they had fun. What I was hoping to do was create a teaching moment where we could talk about the difference between fun and satisfaction. To my surprise every child wearily raised their hands and said that they had had fun. When I asked them to explain, they all said they felt that way because they had never done 3000 yards before. Eventually, three years later, 4 of the 12 swimmer completed 6000 yard in a 90 minute period and the other 8 completed between 4000 and 5000. All those swimmers are still swimming and still loving the sport because the challenge is the fun and the fun is the challenge