

News For SWIM PARENTS

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The Fallacy Of Age Group Rankings

This title is not really what you think it means. Those of you who are licking your chops saying, "Ah hah! ASCA thinks age group rankings are counterproductive!", are going to be disappointed.

The common and popular argument these days is that a fast swimmer at age ten is almost a contra-indicator of later success. It is true that individually, this has some basis in statistical fact. A lot of early fast swimmers do so because they are physically mature and muscularly far in advance of their age peers. As their peers catch up, the early developers may become discouraged and drop out of the sport, or "not realize their early promise." This is a result of simple difference in the developmental rates of human beings, not the effects of early success in the sport.

Many coaches and some lay-persons interpret this individual scenario to project a swimming wide trend. They then proceed to state in effect, "if early success is bad, let's not worry about how fast our age group swimmers swim.....let's not be concerned with producing fast age group swimmers."

Now there are two ways to interpret that approach. The first is the assumption that we will produce fast swimming by piling on a great deal of early physical work to the young child. This will certainly make them successful in relation to their more lightly trained peers. The second approach is to seek fast swimming through aerobic base training, and careful attention to detailed and thorough stroke instruction.

Far too often of late, we see whole LSC's or regions of the USA, where coaches are adopting the "don't worry about fast age group swimming" attitude....and then doing "lazy coaching"....not working either physically, or on technical excellence. Naturally, those areas don't produce fast age group swimming. The LSC coaches and lay persons then pat themselves on the back about how progressive they are.

Wait a second.

The same areas producing slow age group swimming, are also producing slow, (or no) Senior Swimming. And a few of these include areas of the USA which have previously been very productive in other decades. What was the point of de-emphasizing age group swimming? I hear a small voice out there saying "Retention". You think so? Take a look at USA Swimming's retention statistics. There is no statistically significant difference between "fast" and "slow" swimming areas in terms of retention in the sport. (at least in USS swimming) We have poor retention in all parts of the USA.

Now, lets get back to the main point of all this. Areas with fast senior swimming also have fast age group swimming. There are sociological reasons for this, of course, but there also are swimming dynamic reasons.

The primary reason among these is also the simplest. Area "B" has two young swimmers. John

Jones is a super-developed 10 year old, ranked in 6 events in the National Top 16, and a super stud in the ASCA Age Group Motivational Times rankings. Billy Bullwinkle is the original 46 pound weakling at age 10. Billy never beats John, but he sees him win all the time, and swim fast. He aspires to be like John.

At age 12, Billy is starting to catch John both physically, and in the water. Since Billy couldn't win (ever) at age ten, or get ranked anywhere, he concentrated on learning good strokes from a caring coach, who knew that later Billy would grow. Now Billy is growing, and getting faster, and still chasing John.

By age 15, John is swimming marginally well in the 50 free, and Billy is maturing into a lean, mean, lanky 400 meter freestyler and IM'er. By age 17, Bill is swimming well at Senior Nationals, in the NAG Top 16, and John might be on his high school team, or out of the sport.

Now, did John help the sport of swimming in his area? You bet he did! He provided the incentive and the measuring stick of excellence that Bill chased in his years as a developing swimmer. If there were no fast early developers, exactly where would the stimulus come from for the later developers to get better? How would they measure excellence?

Let's stop taking individual cases, and acting as if they compose the collective development of an area. We all develop to exactly the degree that others around us stimulate us to reach. Great Age Group Swimming (done the proper way, with great mechanics and aerobic base) later provides great senior swimming, even if it is not in the same individuals. Observe our nation, and the relative strengths of age group and senior swimming. Fast swimming begets more fast swimming. It's been that way since the beginning of age group swimming, and it is still that way today, and will be tomorrow. Let's work for fast, appropriate age group swimming at all ages, and stop using the bugaboo of age group rankings to explain our failures