

Reflections of a Swim Dad

I had just arrived home, after an 8 hour drive, from my youngest daughter's last college conference swim championships. As I unpacked my bag, I hung her swim cap with her name on it on the bookshelf in my study at home, next to her picture from Senior Night; I also hung my name tag with her picture on it in the same place. I pulled out a one page thank you letter she had written the week before, that started..."Dear Mom and Dad...this is the last week of my swimming career". Of course, I had to wrestle back the tears in my eyes, as I had done every time she got on the blocks that weekend, throughout the entire last day of her swim championships, and throughout the parent's banquet that followed the same evening, not always successfully I might add.

She was the last of 3 daughters, all of whom swam for the same high school coach, and the same college coach. I had been to 11 of the last 12 conference championships, and had a daughter on the same college team for 10 of the last 12 years, with two of them overlapping as teammates for two of the years. Prior to that, I had occupied the same role as many swim parents, that of volunteer. I had been on the Connecticut Swimming Board of Directors for 14 years, as the Chair for 4, Admin Vice Chair for 6, Program Development Vice Chair for 4, and had served on deck as an official for about 16 years, during which I had officiated at the club and college level, and served as the Meet Ref for our LSC Senior Open Swim Championships 17 times over 9 years. More meets had come and gone than I could possibly count. I never swam, but this gave me the opportunity to be involved with my kids, and learn about their sport. Along the way, I also met some great people, from the ranks of swimmers, their parents, coaches and other officials. I now have several adopted daughters from multiple generations of high school and collegiate swimmers to show for the experience, all of them great friends of my three girls, thanks to the sport they all shared.

With the close of the last daughter's competitive career, a 23 year chapter of my life as a parent had also come to a close. They and my son, who played lacrosse in high school and college, had completed their competitive careers, and I was done with my time as the parent of competitive athletes. All of them had achieved a level of success, were two sport athletes in high school, had the opportunity to extend their careers at the college level in their primary sport of choice, and had been captains of their respective high school teams; one had been a two time captain, one a two sport captain and one the captain of her college team. Along the way, there were the usual high points and low points, the achievements and setbacks, for each of them, all of which were learning opportunities. I never missed a meet or a game, for anything, which was something I have never regretted. I had to pause and reflect on what this all meant, and the mixed emotions involved.

The last conference championship meet was like many that had come and gone in the past. Some great swims from our team's swimmers, some not so great ones, some disappointments and some failures. With this, the joy that comes with success, and the tears and frustration that follow the disappointments. The parents who share in the excitement and enthusiasm of great performances, and who shoulder the heavy parenting burden that comes with the failures. And so goes the life of a swim parent, every time out, regardless of the level or skill of the swimmer.

Some kids and parents handle all of the above with more grace than others, but this is a learning process for all involved, and everyone is at a different place on the learning curve.

Through it all, I have learned quite a few things, about myself, my kids and life, and I have learned it all incrementally along the way. By no means do I have all the answers; some days I don't have any. Over time, I have come to realize there are more questions than answers. And I've certainly made my own mistakes along the way, as a parent (and as a swim official). When I hit the complicated moments in life, whether they involve positive or challenging issues, I tend to organize my thoughts in writing, as it helps me to collect all of the emotions in one place. In keeping with that spirit, these are just some random observations from someone who has been through the process, more than once. Some of this may seem obvious, but it's not always as apparent as it should be when you're in the middle of things, or easy to do in reality.

As a parent, our primary role in life is not to develop the best athlete. It is to develop the best person. Athletic participation is a means to this end, not the end itself. There will come a time when they have to move on, and you want them to do so as healthy, balanced, self-aware, mature individuals, who can handle the challenges that life throws at them, maybe better than others because they were athletes. Add to this compassion, courage and confidence, as traits that you hope they will acquire along the way. You want them to be better and more well equipped people when they end their competitive career, than when they started, precisely because they participated and competed. Our job as a parent, raising children, is the most important one we have, and it should not be reduced or limited by a myopic focus on this aspect of their life.

Regardless of what happens during the course of any event, year or career, it's not the end of the world. Swimming (and athletic participation overall) is not a matter of life or death, and it's not the most important thing in life, so it should not be made out to be. Yes, competition is important, as is succeeding at what you set out to do, and it's always fun to have great swims. But don't elevate the importance of the sport or give it perspective beyond what is reasonable, and manageable for your kid.

Recognize the many lessons to be learned, through both success and failure, achievement and adversity.

Love your kids for who they are, and don't make it conditioned on their performance in the pool. They need to know you love them and support them, regardless of where they are in their development process or what their most recent time was. It's easy to be there when they succeed. They need you more when they don't.

Every one of your kids is different. They are each born into a different family, depending on where they are in the pecking order. They each have different skills, attitudes, abilities, and they respond to different things. Don't try to put them all in the same box. You have to get to know each of your kids as individuals, and determine what each of them may need from you. It will be different in each case.

My dad once told me "you remember people who were good to your kids". There will be many coaches and maybe even some officials who will be instrumental in the development of your kid, as an athlete and as a person. Don't forget to thank them along the way, and remind your kid to do the same.

For the parents of younger swimmers, it's a long road, a marathon and not a sprint. Swimming can be a tough and demanding sport, and it's not always a lot of fun. Keep it fun for them. It's not important where they start, but rather where they finish. The developmental process is different for each kid; those who start off fast may not stay that way, and those who start off slow can blossom later. One of the most important lessons I learned was to never give up on a kid when they are young, and to never get too

carried away with fast times at that stage either. The ugliest duckling in the pond can turn into a beautiful swan down the road.

There will be peaks and valleys, and the valleys can seem long and deep. It requires special parenting to work through the valleys, and keep them engaged. Hard work pays off, but not necessarily immediately. It does over the long haul, if balance, perspective and focus can be maintained, and frustration can be contained. Attitude matters also. There is no substitute for a positive attitude combined with great effort, and this will prevail over pure talent in the long run. Over time, a kid with less ability who is willing to work hard will outperform someone with more talent who does not, and this is one of the important life lessons they learn. You can outwork others, if you put your mind to it.

At the end of the day, it's not really about the sport, whether it's swimming, lacrosse, or hockey. It's not about you either, an oversight we all make at some point in the journey. It's about the process of development, and what athletic participation can contribute to this. It can take us a long time to realize this though.

It's about learning how to compete, how to succeed and fail with grace and dignity, how to deal with setbacks and adversity, how to compartmentalize and get ready to go again, without allowing the successes or the failures to cloud the focus, sense of purpose and sense of self. It's about life lessons that can only be learned through competition. Determination, persistence, perseverance, grit, self-awareness, maturity, focus, discipline, hard work, time management, team work, compassion, self-confidence, and the list goes on.

Parents play an important role in this learning process. As the primary teachers for our kids, we have to learn all of these lessons as well, but from a different perspective, as a parent, and maybe for some of us as former athletes. The role of parent is different, and certainly former athletes have as much if not more to learn about all of this as those who were not. They just don't think so, sometimes. Your kid is not you. There is no handbook. This is trial by fire, and mistakes will be made.

As parents, we sometimes like to think we have all of the answers, until we realize we don't, and that we have more questions than answers. We can also make the mistake of believing that there is one right and correct way to do this. In fact, there is not. What works for some parents and kids may not work for others. Lessons can certainly be learned along the way, from observing and listening to others who have gone before you. But each family has to develop their own formula, their own way of proceeding, based on what works for them.

Swimming and athletic participation will not last forever, even though it may seem like it when you're in the middle of it. Swimming will always be an important part of their lives, but their athletic careers will eventually come to a close. My kids and their friends refer to themselves as "swammers", immediately after the last touch, and they proudly wear shirts that proclaim this. Regardless of how ready you think you may be, you're never really ready to watch that last swim. When it does end, we have to learn to let go, and build a different relationship with our kids as young adults. This is hard to do, in a sport that requires hours, days, weeks and years of invested time all dedicated toward advancement to the next level. It becomes an identity that in many respects can define you, your kid and the relationship you have with them. It will always be part of the relationship, and can make it stronger in the years ahead, but it requires some time and effort to move to the next phase of life, one that allows swimming to be part of their lives, but not the only or defining element of it.

One more thing: when it's finally over, no one will remember the times or places. All of this may be important in the moment, but it becomes a thing of the past sooner than you may think. My own kids taught me this. They remember the relationships, being part of a team, and they walked away from the experience with the best friends they will have in their life. And they never talk about the times or places again.

Even when you're done, you're not sure whether you have learned all that there is to learn, and it's likely you have not. And you won't know whether you have succeeded in your task.

What is the measure of success? That is something for everyone to decide privately for themselves and their own families, based on the things they believe to be important in their lives and the lives of their kids. It will likely be a different set of metrics for everyone. We all want to be able to look back with no regrets though, and we're always going to be left with more questions than answers. Were we there for them? Did we emphasize the right things? Were our priorities lined up the right way? What did we teach them, and what did they take away from it all? In all likelihood, none of this will be about their level of athletic achievement though, or their times.

When it is all said and done, the true measure of success lies in the people our children become, and their ability to go forward in life as confident, mature, compassionate, fully functioning adults, with balanced perspectives on what is really important in life. They will be the parents and leaders of tomorrow. So, the primary question will become: what have we taught them about this, and life?

Jeff Gray, retired swim dad

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