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Working with the Coach

One of the major difficulties has to do with the working relationship between coach, parents, and Board of Directors. The ability of the coach to work with parents in a respectful and cooperative manner is often times an issue. This is especially true when parents, primarily age group parents, challenge the coaches' authority and ability to make judgments. Two other issues are the ability of the coach to educate parents as to the athletic needs of their children, and the administrative abilities of a coach to effectively delegate and lead a parent's group.

From our vantage point of "hearing it from all sides" we have developed this advice for parents.

- **Be educated.** Read all you can about your child's sport but remember, that there are usually many different ways to teach a skill, or plan a season, or set a race strategy, etc.. Your coach may use tactics you have not read about and are not familiar with but are never-the-less absolutely sound. Some very gifted coaches may use techniques that aren't well documented but may be a superior method. Your coach may be a pioneer! We don't think that all coaches should coach using the same methods and are anxious to hear from coaches having success with new found methods.

Where do you find information? Subscribe to magazines, read book and research on the Internet.

- **Think before you ask.** When you are concerned about a decision made by the coach it's fair to ask for an explanation but keep in mind two things. First, ask for an explanation at the proper time. During practice or while the coach is working with athletes at a competition are not good times to ask for explanations. It is better to wait for a quieter time and it is better to think through your questions before approaching the coach. Secondly, it is reasonable for a coach to give an explanation by simply saying, "I had a feeling it would work best this way." It's called intuition, and it is one of the most important ways a coach makes a judgment call. Let's not take this away from coaches.

- **Situation: Relays.** Who should be on the relay and what should the order be? You may think it should be the fastest four athletes and since your daughter is the second fastest, she should go third.

However, there are so many factors that go into setting a relay line up that the guiding philosophy of the coach might simply be that he "enters the relay in the best interest of the team". There should never be a specific relay policy that will prevent your coach from using his judgment.

For example, the "fastest four" may not be the fastest four on THAT day; the order may depend on the suspected order of a rival team's relay; the coach may have an intuitive feeling that a given individual may perform faster than the "fastest four"; or the coach might feel that an individual needs the psychological boost of being on the "A" relay and in the long term, this is more beneficial for the team.

The point is it is a coaches' call. He may make a judgment based on an intuitive feeling he has or other reasoning that you do not agree with or understand but it is within his area of authority to make the call and he needs the freedom to do it without undue critical challenges.

- **View the larger picture.** There are three pictures, actually. One is the larger picture of the child's athletic career. Early success (i.e. medals, ribbons and trophies) is not a requirement to career success. In fact, many times those successful early in their careers drop out before they have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Coaches are usually very patient with an athlete's progress because they are able to see the larger picture. Try not to mistake a coaches' calm patience with non-caring.

- **Larger picture number two:** Did you ever see the pin that says "There's more to life than swimming" or whatever your child's chosen sport. We're hopeful that all coaches and parents remember that the most important experiences gained in an individual's athletic career have nothing to do with flip turns or points scored. Making friends, being part of a team, learning self-discipline, learning responsibility, setting goals, and working toward goals are far greater experiences than medals, ribbons, high point awards, and national rankings. (Just ask a retired athlete!)

- **Larger Picture number three:** The team! Remember that you and your child are part of the team and have an opportunity to contribute to team strength, team growth, and team unity.

- **Educate the coach.** Does your club have a "coaching education" item in its budget? We think you should and it might be used for any or all of the following:
 1. People Skills Seminars. On your team there are surely people who receive the bulletins at work. Ask your Board to send the coach to a seminar.
 2. Coaches' Clinics. There are many throughout the year and throughout the country.
 3. National Events. If the team does not have an athlete competing at that level, give the coach the option of attending the competition in place of a clinic. It's a great place to receive an education.
 4. Purchase books, magazines, and memberships for the coach. All of these things are an investment in your team's greatest asset, the coach.

- **Recognize the coaches' experience and education.** This is understandably a very difficult task for many parents. Your children are precious and turning them over to a coach, who often times is a young coach, is unsettling. Coaches, however, have hours upon hours of experience working with young athletes just like your child and will try to make their best judgments in the best interest of your child's long term development. In addition, we're hopeful that your coach has attended clinics, frequently exchanges information with other coaches, and has taken home study courses.

- **Try not to take it personally.** All parents want to see their children be successful, however, some parents get too emotionally involved in their children's successes and setbacks. They love to win through their children, and they hate to lose. What needs to be remembered is that some children physically develop later than others, some children are more talented at playing piano than in sports, and some children simply do not like to a certain sport. Whatever the reasons, your child may not be winning ribbons, or qualifying for championships, or beating all the other athletes in his practice group. When this happens, remind yourself of the greater values of team participation such as fitness, friendships, fun, goal setting, and self-discipline.

- **Be aware of the overzealous, know-it-all, win at all costs parent.** There are usually a couple of parents in every club like this who continually challenge the judgment of the coach and the Board of Directors. Their opinions are based upon emotion, self serving interests, limited experience, and limited knowledge. Their motives are rarely in the interest of the team. They oftentimes try to gather support to change decisions and can wreck serious havoc in a program. What you can you do is support the coach and Board of Directors, and try to educate the parent. One of the greatest untapped resources for parent education are parents of older swimmers or graduated team members.
- **Remember all the different people a coach must work with.** A coach must work with dozens of parents. Be sensitive to the fact that a coach is under tremendous pressure to please as many people as possible while making decisions he knows not everyone will be happy about. A little support from a friendly parent can make a coach's job far more pleasant than if he feels he is always alone.

The lesson for coaches and parents, simply stated, is that both groups need to try to communicate with each other with greater respect and understanding for each other's position. To strengthen the relationships between parents, coaches, and programs and to improve the chances for maintaining a long term relationship both coaches and parents need to work on this.

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