

Wayne Goldsmith: C'mon – we can do this!



A few weeks ago, I was at a famous Aquatics complex in a major capital city. As usual, I was drawn to watch the swimming programs in the pool – the coaches, the athletes, technique, skills, performance levels, attitudes. I am passionate about swimming and want to see the sport succeed.

This is what I saw.

A young coach working with about 50 junior squad swimmers, aged 10-14 in very crowded lanes. He stood at one end of the pool for the whole hour of the training session, most of the time with his leg up on the starting block in lane one. He yelled workout instructions to the whole group and did not provide any swimmer with individualized feedback. All swimmers – all ages – all levels of ability did the same workout. Skills and drills were performed poorly and received with little feedback. The feedback that was given was general feedback to the whole group.

The following week, I was at a similarly famous Aquatics complex in another capital city in another country. Again, I spent time observing a junior swim squad in training. Again, I saw the same lack of engagement, lack of creativity, lack of passion and lack of quality coaching I had seen previously.

The next week I went to a local swim meet – out of interest and love of the sport. Guess what? Swimming is still offering 65 heats of the 7 and under 50 backstroke, still providing little or no interesting competition opportunities for swimmers over 15 years of age, still awarding those stupid coloured ribbons to all swimmers from 5 years of age to 25, still being over zealous with breaststroke rules, still doing little or nothing to engage parents, still offering mostly junk food at the shop... I thought I was in a time warp and it was 1973 all over again.

Put yourself in the position of being a swimmer in one of those squads. You have a choice. You can train for football, outside, with your friends, emulating your heroes and enjoying the team environment. You can stay at home and spend time on your computer engaging with your friends and the web. You can play other sports, play music, just enjoy lazing about with family and friends or... "I can be pushed and driven up and down a pool with no engagement from my coach, receive no feedback, learn nothing and being bumped and bruised in crowded lanes".

Put yourself in the position of being a parent of a swimmer in one of those squads. You are paying money for your child to receive professional coaching. You have had to change your work, social and family schedule to be there. And what do you see? "My child is receiving no quality, individualized instruction, is gaining no learning and receiving no feedback, is swimming mindless lap after mindless lap, bumping into other kids, the end of the pool and the lane ropes and I am paying for the privilege".

Or what about the parent going to the Meet? "I sit there for two days to see my kid swim four events, either in stinking heat or inside breathing in chlorine gas, giving up my precious weekend time and paying through the nose to get in to the facility, buy food and for race fees".

And then the kid drops out of the sport in their mid-teens and we all scream "What's wrong with kids today?" – rubbish: the reason kids drop out of swimming is totally the responsibility of the people who coach, administer and organize swimming training and competitions. Kids and families will stay in swimming if it is engaging, enjoyable, exciting, educational and embraces excellence in all things.

We are offering mass mediocrity, outdated competition formats and inferior coaching quality and expecting people to continue to accept it. Well, have a good look at your registrations, Meets and bottom lines.....people are not accepting it. The sport of swimming – like many other Olympic sports – is at the crossroads. The very existence of competitive swimming hangs in the balance like no other time in its history. Now, more than ever we must provide quality, engaging, interesting, enjoyable and challenging training and competition experiences or swimmers and parents will no longer support the sport.

Why would a talented young swimmer, with so many choices available in sport, in social activities, in study programs, in social media and in life, waste time ploughing up and down a black line in a boring, repetitive, monotonous, poorly coached program? Why would a parent with limited time and limited money pay for a child to be part of a sport which offers mediocre coaching and dull, boring, tedious competitions which typically offer the same events, on the same day, in the same order year after year after year?

Improve coaching standards – do not accept mediocre coaching anytime/anywhere from anyone; Provide more engaging, interesting and enjoyable training environments; Create new, interesting, stimulating and enjoyable competition formats; Stop trying to force all kids into pathways designed to make them Olympic champions – give each individual what they need to realize their potential at all levels of achievement; Put "fun" before "fast"; Embrace parents into swimming programs as partners in swimming performance and stop treating them as lepers who pay fees; And most importantly, stop this "we are different", "those things will not work in swimming" and "that's not the way we do it in swimming" thinking that is killing the sport around the world.

C'mon – we can do this!

Wayne Goldsmith is a sports professional and innovator with a unique background in sport. Since the early 1990's, he has worked directly with Olympic Champions, Professional Athletes, Professional Teams and Winning Coaches across the globe. He has also been Chairman of several high-profile and innovative performance committees including:

- The Swimming Australia Sports Science and Sports Medicine and Research Committee;
- The Triathlon Australia Sports Science, Sports Medicine and Research Committee;
- The Australian Rugby Union Sports Science, Sports Medicine, Innovations and Research Committee;
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He is a past Winner of the Eunice Gill Prize for Outstanding Contribution to Coach Education in Australia Award and the Outstanding Contribution to Swimming in Australia Award.