

# AMERICAN Swimming

on page 7

## Should Coaches Give Their Youngest Age Groupers Hard Work?

by Greig Cronauer



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Over the years I have observed coaches who were afraid of giving their younger kids (ages 7 - 10) hard or long sets. "It won't be fun for them." they said. "You might drive them out of the sport." I also observed other coaches who routinely gave sets that were tremendously challenging and exhausting. In most cases, the kids that were challenged seemed to enjoy practice more. Even those that didn't keep coming back, day after day, developing great work ethics and goal-setting abilities.

cont, next page

# Why is this?

We all know that swimming needs to be fun for youngsters as they develop their skills. But "fun" is the twin sibling of "rewarding" and recognizing effort is as impactful as rewarding skill improvement. When 8-year-old Suzie finishes a timed 500 Free at the end of practice, and you shout "Great effort Suzie! Much faster than last time!" ...this is rewarding and satisfying for her. She might not think of it as "fun" while doing it, but afterward, when she forgets about the discomfort, she is left with a deep feeling of accomplishment.

You can occasionally offer a set so hard they can barely climb out of the pool afterward and they will go home happy and fulfilled as long as you praise them and recognize them individually for their effort. It doesn't need to be done every day for younger swimmers but they need to get a taste of it to prepare them as they progress to Junior and Senior swimming. Testing their physical limits gives them opportunities to break through their perceived barriers.

Now, don't get me wrong...

Your youngest and newer team members need the majority of their practice yards/meters to be stroke and skill development. They will initially get enough aerobic work through this swimming. But as time goes on they need to be introduced to the harder work that complements the technique side.

Even an 8-under can understand the concept, "**When muscles get tired and 'burn' they build up stronger while you sleep at night so they will be better prepared when they are challenged again.**" There are plenty of ways you can work in a little "tough" swimming even if most of your practice is shorter distances and lots of technique work. If planned, this progression will build slowly over the course of the first two or three seasons. To a novice 7-year-old a "Race Car" set that totals only 200 yards is the same as a 1500 yard "Butt Buster" set for a 10-year-old that's been on the team for 2 years.

I have never heard of a 10-under swimmer that quit the sport because "Coach worked us too hard." Most

swimmers quit because it's not fun anymore. Think of "fun" as things young age groupers excitedly tell their parents about on the ride home from practice. Examples:

- **"We had a "draw from the hat" relay today."**
- **"I did a timed distance swim today over one minute faster than last time. I was super tired but Coach said I did great!"** (Suzie example above)
- **"I had awesome push-offs all practice. I made Swimmer of the Day."**
- **"My muscles really burned today. Coach had to lift me out of the pool. She said I'm gonna get super fast!"**

We have all seen age groupers with terrible strokes but, during practice or meets, they will show toughness and grit as they grind out tremendous effort. Kids are motivated in different ways and coaches need to be in tune with praising great physical effort as much as other skills. This will encourage more great effort in practice and meets from all your swimmers.

If your goal as a horse trainer was to win the Kentucky Derby some would rather put their time and energy into taming the wild uncontrollable stallion than trying to motivate the obedient pony with a perfect stride. It is sometimes tougher to impart mental drive and grit than great technique. Recognize and promote both, and you will get both.

When aerobic improvement is added to skill improvement they compound exponentially. A key benefit from harder aerobic work is that, once swimmers build up their "wind", they will be able to focus better on technique instead of how tired they are. However,...there is an interesting caveat to that. You can sometimes teach technique more effectively during a harder aerobic set. Something magical happens when young swimmers start huffing and puffing after a few minutes. They become less distracted by their friends. They don't feel like chatting as much. They listen better because their defenses are dropped and their mind opens up like a sponge to your suggestions and corrections.

cont, next page

**EG:** In the middle of a hard Breast set, you lean over and say to little Billy, "***Good Job on that last 50! If you start your pull after your kick finishes you can be even faster!***" Little Billy look up at you, breathing hard, and barely blurts out "OK" before pushing off for the next one. He does the next 50 in great form and you compliment him in front of the group.

Try to be aware during a hard set of who is doing their best in relation to their past practices. Do the same type of challenge sets frequently during the season, keeping track of averages in a notebook or your workout book. Age groupers can't remember lots of different sets of different distances and intervals. Keep it simple for them and remind them what their previous bests were.

All this will take some work. Most age group coaches are not full-time. They come to practice from other jobs and may be a bit tired and drained. Some love coaching because they work with excited

young kids, and that "recharges their batteries." But the job of a coach is to charge up the swimmer's batteries. The kids, the team and the parents are counting on you to be at the top of your game each and every day.

This takes preparation, focus and positive follow-through, especially when challenging them physically. This is tough to do when you don't have high energy but the results are worth it.

Finally, it is difficult to remember to praise each and every swimmer for their efforts, especially for those that may not have made it. Example: "***Great Job Jill! You made 6 of the 10 before the Interval caught up with you. With effort like that you can make the full set by the end of the month! Keep up the good work.***"



#### **Greig Cronauer**

Greig has been coaching in the state of New Hampshire for over 40 years and has developed national Top 10 age group swimmers despite limited pool time. He has mentored under Olympic coaches, including Jack Nelson, and has started two large, successful teams from scratch. His young swimmers have gone on to become NCAA finalists and collegiate All-Americans. His passion is developing age group swimmers for success at the Senior level and beyond.