

The Real Culture of American Swimming

By Don Heidary, February 26, 2018

As there has been a great deal in the media of late on the “culture of American Swimming”, I am compelled to offer a vastly different perspective, and I believe with all my heart, a more accurate one. Over the past forty years, I have coached in the summer-leagues, at the high school level, and as a proud member of USA Swimming. What I have seen, and have been blessed to be a part of, is a culture that is anything but predatory, abusive, and certainly not profit-driven.

What lies beneath the surface of the sport of swimming are the greatest lessons of life, of relationships, of personal growth, and of athletic development. I have seen countless children learn invaluable social skills, overcome debilitating fear, develop profound self-esteem and self-awareness, build life-long friendships, and discover mentors and programs that changed the trajectory of their lives. I have seen swimmers find a home away from home and a second family, and often a respite from life’s stresses and challenges. I have seen kids learn things they cannot learn in a classroom or at a dinner table, such as work ethic, resilience, sacrifice, humility and teamwork. I have seen young adults learn to celebrate the success of others, transcend pain thresholds, discover acts of courage within themselves, and begin to see life through the lens of team, service, and leadership. I have seen kids that never found “success” in athletic endeavors, find it their role as an inspiration and a role model.

I have seen teenagers contemplate the tipping point of their physical and mental capacity and discover a strength within that they never thought possible. I have seen kids’ academic priority shift from indifference to mastery as a result of the transforming self-discipline learned through swimming. I have seen young student-athletes redefine their academic focus, social priorities, and their predisposition to work and challenge with the possibility and opportunity of being a collegiate athlete. I have witnessed countless swimming careers evolve from nervous children on the stairs of their learn-to-swim programs to high school seniors giving emotional farewell speeches to teams that changed their lives.

Against the backdrop of a culture of (un)social media, technological dependence, and false relevance, the sport of swimming and athletics in general, offers human interaction and relationship dynamics based on depth of character and contribution. Approval or acceptance comes only from earned respect and relationships developed. In swimming, a child’s social life is real life, and it is developed and experienced in the challenge of training, in the unification of competition, and in daily team interaction.

And the culture of coaching has been nothing short of inspirational. I am talking about the ninety-nine percent that define it, that create the cultures described above, the real culture of American swimming. Coaches are individuals who do not refer to their vocation as “work”, view it as a job, or track their hours. Coaches are by and large predisposed to enhancing the quality of the lives they serve: children and athletes. The coaches that I know define success not in pay or recognition but in a life made better, a goal achieved, a note of gratitude, or in a parent’s acknowledgement that they have seen profound change in their child. The coaches that I know view their role as servants, as leaders, as mentors, and most significantly as privileged. They understand that few athletes will become Olympians but all can become leaders on the team, role models in their community, and “Olympian” in character. The coaches that I know went against the norms of professional pursuit to follow a passion and to make a difference. Most have sacrificed financial security for societal contribution.

An illustration of the role and relevance of many coaches came in a parent’s comment many years ago, that has always resonated with me. It was made against the backdrop of the extreme social pressures that kids face, when a mother said, “Don’t you understand, you (coaches) are the last line of defense.”

Beyond coaching, as a volunteer, I have been a member of the Board of Directors of Pacific Swimming (Northern California), USA Swimming, and of the American Swimming Coaches Association. I have seen the inside of the volunteer culture of the sport, and it is driven first and foremost by service; countless individuals working behind the scenes to support children and the athletic process. These people are true servants and in my opinion, the silent heroes and profound examples of selfless support. They are volunteers who spend up to forty hours a week in support of the sport and its members, officials who give up weekends to officiate so that the opportunity to compete is never in question, and committees who work tirelessly to create opportunities outside of the pool to enhance the experience of the sport. They themselves become role model for our athletes.

While the sport has been profoundly successful, its achievement has not been manufactured in board rooms or through corporate sponsors. It has been fostered in learn-to-swim programs, summer-league teams, YMCA's, club teams, and collegiate programs throughout the country. It has been nurtured by caring, professional, and driven coaches, supported by selfless volunteers, and it has been given structure by organizations grounded in methodical plans of athlete development, teambuilding, and coach-swimmer partnerships.

The real culture of swimming and the sport itself is a gift to our children and to our society. The benefits are immeasurable and invaluable. Over 500,000 children and young adults enter a swimming pool each year, some from the shallow end to learn a life skill, some from the deep end to achieve at a high level, with the vast majority falling somewhere in the middle. They choose the sport and the commitment *because* of the dedication of coaches and *because* of the culture of their team, not in spite of them. And every day, tens of thousands of coaches step onto a pool deck to help develop an athlete to his or her potential, to build a team and a team culture, and to help shape lives.

This is what lies beneath the surface of our sport.

The following is an excerpt from a letter written many years ago by a graduating athlete. It poignantly reveals the impact the sport can make far beyond the competitive process. While this is one letter, it may very well represent hundreds of thousands of teenagers who have benefitted from the sport of swimming. This is the culture of swimming that too few see or read about.

"I can only imagine where I would be today, right now, if I had never joined this team back in seventh grade. In middle school, I found myself, like so many others do, at a crossroads of sorts. My best friends were making choices that made me uncomfortable on many levels, and I could feel myself slipping down with them. Looking back, I can see just how far I was about to fall. In joining this team, my life went from slipping downwards, and slipping fast, to something entirely different and profoundly positive. This team, its coaches and teammates, has changed my life in countless ways. It has not only shaped me into the person I am today, but it has made me realize who that person is. Because of this team, I know my values, and I'm standing by them.

I have so much gratitude for everything the team has done for me over the past seven years. To the coaches, I owe not only my career in the pool, but also relationships that I consider some of the most important in my life. I know that there are very few people in the world that would do for me what you would in a heartbeat, and I cannot express how thankful I am to have you in my life. And to my teammates and amazing friends, well, I love you and I could not be more grateful. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart."

So, I acknowledge and thank the thousands of coaches, administrators, and volunteers who work every day tirelessly, unselfishly, and with the highest character. They create, not only a wonderfully positive sport, but a sport that changes lives, a sport that I believe is the finest and most important sport in the world.

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