

TOPIC: HIGH SCHOOL VS CLUB SWIMMING CONFLICTS OR CHOICE

[BY ZAQ HARRISON]

ASCA LEVEL II & BETWEEN GIGS

When I approached John Leonard about this topic I made the mistake of asking him had this been properly discussed. I think the answer was along the lines of about as often as Madonna changes costumes during her shows.

So I'll pile on and add my two cents. My comments are based on my perceptions and experiences. First off I am neither a distinguished head coach nor am I an exceptionally experienced head coach on deck. I have at this writing been a head swim coach exactly one short course club season and one separate high school season. Truth be told I was an age grouper for 12 years and have a lifelong love of the sport if that still counts. I have looked hard at my Club and High School experience as a swimmer and later as a coach. I am also a father of an age group swimmer who made the transition to High School swimming this year which reminds me of the old saying: be careful what you wish for.

Day to day I'm a businessman and an entrepreneur. This is what I do and more importantly the prism that I see things through. I also have been involved in education, coaching and student mentoring for the better part of 25 years which coincides with most of my adult life. Nice, I'm a great guy but what does that have to do with

anything. That was a statement by the way and not a question.

In my illustrious two seasons I saw first as a club coach when the high school coach made it known that his program took priority, as it was an honor to swim for one's school. The following year as a high school coach my elite swimmers trained at a regional club with a top coach and it was up to me to figure out an accommodation. I am a pretty smart guy, I get to do complex equations at work, I am a self-declared expert on the world financial crisis, speak a couple languages and actually understand what it would take to achieve world peace. No big deal right, I am going to bridge the gap for my high school team and make this work. I decided to be pragmatic and communicate with everyone involved, manage expectations and communicate with one clear message. I have to remind myself at this point that I was the genius who said Shaquille O'Neil (when he left LSU after his sophomore year for the NBA) should stay in school because he'll never amount to anything in the NBA. Boy, was I an idiot.

We all have our mentors. If you are reading this and don't have a mentor, make it a priority when you wake up tomorrow and find one. Find one, then to make if fun don't tell them they are your

mentor. One of my mentors in swimming is a guy, to respect his privacy, I'll call Steve. A lifer, as an accomplished swimmer he made it to Olympic Trials finals. His real calling is as an educator. I've been with him on deck and he is a special person to be around; he gets it. Steve was great at hearing me out when I needed to vent. He was the one who taught me that there is actually a law on the books in an Eastern state that swimming coaches are not allowed to bring firearms on deck. For a silly law why are 85% of those reading this smiling and nodding their heads.

Steve told me about his senior year in high school and the understanding with his high school coach. Steve would continue training with his club and their renowned top national coach; he would come to all of the school meets. By the end of the season he was an All-American in several events, State Champ and one of the top high school swimmers in the country. At his high school swim teams award banquet the head coach stood up at the end and presented the team MVP award, surprise, to another swimmer. After the banquet the coach pulled Steve aside and told him he was the most amazing swimmer he had ever had swim for him. The coach went on to tell him that he

gave the award to the MVP of the team and Steve although he swam meets with the team hadn't really been on the team that year. Steve got to swim High School States and be an All-American. The coach got a great swimmer, a great guy for relays and someone to bring attention to the program. That's where it ended. Fair is fair, the kid who got the MVP that season was the best swimmer on the "team."

The argument has always been where is the balance? How can you serve two masters and at the same time do right by the swimmers. There are teenagers often with an inflated sense of self. Throw in a misguided expectation of potential college scholarships. Let us not forget the last ingredient, the most venomous creature this side of the Black Mamba, the parents. It is easy to see why John Leonard laughed at me when I asked if this topic had been thoroughly discussed before. My bad.

I tried to keep this light knowing that swim coaches are split into two groups. The really serious ones and the ones who have been exposed to too much chlorine. You know these guys, the ones who have their seniors do racing starts in the shallow end with 2 ½ feet of water ("we always did this and nobody ever died"). Let's get serious.

The answer is as simple as it is complex. I lived in Israel for 11 years. I speak the language and understand the cultures. I am often asked what in my humble opinion will solve the "conflict." In case you haven't watched CNN or FOX recently, there is this thing called the "Arab-Israeli Conflict." Impossible, I say. Is peace impossible? No, me being humble is impossible, peace is a different matter. My answer is pretty Appalachian. The problem in Israel

is that there is one "girl" (the land) and there are two "guys" (nations) that want to marry her. While only one guy can marry her, the other guy wants to reach for his shotgun.

Club swimming has to be respected. Significant time, energy and commitment are made here. USA Swimming alone has over 2,500 clubs and 300,000 members. That's not including non USA affiliated College, Y, High School, summer or independents. For many of the top coaches this is their full time vocation. If you are an elite swimmer, chances are you are training with your club coach year round. The elite kids don't wake up in the morning and look in the mirror and say "I want to be mediocre." The club coaches make commitments for years and even decades. Many have significant financial stakes in the running of their clubs; it is their profession. Let's be honest, our Olympic athletes come from our clubs. Enough said.

High School swimming has to be respected. For the handful of teenage athletes left who are not going pro in some sport there is an amazing social experience that is unique to American culture. High School Sports. The rest of the world is built on sports clubs. European basketball and soccer are the perfect examples. I've participated in sports overseas as an athlete and a coach. Clubs are efficient and cost effective in dispersing limited funds to the general sporting public in most countries. Clubs are a machine that gives maximum reach of one message. They are also tribal and tend to appeal to specific sub-groups in their societies.

High School sports are about "Friday Night Lights." It is about your letter jacket. The quarterback dating the cheerleader. Campy,

absolutely, so what. High School sports, especially in small towns, is about two sophomores who never swam in their life deciding in English class one day to dare each other to go out for a high school team; why not, it won't hurt on their college apps right? "Anyone" can go out for the high school team. In fact throughout small town America most of the High School sports teams are filled with kids who you could call "anyone." I coached at a High School like this. High School sports can be a beautiful transformative experience for students who are learning to navigate in the world. Somebody has to speak for them; someone has to speak for "anyone."

It reminds me of a Mel Brooks skit. While playing a judge Mel Brooks hears what the first complainant says and looks at him "you're right." Then the second complainant speaks and Mel looks at him and says "you're right." I once jumped off a rock ledge into a water filled quarry from 45 feet. Young and foolish (is there any other way) I jumped. 45 feet is high enough to realize immediately I made a huge mistake. 45 feet is also high enough to have a very long time to think about this terrible mistake all the way down. Here I go...

Topic: High School vs. Club Swimming, conflict or choice? Yes and yes. Elite swimmers, those who are your USA Swimming ranked, Y National finalists or even high school state finalists and will be Division 1 scholarship athletes should be swimming in their clubs if they have this option. They have somewhere to go which is the next level. We shouldn't punish these student athletes nor should their schools reward them. We should hold them accountable to their choices and treat them as

adults. This is where they will get the training they need and have committed to. Their commitment should be commended.

Topic: High School vs. Club Swimming, conflict or choice? Yes and yes. High School programs have the responsibility to be autonomous of meddling and manipulation by club coaches, elite swimmers and their parents. These programs are about personal development not active rest sets. These programs are about teenagers being allowed to grow and learn the right lessons of how the difference between success and failure can be gleamed through effort and heart. Thirty years after I graduated from high school I don't remember my times nor how many meets we won. I do remember the bus trips, the friendships and the camaraderie of representing my school and community.

To the elite club swimmer: if you want to swim High School and take the benefits then you have to surrender yourself to the team during the four month season. There is a team dynamic in Club swimming but the emphasis is on the individual. That is the nature of our sport. You have a choice to be on a High School team, it is not a constitutionally-protected right. Therefore compromise is on you. If you choose to be on the team be prepared to sacrifice and give 100% of yourself to the team. That is the experience. Please don't try to adjust or manipulate the team around you because you happen to be All-State or All-American. In 30 years nobody will care if you were an All-American in the pool, but they will remember if you were a jerk out of the pool. That much I promise.

To the Club coaches: you have as much or as little time as the swimmers want to make a commitment. Your swimmers may start with you when they are four or maybe even fourteen. Many of you have short course and long course rolling one after another. You tend to be passionate and have made a commitment to your profession. You have skin in the game and unlike many High School coaches who may only be head coach the one season a year, you are there all year round. You brought those high school kids up from eight year olds who were still peeing in the pool and then rightly so raise your eyebrows when you are expected to hand your prodigies off to another coach who usually does not have the background nor the facilities you have. That is a lot to ask.

To the High School coaches I say stand your ground. Protect your kids, all of them. Look at the calendar; on average you have four months, about sixteen weeks start to finish. That is not much time to teach, train, motivate, correct and taper. Your job is to be the team coach not the personal coach of the All-American who is helping you win meets. You are the steward of a really neat thing. Ninety plus percent of our swimmers will never compete on an elite level. They swim because they love to and because of the friendships. High School swimming is the reward for sticking around. Kind of like the High School dance that always seems to end with either "Freebird" or "Stairway to Heaven." If you waited to the end you got to hold your date through a great song that lasted forever.

The conflict between High School and Club is self destructive. It is up to us as individual coaches

to see the forest between the trees and help guide our teams and our swimmers to the right decisions. Sometimes the right decision may be for the High School swimmer to sit out of the club during the high school season. Other times the right decision may be for the club swimmer to sit out of the High School season. Both Club and High School have their place and their roles when their needs do not mesh should be respected. Sometimes you just have to choose and live with the results. There is nothing wrong with that.

If we do our job, somewhere down the line, years or decades from now, we might get a tap on the shoulder on a random day in a random place. We will turn around and look into the eyes of a middle aged adult with a few kids in tow. We will recognize the eyes from somewhere but can't put a finger on it exactly. This person will look at you and say "Coach, I thought that was you. I want to introduce you to my kids. I have been telling them for years about this wonderful person who made such an impact in my life. I tell my kids I was a terrible swimmer but I always gave everything I had. Coach, you told me that if I do that the rest of my life I will succeed beyond my wildest imagination. The other kids called me an "anyone" because anyone with a pulse could have filled my lane with the times I swam. Coach, I just may have been the slowest swimmer you ever had but you always treated me like I was your All-American. You don't know but I was in a tough spot and you gave me a safe place I could call my own. Thank you."

Club is about "me," High School is about "we." They both have a place, just be honest about it. •