

Why Swimming – How it helps youth!

T. Lee Burnham, Ph.D.
Rocky Mountain Center for Human Development

At a time when our community is worried about gangs and violence I would like to invite you to come to a local Swim Meet. You could find around 100 youth involved. There are a lot of other places that this many young people could be on a Friday afternoon or Saturday morning. Multiply this by multiple different locations around the state.

Swimming in Utah is administered by Utah Swimming as a part of a national program sponsored by United States Swimming (USS). USS is the organization that oversees amateur competitive swimming in the United States. As the National Governing body for the sport, USS is a member of the United States Olympic Committee and the International Swimming Federation.

Nationally each year over 20,000 volunteers register with USS as non-athlete members. Interested individuals donate their time, energy and expertise to serve as officials, administrators, coaches, and workers participating at every level from serving on national committees, to involvement with the local swim club. Utah Swimming currently has 240 non-athletes and 1,600 athletes registered.

All pools should develop and run a Complete Aquatics Program which would include swimming lessons and a Pre-Comp Swim Team program. These Aquatics Programs would in many cases lead to the formation of an official USS Group Swim Team where every swimmer pays a yearly registration fee to Utah Swimming of \$30.00 and a monthly fee of an additional \$20.00 to \$30.00. This money is used to pay for coaching fees and other expenses of the team

In a meet, six swimmers enter the pool at a time. They are grouped by age and ability. In each group of six there is an even chance of any of the six coming in first. But coming in first is not really the issue. Each swimmer has a personal best time from previous pool experiences. The goal for each individual swimmer is to decrease their own individual personal best time. As a result there are NO losers, everyone is a winner.

Swimming should have no rules about the number of swimmers that can be on a team. Anyone who wants to work and make progress can be on a team. Anyone who wants to work can be a winner. Who can put a price on the value of this experience for those youth who are positively engaged in self-improvement and hard work.

At least one school district is considering the possibility of closing all the swimming pools in the district to save money and avoid liability issues. It is interesting that no one has considered the possibility of rolling up the basketball courts or tearing up the football fields. In Utah, many age group swim teams are required to rent pool time. We have become a community where ALL decisions are based on the "bottom line." Is it possible that our community values are based on money or trophies.

In most other areas of the country either the communities or the schools provide pool time to USS Age-Group Swimming as a recognition of the contribution that participation in swimming makes to the individuals involved and to the community as a whole. You simply cannot find a better way to insure freedom from drugs and other anti-social behaviors in a group of youth.

Come to any swim meet and pick any parent at random. Ask them what their child has gained from the experience in swimming. Any parent will tell you of the growth in self confidence and discipline which is unmatched by participation in any other kind of sport or activity.

Swimming does not get a lot of glory or publicity. As a result the coaches are not as likely to have a lot of ego on the line to produce "winning" teams. Age group coaches are not usually hired or fired based on their win-loss record. They have a lot of personal time and effort invested in

helping individuals to grow and develop and to help swimmers define winning in their own personal way.

Many worthwhile values have been perceived to be inherent in sports participation, yet they are not accessible automatically to everyone who participates. There are values that are not only worthwhile to pursue but need to be made available and accessible to more of our youth. It's not a matter of saturating a community with organized sports leagues or merely upgrading physical education programs in the schools. Many youngsters, including many who participate do not really benefit from sports for a variety of reasons but at least in part because of the "win-at-all-costs" concept prevalent today.

Participation in sports should be a vehicle for all-around personal growth and the development of a positive self-image.

This process includes two key elements:

1. Putting winning in its proper perspective. There are winners and there are "winners." Everyone needs to "win" sometimes if he or she is to gain satisfaction from any sport. Winning can, however, be broadened to include progress on many levels. Each individual can learn to set their own personal goals and define "winning" in their own personal way.
2. The creation of an environment which provides the essential experiences which not only make sports values more accessible, but provides the motivation to participate in the sport, learn the necessary skills, and develop the self-esteem necessary to approach life with confidence --and that's what it's all about.

Well run Complete Aquatics Programs are designed to develop the skills and attitudes that help an individual to feel in charge of his or her own life and to feel like a winner.

Research by United States Swimming indicates that participation in aquatics will foster an interesting list of characteristics:

- Individuals gain a strong work ethic
- Individuals gain great physical conditioning
- Individuals gain mental toughness
- Individuals gain goal setting and achievement skills
- Individuals gain strong self-esteem

Further research indicates that 35% of those who begin in swimming drop out by the time they turn 16 mainly due to an incomplete or inadequate program and/or conflict with the personalities of those running the program.

A swimmer conditions his or her body physiologically for greater physical efforts by progressively increasing the physical stress, combined with proper habits of nutrition, sleep, etc. as the body adapts to the stress of short, easy workouts, the swimmer increases the amount of stress by doing longer, harder workouts. He or she must also condition himself or herself psychologically in a similar manner.

The objectives of a swim club are:

1. To provide opportunities for social and emotional development.
2. To furnish a wholesome and worthwhile physical and recreational outlet.
3. To provide opportunities to learn sportsmanship and develop awareness of team cooperation.
4. To provide an educational environment.
5. To provide opportunities to learn good health habits.
6. To provide training and competition that will aid in the development of worthwhile attitudes.
7. To provide a wide base of experience for all and not just the highly skilled.
8. To provide opportunities for developing good working habits and self-evaluation.

Notice that the objective of the development of national champions or a winning team is not mentioned. Mediocrity should be no one's goal - everyone should strive for excellence. However, the real winner in age-group swimming is often not the winner of the race, for her or she may be achieving that goal at the cost of failure to attain some other goal available in the program, which may be more important. It must always be kept in the forefront of one's mind that the only justification for this program is that it exists for the benefit of the child.

It is hard to debate that winning is important, but children are more important.

In 1979 two groups, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education and the American Academy of Pediatrics endorsed a Bill of Rights for Young Athletes.

Each youth should have:

1. The right to participate in sports.
2. The right to participate at a level commensurate with each child's maturity and ability.
3. The right to have qualified adult leadership.
4. The right to play as a child and not as an adult.
5. The right to share in the leadership and decision making of sport.
6. The right to participate in safe and healthy environments.
7. The right to proper preparation for involvement in sports.
8. The right to an equal opportunity to strive for success.
9. The right to be treated with dignity.
10. The right to have fun in Sports.

This "Bill of Rights," should be incorporated into all approaches to coaching. We cannot think That the agony of one child's defeat can be the thrill of another's victory, that winning is the only reward and that losing is punishment. Children and psychologists know this to be untrue. The drive to tackle physical barriers and, later, to compare one's ability with others is a natural part of a child's development, vital in forming feelings of competence and secure self-identity. All are key ingredients for competitiveness and self-motivation in sports -- but it doesn't have to come at someone else's expense. Learning to win and to lose are parts of the same process. Children can be taught to define "winning" in their own individual way so that their efforts toward personal growth and development are seen as winning.

It has been said that "If you build it they will come." However, this is just simply not true when it comes to pools. Efforts must be made to reach out to the community to encourage and make participation not only attractive but also financially possible. Pools can sit empty and when those responsible for pool programs take the position that you cannot hire staff until you have enough participations to pay staff you will simply never get a program going. How can you hire a lifeguard when you must tell him or her that if there are not enough people involved in the program you might not be able to give them any hours? It just won't happen.