

From I love to play to I love to swim

Recently, I was talking with parents, who were concerned about their 14-year-old daughter's lack of "right" motivation. They were disappointed because she told them she was going to practice so that she can have fun with her friends. The parents shared that it was all about winning in their athletic career when they were young and insisted their daughter needed to focus on getting results.

Motivation is what drives us to initiate and persist at a task despite disappointments, fatigue, pain, and failure. It is influenced by the interplay of a variety of internal psychological and external situational factors. No one exists in a vacuum. Our values, needs, beliefs and attitudes inform our thoughts, feelings and actions in and out of fencing. Our past experiences with others at home and at school, in activities and with media teach us how to view ourselves, even before we get involved in swimming. Think about a friend who only engages with you, after you win races. If this feels like something a good friend does, then ask yourself how you learned that a friendship includes such conditions. Or would you prefer a friend who accepts and supports you regardless of your swimming results? What about sport commentators explaining athletic success with one word – talent? The message that sport is all about talent can be discouraging.

Research consistently shows that children first get involved in organized sports because playing sports is fun. There have been as many as 81 fun-determinants identified (Visek et al., 2015). The meaning of fun changes and evolves throughout one's swimming career. Moreover, there often are discrepancies between what young athletes mean and express as fun, and how adults understand it. Open and non-judgmental discussions between swimmers and coaches, as well as parents and children help clarify what it means to the swimmer to have fun. The light and pleasurable feeling that children get when they first play in the water is impossible to sustain throughout a competitive career. Instead, it is better to focus on enjoyment.

Making swim practice enjoyable through a combination of fun games and swimming drills focused on new learning can foster a love of swimming. Learning new technical skills and successfully completing tasks give young swimmers the sense of competence, which in turn enhances intrinsic motivation, and the youngster is eager to come back to swim practice. The sense of enjoyment can serve as a foundation to continuous learning and growth regardless of errors, set backs and disappointments.

As youth swimmers mature, the love of the sport fuels their efforts in training and competition. Gradually, difficult drills once viewed as "boring" or "impossible" are now perceived as challenges. So, fun takes on a different meaning now. There is a sense of enjoyment and fulfillment when one successfully completes challenging drills and sets, boosting intrinsic motivation. When motivation comes from within, swim meets are perceived as fun, and they become mentally, physically and emotionally stimulating. The swimmer is able to recognize and

solve critical moments in and out of the pool, and their sense of autonomy grows, which in turns leads to enhanced motivation.

As training intensifies, and athletes enter higher level of competition, stronger commitment is needed to succeed. Swimmers may need to train in ways that are less enjoyable but benefit their progress. Extrinsic rewards like medals, college scholarship/acceptance and peer/parent/coach approval beyond swimming can be motivating, driving athletes to initiate additional training in an effort to progress further and/or improve self-discipline. However, when these extrinsic rewards are perceived as pressure and/or as fulfilling others' goals and desires, swimmers' motivation can decrease, and drop out may follow. In these situations, some athletes may feel conflicted, because they also love swimming. The main reason is that the sport is not fun anymore. They may need time (and sometimes professional help) to sort out others' desires and expectations and their own. When this dilemma is successfully resolved, the swimmer may come back with a new-found drive.

An athlete's definition of fun often includes the enjoyment of working together with teammates, challenging each other and succeeding for one another. Relatedness, or the sense of belonging, is a powerful motivator. This is especially true for girls, who often identify themselves through their relationships with others. Having a trusting relationship with your coach, feeling unconditionally loved and supported by your parent/s and having strong role models can be highly motivating. This sense of belonging tends to play a crucial role during life transitions (starting high school for example) or in times of doubt.

Coaches, parents, peers and administrators can create a positive motivational atmosphere that impacts swimmers' development, learning and performance through organization values, modeling of behavior, communication styles, feedback, expectations and evaluation. The motivational atmosphere tends to have a positive impact when it is age- and development-appropriate, athlete-centered and based on collaboration between coaches, parents and administrators.

Questions for reflection:

1. What makes swimming fun for you (in practice and meets)?
2. How has your motivation for swimming changed throughout the years?
3. What is the motivational atmosphere in your club?
4. What kind of input or choices do you have in your daily swimming practice?
5. What do you wish your _____ (parent/s, coach/es, teammates, friends outside of swimming...) knew about your swimming?

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