

# The Marginally Motivated Swimmer

Guy Edson  
ASCA Staff

The other day I was remembering a time when I was a much younger coach and the day I asked a swimmer to leave practice and “not to come back.” In recalling and thinking about this incident I believe there is a message for parents of older, aged 13 and above, lesser committed swimmers.

What was this swimmer doing that was so terrible? Nothing. He was doing nothing; and that was the problem. For whatever reason, he simply decided he wasn’t going to do the set I had prescribed and decided he was going to leave practice.

This 13 year old had a dismal attendance record making just a couple of workouts a week and when he did come there was minimal communication with me. He would arrive seconds before we began the first set and he would immediately leave after the last set. I only saw the mom one time; the dad, never. Quite simply, it appeared that he didn’t want to be there.

I thought about the incident throughout that evening and it was the first thing on my mind when I woke up in the next morning. I hated kicking a swimmer out of practice. I asked myself these questions:

Did I need to permanently dismiss him from the team?

Should I have just let him go without comment at the time or should I have taken the time to find out what was bothering him?

Should I have had a discussion with the parents long before the incident about what my expectations were and to find out what their expectations were?

Before I tackle those questions there are a couple of concepts I would like all parents to consider. First, one of the primary duties of the coach is to provide adversity for the athletes. That may sound like an unusual way to describe it but the reality is that a workout is not meant to be easy. It is meant to be a physical and mental challenge. Good coaches throw the challenge out there and then attempt to provide the environment where the athlete’s will to meet the challenge is high. At older ages and upper levels, say 13 and over at sectional and above level, coaches sometimes design entire workouts meant to make the athlete fail – temporarily fail. At lower levels, right down to novice level swimming, swimmers need to be exposed to sets that are difficult, perhaps so difficult that no one can achieve the set. Good coaches use these sets to build a desire in the athletes to achieve higher levels of physical and mental toughness. Good coaches know that being successful requires a combination of challenge and success in the workout environment and that the relative amount of each will change as the swimmer ages.

The second concept has two parts: the coach’s time and effort; and the athlete’s submissiveness – best described as the athlete’s willingness to release themselves to the coach. To whom should the coach give their time and effort? Answer: to those athletes who give themselves to the coach. The coach has limited time and energy and the fairest behavior of the coach is focusing on those who are ready to meet the adversity. Coaches simply do not have time to coddle and convince reluctant swimmers to do work while there are other swimmers willing and ready to go.

Now, back to the questions at hand. Did I need to dismiss him from the team entirely? In this case, Yes. But it should have been discussed with the parent the next day rather than shouted to him across the pool. Why dismiss him from the team? He had a poor history of effort, bad attendance, and it was not worth the team's time to try change his work ethic. In a case where a swimmer had a history of good effort, and had shown a high degree of coachability – well, this situation wouldn't have been an issue in the first place.

Should I have let him go without comment at the time? Yes. Running a workout where emotions are high is not the time to get into it with an athlete or the parent. It is better to discuss such things in a different environment at a different time.

Should I have take the time to find out what was bothering him? No. That would have been taking time from those in the water who were doing the work and that is where the coach's focus needs to be.

Long before the incident should I have had a discussion with the parents about "expectations"? Absolutely Yes. This was a failure on my part – and the parents.

The bottom lines: There are adolescent swimmers who are of marginal ability who come to practice for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it's friends. That's a pretty good reason, but there has to be the willingness to work as well.

Sometimes it's Mom and Dad making the child go to practice. There are good reasons and bad reasons for this. Good reasons include a sincere desire for the child to be involved in a wholesome activity. Bad reasons include a parent's desire for the child to be a champion swimmer and earn a swimming scholarship when the child doesn't have that talent.

Whatever the reasons, it is important for parents and swimmers and coaches to discuss their respective expectations with each other. Frankly, sometimes expectations just do not match up with what's being offered or what is being done. And then it is time to think about moving on to another program or another activity.