

THE DARKSIDE OF PRIDE

by Don Garman

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For the past 25 years, I have had the distinct honor of coaching some of the finest young swimmers in the Southern California area. During my tenure as a coach, I've seen a variety of parenting styles at both workouts and swim meets. This is my view of the fascinating world of swimming and swimming parents.

It is my belief that there is no harder or more rewarding job than that of raising children. I also realize that most parents have the best interests and the highest hopes for their kids as they mature. What a great feeling it is to see your child achieve a major goal for the first time! Pride in your child's successes and accomplishments are a very natural feeling. Every mother and father has felt this emotion well up in them as they see their kids honored or rewarded for an achievement. As a swimming coach, I often get these incredible feelings of pride as my swimmers improve. It's very powerful and very seductive.

So, what does this have to do with being a good swim parent? The point of my article is simply that too many of our finest young swimmers are being driven out of the sport by parents who mean well but push too hard. These parents are being seduced by the "Dark Side of the Force" --uncontrolled parental pride. Some parents seem to forget that they're not in the water swimming the race, their child is. Heaven forbid the results of the race are less than the parents' expectations. They act as though they're embarrassed or have been shamed by the outcome of the race.

As a coach, I think one of the most damaging behaviors a parent can exhibit is repeated, overt disappointment in a child's performance. Remember that it is supposed to be fun. During my career, I've had to witness the gradual destruction of many potentially great swimmers due to overbearing, zealous parents (some on my own team). It's sad, but also avoidable. It's interesting to watch the evolution of some new families to the sport as they develop into seasoned veterans of U.S.A. Swimming. At first the young swimmer is not pushed nor is pressure placed upon him/her to do much more than just have fun. Life is simple and everyone's happy.

Then comes that fateful day when that swimmer makes his/her first major time standard – life is about to change for the family. Perhaps mom and dad buy a stopwatch or, even worse, maybe they "go video" and purchase the dreaded camcorder. This increased interest in the sport is not necessarily a bad thing; after all, the family is focused on swimming. Swim times are improving, the swimmer loves the sport, they have great friends and they're healthy. But be careful, that very narrow fence that separates the pushy, overbearing parents from the supportive, nurturing parents just got a little thinner.

Being a supportive swimming parent is a must if a swimmer is going to develop the natural talents he or she was born with. What do supportive parents look and act like? Well, for one thing,

supportive parents realize that every swim is not going to produce a personal best time. They are encouraging and congratulatory even when their child does not win or improve. They listen to their swimmer. Supportive parents understand that they are not coaches. They support the coach.

What's the destructive parent like? You know whom I mean – the Darth Vaders of age group swimming. They have their own agenda as far as their swimmer is concerned. They are not team players.

They convince their kids that the coach is not capable of doing what should be done, you know, the way they would do it if they had the chance to take over. They tend to change teams when they don't get their way. They are oftentimes very loud, rude and pushy --a meet secretary's worst nightmare. As a coach, I find this type of parent very tough to deal with. Fortunately, this type of parent is very rare.

It takes a long time to develop the strength and coordination needed to compete at the top. Supportive parents know this and they assist their children in getting there at the child's pace. Mom and Dad Vader don't operate this way; they want it all right now. It doesn't matter that little Jack or Jill is only.

What does matter are things like breaking records or getting to train with the junior national swimmers or being on the relay, no matter what it takes. Being a swimming parent requires a lot of patience. It's a commitment to a long, drawn-out process that is very delicate and can't be rushed. We adults need to let the swimmers stand on our shoulders and reach for the stars --not the other way around. It makes no sense to undermine and eventually kill a budding swim career with non-supportive behavior.

One of my greatest rewards, as a coach, is seeing the high school seniors on our team get scholarships to some of the finest colleges in the nation and then realize that this kid swam for me as a beginner ten years ago. It may have taken a decade, but it was worth every minute. Think about what this implies. Here's a young person who has reached the top in his sport. He/She has dedicated a huge amount of time and effort to achieve this and the expert coaches and programs of the United States college system desire him or her. This would never have happened if the parents of these swimmers had not helped in a positive fashion so many years ago.

So, in closing, I want to congratulate and thank the thousands of supportive parents out there that make this great sport the success it is. Hopefully, we can help guide the Darth Vaders of our sport away for the "Dark Side".