

When the Coach Is Not At Practice

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There are occasional times when the head coach of a group of swimmers or the head coach of the whole team cannot be a practice. They may be at swim meet with one group of swimmers, or they may be at a clinic, or they may simply need the time off for personal business – it's rare, but it does happen. When it does happen there may be some small disturbances such as an assistant coach filling in, usually with a workout the head coach wrote, and maybe there is an adjustment of lanes and a consolidation of groups to make the practice manageable. The question is, how do our athletes respond to the workout when their primary coach is not there and how do parents respond to their children's responses.

What usually happens? The athletes, particularly the advanced age groupers and the seniors also take the day off. They may be at practice in body but they simply do not perform in the same way they would if the head coach were there. There is nothing new about this -- it's been around a long time. We know it as the "substitute teacher syndrome." Chances are, you've "taken a day off" also because the teacher or the coach or the boss was not there that day.

Ideally, what should happen?

Athletes should be taking personal responsibility for their performance. They should not be swimming to please Mom and Dad. They should not be swimming to please the coach. They SHOULD be swimming for themselves and their team. John Leonard has often said, "Honor your teammates with *your* efforts."

I ask my swimmers, "Do you want me to make you great?" Often times they are hesitant to answer thinking it is a trick question and they're right! Because the answer is "I cannot make you great. I cannot make you be anything. When you become a craftsman of your own strokes, turns, and finishes; when you perform at the best of your ability on every swim; then YOU are working toward greatness. You walked in that door an athlete of a certain ability. When you walk out the door at the end of practice you can be a better athlete through your own efforts. Are you faster? Did you improve your turns? Did you listen to the stroke and turn reminders?"

And when an athlete becomes a true owner of his or her own progress they WILL perform even if their primary coach is not there that day.

What response is appropriate from the parent when the child complains that the coach was not there? Answer: see the above paragraphs. Don't encourage a victim mentality. Ask the same questions presented above. Let your child know that they alone are responsible for making it a great workout regardless of who is running the workout.