

## Learning Life Skills through Swimming



BY AIMEE C. KIMBALL, PhD//Sport Psychologist

The old cliché that sport doesn't create character, it reveals it, is somewhat true. However, because of the amount of time athletes spend in athletics during their formative years, sport is at least partially responsible for shaping the character of individuals.



Because sport impacts the psychological and social development of athletes, it is imperative that athletes use sport as a means to develop skills that will enhance their characters and contribute to their eventual success outside of sport.

While there are many life skills that can be learned through sport, we can't just assume that athletes will pick these skills up on their own. It is up to parents and coaches to teach these skills.

A "life skill" is any personal attribute or behavior that assists individuals in overcoming challenges in athletic, academic, social and other life situations. Life skills are often the intangible traits a person must possess to turn his physical ability into a successful outcome.

For example, swimmers who have perfect technique, strength and endurance will only reach their full potential if they have the necessary work ethic, mental toughness and commitment (among other life skills) to succeed.

These same swimmers may also be academically gifted, but without those same life skills, they may not be successful in school. Therefore, it is the combination of physical ability and psycho-social skills that help people to reach their potential.

A common example highlighting the importance of life skills also happens to be one of the most frustrating things for many coaches and parents – physically gifted swimmers who do not achieve the level of success they are capable of.

Parents and coaches may wrongly assume these athletes do not care, but it is more often the case that they just don't know how to put their skill to good use.

Often these are the swimmers that experienced early success, the early maturers were stronger and taller than their peers and were able to win races without having to work at it. When their later maturing peers physically develop and catch up, the athletes with the early success often become frustrated and their confidence decreases because they think they "lost it."

They didn't actually "lose" their ability to swim well. They are not having continued success because they never learned what it meant to truly push their physical limits because they previously did not have to.

Coaches and parents can make sure skilled athletes develop the necessary work ethic and life skills to be successful by stressing the importance of constant improvement, rather than just winning. By focusing on what it takes to improve both time and technique, swimmers develop a sense of pride from seeing their hard work, commitment and dedication pay off. Swimmers can also be encouraged to develop their skills in a wide range of events, rather than concentrating on the ones where they always succeed.

By emphasizing these life skills and by talking about how these characteristics lead to success in and out of the pool, parents and coaches can teach athletes that success is not all about physical ability, it's about how well they combine this ability with their attitude.

Like anything else, life skills take work to develop. While there are many life skills that can be taught through sport, it is up to the adults involved to use "teachable moments" to ensure that athletes learn these skills and develop them for success outside of sport.

### **Life Skills Training Exercise**

Ask swimmers to identify characteristics of the best athletes. Each week pick one of these characteristics to focus on. Have a conversation with your athletes about this life skill and enforce its use throughout the week. At the end of the week, ask them how they used this life skill in the pool, in their social life, in school, or in any activity in which they are involved.

For example, if they say a "positive attitude" is a characteristic of successful athletes, spend 15 minutes talking to them and getting their thoughts on why this is so important. Throughout the week, any time someone is negative, have him turn the negative thought into something positive. At the end of the week, ask them for examples of when their positive attitudes helped them through challenging situations and if there was any time when having a negative attitude hindered their performance. This helps the swimmers understand the importance of this life skill and teaches them how to use it throughout their lives to be successful.

#### **About Aimee C. Kimball, PhD:**

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