

Developing Positive Youth Development in Swimming

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Abstract

This paper examines the current swim programs offered to the youth of the Grand Rapids Public Schools who live in the northeast portion of the district. The focus is to provide an environment in which positive youth development is fostered in all four levels of the swimming programs. Scheduling, funding, hiring qualified coaches, and athlete retention rates are the axillary variables that are also considered. The first recommendation is to establish an age group swim program that introduces athletes to the sport. The U.S.S. club team focus is to provide athletes already interested in the sport an opportunity to hone and refine their skills in a low pressure environment. The junior high team acts as an important tool to gain new athletes to the sport, foster self-esteem and self-worth while deterring dangerous and potential self-destructive teenage behavior. The goal of the high school swim programs is to teach young adults valuable life skills through the sport.

Developing a multifaceted swim program is a daunting task. Securing funding, developing a year-long scheduling, and hiring qualified coaches are some of the factors that need to be examined when creating or amending the programs that serve young athletes. Nonetheless, the real focus of all of the programs is to foster positive youth development through the sport. The program should balance fostering swimmers while growing the life skill sets that individuals can use beyond the programs. At any level of swimming, regardless of experience, there is something to be said about learning life skills. Perseverance, honesty, self-discovery, and commitment are invaluable. Developing an age group swim program would offer an introduction to the sport of swimming. It would also provide many positive skills associated with the sport such as goal setting, new friendships, and belonging. The creation of the U.S.S. sanctioned swim club would offer experienced athletes the opportunity to refine and hone their skills in a low pressure environment. Furthermore the program would allow the athletes to participate in healthy fitness activities, work cooperatively with others, and learn how to link their effort to results. The current middle school program serves as the introduction to the sport of swimming but its purpose is to provide positive identity while reducing the likelihood of youth engaging in dangerous behaviors and activities. High school swimming is designed to teach young adults how to self-access, work on a team, and practice their interpersonal skills while participating in a challenging aerobic sport.

Part of defining the specific purpose of a multifaceted swim program revolves around understanding the local community the program serves. The city of Grand Rapids is becoming more ethnically and socioeconomically diverse. The high school and middle school swim team for

North East Grand Rapids is a combination of two high schools and two middle schools. City High School and Creston High School comprise the high school team while Riverside Middle School and City Middle school comprise the middle school team. The difference between the schools sometimes manifest in mindset, behaviors, and outlooks on the future; nonetheless this difference has not stopped the current teams from developing unity, exchange of ideas, and positive interactions. African Americans, Asians, Hispanics, and foreign exchange students contribute to the mosaic of the team. The dialogue, discussions, interaction, and subsequent shared vision of a singular team from a wide socioeconomic and cultural standpoint should be considered a strong point of the program.

One of the main goals of the program would be to retrain and train athletes the ideas that David Shield and Brenda Bredemeier wrote in *True competition: A Guide to Pursuing Excellence in Sport and Society*. Coaches, at every level of the program, should be required to read the book so that they can begin to see how they can foster true competition versus decompetition. Athletes in the program, regardless of age, can be one or the other mindsets when competitions transpire. “Whether competition or decompetition occurs depends on how the participants think of the contest. True competitors think of the contest as an opportunity for self-improvement, for feeling camaraderie with others, or for enjoying the thrill of a challenge, and related goals” (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009). This type of mindset should be the goal of every athlete in the program at every level. The decompetitor mindset should be discouraged by all of the coaches. The authors wrote, “For those involved in decompetition – we will call them decompetitors – the contest is viewed as an opportunity to flaunt personal superiority, to reap the shallow pleasures of conquest, and to steal whatever rewards come in victory” (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009). Athletes and coaches who engage in the positive true competition mindset will find their experience in the program more worthwhile.

Working with the Parents

Parents play a pivotal role in the development of youth within sports. A strong program will identify a variety of parenting approaches and styles, weave them into a supportive role for the club or team, work with the coaches to foster a big picture perspective, and keep sportsmanship in mind. As soon as a new swimmer joins the team, it is important for coaches to hold a parent meeting. Having a detailed structure for the parent meeting is critical for fostering positive first impressions for both the parents and coaches. The meeting agenda should include ice breaker activities as well as discussing logistics (rules, expectations, end of season banquets, etc.) which often times are the backbone of well-run and organized program. Furthermore, the parent meeting is a great way for coaches to begin to help promote positive youth development with the parents. Parents can encourage, reinforce, and redefine winning without hurting the efforts of the coach. Coaches should explain and provide handout that help parents build up their son/daughters self-esteem, reinforce the coach, and provide examples of how positive actions and words can be modeled. The working relationship between the coaches and the parents can help reinforce and provide youth direction as well as act as a powerful resource.

Age Group Swimming

An age group swim programs offers an opportunity for swimmers of all ages to learn. The program would be structured into four group levels based on age. The first group would be 8 & under. The goals for this group would be to have fun! This group would also learn the rules of competitive swimming, learn to dive from the starting block, master a 25 yard freestyle, rotary breathing (breathing every 3 on both sides), and master a 25 yard backstroke while staying on their back the whole way. The last skill that would be taught would be to move on to breast and butterfly once free and back have been mastered.

The second group would be swimmers who are 9 & 10's. The goal of this group would be to have fun! This group would learn the rules of competitive swimming with a special emphasis on teaching proper turns for each stroke. New swimmers would learn how to swim and master the basics of all four strokes while trying to swim 25 yards. More advanced swimmers would focus on swimming 50 yards of stroke with the proper form. This group would learn to dive from the starting block better, learn proper turns for each stroke, and complete a 100 IM and 200 free during the season.

The third group would be 11 & 12's. The goals of this group would be to have fun! Regardless of ability, this group would learn the rules of competitive swimming while improving on starts, turns, and strokes. This group would begin to work on endurance. The goals of this group would be to compete in every event offered in the 11 & 12 age group. These events consists of 50's, 100's, and 200's.

The last group would be the 13 & 14's. The goal of this group would be to have fun! This group would learn the rules of competitive swimming, improve on all starts, turns, and strokes. This group would continue to work on endurance, participate in the 200 free and 100 IM at least once each season. Each swimmer would try to participate in every event that is offered.

In some circumstance an age group swimmer will not practice with their age group. The best interest of the child might cause a swimmer to placed in a different group. The process of finding the best spot for the swimmer takes time and consideration among the athlete, coaches, and parents.

Selection of coaches

The quality of coaching helps build sport specific skills while developing lifelong skills among athletes. Teaching the nuances of swimming to wide varieties of athletes requires a knowledgeable, patient, and growth minded group of coaches. While the coaching staff enjoys

seeing the athletes succeed in the pool, teaching character and the positive behavior associated with it, should be the focus of the coaching staff. As Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, and Jones wrote, “[C]harter or character disorder has less to do with playing the sport and more to do with philosophy of the sport organization, [and] quality of coaching.” (Cornelius, VanRaalte, & Jones, 2005) A knowledgeable coach should coach both sport specific skills and stage appropriate life-skills. Knowing swimming goals and character goals is at the heart of the programs philosophical foundation. At the age group level through the high school program, learning sport skills and life skills are some of the positive psychological growth skills that occur when an athlete participates in a sport program that is run by quality coaches.

The age group program would operate under the idea that best instruction occurs when the coaches have a lower number of swimmers to work with. The maximum ratio of coaches to swimmers would be 1:15. If funding allowed, an additional coach would be hired if larger amounts of swimmers are in a certain age group. Coaches should be placed in the area that best fits their knowledge base, experience, and comfort. However, coaches with more technical experience should be placed in the older age divisions. All coaches should have a solid understanding of the four basic strokes and their pedagogical approach to teaching the strokes should reflect the appropriate skill level they instruct. Coaches should be encouraged to rotate and practice coaching different age levels every few years so they gain a larger understanding of the necessary motor, kinesiology, and physiological skills that are taught at each age level. Furthermore, all coaches would need to be certified in first aid, CPR, and life guarding by accredited organizations such as the American Red Cross or Ellis and Associates.

Providing coaches tools

Part of developing a strong swimming program is providing educational opportunities for coaches. Since coaches influence whether or not positive youth development occurs, they need opportunities for growth within the sport. In regard to growth within the sport of swimming,

coaches should be encouraged to seek out clinics to enhance their knowledge within the sport. Clinics such as the Michigan Interscholastic Swim Coaches Association or National Interscholastic Swim Coaches Association both feature conferences and clinics for coaches at all levels of swimming. Another part of a coaches growth is to pair and share among each other. They should share various drills or strategies that might be used to teach a variety of skills such as turns, starts, technique, or taper philosophy. Coaches should be encouraged to “team” or work with each other because knowledge is better disseminated when coaches see how other coaches coach.

Coaches should be encouraged to reflect and evaluate themselves over several domains. The majority of coaches start off by repeating similar skills they were instructed in when they were athletes, they should be encouraged to examine the effectiveness of skills they themselves were taught. Some skills, practice ideas, and suggestions might be unsafe for certain levels of youth development. Blowout sprints, excessive underwater swims, or prolonged anaerobic swim are not safe for any swimmer regardless of age. This dangerous practice, common among some swim coaches, should be discouraged. The best way to avoid dangerous practices, retain athletes, and foster a positive environment for the development of youth in sports is to provide and require coaches to take classes in kinesiology, child developmental psychology, and physiological aspects of swimming. The data collected on the coaching education is clear. Trained coaches foster positive youth development and retain athletes. Untrained coaches retain less athletes and resort to negative youth development methods in the process. Farrey wrote, “A 1992 study found that when coaches received training in effective skill instruction and positive motivation technique, only five percent of children chose not to play the sport again. With untrained coaches, the attrition rate was 26 percent.” (Farrey, 2008) It is clear that that retention rate is helped when coaches goes through training. A multifaceted coaches training program provides insight into sports science, kinesiology, and psychology that encourages young athletes to keep playing the sport. Other nations have higher standards in regards to coaches training too – the French soccer development

model is just one of the examples of how most American sports programs get it wrong. Farrey wrote, “Very few of the nation’s 2 to 4 million youth coaches – perhaps as little as 20 percent – have received any form of training . . . and even more have been taught how to coach character. So most of them wing it” (Farrey, 2008) This proposed age group program would budget for coaches training, development, and certification.

Requiring all coaches (age group, middle school, high school, and U.S.S.) to pass the United States Swimming coaching and certification test would be cost effective and ensure a high level of coaching knowledge. David Farrey wrote about the merits of such a “gold standard” program for coaching certification. Farrey wrote, “Every club coach, no matter the age group they're working with, must receive training in first aid, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and basic water safety.” (Farrey, 2008) Water poses a life threatening situation at any moment, so it is critical that a coach know how to react to a potential in water diabetic seizure, spinal situation, or how to assist a distressed swimmer. The high standards ensure the safety of the athlete but the certification goes beyond water safety. Farrey wrote, “By the start of the second year, they (U.S.S. swim coaches) must pass an additional 'Foundations of Coaching' test that covers everything from rules and regulations to strokes to age-appropriate workout sessions. Coaches can only miss 20 of the 180 questions on the online, open book test, so they are strongly advised to read three specific textbooks.” (Farrey, 2008) As a person who has taken the test, I attest to the difficulty of the questions of the test. It took three coaches, who had a combined forty plus years of coaching, to pass the test.

Participating Team

The goal of the age group swim club would be to join the West Michigan Swim League. The acceptance or rejection of the age group team would take place at the fall or spring meeting of the West Michigan Swim League coaches. A majority vote would be needed to officially join the league. In the event that that coaches would vote in a majority vote, the age group team would immediately be assigned to a

division based the size of the team. Meets would be scheduled by the coaches of the West Michigan Swim League. In the event of the minority vote, the team would not be part of the swim league and would attempt to join the league the following season.

Schedule

The age group program would consist of two seasons. The fall season would last from mid November to February so that the meets would be in line with the rest of the teams in the West Michigan Swim League. Practices times for the swimmers between the ages of eight to ten year old would be 6:00pm to 7:00pm. The eleven to fourteen age group programs would last from 7:00pm to 8:00pm for the fall season. Practice runs Monday through Thursday. The summer season would run from mid June to August. The practice time for eight to ten year old would be 10:00 am -11:00 am. Eleven to fourteen practice sessions would last from 11:00 am to 12:00 pm. Summer practice hour are Monday through Thursday. The number of staff coaching each season would be determined by the participation levels. The ratio of coach to swimmer would be 1 to 15. Furthermore, a certified lifeguard will be present at every practice.

Funding

Since the city of Grand Rapids and its public school are in a state of consolidation of funds, the majority of the funding for age group level program would come from funds from United States Swimming program Make-a-Splash. The program supports grass roots level programs that educated young children about swimming and saves lives in the process. The Make-a-Splash program came about due to the high amount of drowning that occurred in among ethnically diverse communities. Some of the initiatives for the program are, “Educates parents through a national awareness campaign, saves lives by joining forces with grassroots learn-to-swim programs, and reaches diverse and under-represented communities by funding free or low cost learn-to-swim programs for children who otherwise could not afford them” (Make-A-Splash, 2010). The

demographic of the Grand Rapids area would qualify for funding from such a program. Depending on what level of funding the Make-A-Splash program funded, the remaining cost would have to be funded by Grand Rapids Public Schools. If the combination of Make-A-Splash and Grand Rapids Public Schools cannot cover the full cost to run the program, a fee will need to be charged.

The majority of the funding of an age group program is determined by the cost to pay the coaches, lifeguards, and pool fees. The ideal scenario would be for Grand Rapids Public Schools to fund the program completely and waive the pool rental fees since the program would fund positive youth development. The operational cost per season (summer, fall, and winter) would be between \$5,000 and \$10,000 depending on how many coaches would be hired and if a pool rental fee would be charged per session. If Grand Rapids Public Schools would not fund the program, the age group program would have to charge a participation fee to offset the coaches' salary, pool fees, and lifeguard pay. A proposal to United States Swimming Make-A-Splash would be filed to bring the participation costs down to a lower payment. However, paying to play is not the ideal situation since it excludes those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. Nonetheless, a program has to think of each possibility and paying to swim is a reality that needs to be planned for and considered. However, in an effort to encourage young swimmers to join the age group team, a free trial program should be implemented. Families can try out our age group swimming at no out of pocket cost. If they do not enjoy swimming they are done with no questions asked. If they enjoy the team, they register and pay. They will need to sign the participation form before attending the first practice.

Youth Developmental Goals

The ratio of support versus challenge will vary in each age range. In the eight and under group, the coaches should be more supportive than challenging. At an early age a child needs to know that the coach cares. Therefore a younger athletes needs to have larger amount of support

thus reinforcing their belief base. By building trust, a coach can begin to challenge their athletes. In each spectrum, the ratio of support to challenge should change. For swimmers in the 9 & 10 range, the emphasis shift slightly away from support to challenge. A coach needs to challenge their swimmers to examine breathing habits off of the wall, needs to ask their athletes how they are being treated by the coach, and how they are treating other. Simply put, a coach needs to begin ask questions so that a coach can see how the athletes process a challenges. At the same time, asking questions shows that the coach cares. For athletes who are 11-12, the ratio once again should shift more towards challenge; however a large amount of support still needs to be in place. Reinforcing positive behaviors towards teammates, sport specific skills, and mindset should be the support system that comes from the coaches on staff. The coaches can begin to challenge the athletes as individuals and within the sport. For athletes who are 13-14, puberty can be a challenging time for many athletes. The athletes are experiencing changes in their body and in their social behaviors. Therefore coaches should find a 50/50 balance between support and challenge. Using motivational and developmental feedback helps balance support and challenge. Coaches should be encouraged to help athletes set realistic goals but the ultimate goal of the program is to produce athletes that are critical thinkers and positive members of society.

One of the last goals of the program is focus on feedback and evaluation. Often time's feedback is given to the swimmers by the coach but this should be flipped in regards to evaluating the program and coaching skills. The focus on this age group program would be for swimmers, regardless of age, to provide feedback to the coaches. Youth sports are really adult driven program so it is critical that the adult be accountable to the youth they serve. Kathrin Walker and Reed Larson, point out how successful youth sports programs build in youth driven feedback. They wrote, "First, adults in the two adult-driven programs put great emphasis on listening to and obtaining feedback from youth. . . always obtains both oral and written evaluations from youth: They walk away knowing that their ideas count." (Walker & Larson, 2006). Timing is just as

critical to meaningful feedback as well. Giving swimmer time to reflect via oral and/or written within the first week, midpoint, and end of the season allows coaches to change their instruction or practice skills to better accommodate the needs of the young athletes. It is important to distribute evaluation forms with a reading level or Lexile score that are appropriate to each group. Furthermore, swimmers who are learning disabled should be given a choice to provide oral feedback or have an appropriate Lexile reading level evaluation.

Keeping it Fun!

Swimming coaches sometimes become consumed with spending practice refining strokes, dishing out yards, and working on turns when they should be equally concerned with giving their athletes time to have fun. Coaches should allocate time at the end of every practice for fun games and activities. Scuba diving for Gatorade bottles, relay races on inner tubes, and a game of sharks and minnows are just a few great ways to kids at any age to have fun while swimming. Structured activities from a coach are great for swimmers but sometimes allowing swimmers to do what they want is another way to encourage fun. Sometimes scuba diving on the bottom of the pool, jumping off the diving board, or splashing around with friends is activities that swimmers make up on their own.

Creating a United States Swimming Club

Creating a United States Swim club is a difficult task from a planning, funding, and logistics standpoint. Creating mission statements, club objectives, and certifying coaches can take several months of planning. All paper work must be submitted to the registration chair for the state. Being in contact with lawyer who can help draft athlete releases, waiver forms, and other necessary forms should be a point of emphasis. A potential club is required to download the prospective club membership booklet and a demographic questionnaire. A name must be selected – our

club team would be Club Polar Bear. Securing needed pool time would work in conjunction with Grand Rapids Public School to use the high school pool at Creston. The condition of the pool would need to be examined by the health department and receive a passing safety grade in order for any sanctioned club practice to occur. From a legal and financial standpoint, the club would need a federal tax ID number, and be set up as a nonprofit or for profit business. The lawyers would also need to address risk management, evaluate emergency actions plans, and also examine insurance options or issues associated with the sport.

The selection of qualified coaches is another important aspect of developing a club team. Any coach would have to have their fingerprints taken by the police department as stipulated by USA swimming. They would have to have a background screening, completed a CPR, First Aid, and Safety Training course by either the American Red Cross or Ellis and Associates. On top the passing the background screening process, any potential coaches would have to pass the United States Swimming test and have the scores sent to the zone representative.

One point of consideration involving the creation of a U.S.S. Swim club would be its possible negative and positive impact on the age groups participation level. The age group club team's main goal is to act as an entry program for young athletes with little to no knowledge of swimming and to have fun while learning the basics of competitive swimming. Based on my coaching experience as an age group coach and a U.S.S. swim coach serving the same community – it is critical to avoid creating a sense of elitism between an age group and U.S.S. travel team. In my previous coaching placement, the U.S.S swimmers often times participated in the age group meets, but some felt that the age group meets were beneath them. If they were placed in a relay with the slower age group swimmers, they did not like the overall relays time. Swimmers and parents often times complained to the coaches about having to swim in the age group meets. Farrey wrote on the dangerous of creating a travel on

the smaller community teams. “The earlier kids are told that they’re not good enough at an activity, the less likely they are to set out to prove the community wrong. They get the hint: they move on.” (Farrey, 2008) Therefore, the interaction between U.S.S. athletes and the age group athletes should be frequent (to encourage comradely among each other) and coaches should take the lead in encouraging U.S.S. athletes not see age group swimmers as equal peers.

One major distinction between this particular United State Swimming club from others around the West Michigan Area would be the starting age. Numerous U.S.S. sanctioned swim clubs around the area allow swimmers as young as six to participate with the eight and under group. This program would not even offer an eight or under group so that participation in the age group program would be encouraged and the likelihood of burnout would be decreased. This type of structure would be going against the status quo for the region in terms of participation age. Programs like Jenison Area Wildcat Swimming, East Grand Rapids Waves, and the Rockford Riptide allow swimmers under the age of eight to be a part of the club team. As a former coach for one of the previously mentioned programs, it was apparent that the number of swimmers who started as an eight and under and were not participating in swimming in their teenage years. Burnout was cited as one of the reasons why athletes did not remain in the program or in the sport. As Donnelly pointed out, “By the 1970s, sport sociologists and psychologists were beginning to express a number of concerns about such programs - that the children involved were suffering from competitive stress and anxiety, increased aggression, parental pressure, high dropout rates and from being treated as adults (rather than children) by their coaches.” (Donnelly, 1997). Therefore, in a radical shift in practice schedule thinking, the practices would be established by the swimmers as to how many practices they want to attend each week. By giving the young athlete ownership, they are learning how to manage their actions and efforts. As the late John Wooden

was quoted by Gould, “I did not feel pressure because my father taught me to make decisions based on preparation and hard work. If you do that and things don't work out you still made the right decision.” (Gould, 2006) Giving youth choices, and letting them learn from their decisions, is a refreshing approach that this U.S.S.

Schedule

The U.S.S. team operates in two seasons. One season would last from September to March and the second season would last from June to August. During the winter season, the pool will be open from 6:00pm to 8:00pm, Monday through Friday. Since this time frame overlaps with the age group program, two lanes will be reserved for the U.S.S. swim club during the age group swim practice. Only two lanes will be used since the majority of the swimmers will either be participating for the age group, middle school, or high school team during the winter season. During the summer program, the pool will be open from 8:00am to 10:00am with all of the six lanes open for the U.S.S. club team. The unique aspect of this U.S.S. swim program involves the level of participation that young athlete determine. The number of practices a swimmer attends per week is established by the swimmers and their family – not the coaching staff. Once the athlete and their family have established the practice schedule, the number of coaches needed on deck can be determined. The ratio of swimmer to coach should be at maximum of 15 to 1.

Keeping it Fun!

A travel swim club sometimes places too much emphasis on yardage base and not enough time spent on having fun. Instead of working on a drill to increase a sprinters tempo, a coach could have the sprinters play water polo for a practice just to change the activity up. Having non

traditional relay races, playful swimming with their teammates and simple games like Marco Polo go along way in terms of giving the athlete a mental break from demands of practice. However, perhaps the best way to foster a fun climate in a U.S.S. swim team is keep the right mindset in regards to practices and competitions. When the stakes and expectations are too high, the sport becomes toxic. Having fun takes a backseat to when the decompetitive mindset is advanced by coaches, parents, and swimmers. Therefore, keeping the practice youth driven, instead of adult driven, is a critical mindset that determines the programs success.

Middle School

The middle school program is already running however; it has room for improvement and growth. The middle school program is a combination of two middle schools around north east Grand Rapids. Riverside middle school serves students in the seventh and eight grades. Riverside is diverse in terms of demographics and socioeconomic. All graduating 8th grade student athletes will feed into the high school program at Creston. City Middle School is top caliber academic middle school. However, the dangers that face teenagers happen in all type of schools – even the top caliber one. As Coastworth and Conroy point out, “Therefore, many youth have unsupervised time for twenty to twenty-five hours each week. Research also indicates that this unsupervised time, typically the after-school hours between 2:00 P.M. and 6:00 P.M., is the riskiest part of the day for youth. It is during these hours that a disproportionate number of juvenile arrests occur and that teenagers are most likely to engage in sexual intercourse, smoking, drinking alcohol, or using drugs” (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2007) Providing an after-school program to the students of Grand Rapids Public Schools helps reduce the likelihood of youth engaging in dangerous behaviors and activities.

The middle school program feeder program has one coach and a certified lifeguard one site. The junior high swim coach position required some coaching experience in swimming, mandatory background checks, and stipulated that fingerprints needed to be taken with the local police agency. The job paid \$1,000 for the three month season. While some aspects of the coaching requirements are commendable, the lack of required experience in swimming, support for additional training, and minimal pay need to be changed.

Top quality coaches do not have to necessarily have multiple years of experience coaching but they need training in a variety of subjects and fields to become an effective coach. Farrey wrote, “A 1992 study found that when coaches received training in effective skill instruction and positive motivation technique, only five percent of children chose not to play the sport again. With untrained coaches, the attrition rate was 26 percent” (Farrey, 2008). It is clear that that retention rate is helped when coaches goes through training. A solid coaches training provides insight in sports science, kinesiology, and psychology that encourages young athletes to keep playing the sport. Grand Rapids Public needs to offer, encourage, and require their middle school coaches to participate in ongoing coaching education as part of their coaching duty.

Schedule

The current schedule of the middle school swimming program runs from early November to January. Practices run Monday through Thursday and last from 4:00 pm to 5:15 pm. The team competes against the other middle school swim teams from Grand Rapids Public Schools. The end of the year culminates with a league championship in late January. The majority of dual meets between the middle school programs are held on Wednesday at 6:00 pm but that would need to be amended in the event of a time conflict between the age group and U.S.S. program. Dual meets could be held in the practice schedule time from 4:00 to 5:15 due to the shortened events or moved to the weekend.

Format

Since the program is designed to be an introduction to the sport of swimming, the middle school event lists have smaller distances than the traditional high school dual meet. The 200 yard Individual Medley at the high school level is cut down to a 100 yard Individual Medley. Events like the 200 and the 500 have been taken out of the event format as well. The focus of the middle school program should not be to cover larger distances but rather to learn proper form, technique, and to have fun.

The majority of the early practices are spent sorting out swimmers by ability. Nonetheless identification of talent should not be the focus of the program. As Abbott and Collins point out, “Selection processes should consider a child’s progress and behavior (e.g. commitment) during a development program as opposed to purely considering standards of performance.” (Abbott & Collins, 2004) Some junior high athletes have had previous experience swimming at on a club or U.S.S swimming team and require more challenging practices, stroke refinement, and have different expectations. At the other end of the spectrum are new athletes who are new to the sport and require more encouragement and supervision. Introducing the strokes slowly and reinforcing good listening skills should be the focus for the newer swimmers. Regardless of experience, the coach should be teaching the athletes how to analytically judge their efforts and monitor their improvements.

Adjusting and Amending

Changes to the program need to be made to better serve the youth and the coaches in the middle school program. The gaps in ability levels pose a problem to a single coach. Furthermore, the growth of the program in terms of numbers (9 in 2010-2011 to 23 in 2011-2012) suggests that hiring an additional coach would better serve the needs of the student athletes. I would strongly advocate that Grand Rapids Public Schools require an assistant coach to help the head coach with the demands of each ability group. While funding at the state and district levels shrinking, adding a paid assistant coach might be an unlikely financial request. Currently, high school swimmers, under the direction and supervision of the

head junior high coach, work with the middle school swimmers. High school volunteer coaches could demonstrate skills, drills, proper technique, help swimmers read the clock, and monitor a lane. Furthermore, by helping coach, they would gain insight into the sport by having to teach its principles, ideas, and concepts. This in turn helps facilitate a better understanding of the sport which they could then use in their own season. Furthermore, interacting under the direct supervision of head coach, help these volunteer student athletes develop interpersonal skills that are extremely vital for their endeavors post high school. It should be noted that the head coach should also help the high school volunteers establish boundaries between themselves and the middle school students.

One of the major problems involved with the current feeder program is where the City Middle School students participate while in middle school and then where they participate in high school. Since City accepts applications from students all across Grand Rapids, some of the student athletes will participate in the middle school program run at the Creston Pool but they will not be student athletes at Creston High School. The current structure of participation needs to be changed so that the student athlete does not feel conflicted, disconnected, or confused as to what high school program they will participate in at the high school level. While the student athlete are part of the middle school team known as Team North, some will not be able to participate together since some of the athlete's live in another Grand Rapids Public High school district and are required to play sports for the district. It would make more sense for the athletes to begin their middle school swimming years working with athletes who will eventually become their high school teammates. However, by allowing future competitors to be on the team and establish good report, this in fact might lead to less unhealthy rivalry between the high school swim programs. However, since the middle school is only in its second year, it is too early to tell if the rivalry between schools and athletes has been diminished.

Funding

Grand Rapids Public Schools pays the costs for a middle school swim program. The middle school program has three locations in which one coach is paid a base salary of \$1,500 up to \$2,000 based on their experience coaching. Towels, goggles, and locks are provided by Grand Rapids Public schools from the general funds account. The pool fees are waived at each site reducing the cost of the program. However, since the students' needs to be bussed from City and Riverside Middle School to the Creston pool, this adds to the cost of the middle school program.

Keeping it Fun!

Middle school swimming is an introduction to the sport of swimming for many athletes. This age range is characterized by increased social interaction so a coach needs to understand that this is important to this group. Furthermore, while some swimmers might be beginning to show a drive and desire in the sport, it is important not to predict future success in the sport by the junior high years alone. "Practitioners need to consider that the key problem is not so much identifying the best performer at that moment, but rather identifying over time which factors may be limiting talent development." (Abbott & Collins, 2004) An athlete's motor skills, muscle development, and mental maturity are years away from reaching full development so a coach should not focus on the developing the talents of swimmers who have matured a faster rate than their peers.

High School Swim Program

A high school swim program is one of the last opportunities for coaches to make an impact on the youth who are about enter the adult world. Student athletes who participate in the program have different cultural values, experience in the sport, and life experiences. Don Hellison pointed out, "The most successful programs make participants feel as if they belong; a commitment to the program and to other members is part of the deal. Belonging and commitment, as well as the opportunity for the program leader and the kids to develop meaningful relationships, are greatly facilitated by the size of the group and the duration of participation." (Hellison, 2003) The coaching staff and team members have an

impact in the direction of the athletes in the program. While an athlete needs to feel validation in their sport, teaching life lessons should be the focus of the high school program. Therefore it is critical that the coaches have a plan or vision for the program to foster positive youth development. Developing a coaching philosophy that reinforces development in several domains is the first step to creating a meaningful program to the athletes and community. As Camire, Forneris, Trudel, and Bernard point out, “A crucial first step for coaches in establishing an effective coaching practice consisted of developing a well thought-out philosophy that prioritizes the physical, psychological, and social development of athletes.” (Camire, Forneris, Trudel, & Bernard, 2011) Once the development of athletes in and outside of sports is the overarching goal, building the relational capacity with the athletes is the first step in the process.

Developing Relational Capacity

The relational capacity between a coach and a swimmer determines the impact both in and out of the sport. An athlete has to believe that a coach is first knowledgeable in their sport and that the coach’s advice and/or recommendations are based on credibility. As Camire, Forneris, Trudel, and Bernard point out, “Many coaches quickly realized that in order to gain athletes' respect and make the coach- athlete relationship work, they first had to demonstrate certain level of credibility. This meant demonstrating to their athletes they had the knowledge and skills necessary to coach effectively.” (Camire, Forneris, Trudel, & Bernard, 2011) It is relatively easy to coach new swimmers with a limited knowledge base since they have little exposure and understanding behind the sport. However, experienced swimmers take a more concerted effort. Swimmers, who have had a great deal of exposure to the sport, have a strong ability to understand. Experienced swimmers can decipher the validity of not only practices, but the theory behind the various parts of the season. Therefore, a coach needs to explain and rationalize with

the experienced swimmers so that they can understand the rationale behind the decisions. The critical piece of gaining a swimmers trust comes from coaching a swimmer towards meaningful time drops in their event.

One way to measure the effectiveness of developing positive youth development is to ask student athletes to take a pre and post-test measuring several domains. The Yes test is a post athletic career survey designed to offer coaches input about a program's effectiveness. The domains range from physical skills, initiatives exploration effort, teamwork, social skills, problem solving, goal setting, community involvement, and negative influences. The survey should be given as pre-test and a post test in which the data could be compared in two columns. As more students athletes take the test, the higher the validity of the tests. Furthermore, using the YES test as a pre-test and post-test would help coaches identify athlete strengths and weakness of athletes entering the program. The areas for improvement could help the coach(s) make more informed decisions as the athlete progresses through the respective program. The post test could show athlete and program growth since the data between the two tests could be examined and compared to each other.

Another way to measure the success of the program cannot be defined by an empirical data since a program's success is determined by what kind of person an athlete becomes when they are adults. Swimming is a vehicle by which coaches begins to teach larger lessons. Hellison commented about how participation in sports can sometimes foster social responsibility. "It starts with a focus on physical activity and gradually shifts to an emphasis on life. The major message is not necessarily to maintain an active lifestyle throughout life but to live a personally and socially responsible life that prioritizes human decency and self-development." (Hellison, 2003) When future athletes move into their first neighborhood, their neighbors will not know that they swam the 100 butterfly and anchored the 400 freestyle relay- they will want to know if their new neighbors are honest, trustworthy, and upright.

Youth Empowerment

Any youth sports program has the potential to teach responsibility, team work, and can empower athletes; however, in some adult driven programs, youth empowerment takes a back seat when the adults make the majority of the decisions. The goal of the high school swim programs is to allow young adults time to practice being leaders, decision makers, and teaching them how to deal with adversity. When a coach steps in to solve a dispute on the team, they might settle the issue, but they have missed an opportunity to let members of the team step forward with ideas how the conflict might be fixed or mended. As Walker and Larson points out in their study, “Data from our research suggest that good youth-driven programs can provide young people rich opportunities to experience leadership responsibility and develop strategic and teamwork skills.” (Walker & Larson, 2006). Developing skills within the sports is secondary in regard to developing situations and experiences in which young athletes can develop leadership, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills they can take with them once they exit their formal schooling.

Funding

The teams are funded by the Grand Rapids Public School athletic budget. The budget allocation takes in mind facilities costs, coaches’ pay, meet operation costs, and an equipment budget for equipment such as touch pads, backup timing clickers, and other miscellaneous items. No athletes are currently required to pay to play the sport beyond the physical fee. Grand Rapids Public athletics budget is derived from the general funds and from a combination of fund raising (Gus Macker tournaments) and donations from the public.

Summary

The focus of this paper focused on the swim programs that are already offered, could be offered, to the students of Grand Rapids Public Schools. The goal of the programs is to provide an environment in which positive youth development is fostered in all four levels of the swimming programs. Scheduling, funding, hiring qualified coaches, and athlete retention rates of the athletes are variables that needed to be considered. Developing an age group swim program would offer an introduction to the sport of swimming while encouraging youth how to set goals, make new friendships, and encourage belonging. The creation of the U.S.S. sanctioned swim club would offer experienced athletes the opportunity to refine and hone their skills in a low pressure environment. The current middle school program serves as the introduction to the sport of swimming but its purpose is to provide positive identity while reducing the likelihood of youth engaging in dangerous behaviors and activities. High school swimming is designed to teach young adults how to self-access, work on a team, and practice their interpersonal skills while participating in a challenging aerobic sport. In all of the programs, positive youth development is the main goal.

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