

Consistent Training for Long Term Development

I've noticed that our practice attendance is usually highest the week before a meet. This phenomenon may be attributable, in part, to misconceptions regarding the nature of swim training. While there are certain skill-oriented tasks that can be polished the day before competition, most of the benefits attendant to swim training require more than a few days to develop.

Improvements in strength and endurance, for example, can be attained only by stressing the body beyond what it is accustomed to. The immediate result of such a workout or series of workouts is to diminish, not enhance, the body's physical capacity. With proper recuperation, of course, the swimmer comes back stronger than before. Depending on a variety of factors including the rigor of the workouts, other stresses in the child's life, and dietary and sleep habits, this rebound effect of training may not be evident for several days.

Thus, workouts leading into an important meet are designed to maintain the conditioning improvements obtained from the previous weeks and months of training. Those swimmers who have not been attending practice regularly and then come the week before a meet may actually be overstressed by a practice that is structured only to consolidate gains already made.

The importance of a progressive training program cannot be overstated. In order to induce the necessary fatigue, each application of stress must be slightly greater than the previous one. Too little stress (*e.g.*, infrequent attendance or insufficient effort) and the swimmer will stagnate or even lose conditioning; too much stress and the swimmer will not be able to recuperate. Because the effectiveness of a given workout depends, in large part, on the foundation built from preceding workouts (detraining occurs rapidly with certain facets of conditioning beginning to disappear within only one to two weeks), consistent practice attendance is vital to the development of strength and endurance in your swimmer.

As with the development of physical capacity, the development of effective swimming skills occurs most rapidly with regular practice attendance. This is true, in part, because physical condition and stroke technique are closely linked: without the requisite strength and endurance to perform a stroke properly over a given distance, "knowing" the skill itself is meaningless. It is also true in the very nature of learning, and is especially true in swimming, which is not a natural activity for most of us. When we attempt a new skill or modify an old one, the movement feels awkward, even foreign. It is only after weeks and months of focused practice that the movement begins to become part of us.

Unfortunately, the necessity of a long-term perspective in age group swimming is often obscured by short-term gains attributable to the nature of learning itself (improvement in a new task is almost immediate because one begins with few skills and minimal fitness) and the size/strength increases (resulting from normal growth and maturation). Once these "inherent" gains have been realized, however, further progress will be made only through hard work and careful attention to detail.

While it is true that some aspects of conditioning vanish quickly with disuse, the investment your child makes in swimming will have more than transient benefits. The generally stronger heart, lungs and muscles developed over years of regular training are retained long after, while the swimming skills themselves are largely permanent. Such "residual" physical effects of training have allowed masters swimmers to return to training and competition well after their collegiate careers and equal or surpass their best performances. But for most adults who were age group swimmers, performance measured in hundredths of a second is less important than other benefits deriving from their swimming careers. The development of strong bodies and sound swimming skills and an appreciation for the hard work necessary to obtain them are the greatest rewards available to the diligent swimmer.