

MAKING THE BEST: MASTERS COACHES

By Dan Frost

Editor's Note: This article is excerpted from a three-part series. Part one covers the swimmers without coaches, and part three covers swimmers and coaches.

Do you coach a Masters swim team? Congratulations! Coaching a group of Masters Swimmers is a uniquely rewarding, albeit demanding, responsibility. Masters are very keen to learn how to improve and listen intently to advice and instruction. Coaching Masters also keeps you on your toes since Masters do not hesitate to question anything that does not make sense or seem applicable to them. Masters will work diligently without constant supervision to put your suggestions into action. Masters appreciate sincerity, timely guidance, dedication, and a good sense of humor from their coaches.

Just as there is no such thing as a typical Masters swimmer, there is no such thing as a typical Masters coach. It is very likely that the coach at the pool down the street or in the next town is employed very differently from you. The spectrum of Masters coaches includes (but certainly is not limited to):

- The head coach or assistant coach of the youth swim club also coaches the Masters team. The coach is employed either by the host pool or the swim club.
- A volunteer, such as an off-duty lifeguard or pool staff member, or another swimmer, coaches or supervises the Masters team for no added compensation.
- A former youth or high school swimmer, now an undergraduate or graduate college student, coaches the Masters team to earn a little extra money.
- The Masters club is an independent private enterprise owned and managed by the coaches with the club being the coaches' full-time profession and main source of income.
- A person with an already steady income, from another job or a pension, enjoys the fun aspects of coaching the Masters team.

Coaches also work in various environments. Self-employed coaches who run their own clubs can earn more money by attracting more swimmers, but often must pay to rent pool time. Other coaches who are salaried employees of private health clubs or public pools do not directly see their income

linked to the numbers of swimmers that are coached by them. Some rely on swim coaching for their primary source of income, while others receive little or no compensation. Even those who coach professionally may have a wide range of additional responsibilities, such as coaching other swim teams, administrative management of the swim club(s), management of the aquatic facility, and duties within the governing swimming associations.



Coaches also possess varying degrees of experience in the sport and skill at coaching. In many ways, developing coaching skill comes from experience, though education also has an important role in the development of coaches.

Realize that because there are many differences among Masters coaches, there is no one formula to help a particular coach become the best coach that he or she can be. However, there are many ways that coaches, no matter what their disposition, can help give their swimmers the best possible chance to achieve individual and team swimming goals. Here is a collection of ideas to try:

(continued, next page)

Ways to make the most of your coaching

(continued, from previous page)

SAFETY

A coach's highest priority should be to help ensure that swimmers can participate in a safe environment. Safety at the pool encompasses many things, but a coach has the most influence on conducting the Masters workout in a manner that reduces the risk of injury to participants from their fellow Masters or from other pool patrons. Coaches should also be watchful for hazards from pool equipment, both in the water and on the pool deck, and point out those dangers to pool management. A coach should also always be able to summon emergency medical assistance. It is not a bad idea to know basic first aid and CPR as well. USMS has a Safety Education Committee where coaches may learn further specifics about safely conducting Masters workouts.

BUILD KNOWLEDGE

Writing workouts, or even a long range training plan, for your Masters group is difficult. What techniques should be taught, and what drills or lessons will best reinforce those techniques? How long should the workout sets be? There are many sources of swimming information for coaches, including the USMS Coaches Committee, coaching associations, books, magazines, clinics, and the World Wide Web. A good source of free information is the Masters Swimming Canada website, which contains *Hints for Coaching Masters (Third edition)*.

KNOW YOUR CUSTOMERS

Coaches are faced with an incredible challenge of meeting the variety of needs of swimmers who are diverse in age and conditioning. To meet all of those needs, a coach has to know what those needs are. Sometimes, swimmers will approach the coach with a list of goals and desires. However, it is often left up to the coach to ascertain what their swimmers hope to get out of participating in Masters. A good idea for a coach is to be available for at least a few minutes after workout for the sole purpose of talking with, and getting to know, the swimmers and their desires.

DO NOT OVERDO

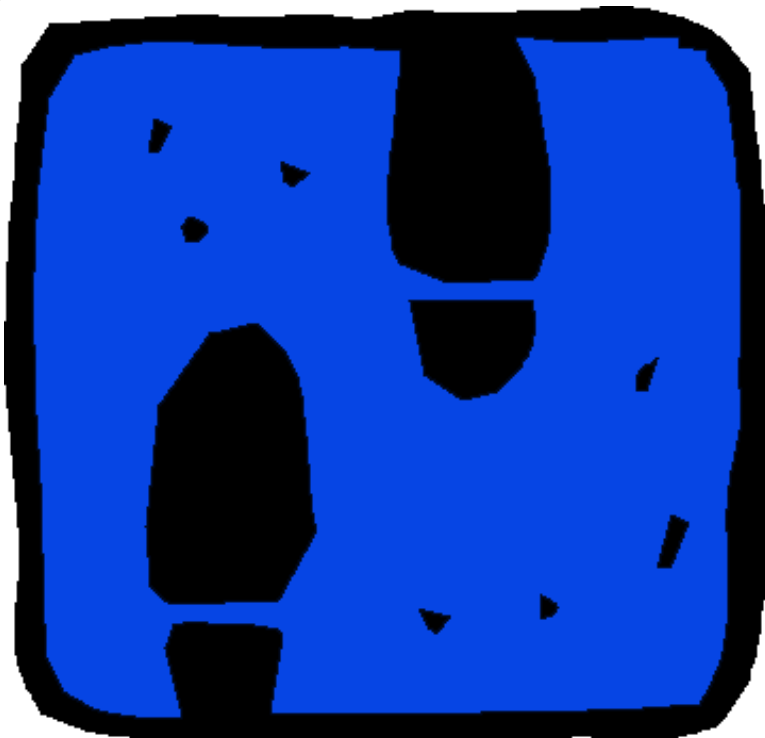
When you "know your customers", you also discover their limits. Masters swimmers definitely have limits. Talented high school and college age swimmers can swim seemingly endless workouts, sometimes twice a day, with incredible intensity. Very, very few Masters can do the same. In keeping with maintaining a safe workout environment, coaches should also put a high priority on injury prevention.

ORGANIZE THE TEAM

Swimmers often look to the coach for team organization. Since the coach organizes workout times and workout sets, he (or

she) "naturally" becomes the person that the swimmers turn to for scheduling the team social, arranging for the group travel to distant competitions, and so forth. Not all coaches have the extra time to do this. However, most Masters value any extra help that the coach can give.

Coaches do not necessarily have to do everything when trying to organize the team. There are certainly many ways in which your swimmers can assume some of the responsibility of team organization.



BE AN ENCOURAGER AND AN ENTERTAINER

Not everybody has the gift of charisma, and it is not imperative that coaches be highly charismatic and entertaining when they coach. However, if you do have that kind of outgoing, extroverted, and entertaining personality, use it! When the going gets tough in the water, and your Masters are struggling through a challenging workout, your encouragement and a good laugh can be the difference in whether your swimmers get over the hump.

DEVELOP YOUR WRITING SKILLS

Writing skills?!? Believe it or not, you can become a more successful coach when you can put your ideas down on paper. A good place to start is to produce or contribute to a team

(continued, next page)

MAKING THE BEST

(continued, from previous page)

newsletter. Newsletters are a great way to communicate to all of your swimmers. You can write about anything...workouts, upcoming events, technique tips, recognizing your swimmers, and so on. Reading the works of other coaches will help give you good ideas for your own articles, and a starting point on how your ideas should be expressed.

Writing is also a big key in being widely recognized as a good coach. Also, the value of writing in promoting your team can not be understated. When your name appears on a team promotional flyer, a newsletter article, an article in a sports magazine, a technical journal, or even a book, it helps to identify you as a knowledgeable coach and your team as an excellent one to join. It also spreads good news about your program to more people than good old "word-of-mouth".

TRY SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT (OCCASIONALLY)

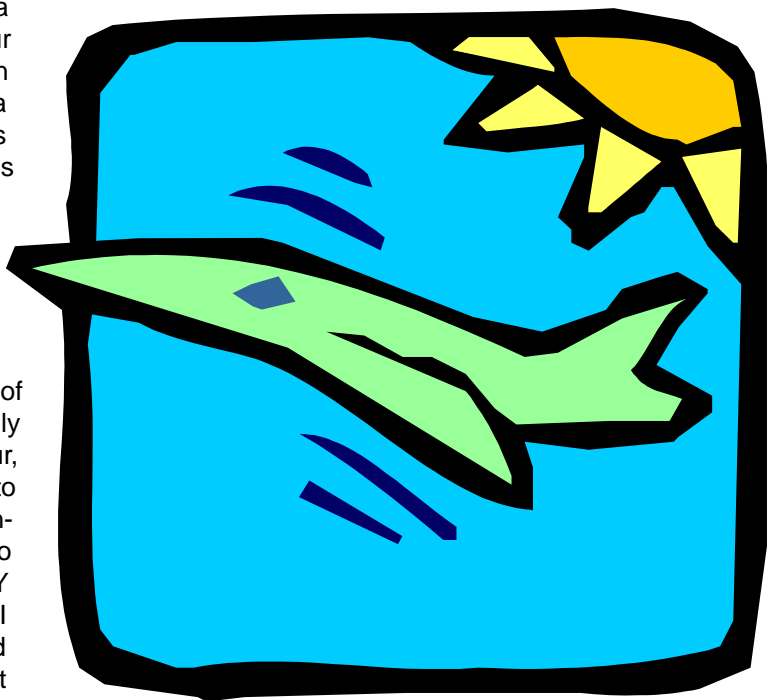
If "variety is the spice of life," then it is certainly the "spice of Masters workouts!" Granted, some swimmers are simply content with going up and down the pool 100 times an hour, day after day. However, others welcome variety from time to time. This variety is not just adding or subtracting a few hundred yards between workouts, or throwing in a new drill to perform. I am talking about doing something COMPLETELY different. A good example was the first Masters workout I ever attended. Instead of jumping right into the water and pounding out 2000-3000 yards as you would expect, we spent at least half of the hour on the pool deck, huddled around the dry erase board, listening to the coach give a presentation on the new "wave" breaststroke. (This was in 1990 when Mike Barrowman was beginning to have great success using it.) That presentation, compared to a "normal" workout, was a much more compelling reason for me to come back to Masters for a second time. Besides such presentations, coaches can set aside time for fun relays and games, practice starts from the starting blocks, watching videotapes of the Olympics, and other activities limited only by imagination.

TRAVEL TO MEETS

Coaches should consider traveling to Masters meets and competitions, especially those where their swimmers are participating. For your swimmers who compete in meets, the meet itself is an extension of the training program that you, as a coach, are helping to provide. As their coach, you are likely the best person to advise your swimmers on how to perform their best in the meet, based on your observations of them in your workouts.

You should also go to see a Masters meet if you have never

been to one before in your area, or if you do not have any swimmers on your team that compete regularly. Masters meets are rather unique. When you attend one, you will discover that they are not like age-group meets, college meets, or anything that you see on television. You can then better encourage swimmers to try a meet or two, if you believe that it will help reach their goals. Plus, you discover that, when you do get the chance to coach at a meet, you can not coach your Masters at a meet like you would coach your age-groupers and college swimmers.



The best way to encourage your swimmers to participate in a Masters meet is to host one. Witnessing a Masters meet will give you valuable information about how meets are run. Swimmers who have never participated in a meet are much less willing (perhaps afraid) to go to an unfamiliar pool for their first ever meet. Even if you do not have the facility or help needed to run a big meet, you can still have a small team scrimmage, a time trial, or a postal swim. Some Masters who do not have the capacity to travel to meets appreciate the opportunity to still compete at their home pool.

The subject of Masters meets and competitions was extensively discussed at the 1998 USMS Convention, with a special focus on ways of inspiring more members, regardless of ability, to participate. It was mentioned over and over that the coach had a huge influence as to whether a swimmer is competitive. Offering competitive opportunities in practice can encourage your swimmers to try other competitions. Going to those competitions with your swimmers is very supportive and tells them "We are in this together!"

MAKING THE BEST

DEVELOP "COACH OF THE YEAR" QUALITIES

Masters coaches are able to set professional goals by learning about recognition programs such as the USMS Coach of the Year. Here is a list of criteria upon which USMS Coach of the Year nominees are judged. Again, there is no one formula for coaching success that applies to everyone, but you will be very successful in coaching if you are doing well in the following areas:

- ACCOMPLISHMENTS - Club size and growth; Results of your swimmers at events such as the USMS Nationals, zone meets, and open water swims; Records and USMS Top Ten placings by your swimmers
- PUBLICATIONS - Articles and material published
- CONTRIBUTIONS TO USMS - Swim meets hosted; Clinics and presentations hosted; Positions held within the Local Masters Swimming Committee
- LONG TERM CONTRIBUTIONS - Years as a coach; Special accomplishments

The USMS Coaches Committee selects the USMS Coach of the Year, as always, from a deserving list of candidates. Do you think that you are a potential Coach of the Year? You can access the USMS website for a nomination form, or ask the Coaches Committee about it.

(LAST, BUT CERTAINLY NOT LEAST) LEADERSHIP

The most successful coaches are leaders. If you are like most coaches, you probably did not grow up as a child and leave for college intending someday to be a coach. New coaches draw from their education (regardless of the type of degree) and experiences (including past swimming experiences) the concepts that apply to coaching. Leadership is the most important of these concepts. Leadership may come more naturally to some people than others, however leadership is a concept that is learned, not endowed or preordained.

Face it, the challenge in Masters coaching is exercising good leadership...convincing a group of fellow adults to spend an hour or so in strenuous physical exercise, and then convincing them to come back and do it again. All of the tips mentioned in this article are tools that a coach can use to exercise positive leadership.

FINAL THOUGHTS ABOUT COACHING MASTERS

(Courtesy of the BC Masters Swimmers)

- Masters coaching is one of the most challenging but rewarding coaching jobs going
- Masters recognize no age limits

- Masters are eager to learn anything to do with their health and fitness
- Masters appreciate knowing why they are being asked to do something
- Masters respond to challenges
- Masters can make incredible performance gains through improved techniques
- Masters Swimming is all about Fun, Fitness, Friendship and Participation

SOME SUGGESTED RESOURCES

USMS WEBSITE (<http://www.usms.org>)

USMS COMMITTEES

The USMS Coaches, Fitness, and Safety Education Committees are available to serve USMS members, clubs, and LMSCs in promoting the goals of the Masters Swimming program. Committees are listed in the USMS Rule Book, and information is available on the USMS web site.

USMS NATIONAL OFFICE

For information about USMS, its programs, services, and products, contact USMS Executive Secretary Traci Grilli at USMS National Office, P.O. Box 185, Londonderry NH 03053-0185, telephone (603) 537-0203, fax (603) 537-0204, and e-mail usms@usms.org.

SWIM MAGAZINE AND SWIMMING TECHNIQUE

For more information, contact their editorial offices at Sports Publications Inc., P.O. Box 20337, Sedona AZ 86341, telephone (520) 284-4005, or e-mail SwimWorld@aol.com.

FITNESS SWIMMER MAGAZINE

For more information, call (212) 573-0376 or write to Rodale Press Inc., 733 Third Ave., 15th Floor, New York NY 10017, or e-mail marybswim@aol.com.

AMERICAN SWIMMING COACHES ASSOCIATION

For information, contact ASCA through their website (lornet.com/asca), telephone (800) 356-2722, or write to ASCA, 2101 N. Andrews Ave., Suite 107, Fort Lauderdale FL 33311.

HINTS FOR COACHING MASTERS

Canadian Masters Swimming coaches have teamed-up to write "Hints for Coaching Masters" (3rd edition). It can be found on the Masters Swimming Canada web page (www.compumart.ab.ca/masterssc).