

The Coach's Corner

NURTURING INSANITY

COACHING THE ECLECTIC MASTERS SWIM TEAM

J. David Williamson III, Head Coach of Masters and Age Group Swimming James J. Harris Branch of the YMCA of Greater Charlotte

In most cases, masters swim coaches originally learn their trade by coaching in age group programs. The set up of most age group programs is fairly cut and dried, swimmers and practices are typically divided by age and ability. As swimmers grow in a program, a practice group might be subdivided as well based on a swimmer's strengths and event choices. A typical practice group may include a group of swimmers training for distance events; a group training for sprint freestyle; and a group that is specifically working on a single stroke. A typical masters group, on the other hand, tends to be far more eclectic in its general make up, thus providing one of the greatest challenges in coaching.



When I first began coaching the masters group at the Harris YMCA in 2006, the fifteen to twenty swimmers who showed up for each practice were anything but a homogeneous group. Within this group, the youngest swimmer was 24 while the oldest swimmer was 74 (with occasional visits from a very gung ho 77-year-old who wanted to constantly work on his “tumble turn” for freestyle). The swimming levels of this group were wide ranging, from former collegiate All-Americans to people who had only learned to swim as adults and were still a little skittish in deep water. The swimming abilities of this group were considerably diverse as well, from triathletes who only wanted to swim freestyle with a pull buoy (and were adamantly against kicking and learning a second stroke) to a gentleman who would shame a few swimmers by swimming a very fast breaststroke during freestyle sprints. Bring all of this together with the fact that our group only had three practices each week and only four lanes for each practice, I was easily confronted with what could easily be called a coaching challenge.

It is unfortunate that the very nature of busy adult lives and the availability of pool space does not allow for most teams to schedule masters workouts in a similar manner to age group teams. The challenge of having a sizable, eclectic group of swimmers is that it is the genesis for creative coaching. Eclecticism should not be looked at as a problem, but an opportunity to build camaraderie and to develop a more well-rounded team. The following is a list of suggestions for some of the coaching practices that I try to incorporate in building the better masters program.

1. Provide workouts that are tailored to the varying abilities of your group. Typically, my workouts are written for three different groups. For the most part, the workout is the same for everybody, but intervals and distances are established by ability. For example, on distance day, I might give my advanced group a set of 4 X 400 on a six minute interval. For my beginner group, I might give them a set of 3 X 300 with twenty seconds rest between each 300.
2. Embrace the eclecticism of your team and encourage your swimmers to try new strokes and to set challenging, new and exciting goals. For my triathletes (although I find them to be a stubborn lot), I encourage them to learn new strokes and to even swim in the occasional swim meet (even if they choose to only swim distance freestyle events). For the old school competitive swimmer, I might suggest competing in an open water race or to train for and participate in a biathlon or triathlon.
3. Have your swimmers establish realistic goals and help them to tailor their training towards that goal. Without a concrete goal in mind, training can typically become stagnant. Have your swimmers set a date or a time period for their goal (for example, have them plan to swim in a specific open water swim or to choose specific events to race in a specific swim meet). The difference between a dream and a goal is that a goal should typically have a date or a deadline set for it.
4. With demanding careers and families, consistently attending practices 52 weeks each year is certainly challenging for the masters swimmer. By running three practices each week, I try to establish a different type of training for each practice (I gave up the goal of trying to satisfy 100% of the people 100% of the time many years ago, otherwise I would be writing fifteen different workouts for each practice). My Tuesday practice is typically distance day, with the major set of the workout incorporating middle distance

and distance sets (mostly to work on pacing and to attempt to swim for a longer period of time at an upper cardio rate). Thursday practices are typically sprint days, focusing on shorter sets that require “bursts of effort”. Saturday morning practices are more of a hodge-podge, incorporating less freestyle and more choices of stroke, as well as technical work through drill sets.

5. Do not be afraid to offer technical stroke advice to your swimmers and do not be afraid to reinforce technique with your swimmers (in short, do not be afraid to nag). The older we get, the easier it is to develop and maintain bad habits with our strokes. As muscles and joints tighten during a long freestyle set, it is very easy to find a different hand position or to alter underwater recovery to relax the stroke. It is vital that bad stroke habits not be allowed to thrive.
6. Along those same lines, adult bodies are changing just as age group bodies are changing. Sometimes, as bodies go through physical changes, it is important to tailor our strokes to these changes. Among the best example, I have had a few swimmers who have had shoulder surgery. Upon their recovery and return, it was important to monitor their strokes to insure that they were not aggravating the repaired area.
7. Encourage change and the acceptance of new skills. Many of the triathletes who originally started with me were resistant at first to work on anything other than freestyle (and some still are). Over time, a number of my triathletes have learned and incorporated new strokes in their training and even attended a master’s swim meet. For those coaches who have worked with triathletes, you must easily realize that this is definitely a triumph!
8. Finally, for those swimmers in their 30s, 40s and 50s, there have been many changes to stroke technique over the past twenty years (when I resumed coaching in 2004 after a thirteen year break, I was shocked to find out how much lower the head position was for freestyle). The master’s swimmer who is returning to the pool should be taught new techniques and patience is required to master these techniques. I recall a clinic we held with Rowdy Gaines at our pool in the fall of 2006. During the course of one evening, he basically tore apart and rebuilt all of our freestyles (we were all carrying our heads too high and not rotating nearly enough). When I came into practice the next morning, one entire lane was basically choking their way through a freestyle set. It was not easy, but everybody worked with it and eventually mastered the new techniques (although it took a number of weeks and a large amount of discomfort). For many, the new techniques led to improved times and much lower stroke counts.

Coaching a masters swim team can certainly be intimidating at the start (after all, adults who are willing to dive into a cold pool at 6:00 in the morning could not be completely sane and as coaches, we are technically “nurturing their insanity”). Over time, I have come to realize that the participants in my program, despite all of their differences, do share one major thing in common-the desire to constantly improve themselves both in the pool and out. A swimmer would not join a master’s program without a desire to be coached and pushed. As coaches, it is our job to see to it that our swimmers continue to move forward and to consistently set and achieve new goals.