

HOW I COACH

By Conrad Johnson

(Check out the December issue of Swimming World Magazine for photos and sample workouts used by Coach Conrad Johnson at the YWCA of the City of New York.)

From 1995-2005, Conrad Johnson coached the YWCA of the City of New York Masters Swimming program until the parent institution sold its midtown Manhattan building in an effort to solve self-inflicted organizational problems of long standing. In the 2003 and 2004 seasons, the program produced two USMS national relay records, six individual USMS national champions, 10 relays ranked No. 1 on the USMS Top Ten list and over 40 national USMS Top Ten performances. The program also, over ten years, trained and developed ten extremely able female coaches, half of whom went to run programs of their own.

Most of the swimmers and coaches moved on to find a happy swimming home with Team New York Aquatics, a team with which the YWCA Masters had a long relationship, built on joint events.

The YWCA Masters Swimming program had two goals: 1) to create a sense of community and support in a busy and sometimes difficult city to live in; and 2) to do this in an atmosphere pervaded by an ethic of continual athletic self-improvement and exploration.

New Yorkers make the best possible use of small spaces. We had a six-lane, 25-yard pool that was really a five-lane pool in terms of width. A member of the coaching staff learned very quickly that workout choreography was critical to our success. We had 150 swimmers with two workouts a day, seven days a week. A swimmer in our program soon knew that less than six in a lane was the rare "slow morning/slow night."

We also offered two weekly stroke clinics and three weekly, coached, dryland workouts of either pilates, yoga or medicine balls before the water sessions. We felt "dryland" was an apt metaphor for the current state of swim-related training out of the pool. Workouts were an hour-and-a-half, two hours on weekend afternoons, and we did, depending on the lane speed or the time of year, between 3,500 and 5,500 yards.

Stereotypical New Yorkers are all hard-driving, type-A personalities. Nevertheless, we had every conceivable profession represented in the pool, many of them in high-achieving, high-pressure New York industries. I often remarked that we could colonize a planet with our program, having every profession from doctors to architects, teachers, designers, lawyers, you name it. On reflection, though, with a team nearly 70 percent female and no farmers, we would be a matriarchal society and very hungry.

New Yorkers have an internal calendar all their own that did not correspond easily to the USMS meet schedule. I always regretted we never

went as a group to a USMS national championship. "May and August are just the worst months for me," was a common sentiment in those very New York professions. We focused on the local short course meters championship in November, where our relay records were set; the One Hour Swim in January; a spring meet; and the June/July open water season.

Having a waiting list to join our club--at some of the highest monthly fees in the country--made the job of keeping people focused on our way of doing things much easier. Sometimes the attitude in Masters swimming that member "satisfaction" is paramount can go too far, allowing people to sell themselves short. The job of the coaching staff in an elite program is to re-define member "satisfaction."

In our program, there was an enormous amount of personal concern and attention to a swimmer as a person, but little leeway in workouts. You did things our way or you left. People saw that when a vacancy did open up, it was filled the same day.

I heard early on in my coaching career that you never bring the workout to the swimmer; the primary job of a coach is to bring the swimmer to the workout. So in practice, as best as we could do, you do the set as written...exactly. No changing intervals, no swimming with fins, and unless you had a compelling medical issue, all four strokes all the time.

We started workouts on time. Four o'clock or seven-thirty meant just that. Warm-ups (and warm-downs) were always on an interval, albeit an easier one. I have seen too many Masters warm-ups of 400-300-200 of something just not get done, or leave one unprepared to swim main sets. The expression is warm "up" as in heart rate/blood flow.

People are going to be late to workout if they have jobs, families or ride the NYC transit system. But if one knows that the workout is fully "in progress" from the appointed time, and it's a little embarrassing to have the coach stop to fit you in to already crowded and organized lanes, people who have "lifestyle lateness" quickly make the adjustment. One couldn't slip in unnoticed--the coaches always asked "if everything was all right," since primarily, we wanted to know if something was wrong, but secondarily, and importantly, the message was always that we noticed you were late and we cared about that.

When I took over the program, we had some older (45-plus up to 70-year-old) ladies (and some gents) in Lane 1, the "slow lane." The "LOLs," or "little old ladies," were doing swims with rests rather than intervals. I promptly banned the LOL expression, along with "slow lane," preferring the phrase "less fast," and insisted on intervals in all their swimming.

People not associated with the program would sometimes be taken aback at how curtly I would talk to them in workouts. I spent hundreds and hundreds of hours with them drilling, cajoling and even demanding they do better. Always take the "bottom half" of the program seriously. They are to

think of themselves as "serious athletes," and behave accordingly. No whining, no sympathy for "goggle problems"--it was keep up or get out.

They were as good as the young, faster, just-out-of-college girl on the other side of the pool. In the ten years, these wonderful women rose always to the challenge, were my best supporters and provided many spectacular competitive performances. They now have a "LOL" dinner once a month. That's "lane one ladies," elite athletes all.

I did not do all of the actual coaching. I felt that I represented a new paradigm of swim coaches, being more the manager of a complex business/social organization, supervising a staff that was in a constant process of training and development, than a person who stands on deck for 14 workouts a week.

I budgeted for and invested a lot of resources to make better coaches. I paid for ASCA clinics, Total Immersion weekends, all registration/memberships, insisting that they all be USA Swimming- and ASCA-certified. I have a dim view of the fact that USMS has no certification program for coaches, being one of the many reasons I feel we in Masters swimming are viewed as the untermensch of the swimming community. All the coaches had to be swimmers, and role models, with their finger on the pulse of life in the lanes.

I laid out a set of broad training guidelines, and the coaches were free to use their own judgement in applying them, a flexibility necessitated by running a 30-40-person workout in six lanes or a 15-20-person workout in three lanes alone. Once in awhile, a set like 10 x 200 on a tight interval is important for psychological reasons, but doing mind-numbing multiples all the time, just reflects a lack of imagination.

The best workouts look easy on the board, but have you stagger, happily satisfied, out of the pool 90 minutes later. We did very few drills in practices. Drills are for improvement and for adjustment by a trained observer. Unless constantly corrected, with immediate feedback, they just have a swimmer practicing an incorrect movement, making it harder to "unlearn" later. (We had four drills that could be watched to some extent by the coach: one-arm fly, double-arm back, breast with a dolphin kick, and fingertip freestyle.) Drills are done in clinics, and we did our best to have follow-up into the workouts. The clinic/workout transitional link is a difficult one that we constantly discussed.

I seldom if ever used kickboards, agreeing completely with those who say that kicking should be trained as part of the dynamic movement of the stroke, contributing and complementing the balance, rotation, undulation or timing of the combined body motions. Kicking without a board teaches you to kick from your hips....not to mention holding the swimmer gossip sessions until the shower.

One reason we could have the discipline we had in the pool was the message we sent outside the pool that you, as a swimmer, were special--as an athlete and as part of our team community.

Having been a caterer in a past life, and having NYC standards, we always made every social event, post-workout event or celebration attentive to small, but significant touches. We did our own events with tablecloths, flowers and top quality beer/wine/booze. Awards were based on improvement and commitment, not necessarily success. Coffee service outside the pool or at meetings rivaled any hotel. We took comfortable bus coaches to meets, stocked with food and sports drinks. (When you have 150 swimmers who together own less than 12 cars, transportation, even to the suburbs is a real issue.)

We set up a play area at events and stocked it with toys at parties so parents would feel they could attend. This was especially important two years after we had the "Baby Boom of 2002" with 10 children born to the team like clockwork, one a month for ten months.

If you were sick or hurt, I called you and insisted that we work with your doctor to get you well and back in the water the properly. I was known to pull people from practice, telling them that it was useless for them to be here, to go home and get a good night's sleep.

I always encouraged people to look out for each other and did not hesitate to take someone aside who I, or the coaches, felt was needlessly gossiping or acting out.

In the end, I felt the team needed to be a safe and supportive place in a city where excitement and creativity is matched by stress and loneliness. If we made the relationship to the team strong in profoundly human ways, the motivation for competitive high standards and excellence would, and did, take care of itself.