



Q&A

KAMI GARDNER

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BY MICHAEL J. STOTT

Q. SWIMMING WORLD: *What have been some defining moments for you as a swimmer (27-time NCAA D-III All-American, 17 NCAA titles)?*

A. COACH KAMI GARDNER: As a swimmer, one came when a relay I was on was disqualified in prelims. It was a tough blow, as one of our captains was out of the meet due to a health issue, and it was predicted to be a close meet. We could not afford to lose those points.

At finals that evening, "Coachman" (Coach Jim Steen's nickname) brought us together and 'announced' that Kenyon was in lane 4-1/2. He then gave us a play-by-play of our relay. I was the leadoff and had been having issues with my turns, but in his play-by-play, I nailed it...and everyone cheered.

He took a negative and made it as positive as it could be, putting the meet back into our hands and giving us the opportunity to swim for us and not to "make up" those points.

It was meet-changing for our team and life-changing for me. It was a simple lesson, but I really got it that day.... I was in control of my future, and it was my decision on how I would respond to the good and the bad. It was also the first time I thought that I just might want to look into this coaching thing.

SW: ...and as a coach?

As a coach, one defining moment came when Oswego State's women's team won our first conference title. The reaction of the team when the last relay touched was amazing. After getting thrown in and celebrating, I sat on the bench with a senior who was holding the trophy. We just sat there, not talking, taking it all in.

Finally, she looked at the trophy a little disappointed and said, “So this is it? Really? I thought I would feel differently when we finally won, but I feel the same as I did last year when we got second. You were right—it really isn’t about winning and trophies. It’s about being your best.”

At that point, she left the trophy and jumped in with the team again. I thought, “YES! The message was received.”

You can’t control what other people do or how fast they are going to swim. All you can do is work on being the best person/team you can be—and if you achieve that goal, you win.

SW: You are known for creating a great team atmosphere. What are some of your team traditions?

KG: One of my favorites is our Halloween practice. At this point in the season, the excitement of being back at school has waned, and the academic work has geared up. The swimmers need a mental break, so we take an entire practice around Halloween and play. It is a trick-or-treat practice with swimmers picking something out of a pumpkin. Swimmers may pick a trick—say a timed 400IM. Or they pick a treat—something like candy eating relays, which is a favorite.

However, I am famous for making “deals” to get out of the tricks. I am not even sure why I put them in there anymore. What I really like is the fact that coaches who have either swum for me or have been my assistants have adopted this tradition or portions of it. I love seeing the pictures posted on their team Facebook pages.

SW: As a coach, how does one balance team building and recruiting?

KG: They go hand in hand. Any time you are hosting recruits, the team is working together. There is no better way to build a team than to have clear communication swimmer-to-swimmer and swimmer-to-coach.

SW: How does the new pool add to the W&L swimming experience?

KG: It has been awesome! This year was the first time the entire team was able to train at the same time. In the past, we have had to run multiple practices throughout the day in order to have quality training. Now that we have 16 training lanes, we can run everyone together, even if they are doing different practices based on their training groups. It has allowed for better training, as practices can get very competitive. The energy both in the pool and on deck has been amazing and a lot of fun!

SW: How much does the new pool matter to recruits?

KG: There is definitely a “wow” factor when you walk on deck now, and it gets recruits excited to learn more about the program. However, I think recruits are much more savvy now. They come to figure out if W&L is where they will get the most out of their academic and swimming experience. We get their attention with the pool, but a pool does not make the experience. The team dynamic is much more important.

SW: *How often do you use your video analysis equipment?*

KG: The swimmers have an opportunity to sign up for videotaping every Wednesday throughout the season. It is up to them to take advantage of that opportunity. They are encouraged to do it more than once so we can see improvements and make other adjustments if necessary.

SW: *What did your experience with Anne DeRue and her brain tumor teach you about handling the unexpected and power of resiliency?*

KG: Anne and her family hold a very special place in my heart. We went through a couple of very scary and sad moments together. What it taught me as a coach is that establishing a relationship with each of your swimmers is the most important thing you can do. If you are able to do that, you will be able to help a swimmer through most things that come up.

Anne is an amazing individual who always had a smile on her face no matter what came her way. A positive attitude like that will take you a long way.

SW: *How has D-III swimming changed since you swam for Kenyon?*

KG: It is significantly more competitive and much faster! In addition, the team race is much closer and more exciting, with the talent level spread out among more teams.

SW: *How does setting a goal of making Olympic Trials help a team like W&L?*

KG: We focus our goals on the college season. If we have an athlete who has the potential of making a Trials cut—like Tommy Thetford—we discuss it individually with them.

SW: *In 2012, it took you and your staff seven hours to administer a school-mandated test for 479 students. Where are you on the subject of a swim test today?*

KG: The swim test is part of the academic requirements at W&L. Luckily, we have a bigger pool, so the time it takes to administer the test has been cut in half!

I think it is a good thing. Those who are not able to pass the test are required to take the beginning swim class. Some of these students have never been in a pool before. I think it provides them an opportunity to become more comfortable in the water and learn some skills that could prove lifesaving in the future. [bug]

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