

When Sally Swims Great...

How Mom and Dad Might Talk To Their Child at a Swim Meet

In a previous article we explored the parental conversation when Sally had experienced what she thought was a "bad" swim. She was unhappy with the result of that experiment, and we listened in as her Coach, Rita Bobeeta, and her parents, appropriately brought her back to a better perspective by putting her into an evaluative mind-set that analyzed why her race (her experiment!) did not end as she wanted it to. This response defused a situation that parents sometimes feel is one of the more difficult ones that they have to cope with in swimming.

I also said that there was another situation that was potentially much more damaging, that parents (and coaches) frequently do not recognize.

That situation is an "embarrassment of riches", or what happens when sudden, overwhelming success is the result. Lets go back and see the situation with Sally.

In this version of her 100 freestyle swim, Sally comes home with a very strong and fast last 25, and goes a new personal best time. In fact, it is a wonderful swim, a 58.9, dropping her previous best time by 2.7 seconds!

Now what happens?

Sally hops out of the water without further ado, and immediately looks for her Coach, Rita Bobeeta. Rita is easy to find, as she too is ecstatic, jumping around on the pool deck, cheering and happy.

"Sally, that was Fantastic! I can't believe you dropped almost three seconds! I've never had another swimmer do that! Wonderful! You can be so happy, and so proud of yourself!"

Sally beams with pleasure, and missing the rest of Rita's comments, begins to look for Mom and Dad. Finding them in the stands, jumping around and waving to her, they are clearly very excited for her! She runs up to see them.

"Sally that was Amazing! Mrs. Jones said she never saw anyone drop that much in the 100 before! I can't believe it! You are incredible!"

Well, you say, that sounds fine. Mom is excited, and happy for Sally, and Sally must feel good to hear all this good stuff from her coach and Sally.

Not so.

The key is in watching what happens to Sally next. She finally walks away from Mom and Dad, thinking the following:

"Wow, that was some hot swim! Rita and Mom and even Dad said it was awesome, unbelievable, fantastic, amazing! That was special. I don't even remember much of it. But it was amazing. I'm amazed. I can't believe I did it, myself. Wow, I wonder what I'll do next time! Gee, I hope I can do at least that well again, because that was a pretty unbelievable swim. Rita said it was fantastic. Like a dream. Unreal. It seems kind of unreal. How did I do that?"

Well folks, the next time Sally swims the 100 free, you can bet dollars against donuts that she'll revert to a time in her 1:00-1:01 range, if not worse. Why? Because the three people who she most respects in swimming have told her that the 58.9 was "unbelievable", "fantastic", "amazing", and "incredible".

They must be right.

So Sally doesn't believe it. It was a fantasy. She is amazed how she, an ordinary person could actually have done such a thing. She finds it unworthy of credibility also. And so she goes back to what she CAN see as credible, a 1:00-1:01 time.

Often swimmers become trapped on a plateau after one really excellent (and precocious) swim for months or even years. We have to be careful of the language we use, because frequently those who put their faith in us, believe everything we say.

What should Coach Rita and Mom and Dad have done in this situation? If you said "stick with the analysis approach", you are correct.

Remember, a swim in a meet is an experiment. If it turns out the way you want it to, you are entitled to a short emotionally satisfying "celebration". Then swimmer, parent, and coach need to analyze WHY it went well.

"What did you do right? How did it feel to do it right? Remember."

Coach Rita and Mom and Dad need to:

- offer congratulations,
- ask questions that bring out the technical analysis by the athlete,
- assure the athlete that they are just touching the surface of what they are capable of.

Coach Rita might say,

"Sally, Nice Swim! That looked like the Sally Smith I know! Very strong last twenty five. Why was that?"

"I remembered to push through to my suitline, and keep my strokes long and strong!"

"Superb. That was technically excellent. Now next time, we'll work on getting the first twenty five out a little bit faster, and you can improve some more. Nice swim. Now get ready for your next swim. 50 back I think. What do you need to remember there?"

And when Sally sees Mom and Dad,

"Sally, I'll bet you are really happy with that! You looked really good. What did Rita say? And where is your towel?"

The "what did Rita say?" is a subtle reversion to the technical side that is excellent.

This way, Sally gets to be happy, is aware of what made her perform better, and goes away confident that more improvement is to come.

Conversations between athletes and parents, and athletes and coaches can be wonderfully effective at swim meets. Work hard on hearing things clearly, and responding with appropriate comments, and you'll really contribute to your child's happiness in swimming. Good luck.