

# What Makes a Great Coach?

by Dick Hannula with Howard Firby  
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I was asked this question by a former coach of world record swimmers. He asked me and some of his swimmers. My response was not the answer he wanted. His answer was great swimmers make great coaches. The recognition that goes with coaching great swimmers, world record holders, identifies that coach as something special. I do believe that coaches of great swimmers may be great coaches, but the reasons for their success are not only the end results.

A number of traits are identifiable in great coaches. The most important trait is enthusiasm. Great coaches have enthusiasm. Great coaches know where they are going, they have goals, and they know what needs to be done. Most importantly, they do it with enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is catching. It affects attitude, work ethics, and personal pride in the swimmers. In the early 70's, one of my summer collegiate swimmers was a bronze medalist in the Mexico Olympics. He swam summers on my club and swam collegiate for the University of Indiana and "Doc." I will always remember what he told me during his last summer of training. "Coach, don't ever lose your enthusiasm!" He said that it was my enthusiasm for the sport and coaching that had the greatest effect on him. A lot of years have gone by, and that advice may have been the best that I ever received as a coach, and the hardest to maintain.

The more stroke, physiology, and training schools and clinics that I attend, the more emphasis in coaching takes a different direction. Consistent enthusiasm is your greatest asset. Teach with enthusiasm, train with enthusiasm, compete with enthusiasm. Enthusiasm results in fun, one big game is taking place. You don't *have* to do something. You *want* to do it. Coaches—and swimmers—contribute to a positive, enthusiastic environment.

Great coaches touch every athlete every day. Every athlete must feel that you care about him or her. Dave Robertson told me of swimming for the legendary Matt Mann. Matt would call out his name when he entered the pool, "Robbie, how are you today?" This was what he remembered. This is what gave him a lift for the coming practice session. Matt cared. Mike Troy told of swimming for Doc Counsilman and believing Doc was always watching him while training. I use to position myself at each lane, each end of the pool, both sides of the pool, on a high ladder looking down on the swimmers, and sometimes in the pool underwater watching swimmers. I always believed that every swimmers felt he or she was being evaluated every moment. Say something to every swimmer every day.

Change is important. Creativity comes through change. I become bored doing the same thing day after day. Coaches have told me that making up a daily training plan gets to be a chore. It is hard to make things challenging and different. This is always hard for me to accept. Visit other coaches and observe them directing their teams, talk to coaches and swimmers—share ideas; read articles; go to clinics; “dream” some new, wild ideas; utilize a variety of equipment; use cross training; and you will never run out of new and exciting ideas. Forty-one years of coaching behind me, and I will never cover all the possible training routines. The most fun is to look back into a log book of 20 or 30 years ago and rediscover a forgotten method of training technique. If you wait long enough, the really old becomes new again. This is one of the advantages of hanging in there for “one more year” many times over.

Great coaches are consistent. Athletes want consistency. They want to be able to depend on a coach’s character, enthusiasm, and commitment. Great coaches seem to be in control. Regardless of what is going on inside, great coaches appear confident, with a strong arm on the wheel of their ship. The most successful coaches have this consistency.

Great coaches are willing to try and, if necessary, to fail. They learn from the experience. We know that the fear of failure is real in athletics and in life. “Can’t” is a four-letter word and must be eliminated from our thinking. One local high school coach dishes out a 200-yard butterfly immediately to anyone using “can’t” in his practice session. It works on that team. We used to have words for what some people called failure. We called it temporary non-success. No great athlete was perfect all the time. All of us fail sometime. It is only failure if we accept it as failure. It is temporary non-success. We learn from it, and it builds for a great success at some later date.

Back to basics!! Great coaches do this. They can keep their program simple and easy to understand. In recent years, we seem to want to make swimming more complicated. It is simple, the best swimmers do it naturally. The best coaches do what comes naturally. Everything flows when we keep coming back to basics. Professional [base] ball players slump, and the usual remedy is to get back to the basics. “Keep your eye on the ball,” etc.

One of the greatest coaches that had a major effect on my coaching was the late **Howard Firby** of Canada. He was a national and Olympic coach for Canada many times. He was a great clinician and teacher. The last clinic that I heard him speak was about a year or so before his death. The first clinic that I heard him speak at was 23 years earlier. His last clinic dealt with basics. Stroke coaching basics of which he was a master. The following is a simple formula of getting back to the basics. They work; and many thanks to Howard for making me a better coach.

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## Stroke Coaching

by Howard Firby

Listed below, not necessarily in order of importance, are suggestions, short cuts, and drills for use when stroke coaching.

**1. *Begin with the standard techniques:*** Later you may tailor the stroke to the swimmer's physique, temperament, and coordinative ability.

**2. *General movements first, complex actions later:*** Get the timing and general actions correct before concerning yourself with exact degrees of arm-bend, etc.

**3. *Teach the arm action first:*** Give the swimmer confidence-building "hands-on" experience. The arms **operate mostly within the swimmer's normal field of vision** and are the easiest components to **control**.

**4. *Skill first, speed later:*** Stress **stroke control** until the swimmer "owns" the skill.

**5. *Speak to every swimmer every session:*** An ignored swimmer is an unhappy swimmer; an unhappy swimmer is seldom a good learner.

**6. *Address your swimmers by name:*** "You see, *Cindy*, what you need to work on now is...."

**7. *Use everyday words:*** Avoid "academic" expressions such as "medial rotation," "angular momentum," "pronate," etc.

**8. *Sequence details:*** Sequencing allows a learner to concentrate on movements one at a time, e.g., the catch, the outswEEP, the insweep, **the outswEEP**.

**9. *Be concise:*** Use short sentences. **Don't ramble on into greater and greater detail.**

**10. *Use word-pictures:*** "Arm out in front like a swordfish's sword" (one-arm fly), etc.

**11. *Be specific:*** Not, "Bring your entry in a bit," but, "Put your hand *here* (demo)."

**12. *Start with something they know and go from there:*** "Remember, in freestyle, when

I said to point the **elbow at the side wall** of the pool? **Well, in backstroke, we point the elbow at the bottom.**”

**13. Compliment, then correct:** Begin **with a positive statement**, e.g., "Your kick is good... now get your left arm to...."

**14. Your stroke is bad... you are not bad:** Never, "You've got it all wrong!" Better to say, "Your *Rhythm* is off because...." (Your *Coaching* is bad... *You* are not bad).

**15. Ask for feedback:** "Can you feel the power you get that way?".... **"Okay, Donna, now make every stroke feel that strong."**

**16. Pick demonstrators with care:** **Contrary** to what many suppose, a near-perfect demonstration may be less effective than one by a swimmer only moderately more skilled than those watching.

**17. Have your swimmer teach it back to you:** **Have** him/her teach” back to you what you have just explained. **You can assess the swimmer's** comprehension. Be informal, and be **generous with praise.**

**18. Be tolerant:** "If the learner hasn't learned, the teacher hasn't taught." Recall this maxim when you are **near frustration** because of the apparent stupidity of one or more of your swimmers. Perhaps your explanation wasn't clear. Smile, and go through it again, using different **words.**

**19. Reward improvement:** If the specific improvement you are seeking doesn't appear, mention some other good feature as a "lead in," e.g., "Your right arm is good... but your left arm still needs to...."

**20. Persist:** Motor-learning and skill retention abilities vary. Some **swimmers need more reminding** than others, and all need stroke **adjustment from time to time.**

**21. Don't be "picky":** **Don't be forever interrupting swims to fix minor** faults. Just note the problem for **treatment** at an opportune moment.

**22. Recruit the major muscle groups:** Elegant "stylists” commonly fail to make full use of the powerful latis simus dorsi muscles, for example; also common is the underuse of the **triceps; and so on.**

**23. Avoid distractions:** **With a group** (or an individual) on deck, have **them sit or stand with their backs to** activities in the water and/or **away** from other distractions (parents in the stands, excessive noise, etc.). **When sharing a pool with another** coach, operate from the opposite end.

*24. Coach at their eye level:* Crouch or sit when speaking to a swimmer in the water, crouch or sit when speaking to a group sitting on deck.

**25. Use visual aids:** **For films and video, arrange for the swimmers to** be dry and comfortable. View the films ahead of time in order to be able to make the best use of them. When videotaping, have a non coaching volunteer operate the camera while you stay in charge of **the session**. Show the tape later, *perhaps days later*, when you have had time to form appropriate comments, and it keeps taping **sessions** from degenerating into disorder **with swimmers standing** around, dripping. *Viewing sessions should involve only you and your swimmers (No Parents) so you can comment freely on each individual's swimming.*

*26. Use "buddy" coaching:* For 15 to 20 minutes the swimmers pair off and take turns swimming and observing and being "assistant stroke coaches."

**27. Physically mold the swimmer:** "Touching," with discretion, has psychological value.

*28. Have the traffic pattern suit the stroke:* **Breaststroke** and butterfly require more room. Consider using a two-lane circle. Start swimmers 10 or 15 seconds apart.

**29. When to make major changes?:** Relatively early in the season for national-class swimmers. With regional-class swimmers, **work on stroke-improvement constantly.**

**30. View your swimmers "upside down":** Sounds crazy... until you've tried it. Just bend over, eyes lower than your nose, and watch **your swimmers "swim across the ceiling."** Even minor flaws in rhythm, symmetry, etc., become **glaringly apparent**

**31. Have your swimmers view each other upside down:** Let them really see the rolling action of freestyle, the undulation of good butterfly, etc.

**32. Use stroke drills and progressions:** **They systematize the teaching learning process.** "Systematize" means, "To arrange in accordance with a definite plan." Stroke progressions are so arranged and lend order to group-**learning sessions.** They also lend much-needed variety to your workouts.