

Bill Sweetenham on Core Principles for Success

Reported and Edited by Dick Hannula

We can use more Bill Sweetenham's in the swimming world. Bill has been the National Team and Olympic Coach for three countries, Australia, Hong Kong, and Great Britain.. Most recently he was in Great Britain where he was the guiding force in returning that country to an international power in swimming. He is now in Australia again. He is the most innovative and challenging coach that I know, having coached with Bill in both Australia and Hong Kong at their respective Institutes of Sports. I have found that his observations and comments are a great source for my coaching.

Bill sent me this copy of his recent lecture that I thought pertained to all swimming coaches in particular. I have edited it only slightly to reduce it to a size to accommodate the NISCA Journal. The following is in Bill's own words on his return from Rome and the World Championships. These were observations he made after the World Swimming Championships this past summer. His vision of improving performance on the world stage has the same application at every level and in every sport. I believe that every high school coach could improve their level of success adhering to these nine principles. Here are Bill's words.

"Of recent times, and in particular over the last month, I have watched several of Australia's international sporting teams compete at the international level and for one reason or another under achieve and under perform. I personally believe that this relates to the core principles that I will go through one at a time.

Objective: When coaching an individual or team or more importantly both, there must

be a clear and defined objective. It is important that the concentration on process must produce an objective or desired end result. There must be an objective in every training session, and in every lead up competition. Compete for the lessons learned and the stimulus provided in any given competition to be better prepared for the next competition, never just for the sake of competing.

Winning experience always rates ahead of experience. I have always believed the best prepared athlete wins, not necessarily the best athlete. The objective must be closely related to the preparation in that everything done in preparation and the process must be focused on the outcome, the achievement of the objective. Basically, if it is not done in training, there is little chance that it can be achieved under the pressure of competition. There must be clear indication that the objective is identifiable, and achievable outcomes are seen and understood in every training session.

Security: This aspect of performance is based on the ability of each team member having a clear view of their role and their ability to successfully carry out that role. Any individual or team must have the ability to prepare and perform in adversity, knowing that they can make the environment work in their favor and not allow it to make them victims. It must be clearly understood that the tougher the competition, challenge and environment, it favors the better prepared team and athlete. On occasions, the preparation should be Spartan, disadvantageous to performance and athletes and coaches must support each other in excelling through the training session under the worst possible conditions rather than the best. There must be

precision-based role clarity where responsibilities and accountabilities can be measured and applauded, or redirected for each individual. An evaluation based on performance and competition must be carried out each step of the journey. It must be positive and supportive, and it should avoid at all costs paralysis by analysis.

Surprise: Whether it is surprise or stimulus, athletes and teams must be provided with an element of surprise in every training session so that the stimulus for improved performance is ever present. It is when athletes and teams can handle distractions and take surprise in their stride that the winning ability to seize the moment is paramount. You should take your opposition by surprise testing leadership and the ability to be innovative and creative in preparation. Always pursue the opportunity to have an element of surprise and stimulus as predictability relates proportionately to vulnerability.

The challenge for each team leader is to think laterally, take calculated risks, see things from a different perspective, address reality over hope, place performance ahead of popularity and understand that everyone can be anything they want to be, given the opportunity and daring to be different are all key factors that great leaders address on a daily basis. Be your best and ahead of the world on a minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, and week by week basis in order to achieve and maximize everyone's potential.

Flexibility: There is no one way to achieve success, there are many ways. The best way is your way. Unconditional confidence in your ability and the team's ability is essential for elite performance. The program must have the ability to work within an ever changing set of goalposts, and there must be an understanding that

60% of all plans can and will change. Every program must have a Plan A, B, and C which are all equally strong as each other, and any one of the plans will not detract from the other. Always believe that you can be the best and never believe you are the best.

Mobility: For any given outcome or objective, the approach of being superior in every possible way must be addressed. It must be possible to have an individual or team perform with consistency, repeatability and sustainability in any given arena around the world, not just in the home environment. A process of evaluation of performance based standards where measurements are made on both controllable and uncontrollable aspects of performance must be clearly understood and the ability to transport all aspects of performance from one arena to another must be practiced and rehearsed.

Whatever it takes to perform well in your home environment is the same as it takes to perform in a foreign environment. There should be no change in attitude or approach when performing away from home or at home. A decreased performance away from home indicates poor preparation. Maintenance or improved performance indicates superior preparation.

Concentration of Force: A team or individual will perform successfully because of its strengths and will under-achieve due to its weaknesses. Preparation and performance must be directed and led by the strengths of the team or individual. Maintaining strengths while eliminating or improving weaknesses has to be the key focus for the team and individual.

The greatest area for improvement is weaknesses and this should continually be addressed in preparation without detracting

from the areas of strength. Every team must have identifiable and winnable events known well in advance, and this should be the focus of all short term planning. Areas of weakness must be addressed, both short term and long term. An understanding that perception is reality is needed.

Economy of Effort: For great athletes, there is no such thing as sacrifice or maximum effort – there is only love of what you do and maximum results for minimal effort. Whenever you observe an athlete who wins and Olympic medal, Grand Final, etc. their perception is that they cannot believe how easy it was. This occurs because of detailed planning which was not compromised by exceptions to the rules and where the athlete relates the performance effort and the ease of it to the hard work and efforts of preparation.

I always ask the question of each athlete and team, “Are you the best prepared athlete in the world, regardless of which sport or event?” “Can you give 100% at least 95% of the time, and especially when it counts?” “Do you give 95% 95% of the time and only give 100% when things are going well or when you feel like it?”

Winning without effort is a result of being superior in every way and having addressed preparation under pressure as well as performance under pressure.

Morale: Maintenance of morale is key to great performance. Confidence can hide a multitude of sins. Great coaches have the ability to have tremendous empathy, especially where athletes are giving unconditional support and effort. Athletes must give 100% support to the program and the staff, and the staff must have the ability to make the athlete who is willing to give this unconditional commitment feel extremely “special”. This does not mean

indulging or spoiling the individual. The ability of the coach to keep morale high but still re-direct athletes who are falling short of the mark is a key performance indicator of all successful teams.

Maintenance of morale through criticism and tough times is a major challenge, and it takes many years of exposure to truly appreciate the value of this aspect. Always praise the athlete and criticize the performance or fault if necessary, but never criticize the athlete. The athlete must know unconditionally that they have the full confidence and support of the team and the team leadership, even when there is a lack of performance or an issue of redirection. This is crucial for maintenance of morale throughout the team and its preparations.

Communication: Being able to effectively keep everyone informed of the above points so that they can appreciate the values you bring to the team as a leader, the strategies and concepts you wish to explore and the objectives and processes you wish to pursue are the marks of a truly great leader who understand the value of building disciplined teams where each individual within the team will have similar standards and be developed individually as a leader of their environment.

Each team member must be cultivated as a team leader. They must be valued, appreciated and have constant supportive feedback, but at the same time continually challenged to lift performance to match the appropriate competition being targeted

Everyone will have slightly different views and values for each of the principles. Put your own values and attach them to each of the nine principles for the best results.”