

Specificity and Individualization in Training by Dick Hannula

When swimmers are training for a variety of events and distances, the coach is challenged to meet the different training requirements of each swimmer. Specific events require specific training for the best results. The most successful programs are individualized in some manner to assure the best results for the greatest number of team members. This individualization often constructs the training sessions towards the most successful swimmer or swimmers on the team, and hope for the best for the less talented and experienced swimmers.

Your team members are made up of stroke specialists, sprinters, middle distance and distance free style, and individual medley swimmers. There are additional differences within these groups. Experienced, inexperienced, year round club swimmers, seasonal swimmers, male, or female are examples of these differences.

I believe that the training must be specific to the needs of the individual for the best results. How specific can a coach get, or how many different training groups can the coach manage successfully? Having one training group for all of your swimmers throughout the season is a "shotgun" approach. Every swimmer receives the same training load everyday, and then at the end of the season the shotgun is fired. It doesn't seem logical to expect success at every event level from this one dimension approach.

Grouping individual swimmers for the most efficient and beneficial training session is a coaching skill. Training must allow for differences. The differences may be by groups, or even by individuals within a

grouping. Adjusting the send off time, or goal times, in sets is one way of accomplishing the latter. Communication by the coach can convince every team member that the ultimate success of the team will be determined by individualizing the training. Each group must have great pride that their group is working at their highest level. They must all believe that their group won't let the team down at the championship meet.

In the early season training, all swimmers can be doing the same training program on most days. An aerobic and general conditioning base will benefit every swimmer. This is also good for team pride and camaraderie. When specificity training becomes necessary then training groups must be individualized. High school programs need different training programs for different groups, and these will occur within the same training time frame.

Ideally each training grouping would have their own coach. In reality, coaches will have to reach across groups within the workout. I strongly recommend that the coach needs to train student assistants to help provide some of the individual attention necessary. Timing and recording can be done effectively by student assistants.

Each group would have one or two lanes for their particular training lanes. The needs of your team will determine how you group your swimmers. You may have to make special adjustments because the number of swimmers in a particular group becomes too small to be an efficient use of the water space.

For a high school team, I recommend the following groups: Backstroke and butterfly swimmers can often be grouped together in one group. Breast stroke should be a special group. Middle distance should include the 200 and 500 swimmers. The sprint group are primarily the 50, 100 free, and possibly the 200 I.M. swimmers. I also liked having a “super sprint” group that were primarily 50 swimmers, who could stretch to the 100, but were inclined to be the drop dead 100 swimmers.

The above 5 groups could be spaced into a 6 lane pool, having one lane each and 2 lanes for the numerically greater group. If you have a diving pool, that must be utilized as well. The cross pool section of the diving pool presents a 7th lane, and could be used by all 5 groups, with a heavier emphasis with the “super sprint” group.

A basic warm up would be done together with all groups. Some of the stroke drills, kicking, and starts, turns, and finishes may often be done together. The main swimming series, speed swimming, pace swimming, timed drills, surgical tubing swims, and pulling sets are best done in special groups.

The result of 5 groups would be 5 different training programs. Yes, this results in more planning time by the coach. It will also require good management and organizational skills to be executed by the coach. However, it is well worth the effort. In the shorter high school season, I consider it essential for the greatest success.

What is the magic number of different training groups on any one team? I don't pretend to know. My example of 5 training groups for my high school team when I was coaching is probably the most training groups that I used. The fewest number that I used in high school was 3 training groups.

The idea is to use your creative imagination for the particular group of athletes that comprise your team.

Tapering is another story. Ideally, you could have a different taper program for every member of your team. Realistically, this is probably impossible or at least impractical. Every swimmer must believe that your training groupings through the season were the best for him or her. This is doubly true in the taper. Every swimmer must believe that this taper grouping will result in the best possible results in the championship meet.

The most taper groups that I managed in high school were 8 different groups. Five taper groups were probably the smallest number I used. Some taper groups only had 2 swimmers, and even one, in them. The average was only 3 or 4 swimmers.

This required considerable planning time for a period of at least the 3 final weeks of training. We would have some common recovery days over this period, but it still involved much more focus and preparation on my part. The results were always worth that effort.

The bottom line is just this. Specificity requires that training *and* taper sessions be individualized for maximum success.