

The Magic Touch Revisited by Dick Hannula

When watching swimming competition as a spectator, I always see more than when I am coaching from the deck. I still do some coaching, mostly teaching stroke technique or supervising the training session drawn up by the head coach. I always maintained that you see far more in the elevated spectator area than you ever see at deck level. When I was actively coaching I sometimes sat in the elevated spectator section at competition when it was reasonable to do so. I was at the USA Swimming Spring Championship at the King County Aquatic Center in Federal Way, Washington at the end of March. Dick Jochums, the Santa Clara Swim Club coach, was sitting next to me much of that time. He was passing the torch to his assistant, who was on deck level, as well as observing race tactics, and technique. Dick is planning retirement in another year, and he too was evaluating his swimmers from the elevated spectator section.

My impression of the Spring Championship, which featured many younger club swimmers, was that there is a great amount of young talent coming up in USA Swimming. It's expected that Katie Hoff (16) would win events. She did that with 5 wins in the 100, 200, 400 meters free and both I.M.'s. A 13 year old girl won the 100 meters butterfly. A 15 year old won the women's 200 butterfly and 11 of the top 16 finishers were 16 or under. The 100 back was won by a 16 year old. On the men's side, the 100 meters free had a 17 year old at 50.51 and an 18 year old at 50.44. There were four 17 year old boys in the finals of the 100 meters butterfly from 53.50 to 55.21. The 100 meters breast stroke had a very impressive 1:05.11 from a 15 year old boy.

I enjoy watching the competition involved, but I particularly like to evaluate the stroke technique of the faster swimmers. When I coached high school, I would sit on a high step ladder, or stand on the top of our bleachers, to watch swimmers. The most successful swimmers always had a great "feel" for the water on entry. This was most apparent to me when they made the catch prior to the start of the arm pull. The best swimmers paused on entry to engage good secure water. They would gather water on the hand and forearm before commencing the pull. I witnessed this time and again through the heats and the finals throughout this Spring Championship.

I wrote an article, "The Magic Touch" after watching Rowdy Gaines swim incredible for the time – 42's for the 100 yards and 1:33's for the 200 yards – during his collegiate years, about 26 years ago.

Rowdy had that "Magic Touch" and attained a very high efficiency in his stroking efforts. The great swimmers can get through the early part of their races with less effort than other swimmers in the race, and then turn on the added power necessary to attain victory in the last stages of their races. Mark Spitz had this same gift. I witnessed many of his races in which he looked so easy in his stroking in the early stages, and could close so strong. Both of these swimmers illustrated that importance of getting good water at the start of their stroke. Too many high school swimmers are too impatient and start their arm pull before setting the stroke up with great feel for the water on entry. Don Schollander, who swam in local meets out of Oregon, as a teenager seemed to hesitate on entry as he had a great touch on setting up good water at the start of his stroke. Don was the premier world swimmer in the 60's, and things haven't really changed in regards to

the “Magic Touch”. John Tallman, coach of Seattle’s Cascade Swim Club and later at the University of Washington, told me in the early ‘60’s that the most important part of the stroke is the start of the stroke. It depended on how well the swimmer contacts and holds water at the start of the pull.

Learning to swim efficiently at slower speeds is necessary to develop speed swimming to the maximum. Whichever drills that improve the catch or feel of water at the start of the stroke should be incorporated by every high school and developmental coach. Counting strokes is a tried and true method of determining stroking efficiency. Swimming with hand paddles is another excellent method to develop that “magic touch”. Sculling drills with and without hand paddles also aid in developing this skill. One arm swims that entered the water softly, then reversed that recovery back to the hips before once again entering the water out front before commencing the pull was one of the drills that I used. Use whatever drills or methods that work for you. The point is that the “magic touch” must be developed in order for each swimmer to swim his or her best.

Let’s change the subject for the remainder of this article. Successful teams and successful swimmers are very motivated. They like what they are doing. One of the first articles that I ever wrote was in regards to communication. Dr. Jim Counsilman’s speech at an ASCA World Clinic was titled “The X Factor”. In that memorable talk communication played a major factor in coaching success.

I’ve had the opportunity to observe great coaches throughout the U.S. and the swimming world. Twice I coached camps at the Australian Institute of Sport, and I traveled with teams to a number of

countries. Successful coaches always had the ability to communicate very effectively. The best advice I ever heard is to talk to each of your swimmers every day. Bill Sweetenham, Australia, would arrive very early to every training session. Swimmers knew it and would arrive early as well just to talk to Bill. He had a very special ability to reach out to each swimmer, and to make them feel a vital part of their team. I saw similar situations frequently while traveling in swimming. A German coach used to arrive early and greet each swimmer and their parents as they arrived at the swim center.

Communication takes a great number of forms – team meetings, printed handouts team booklets, and other forms – but the bottom line is the coach has to talk to the swimmers. What and how it is said can result in a sink or swim situation. I’m assuming that the coach is a coach and not a critic when talking. One on one communication is a two way street. The coach can learn from communication. Problems don’t have to become a crisis. Communicating effectively helps to keep team members happy, and productive swimmers. A coach can be the most informed and knowledgeable coach living, but unless the coach effectively communicates that knowledge to the team members it is useless.

Communication isn’t a one time thing. Communication is necessary throughout the season to keep the team and all team members directed towards the championship meet. Getting to really know your swim team members is vital to helping every swimmer attain excellence. What motivates each individual? Effective communication is partly in the genes and partly learned. But it’s necessary and vital to successful coaching.