

“Tis The Season: Giving Back To Swimming”

By: Rick Edwards

Whether one celebrates Christmas, Hanukah, or Kwanzaa, it doesn't take Einstein to figure out that the old cliché “giving beats receiving” seems to be true nonetheless. It is often said that the world is divided between the givers and the takers, but it is my observation that there are many more in the latter category especially in today's world. Everyone wants to know “what's in it for me.” To say it has always been so, does not excuse us from trying to create a better world. We often say about our student athletes that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree in regards to attitude and even aptitude. Therefore as a coach, I cannot expect my athletes to develop characteristics too far away from under the tree that I cultivate. The question becomes what fruit do I wish to drop. If we wish to perpetuate the sport we love, as coaches we must cultivate the sport we love.

Recently, I visited the Swimming Hall of Fame while the team where I am an assistant coach was training next door for a week. Current CEO and President of ISHOF Bruce Wigo made a point of stopping by on our first day and inviting our team to come over at some point for a visit. I waited in vain for our coach to encourage the team and did not feel it my place to override him and tell them myself. However, I made it a point to stop in. To my surprise and disappointment, I was the only visitor. The surprise was in the number and variety of exhibits, many that spanned a full century of our sport. There were several videos, as well as memorabilia, trophies and award plaques from around the world, and of course tons of history. Bruce even took time out of his schedule to escort me around and fill my head with wonderful anecdotes, many of which I had no previous knowledge. My disappointment came because I was the only one there.

I will not recite the litany of the virtues of knowing one's history, and indeed of one's culture. It seems to me the benefits of having a tradition are obvious. All I have to do is look at the programs that year after year perform their best at the moments of the most intense competition. It seems that many prepare equally hard, but that those who come from a tradition of excellence have the edge in confidence. To see replays of Mark Spitz in Munich or the American men at Montreal reminds us of what could be. Without ISHOF, those elements will be lost to the current generation. As I was aware of the rather bleak financial picture of ISHOF, I began to wonder “why doesn't the archive of our sport receive more support from our own people.” Clearly ISHOF has some rather wealthy friends, but my question addresses all the little guys: those that never medalled in the Olympics, or made it to NCAAs, or even swam in college at all. The response “what's in it for me” looms like a cloud over a Ft. Lauderdale beach on a sunny day. My response to that is: what did O Henry's Della and Jim receive in the classic “Gift of the Magi?” The author seems to suggest the me-first attitude isn't necessarily the wisest attitude.

It seems to me we must give back to our sport more than we gain. That means going to professional meetings and being involved in coaching organizations, not just because of what we *take from* them, but for what we *give to* them. We don't want our athletes to feel that they **have to** come to practice, we hope that they **want to** come to practice. Being involved should not be a have to, it should be a want to. The number of programs that are run on the state and national levels to benefit swimmers, polo players,

and divers is large. It takes only a moment to look at the NISCA or M(ichigan)ISCA websites to see a wide range of services involving individual recognition for athletic and academic performance, team recognition in both areas, as well as educational opportunities for both coaches and athletes. Our state sponsors competitions at several levels in addition to providing scholarships to graduating seniors. Clearly those programs do not exist in a vacuum, yet there are many who simply expect, and perhaps demand, these services. They think of these programs as if they are somehow their natural right.

Anyone who knows anything about coaching knows that coaching involves much more than simply showing up on deck (perhaps even with a planned workout in your hand) and training your athletes to swim fast. It is more than simply motivating your athletes or employing sophisticated mental or dryland techniques. It is more than planning lineups, taking splits, planning the season, ordering busses and equipment, and maintaining that equipment. It is more than all the daily minutiae and routines that are necessary to get through the day. Coaching is also about making time to give service to our sport. In his book *Everyday Enlightenment*, Dan Millman suggests that the highest form of practicing enlightenment comes with serving your world. If we, as teachers, do not coach this concept in our swimmers, especially from the model of our own behaviors, then I believe we have failed them. If we do not teach them to leave the world a little better than the way we have found it, then we are no better than the narcissists of the 80's so accurately depicted in the film *Wall Street*.

I have been coaching swimming for 35 years, and I still love to go to clinics. They are always a great opportunity to pick up something new, or remind you of something you've long forgotten. To hear what the best minds in swimming have to say is both stimulating and motivating because there is always something we can learn and apply to this year's team. As coaches/teachers, we are upset by the presence know-it-alls who think they have all the answers. Yet many coaches are themselves quite sure they already have the answers and find no need in attending professional meetings or sharing their understandings. Such sophomoric behavior in my colleagues distresses me. Not even Stephen Hawking has all the answers, no one does. All we can do is continue to explore the realm of possibility with as much zeal as we can muster. I always try to convey the concept to my students that if we're not going forward, we're going backward: that life does not stand still. However, not only can you learn much from the clinicians, you can pick up that much more just by talking with your fellow coaches in more casual circumstances. Yet our clinic attendance continues to decline in Michigan as well as on a national level.

It upsets me that in my local zone composed of over 20 teams less than half of our coaches are members of NISCA or actively involved in MISCA. At our own local meeting to determine our zone coach-of-the-year and pick the athletes of our local "dream team" we typically have less than 10, and sometimes as few as 5. Even those that attend usually have a vested interest to promote a favorite son or daughter. The only reason some are in MISCA is because their swimmers cannot attend the MISCA Invitational, a meet 5 weeks out from the state meet that draws many of the state's best swimmers to compete together in a fast pool, unless their coach is a member. Otherwise they never attend the MISCA meeting/clinic. "What's in it for me" is the all-too-common response when they are asked to become more involved. Don't we all love the person who, when we have work to do, asks "How can I help?" Whether that help is

financial, physical, or emotional, we can all do the small things that make great things happen.

Perhaps I am guilty of preaching to the choir here, yet of our 2, 000+ members, less than 100 attend the national convention. Is this figure the result of apathy and post-modern angst? Is this the spirit that we want to see in our athletes and/or in our society? One thing that is true in most (if not all) swimmers is the attitude that training and paying attention to detail makes a difference. I cannot imagine a successful team that had a collective attitude that said “why bother, nothing changes, it’s all a colossal joke anyway.” We have all witnessed amazing swims from members of a relay that individually were simply not that good. But when it came time to give something back to their teammates, they gave an effort and an emotion that is rarely seen in the mundane world. We promote such synergism on our teams, why in the world do we not promote it in ourselves?

In conclusion, I encourage every coach out there to dream big things, to inspire your athletes and give them the confidence to reach the highest possible levels, and to lead your teams to greatness however you define it. But most of all I challenge you to give back to the sport we love. After all the presents are opened, it is the smiles on other faces we remember.