

SELLING PROCESS TO SWIMMERS

(Part 1)

BY MICHAEL J. STOTT

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In 1993, Swedish cognitive psychologist Anders Ericsson wrote that greatness wasn't born, but grown. He proposed that a minimum of 10,000 hours was required to perfect performance. His ideas later formed the basis for the "10,000-hour rule" described in Malcolm Gladwell's book, "Outliers: The Story of Success" (2008), which holds that it takes roughly 10,000 hours of practice to achieve mastery in a skill or field. Known by the term, "process," to coaches, Swimming World details how they use that learning curve to improve the performance of their swimmers.

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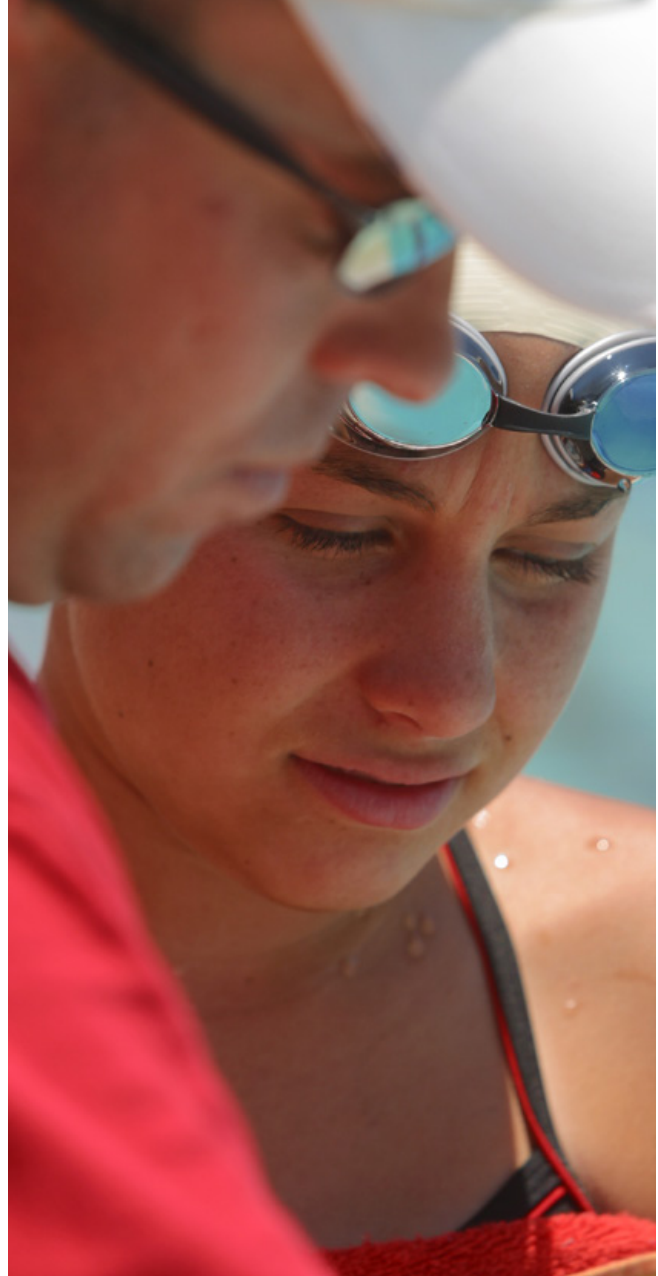
T Tyler Fenwick, former Mission Viejo national team coach and now associate head coach at the University of Virginia, notes "that each generation of coaches faces the same challenge: capturing the attention of their athletes." To that end, "selling the process is a vital part of our jobs. As coaches, it's essential to know the audience to fully harness athlete capabilities," he says.

Few know their athletes as well as Michael Brooks, head coach of the Weymouth Club Waves in Massachusetts. A student of learning cognition, Brooks, among other things, is an international aquatic clinician and coach of national age group record holders and team champions.

"I consider myself a club, age group and developmental coach," he says. "My life is filled with the idea of taking a swimmer, divining his strengths and weaknesses from watching him practice and race, and then figuring out what needs to be improved so that the swimmer can reach his highest level.

"I love the analogy of training and development as building a beautiful cathedral brick by brick. Most of the time this is not fancy or exciting. We come to practice, get a little better, go home, sleep and then come back the next day and do it again. The improvement—the moving just a little closer to perfection—is the motivation."

As just one example: in the last two years, Brooks has employed his process orientation to get a 16-year-old Thomas Hagar to drop significant time in his four best events: 100 back (8.86 seconds), 200 back (21.62), 100 fly (6.82) and 200 fly (16.66). (*For a more in-depth description of his work with Hagar, see the "How They Train" feature in the December 2020 issue of Swimming World.*)



[PHOTO BY MICHAEL ARON]

TRUSTING THE PROCESS

Twelve years after earning NCAA All-America honors at Cal (2007), Richard Hunter won the first of his two Virginia Swimming Senior Coach of the Year awards. Before becoming head coach for TIDE Swimming in Virginia Beach, Hunter mentored age groupers from 8 to 18 at Mission Viejo while also serving as the 13-14 division director. Those experiences have broadened his perspective on how to elicit the best from his swimmers.

"In sports, we talk about process as if it is some mystical intangible, but almost always in the context of the end result. Seven years ago, the NBA Philadelphia 76ers made 'Trust the Process' their slogan as a means to sell their organization, players and fans on patience and short-term sacrifice for long-term gain.

"It is certainly the way coaches speak to athletes: 'If I grind for the next three years, I will attain this promotion' or 'You need to work really hard for six months, and you can qualify for that meet.' While skipping the process is rarely an option, it is much more of an individual journey," notes Hunter.

"When you try to sell a group of individuals on one way of doing things, the end result dictates their ability to 'trust the process' in the future," he says. "So, even if a positive outcome is achieved,

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it is still results-centric. It is a trade-off, a sacrifice with a goal in mind. There is a shelf life to this sort of approach. Alternately, as we have learned during this pandemic, training without a clear picture of what competitions will look like, presents its own challenges.

THREE-STEP BUILDING PLAN

“In swimming, building a successful process with athletes is centered around three areas. First, I try to involve and educate them. While it is easier to tell athletes what they ‘need’ to do, it is more effective for them to know ‘why’ they are doing it. It doesn’t mean I am asking them to write a practice. It means I want them to see a practice, know how it is structured, the focus for the day and how they can tailor it to themselves. On my end, as I see how they approach and understand what is being asked, I can adjust my explanation and feedback to them. As we begin a season, it is a lot more ‘what,’ and as we progress it becomes much more ‘how’ and ‘why.’

“Secondly,” says Hunter, “the goal for them is to figure out their process rather than mine. Once they understand what we do, the goal is to get them to learn what to do. For instance, when it comes to taper, I have moved away from telling them, and moved toward presenting options. Each day, we will have two to three different options in terms of focus, volume, etc., and I let each individual choose what they want to do. If they choose the task, they are much more likely to do it well—to evaluate their choices more accurately—which allows them to make future adjustments.

“This approach has largely eliminated the conversation around not ‘hitting a taper’ as the focal point for a sub-par performance. If athletes needed more rest, they can make those choices next time. If they needed more speed focus, they can go in that direction. The first year is usually a challenge,” opines Hunter, “as many of them do not know what they need, so I may provide some guidance, but I still want them choosing their path each day.

“Thirdly, at some level, this sport is too difficult not to find some enjoyment in the day-to-day. I believe that variety is key to keeping them engaged and enjoying the process. While I want them to understand why we do what we do, I don’t want them knowing exactly what to expect each day. Celebrating small successes is something I have to work on more. It is so easy just to look at times, splits and pace and allow those measurables to dictate success or failure.

“What was a failure on Monday may be a success on Wednesday based on how a swimmer went about the attempt or what kind of effort was put forth based on outside stress and fatigue. If the pace is :29, and the best one can do that day is :30, then we can celebrate the effort in a more relevant way. A :30 might be a failure in relation to the goal time, but so is :34. The failure at :30 is workable and can still be progress toward a goal, whereas the :34 is not. Regardless, we cannot ask athletes to just grind and expect them to be happy



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simply because they achieved a goal.”

OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE

Hunter continues with a story that legendary ASCA Hall of Fame Coach Bill Rose shared with him: “He had an age group athlete with a chance to break a few national age group records. They came up with a plan, worked and worked and likely overworked. The boy broke the records, and while Coach Rose was celebrating afterward, the boy came up to him and said something along the lines of, ‘I did it. I’m glad you’re happy. I quit.’

“Enjoying the daily grind is easier for some than for others. But it is the responsibility of both the coach and the athlete to come up with a plan that highlights the athlete’s strengths and gets them excited about the daily opportunity to improve.

“Former national junior team director Jack Roach likes to say that we want to identify what we do well, and do it better. If you have someone who is a bad kicker, you don’t put them off to the side and give them kick sets. That just reinforces that they are bad at them. You give them opportunities to improve, and focus more on their strengths that have gotten them to this point.

“In the example of the 76ers, they are seven years into ‘The Process’ with no championships to show for the effort. Does that mean the approach is a failure? Well, they are perennially in the playoffs, and look to have the opportunity to continue to compete at

a high level for the foreseeable future. I think the question is not one of success vs. failure,” suggests Hunter. “A better one is: Have they found a way to embrace the opportunity and enjoy the process... rather than just trust it?”

THE IMPORTANCE OF BUY-IN

In November, Megan Oesting, 2019 ASCA Age Group Coach of the Year, became head coach of SwimMAC Carolina. Previously she was head coach and owner of the Eastern Iowa Swimming Federation. She has been on the staff of various USA Swimming select camps and leadership organizations. As an athlete, she was a national junior team member, multi-time high school and NCAA All-American, Pan-American gold medalist and a No. 1-ranked Masters swimmer.

These days, she is devoting her considerable talents to helping athletes get better.

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“For instance, ‘This set is to help you find your bounce off the walls, even when you’re tired, and to carry the momentum all the way through the breakout and into the swim.’ When you explain the set, focus on how it relates to that purpose. Define what bounce is or what it feels like. Explain how they can practice it fresh and off a turn. Stress the importance of being at full speed before setting the approach to the wall. Remind them where to look when they get tired. Challenge their air capacity. Tell them to remain calm while holding momentum as far down the pool as they can.

“Keep teaching them how to execute as they run through each of the set components. I can do this throughout the entire practice by using MySwimEars underwater hearing devices, which allows for connection, teaching, encouragement and direct feedback.

“When the purpose of each set, string of sets, practices and string of practices have become obvious and clearly communicated, it’s easy for them to buy in to the process. Then when it comes time for the race, it’s easy to talk about ‘bouncing off the walls and riding speed,’ or whatever else you have purposefully and directly taught them.

“With this approach, everything is ‘process,’ says Oesting, “because you’ve already discussed how these elements will benefit them and how to pull them off.”

Next month in Part 2, Swimming World explores how college coaches employ process to improve their swimmers’ performance. ❖

Michael J. Stott is an ASCA Level 5 coach whose Collegiate School (Richmond, Va.) teams won nine state high school championships. A member of that school’s Athletic Hall of Fame, he is also a recipient of NISCA’s Outstanding Service Award.

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