

# AGE GROUPERS SWIMMING FAST

## WE CHASE THE BEST WITH MORE INTEREST AND EXCITEMENT THAN WE CHASE THE ORDINARY

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Since about 1980, it has been a trend for some people to dismiss the idea that age group swimmers should swim fast. The concept has been that fast age group swimming means more dropouts, more “burnouts,” more early disenchantments with the sport. In fact, it has become so “au courant” to subscribe to this view that many coaches brag about how they do not ask nor want their age group swimmers to swim fast. They insist that their plan of slow development will result in superior senior swimmers.

My observation is that these coaches often don’t have anyone swimming fast at the senior level, either. Surely some do have fast seniors as well. But I haven’t seen many of them.

My combative assertion in this commentary is that fast age group swimming is important, nay, vital, to a healthy Swim Team. Here’s my reasoning:

1. It’s not whether an age group athlete swims fast that determines if he will drop out, burn out, or stagnate out. It’s how he or she gets to swim fast. What did they do to get there?

2. We need fast 8-year-olds. We need fast 10-year-olds. We need fast 12-year-olds. We need fast 14-year-olds, 16-year-olds, and so on. Each plays a role in our national development. We need to be fast at all ages and both sexes.

3. Neither Top 16 rankings nor national age group champions hurt senior swimming. In fact, they help create fast senior swimming.

Now, let me discuss each of the above in some detail, so those of you who are mentally debating me have some more meat to work on.

1. The real question in age group swimming is not if swimmers swim fast or not, but how they got to swim fast. Coaches with significant experience know that it is not much of a trick to get age group swimmers to swim fast—very fast in some cases—as numerous age group athletes have set world records.

You can get age group swimmers to swim fast by:

1. Accelerating the training volume of 10-year-olds to “normal” 13 and 14-year-old volume and similar volume increases.

2. Accelerating the speed component of young athletes. You can train the nervous system to better speeds with ease at an early age.

3. Improving an athlete’s biomechanical or stroke

skills. Better strokes equal faster speed with no other improvement.

4. Combining 1, 2, and 3 above.

5. Training younger swimmers with older, faster training partners. Young will strive, using all of 1-4 above, to match the older and, eventually, come close to doing so.

The long-term “problem” with number 1 is that there are limits. If you are spending three hours a day in the water at age 10, then to improve at age 12, you’ll need 5 hours a day in the water; at age 14, 7 hours, etc. And of course at any age, volume carries its own medical risks of overuse syndromes and mental fatigue. The long-term problem with number 2 is that the window of opportunity for aerobic development in a maximum way is rather early—11-14 for girls, 13-16 for boys. If you spend too much time sprinting madly down the pool, there is less time for aerobic gains and thus, this approach is eventually very self-limiting, though it likely is better for retention in the sport than number 1.

Number 3 is, in my view, the best way to swim fast at an early age. I will argue that first comes excellent biomechanics, then comes an increase in volume, and then comes an increase in intensity. In my shorthand, I call this “going as fast as you can, for as long as you can, with as little volume as you can, and the best strokes that you can.” Later, let me offer some plaudits to American teams whom I believe to exemplify this approach successfully. Number 4 is what happens when finally you must add some volume and speed in order to keep improving.

And Number 5 is a disaster. Everyone deserves the chance to be a child—to play and learn in the water with their peers—to locker-room talks about things appropriate for their age and maturity, without “skipping any steps,” as children training consistently with older teammates do. As my wife, the famous “Miss Karen” says, “children should have developmentally appropriate experiences—at the right time, not earlier and not later.” I won’t argue with that. Now, what good does a fast age group swimmer do for his team, his swimming nation, and most critically, for himself? We need fast swimmers at all age groups!

Who, generally speaking, are our fast 10-year-olds? Quite simply, they are those individuals who are developmentally mature in advance of their chronological age. They are bigger, stronger, and more coordinated. Naturally enough, it is easier for these

early maturing individuals to produce fast swims when they are compared to their developmentally “on time” peers.

Mother Nature, in her general wisdom, dictates that in most cases, the early maturer realizes less of a growth spurt later in life and generally, by their mid teens are comparable, physically, with their more normal maturing peers.

One danger for these early maturers, of course, is that because they are “winning” and perhaps even “dominating” their events, they will place less importance on, and therefore value and concentrate less, on developing the stroke, start, and turn skills that they will require to be successful later in their career. So many of these early maturers hit a “barrier” and fail to improve because either a) their biomechanics will not support significant further improvement, or b) they have already done so much physical work due to their early mature bodies that they do not have anywhere left to go in training to continue to improve physically.

So what does the early maturer provide for our swim programs if they are not going to reach a “peak performance” at a later set of years? Very simply, they set the bar. For instance, if a 10-year-old boy swims a 27.4 in the 50 free and that time is the best in the area, that is the top bar to which all the other ten-year-old boys aspire and work towards. If the best swimmer is only 29.6, then the bar is much lower for all the 10 and under boys in that area. It is an axiom of human performance that the higher the bar is set, the better the pursuing individual will perform. We chase the best with more interest and excitement than we chase the ordinary. The normal or later matured child must chase the 27.4 early maturer with improved skills, starts, and turns—until such time as they grow and mature themselves. Then, they add size, strength, and power to the previously gained technical skills and they surpass the early maturer who peaked early with muscle and power.

In each age group, our nation needs fast swimmers who blaze the path, raise the bar or set the example of what “fast swimming” really means. In poor swimming areas, we see both slow age group and slow senior swimming. No areas exist where we have fast senior swimming where we do not have fast age groupers in the area. Fast age group swimming goes with fast senior swimming and leads up to it.

### Age Group Rankings

A similar argument applies to age group swim rankings. We frequently hear from people that “age group rankings reward the wrong thing.” Age group rankings reward fast swimming. If the fast swimming comes from good technique teaching, good aerobic base training, and a solid philosophical foundation for competition as a learning tool, we can only applaud and value the fast swimming.

If the coach, parent, and athlete chose to achieve

fast times with an overemphasis on volume, inappropriate use of speed training, and overly accelerated training methods (like early weight training for young athletes), then most of us, as coaches, would judge that fast swimming is not in the best long-term interests of the athlete. At the same time, age group rankings serve as goals, times, and targets for the normally developed athlete. In each age group, they serve as markers for the swimmers below the levels of those rankings. A coach, using well-proven and accepted training methods for his age group team, will use the times himself as goals for his athletes. The coach will not change his methods to achieve the times with his athletes.

The rankings themselves, then, are not bad, but they can be and have, in some cases, been used to stimulate training behaviors that are not in the athletes' best interest. Their value, however, is great in the way that they serve to raise the bar for all athletes in those age groups. In addition, I would argue that many athletes are not, because of their genetic predisposition to early maturity, likely to ever develop fully as senior swimmers, and great age group achievements are the peak of their athletic careers. Surely our sport is big enough to want to provide rewards for these athletes, as well as for those who develop at normal maturity rates and peak at later "traditional senior" ages?

In summary, age group swimming is not exclusively an end in itself, nor is it properly seen as "only" a means to producing great senior swimmers, but rather, should encompass opportunities and rewards for those who both mature early and those who have a more "normal" developmental maturity. Fast swimming at age group level is vital to fast swimming at the senior level. Coaches have a responsibility to recognize those development patterns that have traditionally produced our great American senior athletes, as well as the "special cases" of precocious maturity, and to coach each to perform to the best of his or her ability. Swim fast early by teaching good technique, by encouraging appropriate aerobic training, and promoting good competition. But swim fast!

Swim as fast as you can, for as long as you can, on as little work as you can. When you add volume to your athletes' training program, they will improve. Later, when you add speed training and strength and flexibility training to your athletes program, they will swim faster again. It's not fast age groupers that keep people from swimming fast as seniors. It's poor training and technique progressions.

Swim fast. Now and later.

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## FIRBY'S GENIUS

# FEEL OF THE WATER

That elusive special dimension of swimming known as *feel* can be nurtured in nearly all individuals, *i.e.*, it can be learned. *Feel is not rare.* It has simply been overlooked or unwittingly suppressed by the majority of coaches who, in their insecure knowledge of the subtleties of technique, approach the teaching of strokes as a sergeant might approach rifle drill—"by the numbers." As a former freelance commercial artist of some 20 years experience, and as a one-time art school teacher, I can state that the familiar "paint by numbers" kits tend to stifle rather than help the development of true creative skills. It's unfortunate but this same sort of unimaginative methodology still pervades most swimming instruction: "do this," "push this far," "bend here," and so on—*by the numbers, two, three, four.* The result is that in the sport there are countless so-called competitors who are, for the most part, mechanical robots and no match for the few with *feel* or, if you like, "soul."

I have gone on at some length on *feel* as it pertains to swimmers, but coaches, too, should have *feel.* Coaches who would teach *feel* must themselves have *feel*—a *feel* for *feel*, as it were.

By that I mean that the dedicated coach should strive to surmount the *by-the-numbers* barrier; he should look for the symphony of movement that is great stroke technique; he should learn to think in terms of moving body masses, momentums, clean alignments, shifting forces, and subtle nuances of timing. He should be able to see all of the above within a framework of fluid mechanics, kinesiology, physiology, and psychology—especially psychology because *feel* is a total experience in which the temperament of the individual must be taken into account. Just as music is more than so many notes strung together, so is inspired swimming more than so many levers and units of force. In other words, the coach should strive to be more than a mere craftsman, he should aspire to being an artist in the classic sense of the word. In a manner of speaking, his swimmers should be his works of art.

It takes time in the sport to understand this. The process can be speeded up, however, if the would-be coach will only open his eyes. He should study and evaluate *for himself* the techniques of the great swimmers. Past and present, looking always beyond the superficial details to absorb and, in a sense, *live* the rhythms, etc.—the very essence of what he perceives.

The coach who is caught up in his daily routine of coaching—which can be repetitious in the extreme—should from time to time renew his love affair with swimming. He should himself swim, at least occasionally, and he should constantly imagine the feel of the movements he teaches.

A trick I have borrowed from my years in commercial art is to look at the "artwork," *i.e.* the swimmers, upside down. Artists will turn their work upside down or look at it in a mirror to get a fresh, stranger's-eye, critical view of it now and then as they develop it. To achieve the same end while coaching, I sometimes bend over and invert my head, eyes lower than my nose. The effect is astounding! The swimmers appear to be swimming across the ceiling! Their every movement springs into focus, stroke irregularities that had gone unnoticed before, moments of excessive drag, and the phenomena of waves and swirling water all fairly cry out for attention. So spectacular is it that I often have my pupils take turns standing on deck at the side of the pool with their heads bent down, watching their teammates swim. I find this especially helpful in selling the porpoise-like action of good butterfly to those who are too inhibited in their own rigid version of the stroke.

The inverted "look-see" is certain to help a doubting coach appreciate the flowing, non-mechanical essence of good swimming.

Further, the coach who would understand *feel* should at every opportunity look long and hard at fish and other creatures that are "at home" in "Mother Water." Even where there are no large aquariums there are television programs with scenes showing dolphins, sharks, seals, and the like, swimming. Only recently, I saw swimming polar bears on television filmed from below the surface—it was clear that they are fine natural swimmers and that they trail their hind legs in what modern coaches refer to as a "drag kick."

*Feel* is what makes the best swimmers such a joy to coach, and *the giving of this extra dimension to swimmers* who would be written-off as "ordinary" by most coaches is an even more satisfying experience.

The swimmer who knows the *feel* of his stroke when it is going well can usually detect encroaching errors early and correct them himself or seek help before things become seriously out of adjustment.

For many years now, I have encouraged each of my swimmers to think of himself as an assistant coach in charge of one swimmer—himself. This approach has produced some remarkable independent and successful athletes who, along with their *feel of the water*, have a special, even reverent, feeling for the sport—it has become their sport to enjoy.

From *Howard Firby on Swimming*, "Feel of the Water," pages 17-18.