

What are Masters Swimmers looking for in a Coach?

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Introduction

Research has consistently shown that coaches matter! Coaches set the program, the tone of the workout, the level of motivation, and the level of improvement we make. But as in all professions there are coaches and there are coaches. The good and the bad. Those that make a difference and those that don't. Here is some North American research that was undertaken to examine the experiences of competitive masters swimmers by asking them to describe desired coaching characteristics and the benefits they perceived by being involved with masters swimming.

The Research

Six competitive male masters swimmers between 49 and 64 years of age were interviewed in a structured way. The swimmers were from two different clubs in Canada and been involved with our sport for a minimum of five years. They were all ranked in the top 10 in their province (state). The responses to questions were analysed for themes.

The Results

According to the athletes, the best masters swimming coaches used effective communication skills to establish positive environments that led to social, health, and performance improvements. They also liked coaches who were organised and had good teaching skills. The all-important communication skills were described as the feedback and motivational messages the swimmers got from their coaches.

The swimmers liked organised coaches. Coaches that set the program in terms of lengths, number of repeats, intensity and who could adapt the program to different fitness and ability levels.

The swimmers also valued teaching skills. Coaches who, even though the swimmers were high performers, could pick up technical issues in the swimmers strokes.

In addition, the interviewed swimmers liked how their coach's kept them focused and motivated prior to competitions when their training became more challenging.

What benefits did the athletes get out of being involved with masters swimming? The swimmers outlined social (friendships), health (weight control) and performance (improvement in times and medals) benefits which they felt were fostered by their coach's behaviour. They all liked having their coach at the swim meets and felt it improved their performance.

The So What?

Each of knows a good coach when we work with one. We also know a not-so-good-coach. This is one of the few studies I have ever seen in masters sport that may help a club or individual swimmer decide what to look for in a coach. The present research suggests a coach with strong communication, organisational and teaching skills who can motivate and educate their swimmers are important for masters swimmers.

Source: Ferrari, G. and others (2016). Experiences of competitive masters swimmers: Desired coaching characteristics and perceived benefits. International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, Published ahead of Print. DOI: 10.1080/1612197X.2015.1114504

Peter Reaburn is an Associate Professor in exercise and sport science at CQUniversity. He was the founder of Miami Masters Swimming Club in Queensland in 1987, a club he and his wife Claire have recently re-

joined. Peter was Chair of the 1990 National Swim Organising Committee, spent two years as State President of AUSSI Queensland and 10 years on the National Coaching Panel. He has won national distance swimming championships and was world-ranked in 1500m freestyle as a younger master swimmer. He still swims open water winning the 3.8 km Noosa Open Water Swim in the 60+ age group in 2015 and was winner of the Australian Ironman Triathlon (50-54 years) in 2005. He has recently written the definitive book for masters athletes titled *The Masters Athlete* now in its second reprint and available at: www.mastersathlete.com.au in hardcopy or pdf formats.