

Coaches Describe Club to College Transition

By Jacob Kittilstad

A critical time in swimmers careers are when the athletes make the transition from club swimming to college swimming. The change in training and surroundings takes swimmers out of a comfort zones but many club coaches say they are confident their athletes will succeed.

Nick Rudich, head coach of the Parkway Swim Club, said he believes swimmers are able to maintain or improve their level of performance if the move is handled properly.

“There’s a period of development for freshman swimmers when, for the first time, they’re on their own and they’re really becoming an adult,” Rudich said. “Although, at first, swimmers may find it difficult to feel comfortable at their new team, many are so excited just to be at college that it helps offset the negative effects of the switch.”

The swimmers’ periods of excitement help college coaches by giving them time to get to know their swimmers better, Rudich said.

“I get really excited when my swimmers go to train for a college coach...I feel we’ve succeeded,” Rudich said. “It’s hard to send them off, don’t get me wrong, because after you’ve had them for five years they almost feel like your own children.”

In most cases, high school aged swimmers experience a much more intimate, family-like relationship with their club coach than with their college coach, said Dr. Nancy Cullen, sports psychologist for the University of Minnesota.

“In college swimming, it seems the swimmer-coach relationship is kept on a much more professional level,” said Cullen.

Wrestling with Transition

The change in team atmosphere from club swimming to college swimming is enormous for all athletes from six star recruits to the walk-ons, said Pete Malone, head coach and general manager for the Kansas City Blazers Swim Team. He said he believes the opportunity to train for a new coach teaches college life lessons (such as “how to work for a new boss”) but he sometimes questions college coaches’ motives for new swimmers.

“The swimmers wrestle with that transition but it’s the nature of the college lifestyle and the college coaches’ goals, you know what I’m saying?” Malone said. “Sometimes coaches focus on the athlete’s performance and how it fits into their own, personal goals instead of just the athlete’s development, you understand me?”

Ray Benecki, head coach of the FISH swim club, said if a college coach looks at his or her swimmers in the context of times alone, it may be difficult for a coach-swimmer relationship to be formed if an athlete is not performing to the coach’s expectations.

“It depends on a coach’s ethics: if someone is struggling, will the coach disregard that person and get someone to replace that athlete?” Benecki said. “Developing relationships is hard and if the team’s just a swim factory, more and more freshman keep coming in, pushing that athlete further from the coach’s mind.”

“It’s not right but sometimes it’s what a coach can get away with.”

Dr. Cullen said some college athletes face challenges because their new coaches are coaching to the team as a group and not to the athletes individually.

“The situation might be the first time an athlete is not receiving special attention from their coach,” Cullen said. “Also, sometimes coaches are reluctant to change their coaching methods for a single athlete.”

Coach Malone said college coaching is not an easier job than club coaching, but coaching at the collegiate level can be made easier if the coach isn’t “doing all the work”.

“I think they have an easier job in that they’re getting their athletes at a higher level, but college coaches serve a different purpose and they have to deal with different issues, does that make sense?,” Malone said. “But, I think college coaches should work on individually developing their athletes more.”

Tough Choices for High Profile Athletes

When an athlete of high school age is competitively thriving at a world-class level in a training structure devised by his or her club coach, the choice whether or not to participate in NCAA swimming becomes more complex. Benecki, who is Kate Zeigler’s coach, said it is unknown to him what would have happened had Zeigler begun training with a college program before the Beijing Olympic Games.

“I can’t speculate how Kate would have done if she had started swimming with a new coach when she went to college, but I feel it would’ve been foolish to risk her training,” Benecki said.

When Zeigler began attending George Mason University her training with Benecki continued uninterrupted. Because she had decided not to compete in the NCAA, she had more freedom to focus on her personal goals, Benecki said.

“She doesn’t have eligibility issues to worry about because she’s a pro,” Benecki said. “She had a very light academic workload of six and then three credits leading up to the Olympics.”

To be eligible for competition at a Division 1 college, a student-athlete must be enrolled in at least a minimum full-time program of studies leading to a baccalaureate or equivalent degree that cannot be less than 12 semester or quarter hours (credits), according to operating bylaw 14.1.8.2 of the 2008-09 NCAA Division 1 Manual.

Kathy Aspaas, coach to one of swimming’s rising stars, Dagny Knutson, said Knutson is weighing her options. Knutson may have the chance to sign endorsement deals but she is also considering her college recruitment options.

“I just want whatever is best for Dagny,” Aspaas said. “What worries her is that it’s going so well training here with her dryland coach and me that she’s not sure what will happen if she changes her routine.”

Aspaas added that she feels “change is good” and “there’s not only one right way to do things”. She said she believes other coaches can bring out good things in Knutson and, currently, Knutson is at a training camp in Colorado Springs, Colo. with Coach Bob Bowman.

At the University of Florida, men’s and women’s swimming head coach Gregg Troy said, in the past, he has had the experience of attempting to recruit athletes who decided to reschedule college and continue training with their club coaches.

“In a dynamic where an athlete is competing at an international level, that athlete must be confident with the situation he or she is in,” Troy said. “If the athlete is not going to be comfortable with the new situation and he or she thinks it will negatively affect athletic performance, it’s definitely the right decision to stay home with what’s working for them.”

Bill Rose, Head Coach and CEO of Mission Viejo Nadadores Swimming, said he has had many swimmers decide to wait a year or two before entering college for various reasons such as continuing preparation for an important, upcoming meet or improving swimming ability. Athletes who have extended their training with Coach Rose before entering college include Justin Mortimer, Chad La Tourette, and Larsen Jensen.

“They really wanted to hone in on one hundred percent training,” said Rose. “As we all know, in college, there’s a lot of stuff going on to distract you from training.”

Head coach of swimming at Indiana University Ray Looze said he believes the lifestyle changes are so vast for all college freshmen, athlete or otherwise, that it is a good idea for any swimmer who lacks self-reliance and responsibility qualities to take a year off after graduating high school and sharpen those skills.

Looze said he feels after an athlete has developed these traits, he or she will have a much better chance succeeding in college. He did, however, concede it takes a lot of effort to restrain himself from pressuring a fast athlete to join his program.

“It’s hard for any coach to walk away from talent,” said Looze. “It’s as if the times usurp any other issues the swimmer might have. And if you don’t recruit the swimmer, someone else will. Believe me, someone else will.”

Frustration in Letting Go

When a strong bond is created between a club coach and swimmer, it’s only natural for a coach to feel some stress about losing an athlete to a college program. Coach Malone, who has had a top 8 finisher from his team in every Olympics since 1980, said he has struggled with these feelings.

“Yeah, I’ve faced frustration. The pain and agony doesn’t hurt as much today but back in the 1980s when I was a younger coach, yeah, it hurt. I had problems with the egos...mine and others...but I was wrong, you hear me?”

Malone said it’s important for coaches’ egos not to get in the way of the goals of the athlete and when a swimmer leaves for college, all involved parties should realize the club coach become a ‘mentor coach’ while the college coach turns into the ‘primary coach’.

“I figured out I was wrong. It doesn’t mean I’ve mastered it but I’m at least controlling it,” Malone said. “For coaches like Pete Malone, we’re here to coach kids during their development.”

Coach Rose said he has mixed emotions when he sends a swimmer to college and he related the feelings to when his sons left home.

“You send them off, maybe they came back, maybe they didn’t. It’s a really tough thing,” Rose said. “Back in the day for swimming, that wasn’t the case. You sent them off and they’d come back. Colleges didn’t have summer programs.”

Rose explained that in the 1980s, many gifted club coaches became college coaches. The new breed of college coach didn’t want to lose control of their most talented athletes’ training during the summer so they began offering training programs during the summer season.

“Now you send them off to college and you don’t see them anymore. They pretend to train with you when they come back on vacation but they always just tell you their coach is starting their rest or taper,” Rose said.

Coach Rose admits that when he sends his swimmers off to train for a college program, he covets their new coaches for everyday being able to see the athletes he had grown so close to.

“Whether it’s frustration, jealousy, envy or what...yes, I feel it. You develop a relationship with these swimmers and it’s hard to see them go,” Rose said.

“I wish we were back in the seventies when we knew our kids were coming back for the summer and no one had to think twice about it but...life goes on.”

Club Outlook on College Swimming

Coaches Benecki, Malone, Aspaas and Rose all said there was no one more familiar with their training group’s swimming than themselves. In addition, they confident their swimmers will adjust and hopefully thrive with their college swimming programs.

Germantown Academy Coach Dick Shoulberg said a successful college career begins with the college selecting process. Shoulberg said he believes all club coaches should have a working knowledge of college programs so they are able to offer advice on schools to their athletes.

“If the coach’s track record is all over the place I might tell a swimmer that the University might not be the best fit but I don’t think I’ve ever told a kid ‘You cannot go to that University’,” said Shoulberg.

Furthermore, Shoulberg said athletes have a good chance at improving in college because their programs generally have more resources, such as pool space and pool availability, at their disposals than club coaches. Coach Troy affirms this belief with examples from his program.

“At a D1 school like the University of Florida, we have a full-time strength coach, a nutritionist, excellent pool hours and pool space, and a dedicated staff devoted to our swimmers,” said Coach Troy. “We also have academic support for our athletes including advisors and tutors.”

Coach Rose said he has prepared his swimmers to be able to adjust to any kind of training but, when the transition involves such a large social element, the adjustment takes time.

“People might get upset in the first six months and it’s usually because they’re homesick and they sometimes blame it on the coach,” Rose said. “But typically after six months they’ve made enough social connections to feel comfortable in their new surroundings.”

Coach Looze said club coaches need not worry about their athletes performance level dropping off because, in general, swimmers get better at a program like Indiana’s because they are designed to improve all levels of swimmer: making the average fast and the fast faster.

“We maintain regular communications with club coaches to ensure our swimmers continue to advance with their swimming,” Looze said. “We really want to continue the development they began with their club coaches.”

Coach Rudich said he has formed relationships between his Parkway Swim Club and college programs with similar values in hopes of creating an easier transition into college life.

“And I always tell the college coaches that if they see one of my athletes struggling with something, I will be available to communicate and help remedy the problem,” Rudich said.

Coach Shoulberg said he just hopes his athletes choose to swim for colleges that have proven success and that his athletes are able to blend into their programs.

“There is a great core of young college coaches in the US and I hope my kids are prepared to swim for them,” Shoulberg said.