

ALL FOR ONE, ONE FOR ALL

The verdict is unanimous: high school swimming adds immeasurable value to the career and experience of a young athlete.

BY MICHAEL J. STOTT

From a macro perspective, high school swimming offers innumerable benefits. “Among them are excitement, success, peer recognition and, perhaps, a prolonged aquatic career,” notes Joel Shinofield, a winning club, college and high school coach and now managing director of sport development for USA Swimming.

Kara Lynn Joyce—a three-time Olympian (2004-2008-2012) and four-time Olympic silver medalist, an 18-time NCAA champion and a five-time national high school record holder—loved high school swimming. “It taught me how to be part of a team,” she says. “There is no better feeling than swimming on relays and having people depend on you.” Her coach at Club Wolverine, Jon Urbanchek, once opined that Joyce, a 2003 graduate of Pioneer High School (Ann Arbor, Mich.), would have never reached her Olympian pinnacles without high school swimming.

1964 Olympic gold medalist Fred Schmidt shares Joyce’s enthusiasm. He was a member of the 1961 New Trier team that finished third at the AAU Indoor national championships behind USC and Indiana. That squad had 11 high school All-Americans.

“It is a sense of camaraderie that helps pull you through the training doldrums and flat plateaus of surrounding time improvements,” says Schmidt. “None of us would have done as well as we did without that sense of team spirit and support that raised each of us to higher levels.”

Kate Lundsten is head coach of the Aquajets Swim Team in Eden Prairie, Minn. She has mentored an Olympian, has been a USA Swimming national and national junior team assistant coach, and has won four high school state championships.

“In high school, kids just swim well because they are doing so for a higher purpose than themselves,” she says. “In high school, you have an automatic team, and if you are new to the school, you have a set of teammates. It’s almost impossible to bring that feeling to a club team, although I keep trying. And there is nothing quite as exciting as a high school state meet!”

CRAZY ENERGY AT BAYLOR

Lundsten will get no disagreement from Dan Flack, head coach of The Baylor School, Baylor Swim Club and the only high school

coach on USA Swimming’s 2019 national team coaches list.

“Twice at Baylor, we have had relays win state championships where, on paper, the final leg of our relay should not have been able to hang on,” recalls Flack. “But through execution and heart, we got our hand on the wall first! On those occasions, that crazy energy for the school was enough to win races that ranked those relays first in the country.”

Flack has had three Baylor School girls’ squads capture *Swimming World’s* overall national high school championships (2009, 2011-tie, 2012), while four of his boys’ teams were named independent school national champions (2008, 2009, 2018, 2019). He says, “High school swimming simply offers a very different level of camaraderie because everyone is working for their school. The great vibes and spirit of school transcends the pool; it impacts such a bigger common good and sense of community. There is such a different level of connection in high school compared to club swimming. High school teammates have much more daily interconnection compared to club swimming, where the level of performance is probably the No. 1 determinant regarding with whom they interact,” he says.

“Rivalry dual meets are so much different than an average club meet. You can really show a team before the meet just how tight the final score should be, and kids really understand that absolutely everyone has a job to do and everyone’s attention to detail and spirit matters in every race!”

One Middle Atlantic coach recalls a visit to a distant rival. He began his pre-meet speech on the team bus, mentioning up front that the girls had never beaten the day’s opponent. Thirty seconds into what was to be a protracted plea, a lacrosse player who had rejoined the team after a three-year absence interrupted the coach. “That ends today,” she exclaimed, then rose from her seat and led the team off the bus to a 103-73 victory.

Flack avers there are several reasons why a high school meet can spur athletes to greater heights: “For one, fewer events at shorter distances allow for a truly maximum effort. Also, racing for school points or placing in front of your schoolmates versus swimming a best time to place 54th out of 135 at something like junior nationals is just a completely different vibe.”



“High school swimming taught me how to be part of a team. There is no better feeling than swimming on relays and having people depend on you.” —Kara Lynn Joyce (who went on to win four Olympic silver medals—all relays)

(PHOTO BY ANDREA NIGH)



"High school swimming simply offers a very different level of camaraderie because everyone is working for their school. The great vibes and spirit of school transcends the pool; it impacts such a bigger common good and sense of community."

—Dan Flack, Head Coach, Baylor School (center, pictured with, from left, Kristen Vredeveld, Ashley Yearwood, Emma Michaels and Arden Pitman, who set an overall national high school record of 1:32.63 in the 200 yard freestyle relay in 2011).

ANOTHER VIEW

Running a high school program, however, is not all wine and roses. Stumbling blocks range from varied state association rules and schedules to different school policies to coaches' egos. For example, swimming is a winter sport in Virginia for both boys and girls. In Illinois and Minnesota, it is a fall sport for girls and a winter activity for boys. In California, it is a spring sport for both genders.

Don Heidary is outgoing president of the American Swim Coaches Association and head coach of Miramonte High School and Orinda Aquatics. He is widely regarded as one of the best authorities on culture, character and swim team leadership development.

He has analyzed high school swimming from several perspectives, including athlete ability and motivation, quality and expectation of club participation and quality of high school programs.

"In general—and all things being equal—high school swimming adds immeasurable value to the career and experience of a young athlete," he says. "For instance, it...

- Expands one's high school social circle
- Keeps kids connected to the summer league or YMCA
- Can be a gateway to club swimming (and career development)
- Offers a high-energy, short course season (within a season for club swimmers)
- Typically provides elevated levels of spirit and camaraderie
- Enables high school travel and championship meets to become swimming career highlights
- Elevates a sense of school pride, analogous to collegiate swimming
- Offers a concentrated season with clear objectives—i.e., conference or state competition
- Can be a healthy offset to year-round demands (for club swimmers)
- Can elevate the motivation of non-club swimmers (desire to be locally or nationally competitive)."

Heidary adds, "For club swimmers, there can be potential downsides—

especially if the high school program is a poorly run program. Then the swimming can become more social than competitive and potentially stifle a career. Or a school program can place onerous demands on club swimmers, requiring them to make a choice (or quit one altogether). Such a program can also present contradictory messages to club swimmers, in terms of training styles or needs, technique and even peak meet events," says Heidary.

Navigating the differences requires tact and a willingness to engage a club coach with continual and honest communication. The better the working relationship between the two coaches, the better for all concerned—i.e., swimmer, both coaches and parents.

But that's a subject for another day. ♦

Michael J. Stott is an ASCA Level 5 coach whose Collegiate School (Richmond, Va.) teams won nine state high school championships.

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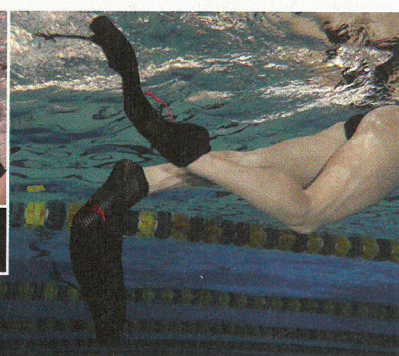


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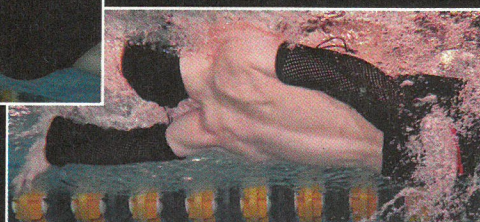


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