

Misty Hyman's Philosophy on Supplemental Private Swimming Lessons

I have thought long and hard about this. As someone who owes her success in large part to her club team experience at Arizona Desert Fox under ASCA Hall of Fame Coach Bob Gillett, I have always wanted to protect and honor the system that worked so well for me.

I started coaching private lessons by accident. While I was writing my Masters Thesis to complete my MBA five years ago, I had a number of people approach me to help their son or daughter with their swimming technique. Something I thought would be a fun way to earn some extra money on the side quickly turned into a full time job. I found there was a need for what I do.

What I discovered was that I love doing it, and that I can have a significant positive influence on the swimming lives of the athletes I have the privilege of working with. My biggest priority is always to be helpful to swimmers and their primary coaches, and to be careful to never detract from that relationship. The key to a swimmer's success often hinges on the trust and cooperation that they have with their club coach.

There is not just one right way to swim. I use what I have learned in my 20 years of competitive swimming experience under several of the top coaches in the country and 9 years of coaching to help each swimmer in a customized and individual way. My goal is to give them as much information as I can about why I recommend the changes I do. My main job is to give them as many tools in their swimming tool box as possible. It is up to the swimmer and their coach to choose what works best for them. If they decide what I tell them is not helpful, that is OK! They will not hurt my feelings or be in trouble. I just want them to have more knowledge and be able to ask questions. I do not want the swimmers to become dependent on me. I want them to own their own swimming. As my coach, Bob Gillett, used to say, "You have to BE the athlete." I encourage the swimmers to process the information for themselves and then apply it to their practices and races. I cannot make them the best swimmer they can be. I can only give them more tools to help them do it themselves.

My role is strictly supplemental. I think of myself as a swimming consultant. I do not have an agenda when the swimmers come in. They direct the lesson. They tell me what skills they would like to work on that day and what their priorities are. I ask the swimmers if there is anything their coaches are working on with them or if there was any feedback they heard from the coaches at their last meet. I strive to support what their coaches are working with them on. It is very rare that what I am teaching the swimmers is in conflict with what their coaches say. When that happens we discuss the reasons why I say what I say, and why their coach might say what he or she says. I always keep in mind that the coach sees the swimmer every day, and so has more insight about each particular swimmer than I do.

There are a number of reasons why I feel private lessons can be so beneficial:

1. Every swimmer can benefit from an hour of focused technique work even if they do it on their own. Guided technique work with an experienced and knowledgeable coach can be invaluable. Most club coaches do not have the time or energy to individually coach each of their athletes. Many also want to avoid any appearance of favoritism or advantage to one swimmer over another.

2. During regular practice time it is often difficult for swimmers to focus on their technique because:
 - The lane may be crowded.
 - They may be focused on making the intervals or completing the yardage.
 - They may be distracted by the social and team dynamics.
 - They may want to lead the lane or not to fall behind.
 - They forget!
3. The nature and economy of club swim teams means that often there is just one coach for 20 or more swimmers at a time. Coaches have a lot of different responsibilities on deck in addition to coaching such as keeping everyone safe and on task, handling administrative aspects, and dealing with discipline issues. This makes it challenging for even the best coaches to give personalized technique feedback on a regular basis, and nearly impossible to continually remind the swimmer enough to change a habit. A combination of private instruction along with great primary coach instruction can significantly help to change bad habits into good ones.
4. Private lessons give the swimmer time and space to work on the skills they feel they need the most help with. They also give the swimmer space to ask questions. Finally, they give the swimmer time to develop the skill in a progressive manner. It is nearly impossible to make a significant change to stroke technique without breaking it down into progressive drills and then putting it together piece by piece one repeated 25 at a time.
5. A good private lessons can boost a swimmer's confidence and ownership of their sport. A swimmer must choose to put in extra time to go to private lesson, and then choose to have the discipline to work on the things they have learned. This gives them a sense of responsibility for their own success that can carry over to everything they do. It also gives them confidence when they stand up behind the blocks.
6. Many of my clients also find me a good resource for mental preparation, nutrition, and other aspects of the sport. As a swimmer who has swum at every level I feel I can give honest feedback and perspective to parents and swimmers about all areas of the sport that can help support what the club coach is doing with the swimmers.

There are some very important things to keep in mind if you decide to do private lessons for your swimmer:

1. Private lessons should NEVER replace a regularly scheduled practice. Private lessons should be considered supplemental and additional to the regularly scheduled practices of the team.
2. The best case scenario is that the coach is aware that the swimmer is seeing a private coach. I have many coaches that communicate with me about what they would like their swimmers to work on with me or if there is something they don't want me to touch. I am happy to communicate with any coach that is interested.

3. I recommend that the swimmer be the one that communicates the information that was learned in her or his own words. Many of the swimmers I work with keep a swimming journal and then share it with their coach.
4. Another great tool to help the kids to remember their technique is to have them make index cards for each stroke with the key tips they get from their primary coach and their private coach. Keep the cards in a ziplock bag in their swim bag. They can look at the cards before each practice and pick a few things to try to remember that day.
5. If you choose to see a private coach be sure to look for the following criteria:
 - a. Someone your coach approves of and can communicate with.
 - b. Someone with significant personal swimming experience or coaching experience at least at the collegiate level.
 - c. Someone who wants to support the club coach as the primary coach.

Happy Swimming!

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