

## *Coaching Applications*

# **Why Coaches should Encourage Athletes' Efforts to Succeed**

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### **Abstract**

*202 competitive swimmers (ages 14-24) from 15 Norwegian swimming clubs were examined, investigating possible associations between coaching behaviors and the perceived athletic environment. The swimmers completed a series of psychological questionnaires a couple of weeks after the Norwegian championship. Therefore, the focus of this study was to identify different types of coaching behaviors, and to understand how these behaviors create different types of athletic environments in swimming. Additionally, we examined how the perceived athletic environment, associated to different coaching behaviors, influenced important well-being parameters, such as intrinsic motivation, athlete burnout, and subjective well-being.*

### **Introduction**

In Norway there are approximately 40.000 active swimmers in the age range of 6 to 25 years old, and 250 registered clubs. These last 5 years, Norway produced one world champion, several European champions, and two Olympic medals. Despite having relatively few active swimmers, the country has performed well on the international scene. The purpose of this study was to investigate the characteristics of optimal training for competitive swimmers in Norway.

Previous research has emphasized the importance of the context within the motivational process of competitive swimmers. A wide body of literature has examined how the structure of the athletic context has influenced athletes' evaluation of their own performance and success. Earlier study findings have typically distinguished between two types of motivational climates in achievement environments, such as sports. In the first type of context, coaches typically focus their attention and their feedback on the athletes' normative abilities. How swimmers perform in comparison to other swimmers on the team becomes crucial to the evaluation of their competence. In competitions where public attention and normative evaluation is high, athletes are prone to interpret their performance level as a reflection of their personal capacity. In a second type of environment, the emphasis of coaches when evaluating and giving feedback is on personal development, solving new technical challenges, learning new skills, and increasing swimmers' understanding of performance components. In this particular mastery-oriented motivational climate, swimmers are typically more focused on their own progression and self-referenced improvement. This focus will be reinforced by their coaches' feedback and athletes' persistence when facing difficulties over a long period of time, and will be valued and interpreted as a sign of competence.

The motivational climate characterizing the context in which the athletes are training and competing in has been linked to important differences in sport participation outcomes. When swimmers belong to a training environment that emphasize normative evaluation and interpersonal competition, when they experience challenges to their perceived level of ability, these swimmers become at high risk of experiencing maladaptive training responses. When normative ability becomes an indicator of self-worth and swimmers face a situation where they fail to achieve an important performance standard, this lead to some athletes experiencing significant physical and psychological distress. When experiencing an unrelenting focus on winning, great training volumes with the wrong focus as well as inadequate recovery, swimmers will most likely struggle with their swimming season. Training adaption failure may lead to serious outcomes, such as overtraining, staleness, and burnout. When swimmers stretch themselves to reach unrealistic goals they are likely to feel emotionally and physically exhausted, experience a reduced sense of accomplishment, and devalue their sport involvement. Athletes showing signs of burnout will typically report low levels of energy and enjoyment as well as lack motivation to train and compete.

The value of a mastery-oriented motivational climate is that swimmers can evaluate their performance perfectly well just by noting whether their effort and persistence levels are high and if personal times have improved accordingly. Indeed, athletes who recognize that they are clearly below average in ability are also able to gain a sense of competence and accomplishment in such an environment. This is important in the context of a physically and mentally demanding sport such as swimming. For a coach this means that athletes are likely to experience activities in various training programs as more intrinsically satisfying. This will also insure that late bloomers have an optimal environment to develop their swimming skills. Athletes who are unburdened by external controlling factors and who feel able of effecting their own progression in the pool will typically report greater levels of self-regulated motivation and well-being. In contrast, athletes lacking personal control over their achievement goals, and especially those athletes low in perceived competence, are expected to struggle more and report lower levels of self-regulated motivation and well-being.

## **Methods**

202 youth swimmers from 15 Norwegian swimming clubs participated in this study. The sample consisted of 99 male(49%) and 103 female(51%) participants, and their age ranged from 14 to 24 years ( $M = 16.4$ ,  $SD = 2.3$ ). On average, participants had participated in swimming for 6.6 years ( $SD = 2.4$  years), received coaching from their head coach for 2.1 years ( $SD = 1.5$  years) and spent 8.0 hours ( $SD = 3.2$  hours) per week training. The competitive levels of the swimmers participating in this study ranged from novice competitors to world championship athletes. The majority of the swimmers had competed at the national level.

After obtaining permission from head coaches, we visited the different swimming clubs during team practice and invited swimmers to complete a battery of questionnaires under the supervision and guidance of a researcher. Swimmers were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and responses would be kept confidential.

## **Discussion**

Findings in the current study indicated that swimmers are more inclined to perceive a mastery-oriented motivational climate when their coach consciously and regularly encourages them on a daily basis to work hard, expresses that mistakes are part of the learning process, and tells them to exert high degrees of effort at all time in order to improve their performance. Consequently, this study clearly highlights the importance that coaches reinforce swimmers' effort, persistence, and self-referenced improvement regularly. By doing so, the coach can make all swimmers regardless of their ability feel successful and competent. All swimmers have the ability to learn something new, improve their swimming skills, master a new task, and exert maximum effort. Study findings also demonstrated that coaches responding to swimmers' mistakes with punitive technical instruction ended up creating a motivational climate that ultimately lead to maladaptive participation outcomes.

A likely maladaptive outcome related to training and competing on teams emphasizing normative ability is exhaustion. Moreover, earlier research has demonstrated that important reasons why athletes participating in endurance sports such as swimming may experience burnout is due to the fact that they perceive pressure from the coach to perform well, feel that they are involved in sport because they have to, feel obsessed with winning at all cost, have high training loads and low level of autonomy during the competitive season, and do not allow themselves to recover well enough. Considering the criteria of success and the reason for participating in swimming is important to ensure maximum recovery and facilitate development and enjoyment in swimmers. Findings from the current study are relevant to coaches focusing on talent development, as the majority of swimmers in the current study were young and competed at the national level. Participation at this level of competition reflects a high level of commitment where swimmers spend many hours in the swimming pool every day to improve their skills. They are thus significantly exposed to the athletic environment created by the coach. Clearly, it is much more adaptive for swimmers to be encouraged by their coach to believe that hard work and practice will lead to improved performance, rather than to receive negative evaluation feedback if they are not performing at high enough of a level in comparison to their peers within the same team.

Coaches can prevent swimmers from experiencing maladaptive training outcomes independent of level of perceived competence, by communicating clear goal priorities and avoiding emphasizing winning at all costs and normative comparison. Swimmers will experience the swimming training as more intrinsically satisfying when coaches communicate goals related to having fun and experiencing self-referenced progress. Coaches giving attention to all swimmers on their squad and highlighting mistakes as part of the learning processes will create an optimal athletic environment for talent development.

## **Conclusion**

The current findings suggested that coaches can improve swimmers' subjective well-being and optimize their achievement motivation by creating an athletic environment that focus on learning, personal development, and understanding new swimming skills. In doing so, they ensure that all swimmers achieve a sense of competence while participating in youth swimming.