

The Ride Home

Judy Goss

One might think, What does the ride home have to do with sport psychology or mental training? Well, in fact, nothing, but on the other hand, a lot. Part of my work with swimmers is spent not just discussing the mental aspects of sport but also the factors outside of the pool, such as confidence, concentration, and even enjoyment of swimming. Unbelievably enough, the ride home is mentioned quite often.

I am sure you can envision it even if you have not experienced it personally. It's just after dusk, a nondescript minivan pulls up outside the local pool and a young swimmer appears from behind the double doors, bundled up and wet-haired, carrying a swim bag and a backpack loaded down with school books. The swimmer gets into the car, the parent asks "How was practice?" The response from beside mom or dad is "Fine." End of conversation? Not a chance, but maybe the end of a two-way conversation.

So what is my point? It seems odd that something so typical or maybe insignificant to some can be and is the start of an unbelievably uncomfortable situation for some parents and swimmers. This encounter can take many different directions but more often it is confrontational, stressful, and hated. The most common responses from athletes that I deal with are as follows:

"My mom wants me to tell her everything."

At the age of about 12 years old, all children start to enter an important developmental phase of growing independence and autonomy from their parents. One method to become more independent is to not share what is going on in the child's life, a difficult thing for many parents to deal with. Often, a parent is just trying to determine what the swimmer is feeling when the swimmer appears tired, upset, or distressed.

"If I say I had a bad workout, I get yelled at."

After a long day at school and in the pool, getting into the car and seeing your parent, the last thing that a swimmer wants is to be yelled at for telling the truth. Most swimmers don't want to have a bad workout, and having external pressure for performance put on them does not usually increase performance.

"The ride home just consists of them talking swimming and lecturing me on what I did wrong and how to do it right."

One of the best pieces of advice that I ever heard from a parent was "let the coach coach and let the parent parent." And if the parent starts to confuse the jobs, the parent will start to confuse the swimmer. After a long hard day and practice, the swimmer doesn't need to hear more about what he or she needs to do to improve his or her swimming because, more than likely, it is not the same message that the coach is giving the swimmer. In that situation, then, who should the swimmer listen to?

So what does all this mean? Parents need to be sensitive and aware of their child's needs.

What are my suggestions for the discussion to make the ride home better? Parents should ask their swimmer what he or she wants for dinner or tell them about the parent's day. Let them ask the parent the questions. Try it for a change. There might be some quiet rides home for a while, but give it time.

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