

LESSONS WITH THE LEGENDS:

DICK HANNULA

BY MICHAEL J. STOTT

Dick Hannula, a member of both the ASCA and ISHOF halls of fame, coached the U.S. national swimming team in 1973, 1975, 1976, 1978 and 1985. He also managed the national team in 1979 and at the 1984 and 1988 Summer Olympics. A highly respected teacher, he is the author of “Coaching Swimming Successfully” and “The Swim Coaching Bible.” His teams at Wilson High in Tacoma, Wash. won 24 consecutive boys’ state championships. He is currently an assistant coach for the University of Puget Sound’s men’s and women’s swim teams.

Following is the complete Swimming World interview with Coach Dick Hannula.

1. What was your motivation for writing the articles and books?

When I first started in 1951 as a high school boys’ swimming coach, there wasn’t much written material available to assist me as a new swim coach. I read “Competitive Swimming and Diving” by David Armbruster, and I learned from my experiences as I coached. This is a very slow and painful way to improve your coaching skills.

It really started early in my coaching career when I was asked to write an article for the *Washington Interscholastic Activities Association’s Journal*. I believe it was on the technical aspects of turns. I found that I had to think through and analyze thoroughly the turning skills. It made me a better coach of swimming turns, and I enjoyed doing it.

Several articles followed over the years, but it really got going with a connection with The Finals and Jerry Greenberg. He wanted me to conduct and arrange swim coaching clinics throughout the country and to write a newsletter for swim coaches. He gave it the title, “Hannula’s Hints.” This resulted in the publication of well over 100 swim coaching articles. This also led to being a continuing article provider for the *NISCA Journal*.

My motivation was to provide basic fundamental and easy-to-understand principles for successful swimming to new and inexperienced swim coaches. The swimming books were the result of just being asked by Human Kinetics to write

“Coaching Swimming Successfully.” It sounded like a challenge, and I just wanted to see if I could actually complete it.

2. Out of the many things you could say to a dedicated swimmer, what might be the most important?

“Think big and be persistent.” Persistence has been the most consistent trait of successful swimmers. Setbacks will occur. Failure is a learning opportunity. It is never failure unless you choose to make it failure. It is temporary non-success and a building block of greater future successes.

3. To an age group parent?

The greatest gift you can give your age group swimmer is UNCONDITIONAL LOVE. I’ve interviewed great swimmers, and it has always gone back to this: support them in every way and in all swimming competition and training.

My own observation over the years has always supported this need for unconditional love. Swimmers who are supported without conditions by their parent approval feel good about themselves. Unconditional love provides the age group swimmer with the confidence to compete without the fear of any adverse parental judgment.

Parents: support your child’s coach in every way. Allow the coach to encourage the development of the competitive spirit in your swimmer at the appropriate time and in the proper stages of that child’s development.

4. Do you still regard communication as the No. 1 priority in coaching?

A coach can have the most technical knowledge of the sport of swimming, but that knowledge is useless unless it can be conveyed effectively to the swimmer. The ability to communicate is extremely important for coaching success. It goes beyond the coach-swimmer relationship.

There have always been very great coaches in the coach-swimmer relationship who have trouble relating to the school administration or the club executive board. This also holds true with relationship with the parents of the swimmers.

Effective communication with these groups can go a long way to keep the coach’s program on a sustained path of higher competitive success. I always recommended and used newsletters, parent meetings and faculty and administrator information exchanges to reduce potential conflicts.

Swimmer meetings—both team and individual—are necessary to keep team members focused on team and individual goals. The legendary X-factor that Doc

Councilman addressed so well in a long-ago ASCA lecture boiled down in a large part to communication.

The relationship between the coach and swimmer is dependent on the two getting together mentally on the same path. Every coach and swimmer is different. There is no one way to effectively communicate, but it has to be accomplished for maximum swimmer success.

Yes, communication is a No. 1 priority in coaching.

5. Is “praise the performer, critique the performance” still good advice? And why?

One of the best articles that I read that helped me in my coaching was in a business magazine relating to success factors. The article was titled, “Be a Coach, Not a Critic.” The article elaborated on that basic need to coach and not criticize. The message was to keep the lines of communication open by avoiding the negative message of criticizing the individual.

Years later, I read “Putting the One-Minute Manager to Work” by Ken Blanchard. This is a short book that spells out in exact detail the steps to follow in getting the best results from employees of companies. What I got out of that book as a coach was never to critique the individual, only critique the performance.

The performance is separate from the individual. Analyzing the performance—even criticizing it—gives the coach the tool to best correct those areas needing enhancement. Criticizing the individual can create coach-swimmer barriers.

Criticize the performance and praise the individual. Praising where and when praise is deserved makes for a happy individual, and happy people perform better. I have found this to be true. Separate the individual and the performance for better coaching results.

6. Describe the importance and the three elements of “hidden training.”

Invisible training is the training that provides the athlete with a greater opportunity for success. I call it invisible or hidden training because it is hidden for the most part from the coach’s eyes.

It is the sleep, rest and nutrition program that each athlete chooses to follow. The use of tobacco, alcohol or drugs would be quickly recognized as bad choices. Sleep, rest and nutrition are less recognized by athletes, but also very important.

Training requires stress and rest to achieve maximum adaptation to training. High-intensity training requires adequate sleep. High school swimmers are still growing and require at least eight or more hours sleep a night. When a swimmer would start to perform poorly in training and/or competition, the first thing I asked was how much sleep you were getting each night. This often required an

examination of how the swimmer organized his or her time to make academic achievement compatible with intense swimming training.

An adequately rested swimmer is a happy, enthusiastic and energetic team member. That swimmer contributes to team morale and preparing to swim faster. Rest goes further than just an adequate night's sleep. Rest refers to taking naps between training sessions in the summer, and taking naps on the weekend days during the school year. Rest includes the social and play activities done outside of the swimming pool. Weekends with the same bedtime as during the school days is best. Any social event that deviates from that schedule should rarely be done.

The other area of invisible training is nutrition and the energy sources that the swimmer is choosing. Every swimmer is constantly making nutrition choices. Athletic nutritional recommendations are readily available. The importance of the best nutritional sources must be emphasized to swimmers and parents.

I provided this information and the importance of maintaining energy levels high throughout training to swimmers and parents. Mom is still the “kitchen coach” in most families. I emphasized that the parents played a vital role in the area of hidden training and encouraged them to understand that role.

7. You coached four Olympians. What did Kaye Hall's success in Mexico City mean to you?

It was special, and I was most happy for Kaye. She was talented in so many ways: swimming, musically and academically. I was an inexperienced coach at that elite level. So for myself, I was very much relieved. I prayed that I wouldn't screw up the training and that she would do well at the Trials and then the Games.

The other meaningful product of Kaye's success was that it proved—at least in Kaye's case—that a swimmer could come out of a small program without a “name” coach and attain the highest swimming success.

One other personal thing happened: Kaye's success fueled my enthusiasm, and I couldn't wait to get back to my high school swim team and the Tacoma Swim Club swimmers.

8. What lessons did you learn, pleasures you derived, from your leadership positions with U.S. national teams?

Meeting and working with so many elite swimmers was the greatest gift. It was educational in every way. These swimmers had the same needs as the swimmers that I trained at home. They were very competitive and shared their technical and training skills whenever asked.

The coaches that I met were great teachers, and I learned so much. Every camp and competition was another super great clinic. These times were one of my greatest coaching experiences.

The leadership positions in ASCA and USA Swimming helped me improve my administrative skills and gain a better understanding of the politics in our sport.

9. What inspired you to invent and market the Han's Paddle?

I was always experimenting. We made our own underwater mirrors, drag suits by pinning sponges to the swimsuit, and used a metronome to learn stroke rates (striking a hammer on a metal pipe held in the water at set metronome cadence). All of this was done prior to the introduction of the commercial products that accomplished the same goals.

Swim paddles were another area of experimenting. My high school shop teachers kept making paddle designs that I requested. In about 1960, we made rectangular hand-sized paddles out of sheets of aluminum. A tire inner tube strap around the paddle secured the hand position. These were thin, light and extremely sensitive to the water pressure.

I believed that swim paddles should improve stroke efficiency and technique. This was my primary goal in designing and using paddles. The aluminum paddles did just that. The swimmer could feel the water on the paddle much better than just on the hand. We used these for several years with good results.

However, a very serious drawback was that these paddles, when nicking a swimmer, could result in a slight wound. After a few years, when Speedo introduced the solid plastic paddle, we stopped using the metal paddle and used the Speedo paddle.

The solid plastic paddle was a good strength-building paddle, but in my opinion, it didn't attain the technique improvement of my first paddles. Han's Paddles were the result of my desire to improve hand sensitivity to the water. It became the first holed swim paddle. I believed that an adequate number of holes and the most efficient size of holes would do just that.

Our swimmers swam with many different types of holed paddles before we settled on the present Han's Paddles. The paddle increased the swimmer's water sensitivity to the hand. It also had the advantage of exerting less joint stress.

This is how it happened, and in 1985, I manufactured and marketed the paddle.

10. You helped develop ASCA's Swim America program. What was the motivation for that?

In addition to high school teaching and club and high school coaching, I served as the aquatic supervisor for the Metropolitan Park District of Tacoma. In that position, I trained the lifeguards and swim instructors working in the program.

The need for an organized swim program soon became obvious. I made a skill chart for each swim level so that swimmers could move up to a higher level once those skills were attained. The program had, at the highest skill level, an entry into our competitive swim team (Tacoma Swim Club).

After a number of years, I had the opportunity to visit Dave Robertson and the New Trier High School's learn-to-swim program. His was a number of levels with specific skill levels at each before moving to a higher level. His program was better than my program of the time. We blended in his level requirements with ours and improved our program.

Dave and I were both on that ASCA Swim America committee, and our programs were the nucleus of that new ASCA program. The motivation was to encourage the teaching of the proper technical skills of the four competitive swimming strokes in more learn-to-swim programs across the United States. The goal was better swimming instruction at all levels, more swimmers being directed toward competitive swimming, increasing the number of swimmers in the base and eventually producing more elite swimmers for the U.S.

11. You had success at all levels, including an undefeated streak of 323 meets (high school dual meets, district and state meets), only one tie and 24 state championships. How would you define failure?

Failure is only failure if you make it failure. I pointed out in a previous answer that we always called it temporary non-success. Setbacks are going to happen. They are necessary even to test the mettle of the athlete. They are learning opportunities.

Early in my coaching years, I read a short book, "Your Greatest Power." That is the power to CHOOSE. Failure is a choice. It is only failure if you choose it to be failure. Kaye Hall had never beaten Elaine Tanner of Canada in 32 previous competitions—32 temporary non-successes. In Mexico City, Kaye won the gold medal and set a world record in her first win over Elaine.

12. As a member of several halls of fame, how would you like to be remembered?

This has never been a consideration. I would hope that the swimmers who I coached would remember me as always being fair—and that what was taught helped them be their best in all aspects of life.