

SwimBC Mentorship Program – Report

I. My objectives for this visit

The objective for this Mentorship Program is to improve my coaching skills; specifically addressing the following questions: How to develop an effective training plan? from the periodization for age groupers 10 to 14 years old down to executing engaging practices. How to get the trainees improve their technique and follow-up effectively with them? To see those skills repeated in meets? How to train their physical and technical skills optimally at the same time? I feel that one of my struggles with my current group is that they have a hard time making effective technical change consistently and through higher speeds, and keeping them in mind – despite my efforts on goal settings and building progressive practices. What can I do better? What can I do to make my swimmers fitter, better technicians, and not be afraid of pushing and surpassing themselves?

Also, on a broader subject – How to build-up a “new” or pre-existing program, to make it successful? How to manage swimmers, groups, parents, swim club's staff and swimming pool's facility staff efficiently for success? I want to learn more about a club's situation and environment, and how this affects its performance. Additionally, how this learning can be applied to my own environment. In fact, in Delta, we are within a large community of individuals, but our club still remains relatively small – in numbers and performance-wise.

II. Why I chose this club

I am doing my third season as a swim coach in British Columbia. I did one season as a summer coach, in Lumby, British Columbia. I did a season in Montreal, Québec. Let's say that my experience is about 4 years and a half as a swim coach.

John Barry Healey, Columbia Shuswap Selkirk Swim Club's head coach, started his career in swimming and aquatics in 1976. Up until today, that adds up to 42 years. This half English coach has had many various and successful moments. His resume is quite extensive :

- Nationally – Provincial Champions multiple times, Provincial Team Technical Director, Provincial Coach, Coached and sent swimmers on Olympic and Commonwealth Games Teams (He has been in BC, Alberta, Manitoba).

- Internationally – Aquatic consultant for USA swimming, multiple athlete accomplishments in the UK
- Besides coaching – President of coaches association, consultant for Canadian Red cross Swimming tutors and swimming teachers, marketing, and fundraising manager, meet promoter and technical manager. Barry also has his NCCP level 1 in volleyball.
- The list goes on.

Frankly, I was not aware of his full extensive past experience before I chose to visit his program. His pink-capped swimmers drew my attention at the Kamloops Classics on my first season as an assistant head coach in Delta in June 2016. CSSSC did not have many swimmers, perhaps only 5. But they were all very fit-looking, all finalists, and many podiums. Ever since, I noticed his club was performing remarkably in every event we had been in together, including the BC Championships.

Witnessing this experienced man in such a small program was something quite impressive for me. In many ways, I thought that this man was here for a reason, and the passion for his job must have been a major one.

I chatted very quickly with him at the BC Coaches Conference in Whistler and found him to be very humble and composed. So when I saw that he was accepting coaches for mentorship, I thought I would be very glad to have the chance to know a bit more about his experience.

III. Observations & Experiences

The Club – Columbia Shuswap Selkirks Swim Club

When Barry took over the club in September 2015, there were 30 members, with hardly any competitors. Groups were mostly recreational. Today, the club has doubled its numbers, with a big part of students being in his *I Can Swim* program (the entry level of the club) followed by the *I Can Swim Fast*, which is coached by an assistant coach. From this onward, they slowly start to be exposed to racing. In the Okanagan, they have the “Jamboree” meets, similar to our PASS meets, to allow swimmers to race in a low-key environment, and to try ultimately to complete the 200 IM under 4 minutes. He then has a few athletes committing 3 times a week, then 5 times, then his Top group with 5 swimmers.

One of the significant realizations I had, was the local population’s noticeable physical fitness. I think that compared to the big cities, people living in remote areas are certainly more active. Some of Barry’s swimmers do a lot of cross-country skiing, or even ice hockey - have fewer

distractions, and have the possibility to eat less processed products and more local and homemade foods. Barry confirmed my observation.

CSSSC has a big gap, currently, on its roster. The club does not have any BC Tier 1 qualifiers. While last summer he sent 5 swimmers to the Canadian National Age Group championships: in the open water 5km event, 1 gold medal and 2 bronze medals were achieved. In the pool, 4 top 8s including a silver medal. I find this quite impressive for a small club in a remote area. This season, CSSSC has grown bigger in their *I Can Swim* program, and still has its Top Age Group.

When I made this observation, Barry responded: “We have a good number of kids, learning how to swim, and enjoying it. My goal is to keep them in swimming, for as long as possible, and magic can happen”. Patient, and calm.

Relationships with swimmers

Some may say, that “older” coaches have an “old-school” approach to coaching swimming: dictatorial, loud, very tough in terms of training demands...

Seeing Barry with his swimmers is quite the opposite. The team’s color is pink. He has a very low voice – that he throws very well – even 8 years old children can listen to very carefully. He does not seem to over push his athletes and has a very individualized approach of dealing with them. He understands what they need and accepts that they take part in their own training – rest when necessary, modify the set... He tries to share with every single swimmer whenever possible. He thinks the interactions between swimmers are also very important. The energy on the pool deck is serene, even in hard training sets. Swimmers have a really pleasant behavior – they show a lot of respect and listen – even to me. Barry asked me multiple times what my thoughts were, after looking at his athletes – from the top-level to bottom – and I was allowed to intervene and make “corrections”, which swimmers tried to accomplish right away.

Barry spends time looking into each swimmer’s goals and needs. Anyone would be able to tell how well he prepares himself and his swimmers for anything he sets up. The team knows what they are training for, and they train for it.

I was inspired by how much investment – research and preparation - is put on all those individual details:

- How far can they go: Is there a chance for a spot on the national team? Provincial team? Scholarships?
- How they plan the big events – he looks at the “statistics”: what are the other fastest swimmers’ in the province splits? What do they need to win? To be on the podium? To

be a finalist? To be successful? How should they manage their race and their training paces according to past and possible future results?

- How much time in advance – compared to the main events – those preparations are set and trained for.

He shares those information and expectations, with the athletes for them to think and even dream – dream to make those goals a reality. And he bases his plan and training sessions on those data.

Dealing with a relatively small group of swimmers certainly helps to manage athletes with such intimacy.

Also, Barry believes it is very important, as a head coach, to be involved in every aspect of the program. He gladly teaches his *I Can Swim* program because the children involved are the foundation and possibly the future of the program. He mentioned that it is something more common in the USA than in Canada. When the head coach of a swim club is in charge of the entry-level group, the establishment of this initial relationship may take off any “pressure” or “fear” that could be related to joining later the Top group led by the head coach. In most clubs, because the smaller kids do not know who the head coach is, they can be intimidated. Barry wants to know who the individuals are entering his club and wants to interact with them first. Certainly, having a relatively small amount of members allow such closeness between parties.

Teaching and Training

Visiting a program for only 4-5 days does not give a lot of clues on how swimmers evolve technically. After I told him that one of my goals was to figure out how to make changes technically on my swimmers that last, Barry quoted a famous Australian coach, Harry Gallagher, with whom he used to work with: *“If I could make 1 change every week, I would do much better”*. It made me realize – again – that there is no magic. The coach is here to give feedback, explain, and remind swimmers what to think about. There are not necessarily a thousand ways to “drill” a stroke. But starting from “gross” or most basic fixes, then slowly going into details and reminding swimmers what they should fix, seems to be the way.

Mostly, he approaches technical changes in sets alternating Drill/Swim. Repeating to swimmers and reinforcing what they need to be thinking about. But in the time I was there, I saw neither him nor his assistant, taking care of some young ones in *the I Can Swim Fast* group, being very insistent on the technical details. The coaches’ energy remained stable, reminding the swimmers from time to time. There was no sense of rush or insistence regarding the

performance of the young trainees. If anything, instructors would let go, as long as everything was safe of course.

I notice that the little swimmers, even from the *I Can Swim* group, use the pull-buoy sometimes. The goal is to learn the feeling of wearing it and experience something different. I think it can help with balance and body positioning as well.

He gave me recommendations on some good training books that I could look into, such as:

- “Science of swimming faster”, by Scott Riewald and Scott Rodeo, Human Kinetics.
- The first 2 editions of Ernest Macglischo’s “Swimming Faster”
- Bob Steele’s “Games and Gimmicks”
- And also other training related scientific articles.

IV. What I learned

I was quite amazed by Barry’s patience. As we exchanged, he confessed that this was not always the case. Most of what I would say I learned was from asking him questions, and him telling me what he learned through the years. I will list my learnings.

- When you are younger, you tend to be caught up in details, that are, ultimately, not so important – you want your athletes to be on time, to be in the water on time, get ready promptly... you try to make sure to squeeze in all the volume you calculated for the practice... But in the end, he said, what matters is that they achieve the quality work they need to do.
- Patience is learned through experiences. Building a program, seeing both yourself and athletes grow and become mature, and getting to know them individually... all those little things take time. And these things are key to successful swimming seasons. Being a good coach requires patience.
- We do not create excellent swimmers necessarily when they are around 10 years old. Some athletes can come into a sport later, and make tremendous gains and performances, in a short time period. To illustrate this, I could use the example of one of Barry’s swimmers: James Lebuke (2002), who comes from Revelstoke’s summer swim club. He also used to play hockey during the winter. He joined CSSSC in the 2016-2017 season and dropped his 200 IM from 2:21.51 to 2:07.94 during his first season. And if I recall, he was still playing hockey during this time.
- The first important thing to teach students is how to listen. Learners that are able to listen will have better focus and have the chance to understand and execute better what is asked of them. And it is, of course, okay for them to do silly things – they are

kids, here to have fun! This comes way before becoming a swimmer. If we are able to make them enjoy racing, the next step to that is to try to make them train.

- It takes personal investment from a coach, to deliver a good program. If a coach wants to succeed, he should spend time to look individually into the needs of his/her athletes, and be part of their own goal setting process, to make those objectives tangible.
- Even though I do have some “extra” qualifications, I am, in the Delta Sungod Swim Club, a swim coach. That’s my hat. Swimmers must mainly see me as this, and so do some parents. For matters that are outside of the “pool” realm, there are limitations to the effect of my suggestions. I mention this because, for example, I have noticed in my group, a couple of swimmers remaining quite weak, fragile, sick, after all the practices I was trying to put them through. I thought they were having some nutrition deficiencies. After investigation, my doubts were confirmed. However, me, mentioning this issue to the family will probably not have the same weight than if a nutritionist would. So, even if I do have some knowledge and confidence in certain fields, some things are better heard from experts or professionals in those specific fields.
- Teaching beginners – It is easier to start teaching a beginner swimmers to swim “short”, “close” to the body in freestyle. Sometimes, beginners might want to swim with big arms, looking like “windmills”. But by staying closer to themselves, the stroke will look better and give faster short-term results.
- Breaststroke Kick – Teaching a wider knee stance in the kick’s propulsive phase is less stressful on the knees. If need be, the gap between the knees can be narrowed later. On the contrary of teaching an inward-oriented knee bent breaststroke kick.
- I should try to be more adaptive to spontaneous situations while in practice. I realized I might not be taking enough of my time. I’m often trying to “squeeze in” the mileage I planned, and thus rush the kids – and myself. For example, in a rather high volume set where I would expect the swimmers to achieve a time at a certain pace time. In order to get quality out of such a set, it may not be the most effective way of proceeding. In those moments, it should be okay to give the athletes more rest, or find them something else to do, if they are not successful. Giving them time – to interact and refocus- may allow better performances. A goal as a coach is to make athletes believe they can achieve things they do not know they can.
- Swimmers’ base abilities - Some have strong legs and are strong kickers, others are not. There might be some reasons why other than technical: some of the members might have done or currently do a lot of lower limb oriented activities, such as cycling, running, soccer, martial arts, or nothing. But as part of the “learn to train” or “developmental” stage, we should try to “balance” their skills. With aerobic capacity being the main physiological aspect they should be training. Then, why not give exercises with a focus on pulling on those strong-legged swimmers – it can help develop their upper body’s

strength and aerobic capacity - if they have a correct technique. And vice-versa, giving a bit more kicking exercises to the ones that appear to already have a strong upper-body will develop their lower limb strength and endurance. It is then important to take into consideration the children's extra-swimming activities, strengths, and needs. Swimming training should then aim to develop weaknesses, and continue improving strong points.

- Young swimmers tire more quickly and easily – they have a higher heart rate and lower stroke volume, smaller heart and blood volume, lesser ability to extract oxygen –so they need quicker and more breaths. Therefore, rest and recovery are even more important – it is okay to give them more than 10 or 15 seconds in an aerobic set sometimes.
- For some reason, I feel like I have been taught to fear the pulling exercises, especially with young swimmers. I understand that it should not be overused, especially if swimmers have major technical issues. However, we are dealing with water and it is very unlikely that inexperienced swimmers get injured using a pull-buoy a few minutes per week, whatever the stroke condition. The effects of using such equipment can be beneficial.
- In the periodization, when we are in a “Power block”: Be creative, really use exercises that promote power and strength gains: Medballs in water – Tubes hooked on an end – resistance swimming...
- When Barry and I discussed training, our subject was mostly re-oriented to preparedness. To sum it up, if a swimmer is confident there is a high probability that he will succeed in the event he has been preparing in advance for. He told me to watch the fastest swimmers at important swim meets, and how they would prepare themselves for warm-up and for their races. He shared with me that most of the time, those elite athletes would do whatever they need to do. This is not necessarily what we would expect them to be doing with everybody, like activating 20 minutes before their race. So as long as the main work has been done well in practice, and the athlete is physically and mentally prepared, confident and ready, nothing else matters. I realized through our conversations that a key to success is making the swimmer believe and make them confident.

V. Limitations and considerations

Spending 4 to 5 days in a program is relatively short, to get to know someone and the culture of a club to a certain extent.

I might have had hopes to come in and ask Barry what was his secret to form international level athletes, but those sorts of topics do not really come up.

The time period may not have been long enough to discuss the specifics of his current training program in more detail – in terms of periodization, sets, seasonal plan... or even past ones he had been successful with, back in the UK or other Canadian clubs.

I leave Salmon Arm with a head full of ideas, but also maybe more things I would like to know or talk about.

I believe this mentorship has not yet concluded but is only an introduction to a new relationship and learning process.

VI. What I bring back to my program

Try to spend more time of my own for my groups and try to give them more tangible objectives to train for. I want to prepare them better for their swim meets and main events.

Tailoring needs to swimmers can be very beneficial. I should try to allow my already strong kickers to pull more, and vice-versa, in more individualized sets. I want to be even more aware of my group's individual strength and needs and allow some part of training for this. Keeping in mind, of course, that the stage which the swimmers I coach are in requires emphasis on aerobic capacity.

Try to let go and be more patient when I feel that things are getting rushed. I want to become more adaptive.

In matters that are not directly related to swimming training, but that can affect my member's well-being and performance, I should not hesitate to ask the help of other professionals promptly. For example, I will attempt to make arrangements for my swimmers to have a session with a nutritionist as soon as we can figure it out.

To not be scared of trying different strategies with swimmers – or situations- that seem to face the same challenges over and over again. Invest more of my time to figure out solutions for my athlete's individual challenges.

Read more about training and swim training related books. I would like to pass my level 3 certification.

Be more meet-prepared with my athletes: What are we training for? What time? What place? What splits? Initiate the process more in advance (up to 3 weeks prior?)

VII. Conclusion

It was a very inspiring mentorship. Every day, I would share whatever was on my mind to Barry – in regards to my swim coaching experience, my thoughts, my doubts - and he would always have an answer full of his experience. I leave Salmon Arm with a couple of ideas and hopes to make a change in making my program better and my swimmers happier.

I am looking forward to begin implementing those new conceptions I realized through this mentorship, and hopefully see some positive results out of it. I am also excited to be able to follow through with this with Barry. We will certainly keep in touch and keep this mentorship relationship going. I feel there is still lots I can learn from him and his experience if he allows me to.

I would like to thank Mike Flegel from SwimBC, for organizing this mentorship program and allowing me to make the trip. Also my swim club, the Delta Sungod Swim Club, that willingly covered my leave during this mentorship period.