Training Envy

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Training envy is more common than any one of us wants to admit. Does this sound familiar? The rival coach and you are chatting and he tells you his 13-14 group does a 2000 warm-up on a 1:20 base interval. You nod and act like that’s about what your team does, but in reality you do 1000 on either no interval or about 1:45. The rival coach starts laying it on now (like any good competitor who senses an advantage) and starts telling you about his sets. The repeat 400 IMs, the 30x100s on 1:10, the monster kick sets, the 500 crunches, and those 9-10s who do a 1600 IM kick! Suddenly you start getting worried: “Why can’t my swimmers do that?” And you resolve to start pushing them harder, much harder, because you don’t want to get beat again next year!

Maybe you think this is all too simplistic, that you would never be threatened so easily by another coach’s bragging. I bet you have because I know I have. It’s natural, you want to keep up with what’s going on around you and you don’t want to be ‘embarrassed’ at how slow, or short, your practices are. And that’s Training Envy. Before I attempt to stop you from feeling Training Envy, let me explain why it happens in the first place.

In our sport the amount of time spent training exceeds the amount of time spent competing by an incredible margin. Contrast that with baseball, for instance, where they are playing games 27 out of 30 days. How many home runs someone hit in batting practice is only meaningful as a sign of proper mechanics and the potential for hitting home runs in a game. In swimming, the ratio of training-to-racing naturally leads us both coaches and swimmers, to place a great deal of importance on training accomplishments; the length and difficulty of sets, the splits held on sets, and the impressiveness of training feats generally. But training accomplishments should not be separated from what they are intended to be: indicators of, future competitive success. If competitive success is not happening, then the training accomplishments were not effective, end of story. I always get a kick out of the college swimmers (for some reason they seem to be the most prone to training bragging) from middle to lower tier programs who go on and on about those killer workouts. Well, when you don’t drop time all season I guess you need something to feel good about.

Back to that rival coach bragging about his sets. Keep in mind that the other coach’s bragged-about sets may be exaggerated, that the set you envy may not be the cause of his fast swimmers, and even if the set is effective for the other coach, it won’t necessarily work equally well in your program.

The last point is especially important because we read, see or hear about sets from top programs and we want to use them in our practices. Sure, maybe we adjust the interval and distance (probably not enough) and think its appropriate for our groups. But that set from another team was part of the context of what happened the day before, the week before, the month before, the year before, and once you pull it out of that context you take the risk of misusing it. I have personal experience with this mistake ...

When I first started coaching year round swimming I was a big believer in Dave Salo’s style of training (or so I understood it at the time). I would routinely go through his book “SprintSalo” and pull out sets from here and there that I liked. What a mistake. I should have either done every workout as written in a row (truly copied the book) or tried to understand the motivation behind the sets; how they worked day-to-day, week-to-week, figured out trends, and then used that knowledge to design my own program. Instead I went grab-bag and it wasn’t effective. As the season went on, I was able to get in touch with about half a dozen of his former swimmers and I asked them about their training. The responses I got showed me that they did far different workouts then what was in that book. Dave’s workouts were constantly evolving and I was stuck haphazardly copying dated sets. Training envy at its worst! Those old sets are full of great ideas, and I should have tried to understand the ideas rather than copy the workouts. Picking one set from here, and another from there, and mixing continued on page 38
them in with sets from other books was not effective.

Reading swimming books and learning about what other programs do is absolutely essential, and in no way am I discouraging anyone from doing that. Communicating and sharing among swim coaches is one of the best parts of our sport. I just encourage you to pause before you drop one of those sets into your workout. Try to understand the principles behind the set, the philosophy behind the training, what its intended effects are, and then think about your swimmers' needs. Blindly copying what others are doing, no matter what the level, is dangerous.

I just read somewhere that Natalie Coughlin does 7 underwater dolphin kicks off every wall in practice, including warm-up and warm-down. Do you think making my swimmers do that would be a good idea? No way, it would be a disaster. Why? It's beyond their ability level. However, I've gotten them up to 3 or 4 kicks on certain sets, maybe I could try extending those 3 or 4 to more of practice. But simply copying what Natalie, or any top swimmer, does is not smart because he/she has years of training background which current practices are built on. Our kids have different backgrounds, different needs and different goals. Arnold Schwarzenegger writes about the mistake people make in the gym of following around a professional bodybuilder and doing the same exercises he does. That professional might be working on specific weaknesses, or is doing exercises that are simply inappropriate for people at earlier stages of development. Is what's good for an Olympian the same as what's good for a 15-year-old? Usually not.

Recently I visited Sean Hutchison at KING Aquatic in Seattle and despite Sean generously showing me his workout book, I didn't copy down a single set. Instead I took notes on what I saw, on themes and ideas. I saw a freestyle set where the swimmers did 100s with paddles holding a low stroke count and kicking as hard as they could. It made for great looking freestyle, and I was floored at seeing girls hold 11 or 12 strokes at 57 seconds. I don't remember how many 100s they did, or on exactly what interval, and it doesn't matter. What does matter was teaching kids to swim fast at low stroke counts while kicking hard. I also saw lots of power work on cords and buckets, and I liked the variety of things done with resistance, some kicking, some pulling, some drill even, or 25s on a stroke count. Again the specifics of what those kids do matters for them, but it's the ideas that I take away and apply to what I do.

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If you are seeing lackluster performance, then make changes based on what you think needs to be improved, and don't let other people's 'hard' sets influence you. Try doing the same kind of sets you have been doing but give more rest and look at the results. Did they all swim faster and walk out with smiles on their faces? Or maybe if the practices are too easy, then one day per week try going longer and grind one out. See how that goes for a few weeks before doing more. How about more kicking? More pulling? More power?

Or maybe your group's technique is lacking. There are many drills out there on video which target different aspects of technique like balance, catch, recovery, breathing, kick. But maybe you are heavy on drills already and what you need is to break practice down entirely. Have everyone repeat warm-up until no one breaks streamline once. Establish a standard and hold everyone to it, even if that means you don't get past warm-up. Or have one of the kids with good technique demonstrate while the others watch. I like to have the kids pair up and coach each other on turns or starts. Sometimes I have contests with the younger kids, like who can dive with the least amount of splash, or glide the farthest from a push-off. Getting done what's on paper is no accomplishment if it's not done well.

There are no magic sets. It's what we coaches do, or don't do, day-in and day-out that matters most. One of my favorite sayings is, "What you allow, you endorse." How the set is done matters as much, and sometimes more, than what the set looks like on paper.

Training envy is insecurity, it's doubt. Changing your program has to be done for internal reasons like poor race performance or staleness. Gather all the swimming knowledge you can and then translate it into what's best for your swimmers. Get over what are supposed to be 'easy' or 'hard' intervals, get over what are supposed to be 'easy' or 'hard' intervals, get over what the group above yours can do, get over what your rivals do, and figure out what's right for the swimmers. If you need to have your kids do 50 breast repeats on 1:00 (god forbid!), then that's what they need to do. If they maintained technique and swam fast, then you coached well. Don't let someone else set your clocks.
Envy training LV. Don't envy IT, work for IT. Book a session. So thrilled to have her training me. - Sarah LeClear. Amazing trainer who makes you what you want to be. Fitness Trainer. 5.

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