



Complete Report: Kids Tell Us What is Fun

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Statement of the Problem

Two years ago, USA Swimming undertook an investigation in an attempt to understand why kids quit swimming as it was reported that about 35% (60,000) of age group swimmers drop out of the sport each year. Results of this study revealed that fun was a major factor contributing to athlete motivation to swim (Tuffey, 1996). Kids reported continuing their involvement in swimming because it was fun and discontinuing their involvement in swimming because it was no longer fun. In fact, fun/enjoyment was identified as the number one reason why kids swim. Unfortunately, the study was not designed to determine what specifically was and was not fun for age group swimmers. Because of an expressed interest from LISS coaches, a follow up study was designed and conducted to identify specific factors that make swimming fun and specific factors that detract from fun for age group swimmers. Additionally, we were interested in assessing whether any age, gender, or ability related differences exist in sources of fun in swimming, as this would be valuable information for coaches.

How the Study was Conducted

We conducted this 'Fun Assessment' study in two phases. In the first phase, we wanted to identify sources of fun for swimmers. To do so, 48 youth swimmers were interviewed in focus groups where they were asked to talk about what is and is not fun about swimming. We felt that interviews (as opposed to paper and pencil measures) would provide the best avenue to identify as many specific aspects of the swimming experience as possible that athletes define as fun. In addition, the group format allowed the individual to express his/her unique swimming experiences but also allowed for the interaction between participants to influence/shape the outcome of the interview. The interviewer traveled to three different LISS clubs and interviewed four athletes (2 male and 2 female) from each LISS age group swim category (10 and under, 11-12 years, 13-14 years, and 15-18 years). The sites of the three USA Swimming clubs included Chicago, IL, San Diego, CA, and Phoenix, AZ. All the interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed. These transcriptions were then analyzed by the investigators to identify dimensions of fun and lack of fun in the swimmers' responses. The factors identified from the interviews were developed into a survey, which is contained in this report following the Reference section.

In the second phase of the study, we sent this survey to 600 age group swimmers to assess what makes swimming fun for kids because their definition of fun may differ from that of adults. To enhance the return rate, several steps were taken: follow up postcards were sent to the athletes to remind them to return the survey; surveys were re-sent to athletes who had yet to return the first survey, and; anyone returning a survey had their name placed in a drawing for prizes. In total, 277 completed surveys (46 %) were returned. The survey contained 57 fun- and non fun-related items (41 fun-related items; 16 non fun-related items) which the athletes were asked to rate on a 5 point Likert-type scale (1=not true for me; 3=sort of true for me; 5=really true for me). In addition, the survey contained several demographic questions.

Participants

Phase One: Forty-eight age group swimmers from one of three USA Swimming clubs were participants. In total, there were 24 males and 24 females with 12 swimmers from each of the 4 USA Swimming age groups (10 and under, 11-12 years, 13-14 years, and 15-18 years).



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Phase Two: Two hundred and seventy-seven swimmers returned completed surveys. The respondents averaged 13 years of age (range 7-19 years) with 123 males and 154 females. They averaged 5.4 years of swimming experience. The table below contains more information on these swimmers.

Phase Two Swimmer Profile	
Age	13 years
Years Experience	5.4 years
Swim Enjoyment Rating	4.3 (1=not at all; 5=very much)
Swim Stress Rating	2.7 (1=not at all; 5=very much)
Swim Ability Rating	3.9 (1=poor; 5=very good)
Continue Swimming next year?	Yes=235 (84.8%)
	No=11 (4%)
	Not sure=29 (10.5%)

What is Fun for Young Swimmers?

Before reading any further, think for a moment about what you believe to be 'fun' for your swimmers; the factors you think they would identify as fun. Oftentimes, coaches assume that when age group swimmers talk of fun, they are talking about playing games, goofing around, unstructured practices,... which would detract from productive, focused practices. However, these swimmers related a much different concept of what is fun regarding their experiences in swimming. A la David Letterman, let us present to you the Top 10 sources of fun in swimming as well as the Top 6 reasons swimming is not fun. As you read each factor, reflect on whether or not it is something that is present for your athletes as well as if you can influence this source of fun. We'll then discuss the results of the discriminant function analyses which assessed for statistically significant gender, age and ability related differences on sources of fun. These analyses were used to determine which sources of fun, if any, best discriminate between males and females; between the four age groups; and between athletes with differing perceptions of ability.

TOP 10 SOURCES OF FUN FOR AGE GROUP SWIMMERS	
<u>Source of Fun</u>	<u>Mean Rating</u>
1. Being with friends*	4.74
2. Coach compliments and encourages me	4.73
3. Being known as a good swimmer	4.72
4. Winning races	4.71
5. Getting in shape	4.68
6. Varied workouts	4.68
7. Relays where team comes together*	4.68



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8. Feelings of accomplishment	4.65
9. Cheering for each other/coming together as a team*	4.65
10. Trying to improve my times; Being on a team*	4.62

TOP 6 REASONS SWIMMING IS NOT FUN FOR

AGE GROUP SWIMMERS

<u>What is Not Fun</u>	<u>Mean Rating</u>
1. Getting slower times than my goals	4.41
2. Getting lapped in races	4.28
3. When other swimmers skip laps or get in front of me	4.12
4. When coach yells or threatens me	4.10
5. Swimmers who think they are good just because they are fast	4.07
6. Parents ask about bad races When parents brag about their swimmer	4.01

In trying to make sense of the findings, what immediately jumps out is the importance of the Team/Social aspect of fun in swimming (*4 of the 10 fun factors tied into this). In fact, 'being with friends' was rated as the most important source of fun across the surveyed athletes. While it may initially seem that these sources of fun will automatically be realized since the athletes are 'on a team', this is not necessarily the case. There is a qualitative difference between being an individual swimmer amongst a group of 40 other individual swimmers and being a member of a team that trains and competes together. Coaches, what do you do to create a team environment? Do you purposefully attempt to foster the concept of team in what is primarily an individual sport? It may be important to do so as these athletes indicated that being with friends and being part of a unified team are significant sources of fun. In a later section, we'll discuss specific strategies that coaches can implement to foster this sense of 'team'.

Based on the results of this study, other areas where coaches may be able to impact fun in swimming for their athletes is in individual interactions with each athlete and in the structure of workouts. While not an easy task, coaches need to make an effort to get to know each athlete to provide the encouragement, reinforcement, and feedback that is needed (not yelling). For example, identifying specific areas for the athlete to focus on and noting when improvements are made will enhance the athlete's feeling of accomplishment and self-perception as a swimmer. Additionally, planning variety into daily training sessions seems to be tied to enhanced fun for swimmers; they report enjoying variety in their workouts. In turn, the athletes are probably going to be more motivated to swim these sets with intensity and focus as opposed to just 'going through the motions'.



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DISCRIMINANT ANALYSES RESULTS

While the items regarding what is fun/not fun about swimming provide useful information for coaches, it fails to identify if sources of fun differ across age, across gender or across perceived ability level. Intuitively, it would be expected for differences to exist in sources of fun for a 10-versus 18-year old swimmer. And, based on findings from gender research in which males and females are found to differ on numerous variables, it is reasonable to question whether males and females differ on sources of fun in swimming. But, what are these differences and how should they impact coach behavior or coach interaction with the various athletes?

Evolution of Fun

Analyses were conducted to identify the 'fun' and 'not fun' items that discriminated between the age groups (7-10,11-12,13-14,15-19) with numerous items showing significant differences (see Table below). In general, the majority of items that showed statistically significant differences between the age groups exhibited an interesting trend. That is, most of these items were rated highest by the 7-10 year olds and gradually *decreased in* importance as age increased. The few items that were rated highest by the 15-19 year old athletes that also differentiated between age groups showed the opposite trend with importance decreasing as age decreased.

Rated highest by 7-10 with decrease as age increases	Rated highest by 15-19 with decrease as age decreases
Received rewards/medals	Hard work
Compete with friends	Dryland training
Winning races	Team cheering for each other and coming together (rated second highest by 7-10)
Pleasing others	
Able to pick/conch asks us for our opinion	
Fun time/not just swim laps	Getting lapped in races (NF)
Practice competitions	
Relays in practice	
Parents give me advice	
Something to do	
Conch knows me as a person	
Known as a good swimmer	
Getting t-shirts and goggles	
Parents at my meets	
Stuck in lane with slow swimmers (NF)	
Dislike no off season (NF)	

**NF = items that were identified as 'not being fun'*



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Take a closer look at the items in the table. What is your first reaction after reading through the list? Based simply on the large number of items rated high by the younger athletes, it appears that they need a lot of external motivation, reinforcement and other 'stuff' to maintain their enjoyment of swimming (i.e., they look to coaches, parents, teammates to provide/structure their fun). Conversely, the older athletes simply enjoy swimming; training hard is a primary source of fun. And, as mentioned, all the items rated highest by the younger athletes showed a gradual decrease in importance as age increased, indicative of a gradual shift from external to internal motivation. It could be that the younger athletes do not have clear goals they are trying to achieve, don't know enough about themselves as swimmers, or lack enough clarity as to why they are swimming to derive fun from just swimming (be entirely internally motivated) as do the older swimmers. Thus, the younger athletes need external motivators and external sources of fun to maintain swimming enjoyment. As the athlete ages, he/she needs fewer and fewer external sources of fun as training/swimming becomes enjoyable in itself and they develop a clear purpose for their training.

Gender Differences in Sources of Fun

As mentioned, gender research suggests that males and females differ on a number of psychological variables (i.e., communication, anxiety, motivation). We questioned, therefore, whether or not males and females differ in their perception of sources of fun in swimming. To assess this, we conducted a discriminant function analysis to identify if any of the sources of fun from the survey discriminated between males (N=123) and females (N=154). The analysis revealed several items as having high discriminant scores, contained in the following table (listed in descending order of importance with * indicating a higher mean value). All the items relate to sources of fun as there were no significant gender differences on 'lack of fun' items.

<i>Fun Source</i>	Males	Females
Getting rewards/medals	4.19	4.44*
Coach telling me what to improve on	4.28	4.62*
Excitement of swimming	4.16	4.53*
Winning races	4.78*	4.64
Competing with friends	3.97*	3.72
When parents give advice	3.23*	3.08
Feelings of accomplishment	4.55	4.78*
Meeting new people	4.16	4.42*
Improving skills	4.13	4.44*
Being on a team	4.51	4.73*
Relays where my team comes together	4.53	4.79*

"Motivation" seems to be a theme that stands out when looking over these results. Past research on gender differences in motivation has found that females are more motivated by social affiliation and self-referenced success whereas males are more motivated by winning (Gill, 1988; Gill, Gross, & Huddleston, 1983). Present results support this past research. The results indicate that the social aspect of swimming is an important



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source of fun for females ('being on a team', 'relays where my team comes together', 'meeting new people') as is self-referenced success ('improving skills', 'feelings of accomplishment') whereas males indicate 'winning races' is a significant source of fun. The only item that seems to contradict this is 'getting rewards/medals' which females rated significantly higher than males.

Interestingly, males rated 'competing against friends' significantly higher than did females, yet females appear to derive more enjoyment from the social element involved in swimming. This may not be as contradictory as it first appears. It could be suggested that because females value social relations, they struggle competing against friends for fear of jeopardizing the friendship. While this is only one possible explanation of this finding, it is supported by others in the sports arena (Dorrance, 1996; Tuffey, 1995).

Sources of Fun for Athletes with Different Perceptions of Ability

One of the demographic questions asked the athlete to rate his/her swimming ability level relative to teammates on a scale 1 to 5 (1=not good; 3=average; 5=very good). The mean rating across all athletes was 3.9. Discriminant function analyses was conducted to determine if sources of fun and sources of lack of fun discriminate between athletes with different perceptions of ability (low-average/above average/very good). The analyses revealed that 12 items related to fun in swimming and 8 items related to what is not fun in swimming discriminated between the three levels of perceived ability. The table below identifies the five items from each analysis with the highest discriminant function scores with * indicating the highest average score across the three ability levels.



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Fun Source	Low-Ave. N=81	Above-Ave N=118	Very Good N=65
My coach knows me as a person	3.91	4.23	4.31
Traveling to new places	4.28	4.45	4.63*
The challenge	4.00	4.30	4.57*
Being on a Team	4.59	4.56	4.80*
Excitement of swimming	4.12	4.35	4.71*
Non Fun Source	Low-Ave. N=81	Above-Ave N=118	Very Good N=65
Get beat by people I used to beat	4.09*	4.18	3.49
Stuck in lane with slow swimmers	4.24*	4.12	3.74
Screaming/yelling parents	2.07*	2.03	1.60
Swimmers who think they are good just because they are fast	4.20*	4.22	3.76
Getting slower times than my goals	4.26	4.43	4.56*

What seems more important that the actual items is the trend that was exhibited. That is, of the 12 'fun' items that discriminated between the groups, ten of them were rated highest by athletes who perceive themselves as having 'very good' ability relative to their peers. Of the 8 items reflecting what is 'not fun' about swimming, six of them were rated highest by the athletes who perceive themselves to have low-average ability relative to their peers (the lowest ability level group). So, athletes with a high perception of ability rate a variety of sources of fun significantly higher than those athletes with a relatively low perception of ability. The opposite is true regarding things that are 'not fun' about swimming - - athletes with a low perception of ability rate a variety of non-fun items significantly higher than athletes with a relatively high perception of ability.

What remains to be determined is the direction of influence... Do athletes with a relatively high perception of ability enjoy more things about swimming? Or do athletes who enjoy swimming rate themselves as having high ability? It is probably the case that a circular relationship exists but this relationship can not be determined from this investigation.



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WHAT CAN COACHES 'TAKE' FROM THE FINDINGS?

We know from past research that kids stay in swimming because it is fun and quit because it is not fun. This research project has added to our knowledge base by identifying what makes swimming fun for athletes. We have also learned a little about the influence of age, gender, and perceived ability on sources of fun. Below are several coaching implications or 'tips' derived from these research findings:

IMPLICATIONS FOR COACHES

Recognize fun can be incorporated into practice without detracting from it

Promote a team concept

Steer clear of what is "not fun" for swimmers

Be aware of the need to provide external fun for younger athletes

Ensure the social aspect is present for females; Talk with males about self-referenced success

Work to enhance each athlete's perception of ability

✓ **Recognize that fun can be incorporated into practice without detracting from it**

Typically, coaches view fun and hard practices as being on separate ends of a spectrum. But, from this research, we found that kids do not define fun as goofing around at practice. Instead, fun is found in things such as being part of a team, experiencing success, and having an encouraging coach. It is important to work to incorporate these and other 'sources of fun' into daily training. While this investigation has helped define what kids consider 'fun', ask your *athletes* about additional things that are fun for them and try to structure it into the environment.

✓ **Promote a team concept**

Although swimming is usually thought of as an individual sport, these kids reported enjoying the team aspect of swimming (i.e., relays, cheering for each other). There are an unlimited number of things coaches can do to help foster a 'team spirit'. Examples include:

- Create a team identity and team pride via t-shirts, team mascot, unique traditions, team cheers,
- Organize social functions to provide an opportunity for athletes to get to know each other outside of the pool
- Help the athletes identify team goals for practice and competition; goals that will draw them together (i.e., encourage at least one teammate every practice)
- Make an effort to recognize the individual effort of each athlete so each athlete feels special and feels they are making a contribution to the team
- Reward/reinforce behaviors that demonstrate a team emphasis

✓ **Be aware of the need to provide external fun for younger athletes**

For most young athletes, participation is not fun in itself. These athletes need other 'things' from coaches, parents and teammates to provide/enhance their fun in swimming. Fortunately, as a review of the identified items illustrates, it should not be difficult for coaches to incorporate these sources of fun into training. Kids identified such things as relays in practice, individual recognition from their coach, earning 'game time' on



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Fridays, and practice competitions as 'fun'. Work to make some of these, and other, sources of fun a more consistent part of swimming. When in doubt, ask your athletes what they enjoy most about swimming. Keeping it 'fun' for these younger athletes, while still having them work hard, will keep them motivated and interested in swimming.

✓ **Steer clear of what is "not fun" for swimmers**

An awareness of what is 'not fun' for athletes and taking steps to avoid these things (if possible) will enhance the athletes' overall enjoyment of swimming and desire to continue in the sport. For example, helping the athlete set realistic time goals will, with hard work, increase his/her chance of achieving the goal ('getting slower times than my goal' was rated as the #1 reason swimming is not fun).

✓ **Ensure the social aspect is present for females; Talk with males about self-referenced success**

Two suggestions for coaches arise from the finding regarding gender differences in athlete perception of sources of fun: 1) It may be important to take extra steps to ensure that the social aspect of swimming is part of the swimming environment for females. 2) It may be necessary to discuss with males the need to measure success in swimming based on themselves as opposed to referencing it to others or outcome as males have a tendency to focus more on winning/outcome. Extensive research suggests that a focus on skill improvement and doing one's best fosters continued participation, increased effort, and increased persistence (Duda, 1988; Nicholls, 1984).

✓ **Work to enhance each athlete's perception of ability**

Kids who perceive themselves as having a relatively high ability level rated a variety of 'fun items' significantly higher than those with a low perception of ability. It may be beneficial, therefore, for coaches to make a conscious effort to enhance each athlete's perception of ability/competence. A few suggestions on how to accomplish this:

- Provide positive reinforcement and feedback regarding skill improvement, demonstration of appropriate behaviors, and effort exhibited by the athlete.
- Structure the environment so the athlete has an opportunity to experience success (i.e., individual goals, focus on performance not outcome).
- Attribute poor performances to effort (which the athlete has control over) as opposed to ability (which they may view as relatively stable).
- Identify areas that need improvement and strategies for the athlete to improve so he/she knows how to enhance ability.



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