

GOOD INTENTIONS

By John Leonard, American Swimming Coaches Association.

It has been said that nothing is as dangerous as “good intentions.” I believe the following situation reflects that danger perfectly.

In Florida Gold Coast Swimming, we are blessed with dedicated and well meaning swim officials, as is the case in most of the USA. Officials in the USA, and their leadership, are the best in the world so I do not want this to come across in any way as criticism. I believe it is simply a case of misguided “good intentions.”

FGC has a series of meets called “Sizzlers” which are beautifully designed to have an excellent two hour or less first competitive swimming experiences for 8-and-under swimmers. These meets serve their purpose admirably. The kindest, most gentle officials work those meets and provide loving help to our newest swimmers. In fact, they overdo it.

At times, officials have decided that it is unnecessarily harsh to actually disqualify 8-and-under swimmers for stroke violations. When questioned, officials have stated that there is no need to create stress on children that small, or tell them that they are doing something wrong, as it is damaging to their self-image/self-esteem.

At first glance, this seems like a kind and gentle world that is “swimmer first.” In point of fact, it is a very serious problem for the long term best interests of the child.

Let’s look at it a bit closer.

Susie is seven. She’s been trying to learn to swim breaststroke but, like a lot of seven year olds, she has trouble turning out her left foot into a breaststroke position. As a result, most of the time she has one breaststroke foot position and one butterfly foot position when trying to swim breaststroke. Her Coach, John Leonard, has been trying for months to explain to her that the legal way to swim breaststroke requires that both toes turn outward to begin the kick. Susie can’t really see or feel the difference. Nor can Susie’s Mom.

Susie’s Mom enters her in the Sizzler Meet. She enters her in breaststroke because she (The Mom) can’t really tell the difference in a legal or illegal stroke nor does she particularly care.

Coach John sees that Susie is entered in the breaststroke and even though he didn’t want that done decides, “Why get into an argument with the parent. When the official DQ’s Susie, both Mom and Susie will get the message.”

You can see where this is going. Susie does NOT get disqualified due to the “good intentions” of the officials at the meet. And, after the event, she comes back over to Coach John to show off her shiny blue ribbon and her coupon for a six pack of Dr. Pepper for winning her heat.

Now if Coach John says “but Susie, you swam an illegal stroke with one toe turned in,” Susie can rightfully say...”Gee Coach John, I didn’t get disqualified, you must be wrong.” And, much worse, the “learning moment” is lost and Susie will continue to swim her breaststroke in her fastest possible manner, i.e. with one butterfly foot. This will continue until Susie turns 9 and swims in a “real USA-S meet” when finally an official will DQ her.

Good intentions, terrible result for the child. The non-DQ is based on two false premises. First, that children don’t “really” need to learn to do things properly in swimming and that “close” is good enough. Any experienced coach will tell you that both of those ideas are remarkably destructive to an athletic career. Second, that our children are somehow so psychologically fragile that a disqualification followed by a simple explanation of what they did incorrectly by the official and reinforced by the coach’s explanation will somehow crush the tender psyches of our young swimmers. This is total nonsense. Children need to hear the unvarnished truth about their performances with explanations as thorough and clear as possible. Our children are plenty tough enough to handle the occasional disappointment in life, especially ones over which they must learn that they have control.

Disqualify when necessary. Please do the job that officials are on deck for. We trust you; we believe in you; we need you. Together we build America’s swimming team, one young swimmer at a time.