

“He Wasn’t Going to Win Anyway . . .

by Clark Hammond, Southern Zone Officials Chair and
Warren Sanders, North Carolina Swimming

You have just finished a four and one-half hour B/C meet and an official says to you, “I was pretty nice today; I didn’t write one DQ slip. I could have written a couple, but I decided since this was the first meet I’d give them a break. I figure the other end probably caught them anyway.”

What is wrong with this statement other than the fact that this judge did not enforce the rules? What are the real issues? How do you deal with a judge who makes this type of statement?

It is obvious (or should be) this is not an acceptable perspective for any official, but it is important to know why this is true so we can educate officials as to why this point of view is improper. To whom was the judge giving a break or being kind? Was the official being kind to the child that should have been disqualified? Was he or she being kind to the other children swimming in the same event? How about the parents of the child or the child’s coach? Was this official thinking about the impact on the other officials who are calling them as they see them? Exactly who was this judge helping? The simple answer is no one and, in fact, they potentially harmed each of the above groups.

Let’s start with the basics. In the *USA Swimming Rules and Regulations*, the introduction to the Technical Rules states:

“All competitive swimming events held under USA Swimming sanction shall be conducted in accordance with the following rules that are designed to provide fair and equitable conditions of competition and promote uniformity in the sport so that no swimmer shall obtain unfair advantage over another.”

The rules apply to ALL competitive swimming events held under USA Swimming sanctions. This includes B/C meets as well as senior level competitions. It applies to the first meet of the season as well as the season ending championship. The introduction further states that the purpose of the rules is (1) to provide fair and equitable conditions of competition so that NO swimmer shall obtain unfair advantage over another and (2) to promote uniformity in the sport so that NO swimmer shall obtain unfair advantage over another. Let’s look at those two purposes in light of the official’s post meet statement.

If you do not disqualify Johnny or Susie for a violation of the rules, you have not only failed to enforce the particular rule but have violated the above basic principles upon which the rules are based. But this is not all you have done. You have potentially harmed Johnny or Susie because they will be under the mistaken assumption that they are performing the stroke properly. Real life examples are the best teaching tools and this one happened just a few years ago. I was the stroke judge in a long course senior level meet during the 200-meter breaststroke. As I watched my lanes, I was drawn to a swimmer that appeared to be intermittently doing an illegal downward butterfly kick. Once I confirmed that this swimmer was in fact doing a downward kick after each second or third stroke, I raised my hand and immediately I heard from behind me a coach expressing appreciation for my call. Needless to say, I was surprised by the coach’s comment. Later, the coach told me that he had been trying to correct this problem, but the officials in his LSC had not been uniformly making the call and the swimmer therefore believed it was not a chronic problem. Certainly, it is not our duty as officials to teach swimmers the strokes but we do provide feedback in the form of disqualifications that allow coaches and swimmers to adjust their training to correct any

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improper strokes. Apparently, in the coach’s opinion, this had not occurred with this particular swimmer on a consistent basis. When we decide not to make a call, we leave that swimmer with the false impression that he or she is swimming the stroke in compliance with the rules.

Not only does our non-call potentially harm Johnny or Susie, it also harms the other swimmers who are performing the stroke correctly. Our rules are in place to ensure that NO swimmer obtains an unfair advantage over another. By not making the call, we are violating this fundamental principle. In most meets, we are happy to have six officials to officiate the meet. This means that we have only two stroke and turn judges at each end of the pool, each judging four lanes. In the above example, the judge felt it was OK not to disqualify Johnny or Susie because the other officials will catch the infraction. This means that one quarter of the pool was not being judged according to the rules, while the other three-quarters were. Clearly those swimmers in lanes being judged by this judge receiving an unfair advantage. There is only one judge enforcing the rules in a quarter of the pool and he or she might not see the violation. The judge may be looking at other lanes when the infraction occurs in their jurisdiction or the swimmer may not violate the rules while in the judge’s jurisdiction. The violation may have been a kick infraction and the judge at the other end may not be able to see the kick because the swimmers are swimming towards them for a finish. The lighting in the swimming venue may obstruct the judge’s ability to see the same infraction. If the infraction was an illegal touch, the other judge cannot make the call (even if he could see it) because it is outside his jurisdiction. So to abdicate your responsibility and to justify your actions by saying someone else will probably catch it is a failure to appreciate the real facts of the situation.

On this same issue, I have heard people say that it did not matter that they did not disqualify Johnny or Susie because they weren’t going to win anyway. They argue that there was no unfair advantage. This statement is based on 20-20 hindsight. You can only know if this is true after the event is over. What if the other officials who are correctly performing their duties disqualified all of the other swimmers? Johnny or Susie would receive an award by default when in fact they should have been disqualified. You may say this is an absurd illustration and while that is true it does demonstrate that this viewpoint is results driven. You only know if it is true when it is too late to disqualify Johnny or Susie. If the meet is a small one and the top eight swimmers are being given awards, it might not be such an impossible outcome. Moreover, it is entirely possible that a swimmer may be able to achieve a faster time performing the stroke illegally than those swimmers performing the stroke correctly and thus be improperly awarded for his or her efforts.

Again, the rules speak clearly to the duties of a stroke judge and state:

“Stroke Judge — Shall operate on both sides of the pool, preferably walking abreast of the swimmers during all strokes except freestyle, during which events they may leave poolside, at the Referee’s discretion; **shall ensure** that the rules relating to the style of swimming designated for the event are being observed; and **shall report** any violations to the Referee on signed slips detailing the event, the heat number, the lane number, the swimmer’s name and the infraction.” (Rule 102.15.3 - **emphasis added**).

The rules again speak to the duties of the turn judge and state:

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“Turn Judge - Shall operate on both ends of the pool; **shall ensure** that when turning or finishing the swimmer complies with the turning and finishing rules applicable to the stroke used; and **shall report** any violations to the Referee on signed slips detailing the event, the heat number, lane number, the swimmer’s name and infraction observed.”
(Rule 102.15.4 - **emphasis added**)

The rules are clear in both cases; stroke and turn judges “shall ensure” the rules are being followed and “shall report” any violations. It is mandatory, not permissive. It does not matter how you feel about Johnny or Susie or if it is the first meet. It does not matter if you think they did not get an unfair advantage. You call them as you see them. It is that simple.

Finally, not only does the failure to make a call potentially harm Johnny and Susie and the other competitors, it also harms the other officials working with you and officiating as a whole. Again, the introduction states that the rules are designed “to promote uniformity in the sport so that no swimmer shall obtain unfair advantage over another.” By not making the call, you are violating the principle that the rules be uniformly applied in all USA Swimming competitions. Who hasn’t been at a meet where Johnny’s or Susie’s coach (or most likely parent) comes up to you after a call and says: “Why did you disqualify them, they have not been disqualified for that infraction all year.” Assuming the violation did occur in earlier meets and the officials observed it but choose not to make a call, it brings into question the overall quality and uniformity of officiating. Moreover, when we make comments on the deck about giving swimmers a break or not disqualifying a swimmer for a clear infraction, we need to realize the walls have ears and it can jeopardize the entire officiating team if a parent or coach repeats that comment to others in the swimming venue.

To further illustrate, have you ever had a coach approach you about his swimmer being disqualified and he was not mad about the call because it was correct? He was fuming about an official who he has been watching who has not been making calls and he wants a fair and uniform forum. He would say something like: “If you are going to disqualify my swimmer then be consistent and also disqualify the other swimmers who also violate the rules.” He is totally correct. It is an unfair forum if one of the officials is knowingly not enforcing the rules.

Whenever we take it upon ourselves to not enforce the rules, it can have real consequences. We not only potentially harm the swimmers because they never learn they are doing the stroke incorrectly; but we also potentially harm the other swimmers and officiating as a whole. If it is difficult for a person to disqualify someone, then it is better for that person to work in another position other than officiating on the deck. When we step on the deck, we are pledging to each swimmer, coach, parent and official that we will judge the meet in accordance with the rules, will be fair and equitable and will uniformly officiate the meet so that no swimmer obtains an unfair advantage over another.

If we keep the above principles in mind, then we will not be prone to give Johnny or Susie a “break” or fail to enforce the rules because we understand that the consequences of such a decision can have a far greater impact than just one swim at one meet.