

# 15 Burnout and Training Maladaptation Affect Well-Being: Strategies for Wellness Amongst Young Swimmers

*Sean Heath*

## Introduction

In 2017 Swim England commissioned a large-scale report on health and well-being. This report titled ‘Health and wellbeing benefits of swimming’ is comprised of systematic literature reviews, which touts the individual, physiological, public health, and economic benefits of engaging in some form of aquatic-based movement programme. The report details a number of recommendations for additional research on health and well-being amongst youth engaged in swimming (Moffatt et al., 2017). Interestingly for this report, much of the literature reviewed was quantitative in nature, taking little account of the sociological and anthropological literature concerning people’s relationships and experiences of swimming. Yet, the authors state that there is ‘no experimental evidence of the health and wellbeing benefits of swimming as a sport’ (pp. 135). Indeed, there are numerous sociological investigations of swimming that show the potential negative consequences of this elite sporting environment (Lang, 2010, 2015; McMahon and Dinan-Thompson, 2011; McMahon, Penney and Dinan-Thompson, 2012; McMahon, Zehntner and McGannon, 2017). Yet, a few authors note positive effects of immersion in water (Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 2010; Merchant, 2011; Throsby, 2016) and in swimming (Light, 2010; Light, Harvey and Memmert, 2013; Heath, 2014, 2017) as evidence of well-being benefits.

Overall, little research has been conducted on mental health and sport participation amongst youth. Despite the nigh impossibility to control for variables such as sociability, relationship dynamics, and individual behaviour (Faulkner and Tamminen, 2016, p. 406), mental health and well-being in competitive sport has been receiving more attention in recent years; incidence and prevalence of training maladaptation, and burnout in young swimmers in particular (Raedeke and Smith, 2004; Black and Smith, 2007; Larson et al., 2019).

Drawing on ethnographic evidence from research I have conducted in both Canada and the UK, this chapter aims to show some of the ways competitive youth swimmers discuss, experience, cope with, and embody burnout and well-being. In this chapter, I argue that anthropological ethnographic investigations of

youth sport are well-positioned to account for and explore the social, individual, and cultural factors and influences that contribute to or inhibit well-being, mental health, and burnout. Ethnographic research allows for a truly holistic approach to youth swimmers' lives, both at the pool and beyond. Through such research projects, it is possible to see coping practices and strategies for mitigating burnout and increasing well-being happening in situ and over time. Thus, researchers are able to hear directly from youths how particular strategies are working or not, while giving them more of an active voice and agency in designing and implementing well-being strategies.

This chapter is organised in such a way where the social-psychological and physiological literatures are presented to the reader in an accessible fashion, which are then complemented by selections of interviews and fieldnotes from my ethnographic research with youth swimmers, allowing their voices and perspectives to inform the reader on how well-being and burnout are enacted in and around the pool. Ultimately, this tacking back and forth between theory and practice has application for academics in the social and physical sciences, for parents and students, and can be applied in a reflective model of coaching practice (covered in chapter 16).

## **Mental Health and Well-Being**

### ***Defining Well-Being and Considerations from the Field***

*Well-being* can be defined as a 'balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced' (Dodge et al., 2012, p. 230), while using the metaphor of the see-saw where the see-saw represents the 'drive of an individual to return to a set-point for wellbeing [sic] as well as the individual's need for equilibrium or homeostasis' (2012, p. 230). Accordingly, reaching a state of '*stable well-being*' (2012, p. 230 emphasis added) requires that individuals have the resources they need in order to meet particular challenges.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines *mental health* as 'a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community' (World Health Organisation, 2014). Informing each other, the above two definitions stress that well-being and mental health are subjective and individual, or in other words, everyone has their own 'set-point for well-being ... equilibrium or homeostasis' (World Health Organisation, 2014). When that well-being point is balanced between one's resources and challenges, which are also key to interpretations of the origins of stress (see Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), then the individual can realise their potential, work productively, and fruitfully. Well-being in this instance underpins mental health.

Well-being and happiness for Sam, 19 years old, are intimately tied to swimming and immersion:

*Probably just being in the water, to be honest. Yeah, everything about being in the water just really makes me happy. It has always just been a quiet place where I can keep my head in....*

*It is just a really nice place that I can just be myself, to myself, if that makes sense.... It is my happy zone, my comfort thing to do.*

For Shaun, 18 years old, it is the sense of immersion in water that places him in a positive mental state:

*I actually wrote about this in school, when I was in school, about like the feeling of water, just 'cause we had to write about something safe. And it could have been anything, I was just like "Okay, water". I'm in it every day. Clearly, like, it is not a conscious thing [that I think] that, "Oh, water is safe for me" but it must be. I clearly feel comfortable in water. I am not like consciously diving in think "Oh, this cold water feels great!" But it is something that I feel comfortable in.*

In both Shaun and Sam's cases, the experience of immersion, of being in the water, was calming and improved or reset these two youths' psychological resources. They move back to what can be described as their personal equilibrium of well-being. This personal equilibrium, or *subjective well-being*, can be conceptualised not so much as an end state or attainable goal, but rather 'a process of fulfilling ... one's virtuous potentials and living as one was inherently intended to live' (Deci and Ryan, 2008, p. 2).<sup>1</sup> This *process* for Shaun and Sam is that of immersion, being-in-the-water.

The social group of their squad was another important factor in balancing well-being in what Sam calls a 'brutal sport':

*It is such a brutal sport and there are always times when it is definitely really hard. But I think especially here, with our group, we have formed it with more of a family atmosphere.... You can come in and have a bad day and your lane mate will come and pick you up.... Or you are having a great day and you got to tell everyone about how you are doing, and everyone is excited for you, and it's awesome. So, I think just having that constant medium of great attitude in practice it really helps get through to the next meet or through the day or whatever it might be just because of that whole family atmosphere.... It is a team sport. We are all here and we wake up early and do things that we don't want to do, together.*

The social resources in one's club or swimming group (squad) have a substantial impact on a youth's well-being. Friendship is an important part of the competitive swimming experience, for as 16-year-old Sammy noted after his knee injury and subsequent recovery time, his friends in his squad were a source of support.

*I got quite lucky. A lot of my friends were, like, really supportive.... [I]f everyone is supportive it is quite nice.*

Well-being for competitive youth swimmers is complex in nature and has a variety of factors associated with balancing their equilibrium and reaching that point of homeostasis in their ever-shifting lives.

### **Perfectionism as a Risk Factor**

*Perfectionism* is multidimensional (Stoeber and Madigan, 2016; Vaartstra, Dunn and Dunn, 2018): ‘A personality characteristic that reflects the compulsive pursuit of exceedingly high standards and a tendency to engage in overly critical appraisal of accomplishments’ (Appleton, Hall and Hill, 2009, p. 458). Conceiving of perfectionism as a risk factor, it is only necessary to emphasise *perfectionistic concerns* – ‘maladaptive, dysfunctional, or unhealthy processes’ (Vaartstra, Dunn and Dunn, 2018, p. 478) – when discussing well-being amongst competitive youth swimmers. Concerns in sport over ‘making mistakes, fear of negative social evaluation, feelings of discrepancy between one’s expectations and performance, and negative reactions to imperfection’ (Gotwals et al., 2012, p. 264) are further dimensions of perfectionistic concerns.

*As the coach was preparing to explain the set he’d written up on the whiteboard on Tuesday evening Darcy, 12 years old, asked “Why haven’t I PB’d in 7 months?” Her coach explained to her that the reason she hadn’t attained any personal best times this season was mainly due to her growth spurt this past year.... “Can I start going to the gym then?” asks Darcy. (29.04.2019 fieldnotes)*

This has the potential to feed into the signs of training maladaptation as Darcy seems to be outcome focused, the outcome being attaining personal best times. If Darcy decides to go to the gym and begin weight training, despite her coach’s insistence that she hold off until she is older, there are potential negative physiological and mental consequences.

Youth are also concerned with the social evaluation of their peers, their own performance, and are highly aware of their own personal best times and qualifying times for the next level of ranked competition. The fear of making a catastrophic mistake, such as getting disqualified in a race, can lay heavily on the minds of young athletes. As Platts and Smith (2016, p. 502) so rightly argue for elite athletes, while they may not all be perfectionists, many ‘feel constrained to manage and conceal their emotions... and to hide their real selves in public behind masks of apparent invulnerability and self-confidence.’ Indeed, many youth conform to what Hughes and Coakley (1991) have termed the ‘sport ethic’ as a model of what it means to be a real athlete. This ethic emphasises sacrifice for ‘the game’, striving for distinction, taking risks and playing through pain, and challenging limits of one’s skills and abilities (1991, p. 309). It is therefore beholden to coaches, parents, and other professionals not to feed the sport ethic, but rather, to take account of and to listen to what youth are saying about their swimming performances and progress, or lack thereof, for the well-being and mental health of these young athletes.

### **Observing Signs of Training Maladaptation**

As noted early on in this chapter, ethnographic research methods focus on close observation, interaction and rapport building, in-depth discussions, and interviews

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with interlocutors<sup>2</sup>. Techniques from these research methods can easily be adopted for use in everyday settings on poolside. Suffice it to say that close observation of swimmers, their everyday habits at the pool and at home, and maintaining dialogue about youths' swimming practice is vital to spotting potential signs of training maladaptation. Any anomalies or changes to their routines may signal issues that may need to be resolved.

With swimming programmes, there is the potential that younger swimmers will try to 'swim up' to do the meterage and the sets of older swimmers. Larson et al. (2019) argue that excessive training at an early age may stunt growth and hinder later physical development of young athletes and can even lead to burnout and dropout in swimming. Despite this, swimmers may want to do extra training to prove their toughness to themselves and their peers.

One Saturday morning while doing some active stretching for mobilisation, Matt, 11 years old, said upon seeing his name beside the set for the 14-year-olds, 'I'm doing the middle set today 'cause I'm hard'. He may be chronologically eleven years old, yet he has the physical capacity to do the longer and more difficult sets. As this example shows, there will be some swimmers, and uninformed parents, who want to push the boundaries,<sup>3</sup> taking on additional training while forfeiting alternative sporting and exercise activities.

Linking this to early specialisation, Larson et al. (2019) posit that maladaptive associations may be more prominent amongst homogenous groups of older, more specialised, high-performance swimmers. Yet, they hypothesise that 'as long as swimmers are experiencing enjoyment and feelings of competence, their significant investment in early involvement may not be maladaptive' (2019, p. 52) leaving open interpretation and room for further study on enjoyment and fun as possible combatants of burnout, dropout, and maladaptive training. Thus, Matt wanting to swim up on occasion may, in fact, be physically, technically, and socially beneficial, and positive for his well-being.

Land warm-up exercises are another opportunity for coaches to observe their athletes moving outside of the water (*see* chapter 3). Basic functional movement screening (Cook and Burton, 2010) can, for example, be conducted using land warm-up exercises for mobilising, activating, and priming muscles and joints with observations made during land training. Moving from mental health and well-being, this chapter now considers these concepts and how they relate to athlete burnout.

## **The Syndrome of Athlete Burnout**

### ***Definitions***

If mental health and well-being are states of equilibrium, then burnout is a tipping of the balance point where we are neither able to cope with the stresses of life nor work productively. Burnout in sport has been investigated for decades with the emergence of three main models (Figure 15.1).

The first model comes from Gould et al. (1997), who conceive of burnout as defined by Smith (1986, p. 37), as a 'psychological, emotional, and at times a

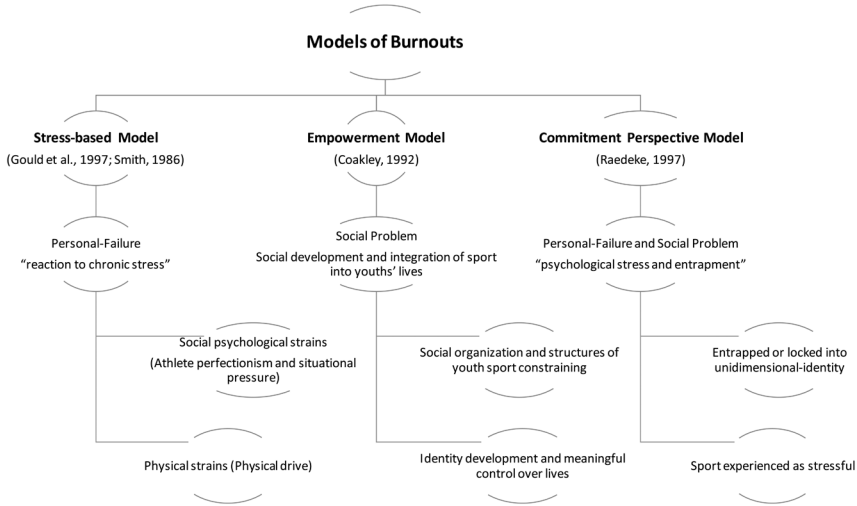


Figure 15.1 Models of athlete burnout.

physical withdrawal from a formerly pursued and enjoyable activity'. It is a 'reaction to chronic stress' (37), in response to 'complex interactions between environmental and personal characteristics' (37). Where players cannot meet the standards in demanding training environments, they therefore experience physical and psychological burnout as a result (see Silva 1990).

The second model, introduced by Jay Coakley (1992), conceives of burnout as situated in the social organisation and structures of youth sport and rooted in issues of identity and control. For Coakley, burnout is 'a social problem grounded in forms of social organisation that constrain identity development during adolescence and prevent young athletes from having meaningful control over their lives' (1992, 271). This 'empowerment model', as Coakley terms it, aims to equip young people with opportunities for social development and the tools to critically view the integration of sport into their lives.

A third definition of burnout, the commitment perspective, is proposed by Raedeke (1997). The commitment perspective emphasises that 'athletes who are entrapped or locked into the role of being an athlete are likely to burn out. This occurs when individuals do not really *want* to participate in sport but feel they *have* to maintain their involvement' (1997, p. 410 emphasis in original).

All three models of athlete burnout highlight the complexity of this multifaceted issue (for a detailed discussion of a related topic, overreaching, see chapter 14). The *stress-based model* (Smith, 1986; Gould et al., 1997) argues for an individual accounting of youth burnout in sport, the onus on change and prevention squarely placed on youth athletes' behaviour and attitudes toward training. The *empowerment model* (Coakley, 1992) situates the root causes of burnout in the social and structural

organisation of youth sport. This model seeks to remediate the imposition of adult values on children (Lee, 2004; Whitehead, 2011; Whitehead et al. 2013) while moving away from the focus on performance and winning that controls the lives of young people and doesn't provide them with opportunities to apply agency to their training. The *commitment model* (Raedeke, 1997) 'identifies the specific conditions under which elevated stress may be associated with burnout – conditions that result in athletes having psychological characteristics of entrapment' (p. 414). The last two place a focus on unidimensional identities of athletes and structural factors constraining athlete's perceived control over their participation. There is merit to all three models and each model has been re-tested within competitive swimming contexts<sup>4</sup>.

### ***Incidence and Prevalence in Swimming***

Despite the proliferation of both qualitative and quantitative examinations of burnout (Cohn, 1990; Gould et al., 1996; Cresswell and Eklund, 2006), there has been little work done on *the syndrome* specifically in a competitive swimming context. Coakley's assessment that an intervention based on the 'empowerment model' should provide changes to 'the social organisation of high performance sport programs and the conditions of training in those programs' (1992, p. 273) highlights the fact that coaches and parents have direct control over these factors in swimming environments. But what changes should be made if we are to listen to youths' suggestions?

Gould et al. (1982) conclude that the most prevalent negative factors that lead to dropout and discontinuation of swimming by youth are that they were not having enough fun, did not enjoy the pressure, found it boring, or practices were not exciting enough. Salguero et al. (2003), in their replication of Gould et al.'s (1982) questionnaire, indicate that the main reasons for dropout was related to either having other things that the youth wanted to do with their time, a lack of 'fun', and/or challenging and hard practices. Fun, enjoyment and achievement, as noted in these and other studies (Lee and Cockman, 2013; Lee, Whitehead and Balchin, 2013), are the most important values for children and youth in sport. Gould et al. go on to recommend that in order to help prevent burnout and dropout, activities that are experienced as fun and exciting 'should be incorporated into practice and meet situations' (1982, p. 163). Examples may include the introduction of games based on stroke count during aerobic training sets (*see* chapter 5).

Coach and parent control of training environments isn't the only factor involved in changing competitive swimming environments. In their survey of 182 USA swimmers, Black and Smith (2007) attempted to assess Coakley's (1992) perspective on athlete burnout. Their findings suggest that youths' control over their participation was a significant predictor of both exhaustion and devaluation of their practice and their ability (Black and Smith, 2007, p. 430). In addition, they found that their hypothesis that a higher athletic identity exclusivity would predict higher rates of burnout and exhaustion in fact functioned as a preventative measure of burnout<sup>5</sup>. In other words, those who thought of themselves more as competitive swimmers were less likely to experience burnout.

In contrast to this, Raedeke's (1997) questionnaire study of 236 USA swimmers examined athlete burnout from a commitment perspective, which focused on 'sport attraction (*want* to be involved) and sport entrapment (*have* to be involved)' (1997, p. 396). Raedeke interestingly shows that many swimmers '*did not* have a unidimensional identity' (Raedeke, 1997, p. 413, emphasis in original), identifying *only* as a swimmer. Yet, according to Raedeke, approximately twenty-five percent of those swimmers were currently or nearly experiencing burnout, which does not bode well for the field of competitive swimming.

It is important to highlight some of the factors and recommendations for avoiding dropout in competitive youth swimming<sup>6</sup>. Burnout may be a factor in dropout, yet it is hard to find specific instances of burnout amongst competitive swimmers as there have not been more than a few studies focusing on this specific issue. As well, other social and structural reasons for discontinuing swimming may also factor into a youth's decision to leave the sport, obscuring the physical and psychological issues associated with burnout. There is the likelihood that due to the training regimes instilled in the sport of swimming and the target training requirements, which tend to require many more training hours than other sports, physical and psychological burnout of swimmers may be higher than in other team sport environments. I agree with the above-mentioned authors' call for further longitudinal research into the factors associated with burnout and dropout amongst swimmers. Ethnographic approaches provide one possibility for carrying out such research.

### ***Signs and Underlying Mechanisms***

In an early study of the signs and mechanisms of burnout, Smith (1986, p. 39) highlights initial physical (low energy; chronic fatigue; increased susceptibility to illness), behavioural (decreased efficiency and inconsistent performance; inappropriate behaviour and withdrawal), and emotional signs (feelings of depression, helplessness, and anger; tension and irritability; increasingly negative attitudes toward the activity; resentment beginning to build towards external demands). Emotionally, swimmers may have feelings of entrapment and a lack of control, i.e. helplessness, in their present situation. This may manifest itself in feelings of anger towards coaches, peers, parents, the sport, and themselves. The emotional signs are closely linked to the behaviour outcomes of burnout and those swimmers experiencing burnout may begin to skip practices, exhibit inappropriate behaviour while at practices and competitions, and begin to withdraw from their swimming practice (Raedeke, 1997; Raedeke and Smith, 2004). Yet, they may also find it difficult to withdraw due to the high social constraints that peers, parents and coaches place on them.

### **Recommendations for Wellness Strategies**

#### ***Understanding the Threats to Well-Being and Observing the Signs***

If, as Raedeke (1997) suggests, emotional and physical exhaustion is the most central and the first dimension of burnout to develop, then we should begin by



looking at some of the emotional and physical threats to well-being in competitive athletes. Concerning the pressure, time commitments and intensity of training young swimmers engage in, Merglen et al. (2014) conducted a study where they measured the total number of hours of training per week by competitive athletes and measured this against their well-being. The results showed that an increase in competitive sport participation was a protective factor against poor well-being, with the athletes who participated in an average of 14 hours per week having the highest well-being scores. A caveat of this increased participation is that they also found that after 17.5 hours per week or more of competitive sport participation, well-being scores decreased. This is a significant finding for competitive swimming as youth typically train between 14 to 17 hours during their middle and late teen years. There is the potential that youth who participate in competitive swimming as their main sport score lower on reported well-being than other competitive sports where there are fewer training hours per week, for as Merglen et al. note, 'very high training loads can potentially be detrimental to athletes' physical and emotional well-being' (2014, p. 415). There is a balance to strike here between early specialisation, increased training loads, enjoyment of the activity, and autonomy in participation and control of training competencies for youth swimmers.

### ***Listening to Youth***

It is concerning to me that in a context where researchers were discussing burnout with youth, those same youth reported that they were being 'torn down;', 'broken down', 'burnt out', or 'run down' (Black and Smith, 2007, p. 431). There is no reflection in this study by either researchers or coaches as to the language youth are using to report their training. If coaches are telling youth that they will be 'burnt out', 'broken down', 'torn down', then we are only setting them up for failure, as their expectations that we give them are that we as coaches, parents, and academics, expect them to work or be worked to the point of physical and mental exhaustion. It follows from Raedeke et al.'s (1997) suggestion that emotional and physical signs of burnout are the first and most critical, that then surely, our goals and the goals of the programmes we develop for youth should not be actively running them down, despite competitive sport being 'structured by a series of performance oriented practices intended to maximise the likelihood of success, and which emerge out of the dominant norms and values that inform the sports ethic' (Platts and Smith, 2016, p. 500). Rather, we should be building them up, bolstering their self-confidence and developing the social support network inside and outside of the clubs where these young people train.

If coaches, parents, and academics take seriously the responses of young swimmers, then paying attention to the moments of frustration, lack of enjoyment, or dips in efficiency and inconsistencies in their practice is necessary (Figure 15.2).

Despite what adults say regarding their commitments to youth sport as being 'all for the kids' (Messner, 2009; Dyck, 2012), it is the *youths'* sport, not the adult organisers' activities that matter. Those moments of frustration or lack of enthusiasm and enjoyment in practice or meets can be viewed as opportunities to

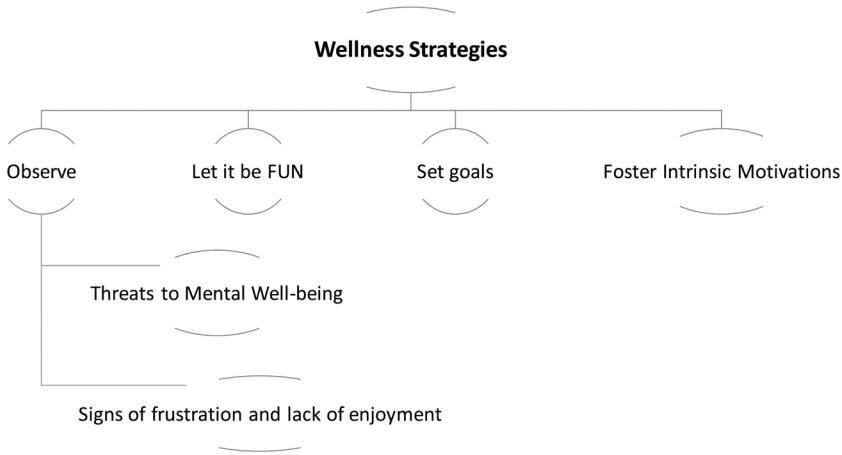


Figure 15.2 Wellness strategies.

re-think or re-structure a given practice or a training cycle to inject elements of fun, play, and enjoyment into training. This need not be done at the sacrifice of good technique or wholesale abandonment of a training cycle. Rather, it can be used to increase the social bonds between swimmers to create a more friendly and accommodating space for young athletes to learn and build confidence in their swimming and themselves. For as Faulkner and Tamminen (2016) suggest, ‘peer groups in competitive sport that promote effort and mastery may be a protective factor against developing burnout’ (p. 418). In other words, the more cohesive the positive social bonds in a squad or club, the greater chance of avoiding burnout and dropout.

**‘Having fun with it’**

A majority of youth with whom Gould et al. (1997) conducted research stressed the need to remember to play for fun. As mentioned earlier, more recent scholarship (Lee, Whitehead and Balchin, 2013) demonstrates the significance of ‘fun’ for child and youth athletes. Sammy, 16 years old, mentioned that his reasons for moving clubs was that he was no longer enjoying training, that it was no longer ‘fun’.

*They [the coaches] would just like, it was like they were just trying to churn out... national swimmers. Like, just that was it. There was no focus on how swimmers actually felt about the training and stuff. And like how we would never do technique sets, it just got so boring and it wasn't fun.... that's why I moved, 'cause it seemed like a good thing to do, in terms of like picking up swimming again and having fun with it.*

Erin, 16 years old, another swimmer who had moved to a new club mid-season, described her complicated relationship with swimming as a love-hate relationship:

*Erin:* I don't know how to explain how I feel about swimming. But I love it. But I hate it [she laughs to break the tension].

*Sean:* Is it the training? Is it the commitment?

*Erin:* No, I like that. But I hate it [she laughs again]. It doesn't make sense. It is like you love it because you are always doing it and you have, if you didn't do it you would be lost without it. But then you hate it 'cause it's hard and you are always tired, you are always hungry. You always, you can't go out because of swimming.... But then at the same time I like racing 'cause you meet new people, make new friends. I like seeing new places.

Both of these swimmers indicate that having fun is vital to their enjoyment of the sport of swimming. Again, this resonates with Faulkner and Tamminen's (2016) suggestion that peer groups, social bonds, and fun are significant factors in maintaining youths' well-being in sport. For Erin in particular, it was the striving for personal best times that was most important for her, although she did enjoy being on the podium occasionally and receiving medals for her swimming. For Sammy, the fun seemed to stem more from the camaraderie, from the social relationships he established at the clubs where he swam, as well as the acquisition and mastery of techniques.

### ***Set Goals***

It is important for swimmers, parents, and coaches to set realistic and attainable goals within a season and for the future. Taking account of the evidence-based models of athlete development (Lloyd and Oliver, 2012), coaches need to speak to each swimmer in their group, discussing qualifying goal times, targeted meets, or just to see improvement in personal best performances. Some youth may need help deciding what a realistic goal is *for them*, and it is beholden for coaches and parents to help them reach it.

Hall and Kerr (2001, pp. 232–233) suggest that practitioners (coaches) need to take account of three main points when it comes to goal setting: 1) how athletes give meaning to achievement and goals; 2) athlete's commitment to discrete goals; and 3) how changes to the motivation of athletes may affect meanings of achievement for them and the goals they are working towards. They argue that 'one can understand the motivational and performance effects of goal setting only when taking into account the meaning of achievement' (2001, p. 233) for each individual youth swimmer. In other words, this means actively pursuing what swimmers perceive as important to them in their aims and goals as swimmers, whether that be a County time, personal best for the season, or making the junior Olympic team, as well as understanding the meanings that swimmers' attach to the steps<sup>7</sup> towards that achievement.

### ***Foster Intrinsic Motivations***

Competitive swimming is an inherently boring sport where the youth spend the majority of their time staring down at a black line denoting the middle of the lane

in a pool or looking up at the ceiling if they are swimming backstroke. As Phil, a level 3 coach of a high-performance squad, told me while standing on the pool deck during a long aerobic workout, “There are only so many ways you can say, “You see that wall over there? I want you to swim down there. When you get there, touch the wall, turn around, and swim back to this wall. Then do it again.” Youth will continue in an activity long after they have stopped enjoying it for a variety of reasons including not wanting to disappoint parents and coaches, or the fear of losing their friend group (Coakley, 1992). Many of these are extrinsic motivations. As I have noted throughout this chapter, young people are active social agents and have designs as to what they want out of their participation in competitive swimming. Yet listening to youths’ concerns and discerning what their intrinsic motivations are may seem an insurmountably large hurdle.

Fostering intrinsic motivation, ‘doing an activity for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself’ (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p. 71), is a dialectic process between youth and coaches. Youth are as much consumers of health and fitness discourses as adults but may not be as attuned to the subtle ideological positions of sport as sites that instill such qualities as teamwork, hard work, accountability, and moral and ethical agendas.<sup>8</sup> (see Dyck, 2012 for an example of community sport as a site for instilling values into children). According to Ryan and Deci (2000, p. 70), ‘choice, acknowledgement of feelings, and opportunities for self-direction [provided by coaches] were found to enhance intrinsic motivation because they allow [swimmers] a greater feeling of autonomy’. In other words, the competence of the athlete, autonomy of training and competition, and the relatedness of the activity all matter<sup>9</sup>. Thus, finding the aspects that youth enjoy about swimming, discussing those with swimmers, and tailoring their practices, workouts, and experiences at their swimming club to individual preferences will bolster intrinsic motivation in youth swimmers.

Part of the issue with a sport like swimming is that it requires a fair amount of aerobic work and maintenance to continuously perform at specified levels, be they County, Regional, or National ranked qualifications. These aerobic maintenance practices are not inherently boring but certainly have the potential to be tedious in the built environment of the swimming pool (McPherson et al., 1980; see Gould et al., 1982). Building a positive swimming space and fostering an environment of inclusion as well as friendly competition in a squad can provide some tangible benefits to keeping swimmers motivated to train, especially during the months where outdoor activities begin to dominate the schedules of their school peers. Hence the suggestions in these sections has been for coaches and parents to invest extra resources into listening to youth swimmers, injecting aspects of fun into practice and competition, and helping youth set appropriate and realistic goals while fostering youths’ motivations for participating in competitive swimming.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter presented examples from the literature surrounding mental health and well-being, burnout, and dropout in swimming, as well as presenting some of my own research findings in this area. The health and well-being of any youth

athlete is complex and multifaceted, of which many factors may influence the positive or ill outcomes of training and competition on mental health. If we are to foster health and well-being amongst youth swimmers and develop further strategies for wellness then the youth should be the first ones we consult, asking what *their* goals are, *their* reasons for continued participation in the squad, club, and sport, and nurturing *each individual athlete* in uniquely tailored ways that best develop their potentials. It is not a one-size-fits-all model, and it requires a holistic approach to the practice of youth swimming as a physical and social activity where not all athletes will necessarily continue down talent pathways and become elite or professional swimmers, nor will all want to go down those paths. Indeed, there is much variation of different skills and abilities, competencies and purposes amongst youth enrolled in competitive swimming programmes.

Youth have multiple identities in and out of swimming, and if youth are labeled with the unidimensional identity of ‘competitive swimmer’, then their prospects may be stifled. Instead, options for leisure swimming, lifeguarding, and even pathways into coaching can be pointed out to youth who seem less inclined to strive for Olympic glory. An integrated approach to these phenomena through both qualitative measures and qualitative long-term ethnographic studies is one interdisciplinary way forward to keep youth healthy in sport and advance the academic discourse on youth swimming. Our collective responsibility as coaches, parents, and academics is to place the needs and wants of the youth under our care ahead of winning medals. With that in mind, youth will more likely be able to achieve their potentials in competitive swimming and have fun doing so.

## Notes

- 1 In many ways, this fulfillment model shares similarities to Malsow’s (2016) hierarchy of needs and attainment of self-actualisation.
- 2 For resources on ethnographic methods see Cerwonka and Malkki (2007), DeWalt and DeWalt (2011), Emerson et al. (2011), and Robben and Sluka eds. (2012).
- 3 Canada and Australia both use Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) trajectories for defining those boundaries while coaching swimmers. The UK follows a similar model.
- 4 For stress-based athlete burnout model see Gould et al. (1996a; 1996b; 1997). For an empowerment model see Black and Smith (2007). For a commitment perspective model see Raedeke and Smith (2001; 2004). For a systematic review of dropout in competitive swimming see Monteiro et al. (2017).
- 5 Athletic identity exclusivity is the amount to which a youth identifies themselves singularly as an athlete (i.e. swimmer) over other identity characteristics (i.e. pianist, teenager, girlfriend, sibling).
- 6 Larson et al. (2019) reviewed survey data of 137 Canadian youth swimmers between the ages of 12 and 17 years enrolled in summer swim clubs to determine the link between early specialisation and burnout or dropout in competitive swimming. Their findings suggest that ‘extensive early engagement in one sport may not be troublesome, as long as it is accompanied by positive mediating conditions, particularly enjoyment, autonomy, and competency’ (2019, p. 52) when it comes to burnout and dropout.
- 7 For more information about the classic ‘SMART’ approach to goal settings (i.e. Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-frame), and a critique of this method see Day and Tosey (2011).

- 8 See Dyck (2012) for an example of the use of community sports as sites for instilling values into children.
- 9 These also correspond to what in Self-Determination Theory is identified as three necessary psychological needs for enhanced self-motivation and mental health.

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