

Seton Swimming Awards – '21-'22
Coach Koehr's Talk

How to Sheath Your Sword in Meekness

- Introduction

- Anyone who knows me at all, knows that **I love sports – and I love to win.**
 - **No one bristles more** than me when the words “*winning doesn't matter*” come out of someone's mouth within earshot of me.
 - As parents and/or coaches, we naturally want our children to succeed, but
 - **How do we balance** our very real desires
 - for our **kids to be the best**
 - with ensuring that we first and foremost **focus on the formation of their whole person?**
 - **Pope St. John Paul II**, himself a lover of sport, explored these challenges during a homily on Oct. 29, 2000, on the occasion of a jubilee of sportspeople.
 - “*Playing sports has become very important today, since it can encourage young people to develop important values such as loyalty, perseverance, friendship, sharing and solidarity,*” he said.
 - But he also wisely acknowledged that an examination of conscience is necessary to ensure that sport achieves these positive goals while avoiding any possible pitfalls.
 - “*The educational and spiritual potential of sport must make believers and people of goodwill united and determined in challenging every distorted aspect that can intrude, recognizing it as a phenomenon opposed to the full development of the individual and to his enjoyment of life,*” he said.
- How should we **reconcile our desire to win with our desire to keep sports in its proper place in our lives?**
 - They way **I attempt to do that is with our GEMS,**
 - Specifically, the “M”, Meekness.
 - You've heard me speak of Meekness often, but **let's explore it a bit more deeply**
 - And then talk about **what it takes to become Meek.**

- **What is Meekness?**

- You've all heard this before, but just to lay some groundwork here, my definition of Meekness is:
 - ***“Meekness is neither timidity nor capitulation. Meekness is the spiritual strength to help you opponent over the bar that you raised by winning”***
- Jordan Peterson, not surprisingly, said it better than me”
 - ***“In the New Testament, there’s a line, ‘The Meek shall inherit the earth’***
 - ***That line always bothered me.***
 - ***No way, that’s not right.***
 - ***‘Meek’ is not a good word – or it has moved in the 300 years or so since it was translated***
 - ***‘Meek’ does not mean ‘meek’, that’s wrong.***
 - ***What it means is this: ‘Those who have weapons and know how to use them, but still keep them sheathed, shall inherit the earth.’***
 - ***That’s a lot different, man. That’s a lot better.***
 - ***It’s so great.***
 - ***One of things I tell young men, well young women as well, but the young men really need to hear this more I think, is that ‘you should be a monster’.***
 - ***Because everyone says, well, ‘you should be harmless, virtuous, you shouldn’t do anyone any harm’.***
 - ***You should sheath your competitive instinct.***
 - ***You shouldn’t try to win.***
 - ***You don’t want to be too aggressive.***
 - ***You don’t want to be too assertive.***
 - ***You want to take a back seat.***
 - ***No! Wrong!***
 - ***You should be a monster, an absolute monster – and then you should learn how to control it.***
- Anyone who knows me well is completely unsurprised that I love Jordan Peterson after that.
- So **where is the balance** between trying to win and trying to develop the whole person?
 - It’s **in the “control”** that Peterson talks about
 - **Meekness is not a lack of passion**

- **It is the direction of that passion**
- Directing your passions towards good.
- **Easier said than done**
 - Particularly if you are a very passionate person.

How Do You Become Meek?

- **As a particularly passionate person** who is not known for concepts like “moderation”,
 - I’ve spent a great deal of time thinking about Peterson’s requirement for “control”.
 - **What can help us** as swimmers, divers, parents and coaches
 - to **keep our passions** about youth sports, in general, and
 - high school swimming, in particular,
 - **in “control”**
 - And directed toward good
- **To be Meek, we need some Perspective**
 - My favorite passage of the Bible is the **Parable of the Talents**
 - You remember the story?
 - The Master went on a journey and called in his three (3) servants:
 - To one he gave five (5) Talents, to one he gave two (2) Talents, and to one he gave one (1) Talent
 - **“to each according to his ability”**
 - Then the servants with five (5) and two (2) doubled what they had
 - But the one with only one (1) Talent buried his
 - When the Master returned home, he settled accounts.
 - To the ones with five (5) and two (2) Talents, he was well pleased:
 - **“Well done my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your Master’s joy.”**
 - But to the servant who buried his Talent out of fear that he might fail, he was not pleased at all.
 - **“You wicked, lazy servant!”**
 - **“Throw this useless servant into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.”**
 - Whoa!
 - I have spent a lot of time pondering that parable:

- Jesus only had 1,000 days, so I **don't think he was saying anything superfluous.**
 - So **why** did Jesus choose to **tell that story.**"
- Is there **more to our path to heaven than just being a "good" person?**
 - Surely, you can be a "good" person
 - Without working really hard, or
 - Without continually improving yourself, or
 - Without taking any risks
 - Can't you?
 - So, there **must be more to being a "good" person** that just being pious, loving, and kind.
- More to the point we are discussing here though
 - Is there a reason **why**, in Jesus' story, the **Master gave a different number of Talents to each servant?**
 - In my 58 years in this world, I've noticed that it is quite normal to see that the **people around me start with different levels of ability** in various things.
 - Doesn't the fact that Jesus told this story sort of imply that that is **part of God's plan?**
 - If God wanted us all to be great swimmers in the objective sense, wouldn't he have made us all 6'5" tall with big muscles, long arms, and tiny hips?
- And isn't it interesting that the Master **seemed equally pleased** with the servant who returned five (5) Talents and the servant who returned two (2)?
- In pondering this Parable, **the inescapable conclusions** I come to are these:
 - **There IS more to being a "good" person that just being pious, loving, and kind,**
 - It doesn't matter how many Talents we have been given, **as long as we use them to the best of our ability,** and
 - If we have a talent and are afraid to use it, that is a waste of a gift from God.
- It is less common today, but almost **all boys of my generation we played baseball** every spring.
 - After an incredibly undistinguished career on the diamond, I entered my final year in baseball as a **12-year-old** on a recreational league team called **Beacon Barber Shop**
 - I was the kid who **only got 1 Talent.**

- I was always **jealous of Mike Spittle**
 - He was only 12-years old, but he had a **vein down his massive bicep**
 - He even had hair under his arms!
 - He was left-handed and used this massive bat with an extra fat end to smash home runs over the right field fence seemingly every other time he got up to bat.
- **My coach, Mr. Jackson**, was one of the three (3) best coaches I ever had in my life
 - Behind only
 - Mr. Funderburk, my 80-lb football coach and
 - Harry Sober, my high school swimming coach at Bishop Ireton
 - Mr. Jackson **knew my limitations** and always seemed to find a way to work with what little I had.
 - For instance, he always **had me play 3rd base when Mike Spittle was pitching**, because no one could ever get the bat around fast enough to hit it to third base.
 - But more impactfully, he found **a way for me to be successful at the plate**
 - He gave me a 26” bat and had me stand virtually facing the pitcher
 - He told me to keep my back elbow high and bring it down with a half swing into the ball
 - My goal was just to **pop it over 2nd base** which was less than 85 feet from the plate.
 - It was kind of **embarrassing actually**
 - But it worked!
 - It worked so well, that I spent the bulk of the season batting 2nd in the line-up so that I could be on base when Mike Spittle hit a home run.
 - With Mr. Jackson’s help, **I had found my niche** with my one little Talent
- I learned to get some **perspective on swimming early in my career as a parent**
 - I got into coaching because I had a **kid who I thought was a great swimmer.**
 - When you are a parent with such a kid, it is **easy to lose perspective.**

- It can be pretty exciting when your kid wins the State Championship and earns All-America honors.
 - Then he went on to swim at college, and I was reminded of something I already knew, but hadn't fully internalized
 - **No matter how good you are**, unless you are the best on the planet, **there is always someone better**
 - Even Coach Palazzo ran into swimmers in his life who were a lot faster than he was.
- My adult boys **make fun of my lack of natural athletic ability**, but
 - I don't think any one of them **doubts my determination**
 - You may be able to perform better than me, but **you will never try harder than me**
 - That's how you all should think, no matter how many Talents you got.
- That's where you can get some perspective
 - Try to win as if winning is all that matters.
 - But if you lose to someone with more Talents
 - **after doing the best you possibly could** with the Talents that God gave you,
 - then you can be **completely justified in your happiness** about your performance
 - If you know in your heart that you did your best, **then you are free to be able to be happy about your competitor's performance.**
- To be Meek, **don't assign our own personal worth to any talent** or ability that we have
 - **I don't love you more because you are a great swimmer**
 - If you can be a great swimmer, then **I want you to be a great swimmer because I love you**, not the other way around,
 - I don't love you less if you will never be a great swimmer
 - **I want you to be a better swimmer because I love you.**
 - **If you have some perspective about your abilities, or the abilities of your child, it is much easier to appreciate someone else's ability.**
- **It is that perspective that allows you to be Meek**
 - **To sheath your sword because you have the control to know when it is best used**

- **To be Meek, we need some Confidence:**
 - We need to have built an **inner confidence that can only come with experiences overcoming adversity**
 - That's why, when I see my own kids encountering adversity, I'm often slow to react
 - And I do the same with you – and your kids
 - I will often **put you guys in difficult situations on purpose**
 - If I didn't know you could handle it, I wouldn't put you there.
 - And that's why I get so upset when you try to get another coach to let you out of swimming something
 - Nope – allowing one of you to skip an event is up to me and me alone
 - **No one can tell you are not good enough unless you have never put yourself out there to find out**
 - When I tell you to **take the first 50 of your 100 out like the race was only 50 yards long**, I'm not expecting you to swim the perfect race
 - What I am doing is trying to get you to **find your limit**
 - If you can push yourself to your limit, you'll build real confidence
 - When I give you grief because you **had too much left at the end of a 500**, I'm trying to help you overcome your fears
 - I love asking you swimmers, **“at what point in the race did your arms and legs go numb?”**
 - You sometimes look at me like I have one-eye
 - **I know you can do more**
 - Deep inside **you know it too**, but
 - You just don't have the confidence yet to risk
 - The pain, or
 - The failure
 - **Once you've put yourself out there and overcome, no one will ever be able to tell you that you are not good enough**
 - You have **put yourself out there in some amazing ways** this season. Some of you
 - Swam or Dove in against the best competition in the State in the Championship or Consolation Finals at the State Championship
 - **Died at the end of a 200 Free** because you took it out so fast
 - **Completed 200 laps** at the CF swim-a-thon for the first time
 - **Swam the 500 Free** in a public race for the first time
 - Got that reverse dive after back-splating multiple times

- Competed in a 100-yard race for the first time
 - Or just **dove off the high blocks** at the Freedom Center in public for the first time
 - In 2002, **I completed an Ironman triathlon**
 - **Yes, it took me 15 hours and 20 minutes**, and I finished in the dark about 40 minutes before they closed the course,
 - **but I apologize to no man!**
 - Even Coach Palazzo hasn't done an Ironman Triathlon
- Once you have taken the risk to willingly put yourself in a massively uncomfortable situation, you never need to apologize to any man either
 - **And if you can get there, you can be happy for a competitor**
- At Seton Swimming, **we are not trying to create “good boys and girls”**.
 - I'm trying to create **strong and generous men and women capable of doing good and thinking of others before themselves**
 - Those people are the ones who have a **hardened confidence that has been forged in the fires of discomfort**
- **It is that confidence that allows you to be Meek**
 - **To sheath your sword because you know that you know how to use it.**
- **To be Meek, we need Intimacy**
 - I was asking the coaches for some input on things that happened this season for the special awards that we will have in a moment, and I got this great story from Coach Jerry Zadnik:
 - ***“One striking moment I saw this season was a Seton swimmer, waiting for her heat to start, turns to the swimmer behind her in line for the next heat.***
 - ***They meet and chat for a moment before their swim.***
 - ***When the Seton swimmer finishes her swim, she gets out of the water, stayed at the starting block and cheers for the swimmer she just met from an opposing team *by name*.***
 - ***When the second girl got out of the water she seemed to be beaming like she just made a new best friend.***
 - ***They shook hands congratulating each other, talked for a bit and went back to their teams smiling.***
 - ***Realize what just happened:***

- *The Seton swimmer reached out and met her opponent and cheers for a faster swimmer from another team by name.*
 - *When our young people reach outside of themselves like that... it matters. ...that's exactly what Seton Swimming encourages the swimmers to do by living our GEMS.*
 - *Of course, there are no enemies on the pool deck, but that that's as close as we get to "love your enemies" in swimming"*
- I know it might be a bit of a personality thing, but **I've gotten to know a lot of our competitors personally.**
 - I enjoy getting to know them because it makes the competition more fun for me
 - At States, I was talking to the kid who eventually got the Bronze medal in 50 Free
 - **Jackson Kiland** from Christchurch.
 - He was a big personality kind of kid
 - I was giving him some good-natured grief about breathing so many times in a 21 second 50 Freestyle
 - He suddenly asked me, "**Is Ross Palazzo one of your coaches?**"
 - I said "Yes, there he is right there"
 - Jackson told me, "I'm from Hudson [Ohio], and Ross Palazzo was one my heroes when I was a little kid."
 - Needless to say, it was a **whole lot easier to cheer for Jackson** that night in the Finals
- As I'm sure you know from my blog posts and the live streams, I've gotten to **know most of the swimmers and parents from our arch-rival Trinity Christian** over the years.
 - Hasn't that made the big battles with them a lot healthier?
 - And a lot more fun?
 - You better believe that when we lost the regular season conference championship to them by a single point
 - **I was not a happy camper**
 - I'm still not, truth be told
 - But **one thing that made it a lot easier for me to accept was the smiles on the faces** of swimmers, coaches, and parents that had become my friends.
 - "Oh well" I thought, "At least somebody's happy."
 - When I went back and analyzed the results, **I didn't just find my huge mistakes**

- I also found that **they had swum very well**, particularly two lesser-known young 8th graders who I was able to highlight in my blog
 - Much to their mothers' delight I'll tell you 😊
 - It was a great example of how **we had competed in a way that made our competitors better**
 - That is Meekness in action
 - Then, when we got to States, the Trinity Captains gave me a **bag of handwritten notes** from everyone on their team to everyone on our team.
 - I'm sure that **I wasn't the only one who felt valued**, as a coach and as a person, by the team with whom we have had so many hard-fought battles
 - I **carried the note from Josh Kim** with the University of Michigan logo on it around in my pocket for the rest of the weekend.
 - Wasn't it so much easier to think of Trinity Christian as our fellow VCAC school rather than our arch-rival because we knew them as people?
- It turns out that it is a **lot easier to have negative feelings about a concept or entity than it is to have them about a person** you have gone to the trouble to get to know.
 - Once you know a person, you have more of an ability to appreciate them
 - And that is one thing that will help you appreciate their success.
 - I was recently at an event in Georgia, and I heard someone tell me:
 - **If I see you as broken, I'll fix you**
 - **If I see you as hurting, I'll heal you**
 - **But the moment I value you, I'll serve you.**
- **It is that intimacy that allows you to be Meek**
 - **To sheath your sword because you just want to make each other better**

Conclusion

- Basil W. Maturin, in his book **Christian Self-Mastery**, wrote:
 - ***“Meekness is the blending of gentleness and strength —***
 - ***a strength that has been won by victory over self and passion, and***
 - ***a gentleness that shows that this victory is the outcome of no harshness and bitterness toward self or the world,***

- *but of love.*
 - *Test true meekness by the severest trials to which it can be put,*
 - *and you will find in it no flaw of weakness or harshness,*
 - *but a dauntless courage of the loftiest kind and an inexhaustible gentleness.”*
- If you are **trying to grow in the virtue** of Meekness, bring with you
 - the **Perspective** that comes from our Catholic faith
 - the **Confidence** that come with your experiences in willingly facing and overcoming adversity, and
 - the **Intimacy** that comes with Jesus’ commandment to love your neighbor
- **With those tools**, I think all of us
 - Swimmers, Coaches – and Parents
 - Will be better equipped **to use our opportunities in high school athletics to grow into the strong and generous people** that God wants us to be.