

The JOURNAL

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When your swimmers complain about cold water this time of year, just show them THIS!

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Life Changing Leadership at Work

Michael J. Stott

Team captains affect team culture and performance like few other dynamics. That said, all coaches, experienced and inexperienced alike, have encountered the good, bad and ugly of the selection process and the ongoing maturation of the chosen few.

Regarding captain selection, as a coach whose athletes won multiple state championships, I have

- * Had epiphanies while watching average swimmers mentor younger teammates and ultimately emerge as captains
- * Incurred the wrath of angry parents
- * Watched best friends turn sworn enemies
- * Experienced the inefficiency of an all senior captain system
- * Enjoyed the energy and positivity that has stemmed from well-organized and respected team leaders

And that's just for starters.

Below are words of wisdom from six highly successful coaches whose varying methods on captain selection have proven highly effective. Early on in my coaching days I wish I'd had the benefit of their counsel.

Jeremy Wade – The Woodlands

In 2023 Wade's Highlander girls won their second UIL 6A Texas state championship in the last two years. His boys finished second.



I have a senior BBQ at the beginning of the year and tell team members what I expect from them to carry on our tradition of excellence. We talk about leaving a legacy of how they want to be remembered.

My view of a leader is as a servant. To be a good leader you must be a good servant.

I don't appoint or have a vote on captains at the beginning of the year. I think it creates too much drama. Feelings get hurt... and to be honest, no one has proven themselves to the incoming freshman class as to what they bring to the table as a leader. I have every senior lead the team. It is something each one can put on applications, resumes, etc.

We vote on a leadership award at the end of the season to be presented at our banquet. Before we vote I tell team members to vote for whom they thought led the team and served them best.

I have done it this way for the past 17 years and have had no

drama. It's awkward at the beginning of the year as to who is really going to step up. But I have not been disappointed even once in the team's vote at season's end. Sometimes I give multiple leadership awards when the voting is extremely close.

Susan Mayfield



A Stanford All-American, Mayfield in her eight years as coach led her girls (Lakeside School, Seattle, Wash.) to three 3A state championships and three second place finishes.

"At Lakeside we only had senior captains. The numbers varied based on the size of the class and how many the coaches thought would make strong captains and were deserving of the opportunity. Most years we had three-to-four captains for a team of 35-40," says Mayfield.

"We selected captains at the end of the high school season for the following year. Junior candidates had to have been on the team at least two of their three years of high school.

"We asked interested juniors to complete a questionnaire. The coaches also 'interviewed' them one-on-one. Question examples were: Why do you want to be captain? What is something new you would bring to the team? What is something you would need to work on in order to be an effective captain? The main purpose of this process was to show the athletes that they had to put in time and effort to become a captain, and it wasn't a job to be taken lightly. We wanted athletes who felt a level of additional commitment to the team and who were interested in continuously building/improving the program.

"We then had the current team members nominate juniors who had shown interest in being named captain. Typically team members could nominate up to three. We asked the team to also explain in writing why they were nominating these athletes. The goal was encourage the team to really focus on who they saw as a leader and who exemplified the qualities they wanted represented.

"Based on the interviews and the nominations, the coaching staff discussed the results. We aimed to create a captain's group that had shown ongoing commitment to the team and strong leadership qualities. Ideally, the group would naturally cover the entire team, meaning they were of varying speeds and different personalities — essentially connecting with every-

one across the team.

"We shared with the team that the coaches had the final say on captains, both who and how many. In almost every case, the girls the team nominated were the same ones that the coaches saw as the best next group to lead the team.

"Once we made a decision, the coaches met with, or called the girls, who were not selected to let them know our decision prior to the team announcement. At the same time we made calls to the selected captains.

Pros

"The positives to our method was involving the team in the process and hopefully avoiding a popularity contest while still allowing coaches to have the final say. In practice the coaches worked very closely with the captains so we wanted to be sure it was a group who could best represent the team.

We required the candidates to actually say they wanted to be captain and explain why. We asked quite a bit of our captains, so the coaches always wanted to be sure the girls weren't just using the opportunity for a resume bullet point but truly wanted to be captain and were willing to put in more time than other seasons to support the team and coaches.

"A small captain's group allowed us to work more easily together, in terms of conducting meetings, assigning tasks and managing social and team activities. Having a smaller group made it easier to hold captains accountable.

Cons

Because some senior classes on the team were very large (one year we had 16 seniors out of 40 total team members), not everyone who would have been a strong captain had the chance to be in that position. We never had more than four captains, as we assumed any larger of a group may dilute the effectiveness of the captains and also might make it more challenging to coordinate captains meetings and other communication.

Of course in some instances some girls were very disappointed that they were not selected. For those few seniors not being a captain seemed to take away from the overall joy of the team. In those cases the coaches tried to find ways to include ALL the seniors as leaders and not just put everything on the captains. In this way all the seniors were given opportunities to be seen as leaders. In the best cases, girls who were not selected as captain became some of the strongest leaders on the team, just without the title of captain.'

"At times we talked about just having 'senior leaders and not specific named captains, but we had yet to try this approach while I was coaching.



Tim Sirois – Highland Park High School



Coached the Highland Park (Ill.) High School boys team for 21 years; former president of NISCA and Illinois High School Swimming and Diving Association.

I always selected the captains with a lot of input and discussion from my coaching staff. We placed no restrictions on grade in school, although it was almost always seniors. There were years when I selected a junior or all juniors. Being named captain as an underclassman did not necessarily mean being named captain in the following season.

There were also no restrictions on how many captains were chosen though I typically went with one, two or three, depending on whom we felt fit what we were looking for.

Throughout the season, we looked and listened for things that set the underclassmen apart in terms of leadership and then discussed them in our coaching meetings. We considered traits like arriving early, staying late, asking questions, looking out for teammates, receptiveness to coaching, coaching peers and how their peers received the advice they gave. By the time the season was over, we had a really good idea of who would be the next captains.

The role of captain is important in how it contributes to our team environment and atmosphere. We want the upperclassmen to be great role models and leaders, regardless of whether they are named as captain. We look for the upper classmen to support the freshmen in their transition into high school and to keep that support for each athlete through their high school careers. We want everyone involved in the team atmosphere and to feel like they have a role in contributing. Again, the captains are the leaders.

The advantages to this method are:

As coaches, it is our choice and we have to live with any mistakes that are made. As a result, when a mistake is made, we look to correct it for the future. Honestly, we really have been happy for a long time with the choices made and the resulting team atmosphere that has improved and sustained our team culture.

Since the athletes know our selection process we believe it translates to hard work in practice and better results in meets. We see a lot of peer coaching and athletes caring for one another.

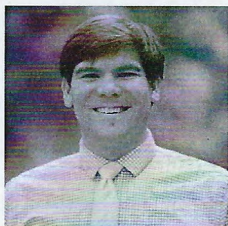
Some cons:

When we had a smaller group of athletes with the desired leadership attributes there was a feeling among some team members that the coaches played favorites in the captain selection

process. That was a learning curve for our coaching staff. We realized that we needed to do a better job working to get everyone more involved in the team atmosphere.

There were some athletes who came out for the team with whom I was unfamiliar. They contributed to the team, but not having gotten to know them earlier they were not in the running to be named as a captain.

Greg Guldin -- St. Andrew's School



Currently an assistant swim coach at St. Andrew's School. While at Woodberry Forest (Va.) he was president of the VISAA Swimming and Diving Coaches Association and coached his teams to perennial top three finishes including a state championship.

As for captaincy the process I eventually adopted was:

1) Nominations - anyone on the previous year's team was able to nominate anyone on the current year's team. When doing so they had to write a thorough reason explaining their selection. Athletes were not permitted to self-nominate and, in order to become a candidate, needed to receive at least two nominations.

2) All candidates had an individual meeting with me and, maybe, my assistant coach(es) where we explained the role and our expectations of those in it. Candidates were given a period of time to consider our thoughts, ask questions and ultimately accept or decline their nomination.

3) The names of those who accepted their nomination were placed on a ballot, in alphabetical order. Everyone on the team had a chance to vote for up to two people; candidates were allowed to vote for themselves. We tallied the votes as a reference point. In most instances, we went with the wisdom of the group. However, we always reserved the right to adjust the vote if deemed necessary.

We often debated whether it would be better to vote for captains at the end of each season or at the beginning of the following one. We dabbled with both and I am not convinced either was better.

We may have had a year where we only had one captain -- mainly because of the small team size. But I generally tried to aim for two captains. If there was a strong reason to have three, I went with that.

There was not a requirement that captains be seniors... captains were those who most embodied our team values -- which were a cornerstone of everything we were trying to accomplish as a team.

There is a lot of discussion on the role of captains in today's world. Should there be more of a leadership squad? Should there be no captains at all? Is everyone a leader, etc., etc., etc. I am a firm believer in captains because a unique and critical relationship forms between the captains and the coaches

which, when functioning at its peak, empowers the team to achieve great things. A captain is not able to function, however, if one does not also teach others on the team to lead by lending their followership to the captains. Everyone on a team does, in some way, lead... but if an ego gets involved where someone is more interested in one's own role, performance or achievement, it can all fall apart pretty quickly. So it is important to discuss with the team the role of the captains... and it is important for the captains to practice servant leadership -- i.e. serve their team.

I also believe that captains do not innately know how to lead. It is the role of the coach to educate and draw awareness to the captains about everything that the coach sees -- the things that are going well and the areas in need of improvement. I admit I was a bit over the top about this... in fact, learned after the fact that each year, captains passed along to the next captains some "advice on how to deal with Guldin."

But the underlying tenet of our whole program was working together for something worth having. And to do that we all had to have each other's backs -- the coaches have the captain's, the captains have the team's, the team have the coaches and the coaches have the team's.

The downside to captains is that not everyone feels like their voice matters equally... but if you and your captains are doing their jobs, that feeling will never reveal its ugly head.

Jim Koehr -- Seton School (Manassas, VA)



Koehr, a businessman and entrepreneur by trade, got involved with Seton swimming more than 20 years ago. Shortly thereafter he became coach, galvanized the swim team and the school community while winning ten VISAA Division titles. He was also heavily involved in VISAA administration serving as secretary for 14 years and state championship meet host or co-host for seven.

The process I use to pick captains is quite structured.

1. Right after the state meet, I post a blog describing what I am looking for in a captain. 2023 blog entry: setonswimming.org/help-the-coaches-select-next-seasons-captains/
2. The blog includes a poll using Google Forms. I generally list all rising seniors and juniors. My team is so big, there is really no reason for me to go below that.
3. Seton Swimming is a benevolent dictatorship, so using poll results, I make a preliminary selection that I run by all of the coaches. With 113 kids on the team, I generally pick three or four boys and three or four girls. Then I designate one of them the "Captain of Captains" so I have a primary

kid to deal with.

4. At the awards banquet each year, I give a talk to introduce them to the team. The selection of candidates is based on three inputs:

- ⇒ How the coaches saw them live Seton's GEMS value system (Gratitude, Excellence, Meekness and Sacrifice) all season long
- ⇒ What their teammates thought, particularly for candidates below rising seniors
- ⇒ How much I think I can develop them into leaders.

At the banquet I announce which candidates are eligible for captain. I call them up by name.

A. It is not a simple vote, but responses definitely carry weight. I have candidates speak publicly to their level of commitment for the position.

B. I reread the description of our expectations on the web site, ask them to think about it and then let me know. I expect them to prioritize their commitment to the team and attend every meet, particularly the championship meets. We discuss conflicts with USA Swimming meets in separate conversations.

If candidates decide that they cannot make the required level of commitment for whatever reason, it is no big deal. However, we want them to know that both the coaches and their teammates think they would be a good captain. The choice is theirs. Then I wait to hear from them individually.

This process has worked very well. It allows me to start the season with the captains in place so I can get things organized – especially on the very first day of practice when we have 30 or more new kids that I've never seen before.

Don Heidary –Miramonte High School (Calif.), Co-founder of Orinda Aquatics



Former ASCA president and current World Swim Coaches Association board member. Along with his brother he is one of the world's leading experts on team character and culture.

We have seen countless kids come into programs nervous, intimidated, self-conscious and with no vision or foresight of being a role model, let alone a leader or one who inspires. Yet, experience shows that when coaches recognize potential in young adults and nurture leadership traits, truly life changing things can happen for both the unassuming athlete and the team. A corollary is that team members see leadership not as a product of performance, but of service. Below are two examples.

Where Leadership Transcends Speed

Zoe and Caitlan

I vividly remember that first day of the high school season. The team was split into varsity and junior varsity groups -- 40 and 60 swimmers respectively, training side-by-side. At the beginning of the year, expectations are low for the Junior Varsity group on all fronts; technique, training ability, organization and maturity. It is always a major work in progress and a very steep learning curve as these kids come primarily from the summer league and even a few from their own backyard pool.

On this day I was trying to generally assess both groups. As I came to the lanes of the Junior Varsity group, two members stood out. They were in the middle two lanes. They were leading their lanes, shouting out send-offs, encouraging others, focusing on the set details and smiling the entire time. I watched them for a while and walked over to the JV coach and told him that those two will be leading this entire program (very competitive in Northern California) one day. He asked how I could say that so early in the year, with novice swimmers, on the JV team. I told him they were innate leaders, driven to make a positive impact.

Each year they grew in their roles on the team, and we rewarded them with more responsibility. As juniors, they moved to the varsity group (not by time but by effort) and they were both elected team captain. Concluding their senior year, they were voted Co-Most Inspirational Award winners and left as somewhat iconic figures in the programs' history.

They both enthusiastically admit the program changed their lives. And the staff would unequivocally say they dramatically changed the program.

The Leader Within

Evan

Imagine a deep booming voice leading a team of 150 members cheering for one of the top high school teams in the nation (second at the California CIF state championships). And imagine that same person making sure all of lane lines are in and secured before every workout, and then removed at the end of the workout. Can you imagine that same swimmer beginning his high school career as an unassuming, unathletic, shy (self-proclaimed negative) introvert. The transformation was near miraculous yet further evidence of the unlimited growth potential that comes from sport and from teams that promote and recognize leadership potential. He was not only recognized as a team captain but also won our Inspirational Award.

Below is an excerpt from his senior letter.

"I used to be a negative guy, thinking about how cold it was outside and when I would get to go home and get in the shower. However, I've changed from, "do I have to help?" to "how can I help," and now I am the one who people come to with those questions. I was just trying to have a more positive perspective, thinking it would make me a little bit happier day-to-day. After a few months, however, I became a different person. I essentially

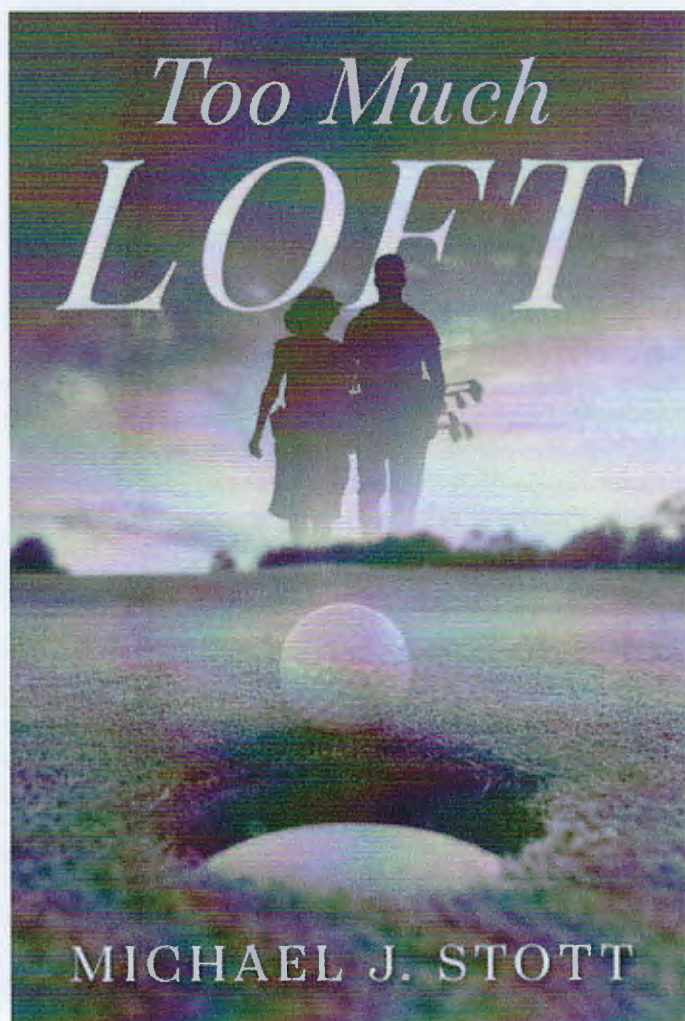
stopped saying, "I have to" and began enjoying opportunities that arose. Every time anything happened, I would think about all the good things that would come out of it. The minor shift in my vocabulary ended up completely transforming my outlook on the world. It changed from just enjoying my time in the pool to truly feeling content with how I live my life, knowing that I am making a positive contribution to others."

Disability to Empowerment

Megan

Our greatest story of growth and inspiration comes from a little girl who lost a leg to cancer at age seven. She joined the local summer-league team where her older brother was a member. After a few years there, she moved on to the year-round club team and confidently joined the high school team. She insisted on being treated no differently than any other member of the team, yes, even on kick sets.

She emerged as a beloved team captain and Inspirational Award winner. She led by resilience, work ethic and with an infectious positive attitude. She proved that the only real disability in life is a negative attitude. She went on to compete in college for four years and to become a multiple Paralympic finalist.



Note from Megan

"When I first joined the team, I was antisocial, negative and not very competitive. I lacked talent and character. Four years later, I have changed in countless ways. While my times have dropped, my biggest improvements have been in my attitude and perspective on life. Before, I was constantly frustrated with the fact that I couldn't keep up with my peers and teammates in the pool. I came to learn that my swimming experience was not defined by my times. Over the years, I embraced qualities like humility and sportsmanship and I learned to incorporate positivity in every aspect of my life. I know that the lessons I have learned will absolutely help me excel in my future endeavors both in and out of the pool, and it is humbling to know that I have had a positive impact on others."

All of which is to say, leadership can be life changing.



Michael J. Stott is an ASCA Level 5 coach, golf and swimming writer. His critically acclaimed coming-of-age golf novel, "Too Much Loft," is in its third printing, and is available from store.Bookbaby.com, Amazon, B&N and distributors worldwide.