

Hard Fun

By John Leonard

I enjoy oxymoron's. I love Jumbo Shrimp. Military Intelligence. Parking in the Driveway. Driving on the Parkway. You know.

Last week, an African friend of mine sent me an email thanking me for an article I had written in the 80's. It was called simply, "Hard." I had forgotten all about it. He was sending thanks because the athletes he was coaching wanted "fun" and he found this article in some obscure publication and reprinted it as part of his attempt to change the culture. When I asked if it was working he laughed for a minute or two, and said "Not yet, but its making them think."

The group I coach every afternoon has athletes in their first three years of swimming. Some are ending their third year with me. Ready to move on up. They come into the program looking for fun. They leave looking for fun, but they understand that fun can come in the hard box. They've been to the land of Hard Fun.

When I started coaching in the 1970's, I came to swimming with the idea, from what I had heard about the sport, it was "hard"...difficult, challenging. When I started coaching, that was my dominant thought...that it was a sport for those who sought challenges. No wimps need apply. That was how I started out coaching, and had immediate and gratifying success. Those I admired in coaching coached the same way. The athletes I admired had the work ethic, the toughness that I admired and other athletes admired.

Then, over the next decade, a really disturbing thing happened. Society started to change, the pendulum swung, and adding to it, a very confused bunch of "scientists" mistook one thing for another and started to tell us that it was not really necessary to do all those challenging, difficult things that I admired in order to be successful. And a few very accomplished athletes were glorified for the "lack of work" they did and they themselves promoted that idea as a "competitive psych job" on their competitors. They invariably did not tell anyone of the YEARS of hard work they put in before they "slacked off" and did "speed training" and either they didn't understand the relationship of each type of work, or they willfully misled their competitors and those who followed them, with tales of relaxation, casual training, parties, etc. Several very funny stories circulated about some of these "great guys" who practiced sleight of hand to make it appear that they "partied hard" when in fact they had one or two beers, led their younger comrades astray, then arose Saturday morning and kicked their butts in the pool, while the overindulges puked their guts out in the trash can at the pool. And the legend was born of the athlete who could "party all night" and then train like a maniac in the AM. (when the "party animal" really had one or two beers.) Quite a joke, eh?

Easier, and "funnier" sounded good. Who would not like to spend less time in the pool, more time in bed snoozing, and still swim well? Coaches mostly wanted to buy that idea as well.

People got on the fun bandwagon. At least, a lot of them did. And gradually, performances declined. Eventually, our national leaders caught on that we'd been following some false science and some phony gods, and my heavens, swimming actually required a lot of very challenging "hard" work. So most went back to work by the late nineties. Let's put that aside for a moment (we'll come back to it), and look at society.

What else happened during the period from the mid-sixties to the late nineties?

One, the world went digital. Games became electronic. Two, telephones went from something on a wall, with a cord, to something without a cord to something the size of a credit card that you could lose in your pocket if you weren't careful. What did that do for people? You could "communicate" (or at least, TALK) all the time. So no "planning" was required. Every child on your team has a cell phone now, don't they? Do they communicate better or worse? (as you answer that reflect that EASY communication does not necessarily mean better communication.) They need to plan less, since they have instant communication. Does it help them think through their day? Help them plan what they need to do to even operate their omnipresent social life? Is their social life any better? Three, video games went from "Pong" (who remembers that game, fess up?) to today's incredible adventures. And boys got lost in them. Why? Mastery of a race car, a set of skis or an AK47 is a LOT easier in a video game than in real life. And you know what, there is a fraction of the risk...or no risk. Yet the visuals are so good, that the thrills, the racing heart, etc., are there. Just none of the real danger or real difficulty. It's excitement without risk. And if you mess up, you just try again until you are good. And you know what's best? Adults don't understand the game, so they can't judge you good or bad. You get to develop "mastery" without any criticism or critiques. Or, you can just quit and not worry about not being any good at it, with no one the wiser!

Now, ponder how many girls you have seen disappear into the cyber world of computer games? Very few. Very, very few. Why?

And now we come to the real world....where bones still break, skin still abrades and tears, and TEARS still flow when pain happens....I am speaking of course of skateboards, wakeboards, and all the "extreme" sports. The kids who participate in these sports are athletes with remarkable quickness, toughness, courage, balance and other athletic skills. They are in the real world, so when they mess up, it does hurt. And both males and females love these sports. And they are far more "cool" and the athletes far more popular among their peers, than the athletes in the big time sports of basketball, football, baseball, and the minor league of sports including the Olympic Sports and Swimming. Why? Because, again, parents have no idea what is going on. Parents don't know the rules, parents don't control the action, parents have absolutely NOTHING to do with the extreme sports. The rules are made by the kids. Evaluation of the performance is done by the kids themselves, not by adults, and especially not by parents. Parents can't even understand what the "scoring" is. So it can be competitive, or it can be cooperative, or, most often, it can be both.

That's FUN. Control. Breaking away from previous generations. Evaluation only when and where and how you want it. Playing.

That's the direction our world has moved in. And let's face it, with so many single-parent families, whatever has kept kids off drugs, out of jail, and involved in something relatively healthy, has been embraced by parents as good. And by and large, it IS good.

Swimming looks a lot like the real world. Get up early, work hard in the water, go to school, eat, more school, more practice, go home, study and sleep. If you are an age group swimmer, drop that first "work hard in the water," and you're still right there. More like a job than a game, or playing.

Now we know it's not that grim. Because kids do swim, swim a lot, enjoy it a lot. Swimming can be entertaining, if it's with your friends, it can be satisfying. But it's counter to our culture. Our culture sells video games, instant gratification and "X" sports. No, or low, evaluation.

Swimming sells long term improvement, goals, goal-setting, lots of evaluation, competition often without any mitigation, and putting yourself on the line once or twice a day where everybody around you (and you) can evaluate yourself. It must take some getting used to, by our young charges, don't you think? We are no longer the mainstream. We're the counter-culture.

But the counter-culture can sell. And we need to not be afraid at the middle years and the teen years to sell the “hard fun” of challenge, failure and then longer term success and the value and importance of taking on real, hard stuff that everyone can evaluate. Win. Lose. Succeed. Fail.

Tough words. Tough love for kids trying to be adults.

Hard Fun. We can sell it to teenagers and young adults. It runs counter to what they are used to, but there IS a market for it, and always has been.

That’s the end of my article, almost. At least, it is for the immediate sub-teens and teenagers.

We need to remember though, that most kids come to swimming when their parents bring them. (not cause they suddenly jump up and say “MOM, I Just Saw Natalie Coughlin On the TV and I want to be JUST LIKE HER, TAKE ME TO THE POOL!”

More likely, Mom saw Natalie on TV and said “what a nice young lady, wouldn’t it be great if little Debbie grew up to look and act just like her?” and packed Debbie off to the pool.

What do they find? Well, they need to get a good dose of the fun stuff (think digital games and “Extreme Sports” and “low evaluation” to start with. And very little of the “hard stuff.”

But if you don’t start introducing “hard fun” into the equation once in awhile, pretty early in the process, you are misleading the young person. Don’t pretend swimming isn’t hard. It is. But teach them to love the challenge. Teach them that failing isn’t really fatal. Nor final. That they can come back tomorrow and succeed at that flip turn that they can’t do today. Teach them the sheer joy of learning to do a good racing start. Or even stretch the envelope and let them run on the deck a bit, if its safe, and then dive into their first set. (that’ll teach a great streamline in a hurry!)

Think about the “X” Games and what it gives to kids. Then try to re-create the thrills and the self-discovery in their early years of practice.

Hard Fun will sell. Believe in it.

Good Coaching To You! JL

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