

SWIMMING AND THE PRESS GAME

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Picture this scene. It is Sunday morning, after a long Saturday meet. You are sitting at the kitchen table, enjoying a cup of your favorite coffee. You open the paper to the sports section, and look for the article about your swimming team's success the previous day. You look at all the pages, and find nothing. You then get upset, thinking "Why doesn't the paper put the results of our meets in the paper?" This scene is repeated in many homes across our country. The swimmers have a great meet, but no mention of it in the local paper.

Many coaches, parents, and swimmers wonder what they can do about this. The reason for this lack of coverage in the local newspaper is so simple. But as in many things, the obvious is often overlooked. The reason that teams get no coverage about their meets is the coach fails to provide that information to the media. In my experience, I have found that with all the potential stories out there to cover, reporters have to pick the stories that will interest the most readers, or the stories that are the easiest to write. The reporter has "to make a deadline." The obvious solution is to "help" the reporter.

The coach must make coverage of swimming as easy as possible for the person writing the article. In my 25 plus years as a swimming coach, I have had difficulties, at times, in getting media coverage of my swimming programs. Many teams have this same problem. But the one thing that they all have in common is they fail to "promote" their program. If the coach, or their designate, doesn't take the time to promote the program, no one will. Remember these words, "promote...promote...promote."

Most college and professional sports teams have a Director of Media Relations or a Sports Information Director (SID). The purpose of these positions is to write, distribute, and provide press releases to various sources about their programs. The coach, or someone appointed by the coach, needs to become your team's SID. After each competition, that person should immediately write up a press release, including the results of each event. With the availability of lap top computers and word processing programs, drafting a press release after the meet should be relatively easy. Most word processing programs have spelling and grammar checks, which makes writing the release a simple task. Most meet operation programs (Hy Tek and Easy Meet) have a function that will print the results in formats that are convenient for the media's needs. Many papers will only print the results of the top three finishers in each event, if any at all. You can send them all the finishers in each event but, I would suggest sending just the top three. If your results are from a multiple division meet (varsity and junior varsity), don't expect the paper to publish all the results. They just don't have the time and space.

Another issue that comes up when doing press releases, and this is more of an issue with parents, is the newspapers just don't have the space to print every athlete's name that competed in the meet. Press releases that list every swimmer, and their results, usually end up in the recycle bin. I know that sounds cruel, but there is not the space to cover every athlete. Smaller papers can afford to be more accommodating, but to be on the safe side, keep the press release to the top achievers and outstanding performances

This is not to say that swimmers who are not the winners of the events should not get press. You must look for ways to get coverage for those swimmers. Look for things that are going on in your program that might be deemed as human interest stories. A swimmer who is overcoming an injury and is making a good comeback always makes good copy. A story such as this is not restricted to being current news. The reporter or sports editor may hold such a story until they have room to run it, or needs filler stories on a slow news day. Look around and think. There are ideas for stories all over the place. The possibilities are only limited by your mind and the way you look at things.

Don't forget the local television and radio stations. I have had success in sending out small press releases about something special that happened at my meets or with my program. Ideas include swimmers breaking a long standing meet or school record or the team extending its winning streak. The key to receiving coverage is to "inform" the reporter or sports editor, and keeping them informed. Distribution of information and education of those people involved covering the local sports beat is crucial. I have, for many years, produced a team media guide and distributed it to all the local newspapers, television, and radio stations in our area. Computers make this very easy, and after the initial work of developing the guide and updating it every season with current information is very easy. You can include small biographies and photos of each team member and of the coaches. Don't forget to include team records, competition

schedule, and other information that would be useful to a reporter. In addition, an explanation of the events and procedures as to how meets are run is useful. If you need some ideas, check with your local college or university, and ask if they have any media guides for their teams. They will give you some idea of how to develop your guide.

As I stated earlier, "promote, promote, promote." When submitting your press release, think of the ways a reporter can make use of it. If the release is too long, or requires a good deal of rewrite, it may not get published. E-mail makes an excellent vehicle to submit your releases. If the reporter needs to rewrite or edit the release, it is much easier to edit an electronic message, than to retype a fax or a hard copy of the release. Don't forget to submit photos with your releases. Digital camera make the photo process very easy, and helps in getting the photo out their with the story. Gone are the days when you had to send in your photos to be printed or use a Polaroid camera. Those items are still useful, but I have never had a photo taken from a digital camera ever turned down by a paper.

In conclusion, it is of great importance to take matters into one's hands, and become the SID for your team. It is amazing what a little bit of planning and organization can do to get your team more press coverage. When you begin to promote your team; your community, school, parents, swimmers, and other teams will see what you are doing. Use good common sense when promoting your team. This information is written from my long experience as a swimming coach. I have, at times, also coached many different sports in my career, (football, water polo, finswimming, and track and field) at the high school and junior high levels. These ideas are not just limits to the sport of swimming. I have used them in the past on numerous sports I have coached, and they have worked wonders. Just put your mind to it, apply a bit of effort, and I guarantee it will pay off with improved media coverage of your program. Good luck.