

## The Art of War and Coaching Swimming

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So how did a 20<sup>th</sup> century (and I am -so- last century), swim coach get hooked up with a Chinese warrior from 500 BC? Thanks to two thoroughly 21<sup>st</sup> century institutions; USA Today and HBO. While I usually don't get coaching tips from USA Today, last spring while in a moment of leisure I was reading the national daily newspaper. It had an article on the HBO cable program "The Sopranos". More specifically, it was about a "book" by a Chinese warrior named Sun-Tzu. Apparently, the book had been mentioned on "The Sopranos" and was now the rage among fans of the cable program. I don't have HBO and don't watch "The Sopranos" but I found talk of this book, "The Art of War" intriguing. So I hopped on Amazon.com and looked it up. To say I was surprised is an understatement. It turns out there is not one book, but seemingly a countless number of translations of Sun-Tzu's writings. I investigated and settled on a translation by Gary Gagliardi published by Clearbridge Publishing. Mr. Gagliardi has adapted the principles of Sun-Tzu to Sales, Marketing, and Sales Management in a series of books. So I bought the straight translation of the book. While it isn't an easy read, it is well laid out, short and to the point. When I looked at in an athletic/swimming context the simple truths make more than a little sense.

The book is divided into 13 chapters. With names like "Going to War", "Planning an Attack", and "Using Spies", most don't appear to be remotely applicable to swimming or diving. I read the book. I discovered four main coaching topics or strands running through the text. They are Team Building, Leadership, Meet Strategy and Training. I then re-read the book, this time with my trusty highlighter. I highlighted passages that related to one of the four topics. The third time through, with my yellow legal pad at hand, I sorted the highlighted passages into the four strands. In this article I would like to focus on Team Building. Sun-Tzu has some interesting views on this topic. A disclaimer: some of the writings have been taken out of context.

## TEAM BUILDING

Sun-Tzu said, *“Command your people in a way that gives them a higher shared purpose”*

He continues, *“Victory comes from everyone sharing the same goals”*

Coaches of “team” sports, the traditional games, football, baseball, and basketball, understand the importance of higher purpose and shared goals much more than most swimming coaches. I consider high school swimming and diving to be a team sport. While it clearly is not a game, the social and support structures of most high school swimming and diving teams lend themselves well to the type of community that exemplifies the true meaning of teamwork. Most people have no problem identifying relays as one activity, probably in most minds the only one, where teamwork comes into place in swimming and diving. How do you get this to transcend all areas? “Command (read “coach”) your people in a way that gives them a higher shared purpose.” It starts with a philosophy. New Trier’s can be found in our team handbook. It is available online at [www.ntswim1.org](http://www.ntswim1.org). (Follow the links to the boys page, current season and then to the handbook.) The handbook clearly outlines the purpose of the team and the expectations of team members. Topics covered include Team Goals, Philosophy, Dual Meet Objectives, Core Beliefs and Team Expectations. In writing, from day one, team members have a clear understanding of roles and the importance of each team member. Below are the core beliefs from our handbook.

### **CORE BELIEFS**

**POTENTIAL** - Every person is capable of high achievement, not just the fastest and most confident.

**BROTHERHOOD** - We will look out for each other. We are our brother’s keeper

**THE BIG PICTURE** – We will always look at TEAM goals, TEAM outcomes and the TEAM agenda. The TEAM **is** the big picture.

**TEAMWORK** - We will accomplish what we do together. Good athletes work together and solicit help from one another.

**NICHE** – Every person on the TEAM has a role to play, and every role plays its part in contributing to the big picture. The goal is more important than the role.

**SHARING** - We will share our success, our failures, our blood, our sweat, and our tears. We will never let anyone fail alone. We celebrate together.

**FAILURE** - You are not supposed to understand everything the first time around. Mistakes help one learn.

**EFFORT** - Consistent effort is the main determinant of success.

**VICTORY** - Success is evaluated in many ways, there is value in alternative assessment of individual performance.

**EXCELLENCE** - Excellence is a full time endeavor.

**INTEGRITY** - We will keep our word. We will say what we mean, and do what we say.

**HONESTY** - We will not lie to ourselves or to each other. None of us will tolerate any of us doing so. We will depend on each other for the truth.

**ADVERSITY** - We will keep our heads. We will not panic in the face of adversity. We will find a way or make a way.

**LEADERSHIP** - We will use our influence wisely. Bad attitudes are a disease. They can be spread and caught just like the flu. Many people with bad attitudes are carriers. The attitude doesn't affect their performance as much as it does others.

At New Trier we have three different practice groups, four if you count divers, and we do count divers! The three swimming practices are the varsity, junior varsity and freshman. These three groups meet at different times and in some cases different pools. So how do you communicate “a higher shared purpose”, “victory from common goals” and your own team philosophy? Write it down, teach it, then walk the walk. Actions speak louder than words. As with most things athletic, this starts at practice. Everyday at practice, if properly planned and implemented, this philosophy is in play. The feeling that “We are all in this together” comes from common experiences, many of which occur during practice. Encouragement, conflict and competition in practice build the team. However, they are not naturally occurring phenomenon. It is also found in how you treat your athletes. Is there more attention and special favors for the best, or do you treat them all the same? Maybe more of a problem than too much attention for the best is too little

attention for the rest. It is also important to have team members feel they are treated the same. During the Lombardi era in Green Bay, one of his players was quoted to the effect that Lombardi treated all the players the same, “like dogs”. It sounds funny, but it probably said volumes to the offense and defensive linemen, the “non-glamour” players. Lombardi not only treated them all the same, he also expected the same from all of them. If a varsity swimmer is not at morning practice on time, I give them a call. Our coaches on all levels do the same. It is a team expectation that everyone attend practice and get there on time. Not just the fast ones or important ones but EVERYONE. Our handbook lays out some clear ideals as to how team members are to be treated AND what behaviors are expected from them. Below are the “Team Expectations” from New Trier’s handbook.

### TEAM EXPECTATIONS

In choosing to be a member of the New Trier High School Boy's Swimming and Diving TEAM you are becoming part of a program rich in history and steeped in tradition. New Trier has fielded TEAMS dating back to at least 1912 when the first indoor high school pool in the country was built where the new gymnasiums (G108-110) now stands. You need look no further than the natatorium walls to understand the tradition of excellence embodied in the words; **New Trier Swimming & Diving!** TEAM membership is a privilege, not a right. As such, you are expected to fulfill certain obligations.

Sun-Tzu said, *“An organized force is braver than the lone individual. This is part of organization. Put the tough and the weak together”*

*“United men are strong. Divided men are weak. A united unit is strong. A divided unit is weak.”*

At most varsity practices we try to group athletes by speed, ability, stroke and event. This may be as simple as having different intervals for varying skill levels. However it could be quite a bit more complicated. A single practice might be divided into four main groups; distance, mid-distance, IM and stroke/sprint. Those four main groups may be further divided with the stroke/sprint group separated into the four competitive strokes. The result of this division is basically a different practice in each lane. It also means in the IM lane, for example, our best IMer is in the same lane as our slowest varsity level

IMer. The same would be true in any of the lanes, the best (toughest) we have would be in the same lane with our slowest (weakest) swimmer in each specialty. This allows the “weak” to learn and gain strength from the knowledge, speed and courage of the “tough” or the fastest.

Design situations that encourage reliance on each other. This doesn’t always happen by accident. At the end of a particularly challenging practice last fall we tried something different with the girls team. At the suggestion of Mike Leissner, one of my assistants, we did some relays, and instead of the regular, everyday relays, Mike added a twist. We gave the team a challenge. They had to put together eight, 400 yard relays of four swimmers each, and each relay would have to finish in under 4 minutes. The tough had to help the weak and the weak would have to become tough. The prize was getting out of practice early. We don’t do many “get out” swims so the girls were motivated. The real prize was swimmers working together, talking to each other, problem solving, asking each other best times, and doing some difficult math. It was also interesting to watch who the leaders were and who took charge. The coaching staff carefully watched all of our underclassmen to see who the emerging leaders were. I will mention the topic of roles in more detail later but this was a great lesson in how they change and evolve. Before they got the relays set, weak and tough roles in some cases were totally reversed. The challenge was met, we had seven, 4 member teams and one, 3-member team go under the 4:00 (3:00 for the team of 3) mark. The burden of a “get out” swim was not on one swimmer but on the team as a unit. It was not just a physical challenge but a social challenge as well.

Sun-Tzu, *“To command and get the most of proud people, you must study adversity. People work together when they are in the boat during a storm. In this situation, one rescues the other just as the right hand helps the left.”*

Design situations that are adverse and require teamwork to survive. We do many varied sets and drills that require the team to be successful in order to complete the work. Mental Toughness Tuesday, 100 x 100, the Hour of Power, and Dryland practices in

general are all examples of designed situations that are to say the least adverse. In some cases simply the encouragement of teammates is required. Over winter break, the boys' varsity team does 100 x 100 in practice. We usually do it on New Years Eve day. Each swimmer chooses the interval they want to attempt. I have been doing this with my teams for almost 20 years, going back to Cy-Fair High School in Texas. (*The complete history of this set is on the New Trier Boys Swimming and Diving webpage under NT History.*) This year we had guys try every interval from 1:07 to 1:30. If you go on 1:07 you get done in around two hours, on the 1:30 you get done in two and a half hours. None of the swimmers who were done early left until everyone was done. They stayed around, ate their bagels and donuts, drank their juice and Gatorade, and encouraged the rest of the team until the end. They don't look forward to the 100 x 100's. But when it is over they talk about it for weeks afterwards. They like looking at the history, what has been done before and what they have done in the past. Every year notable things happen during the set. Each lane has stories to tell. It is a designed adverse situation. It is a memory maker.

In adverse situations roles are developed and played by the various athletes. Roles come in to play in each of the lanes of any practice. The swimmers in each lane develop roles or jobs creating team microcosms. If the number five out of five IMers is a breaststroker he would most likely lead the breaststroke repeats, drills, sets. That would be one of his roles, even if he weren't the fastest breaststroker. Many times the youngest swimmer would be put in the position of leader for no reason other than he is the youngest. The roles change with each stroke in the IM lane. There is literally an infinite number of evolutionary and even some revolutionary changes that impact roles. They change daily as sets and drills change. They change throughout the season as the swimmers grow and change. Swimmers learn that they truly are part of something bigger than themselves and it takes the whole team to make it work. In this case the team is the five IMers. Swimmers, both tough and weak, learn to challenge, test, push, pull, encourage, lead and follow. In order to lead you have to know how to follow. With the varied roles everyone learns to follow and everyone becomes a leader.

An example on our team would be the IM lane the last four years. We just graduated an IMer who broke our school record and won the state title despite being sick at the state meet. When Meir joined the team he was a good swimmer with a good club background. His best time was somewhere around 2:10 for the 200 IM. We had a couple of swimmers better than that and a couple that were a little slower. At the time, our fastest IMer was Johnny, a senior with a best time in the 2:04 range. Keep in mind that there were usually four to six swimmers in the IM lane and I am putting the spotlight on only two of them. Meir learned from Johnny all year. Meir was not a good follower at the beginning of the year. He thought he was already pretty good and acted the part. Johnny pushed Meir, forced him to lead sets, instructed, encouraged and treated him like a little brother with all the good and bad that would imply. John even taught Meir how to skip a 50 at the deep end wall when they thought I wasn't looking. Also how to sneak into the locker room during a set again when they thought I wasn't looking. At the end of the year Johnny was around 2:00 and Meir was a mere tick behind him.

The next year we basically had two guys that spent a lot of time in the IM lane, Meir now a sophomore and a senior named John. John was really a breaststroker, but we were short of IMers so I trained him in the IM lane. His butterfly was painful to watch, his backstroke had the classic alternating whip kick and his freestyle at the end of the IM was positively frightening. Like I said, we were short on IMers. Meir's weakest stroke was breaststroke. They worked together, most of the time just the two of them, and Meir became a breaststroker and John became an IMer (2:02). In the process, Meir also became a better follower. I believe to be a good leader, you first have to learn how to be a good follower. Meir finally learned to follow.

The past two years Meir has been the undisputed IM lane leader. Last year we had James, a freshman, come in with pretty solid credentials. This guy was similar to Meir as a freshman but a little faster at about 2:06 IM. They worked well together. Meir had a break out year (1:53) and James just missed breaking 2 minutes. The lane got crowded this year; in fact we had two lanes most of the season. Our top IMers were; 1:52, 1:56, 2:01, 2:03 (unshaved), 2:06 (unshaved).

While all of this is going on in the IM lane, it is also going on everywhere else in the pool. Swimmers don't usually stay in one lane all of the time. The roles are always

changing. The weak working with the tough really evolves the weak into the tough. It also creates situations for leadership and leadership development. This leadership opportunity is for ALL not just for a select few.

We organize our freshman team with the same purpose in mind. We want to develop a TEAM, not just good swimmers. Similarly, Sun-Tzu wanted to build a fighting force, not just a few superior warriors. He really didn't care about the individual; it was ALL about the TEAM, the fighting force. One of my key beliefs is that you build the individual by building the TEAM. In my opinion, and according to the text, Sun-Tzu felt the same way. While there are freshman capable of swimming at the varsity and the junior varsity practices only a select few swim varsity. We don't allow any to swim with the JV. This allows for larger numbers and the development of a team atmosphere at the freshman level. Roles in this situation are the same as any other team microcosm, the roles develop, they evolve and change, and little boys become big boys. We are fortunate to have a six-lane pool for our freshman team. They have their own coach. We average probably twenty freshmen each year. Many of the freshmen are beginners, some even beginner swimmers in the classic Red Cross sense of the word. It is also not uncommon to have swimmers who just miss the varsity practice in the freshman practice group. So the ability and skill level of the freshman practice is much more varied than the varsity. In meets we also attempt to swim freshman together as a team as often as possible. Even the more advanced freshman who practices with the varsity will swim at least some meets at the freshman level. This helps strengthen the weak and place the "tougher" freshmen in leadership positions they may not enjoy very often on the varsity level. After all this is the athletes' chronological peer group. They will be spending their four-year careers together. These are conscious decisions to "organize" the force and strengthen the team.

Sun-Tzu said, *"You must control your soldiers with esprit de corp. You must bring them together by winning victories. You must get them to believe in you"*

As you build the team you build esprit de corp. You are forging a common goal and a shared higher purpose. While defeats can bring a team together and give it a moment of clarity, victories are a surefire way to build confidence and solidify the team. This



confidence is built in YOU, as a coach and each other as athletes. In swimming and diving there are so many opportunities for “victories”. My first year at New Trier I took over a boys team that had not been very successful for several years. We were very fortunate to have a freshman star named Justin. He didn’t even have state cuts but he was the best swimmer on the team. It was amazing how his victories, whether big or small, were all TEAM victories. Every time he did something great everybody’s confidence grew. This freshman swimmer literally carried everyone on his back for the whole season. Several times that season he came from about 15, 20, 25 yards behind, anchoring the 400 free relay. He would touch out the other team and we would win the meet. One of the “come from behind” victories occurred in my very first dual meet at New Trier against a team we had not beaten in about eight years. The meet was two weeks into the season. Understand, I came in as the new coach and changed everything. In the past, they had not been doing doubles. I -started- them with doubles. Before, they had not practiced very much over the Thanksgiving holiday. We did (you guessed it) doubles. The Thanksgiving holiday just happened to fall during the first week of the season and they were used to taking it easy to get ready for a meet. I made it clear we weren’t going to alter our long-term season plan for short-term dual meet success. We won the first meet. I found out later that the parents and some of the team members were ready to run me out of town on a rail! The win in the first meet changed that, thank goodness. Their confidence in me, the new coach, and in the team was born on that day. Everybody was better because Justin was on the team. His victories were team victories and built the foundation of the team esprit de corp.

Sun-Tzu said, *“Your esprit de corp increases your momentum.”*

As I mentioned before, my philosophy is that we don’t do anything special as a team for dual meets. In other words we don’t change our basic season training plan in order to win a dual meet. However, winning meets is important in building the esprit de corp during the season. More importantly, how you win meets is significant.

Sun-Tzu said, *“Make good use of war. Unite your men as one. Never let them give up”*

You can make good use of war (competition) by careful and deliberate placement of swimmers in dual and invitational meets. Creating challenging yet successful situations for your swimmers at different times during the season is helpful in building esprit de corp. In New Trier's situation, required league meets comprise more than half of the season's schedule and many times the team outcome is not in doubt. In order to lend more meaning to each meet and to each race, we attempt to create situations that are a test for individual athletes and challenging for the team. The individual athlete's successes become team successes and these team victories build the individual. The successes build the esprit de corp that allows everyone to stay focused and keep working towards the bigger team goals and the larger team purpose. **This "scattered" success where not everyone experiences success at every meet, builds and increases momentum without sacrificing training goals.** When athletes see their team mates swimming fast it helps them realize that we are on the right track, things are going well and that their day will come. There are many different ways to accomplish this: swimming a swimmer in an off event against good competition from the other team or mixing up relays so we have two or three relays of approximate equal speed instead of just putting the fastest swimmers on one relay team. It could be making a swimmer who likes to hide in the relays, lead off or anchor or placing non-distance swimmers in the 500. The 500 challenge is probably the number one eye opener. It does amazing things to a team when they see the "drop dead" sprinter swim a great time in the 500. It "increases the team's momentum" and builds esprit de corp. It helps the individual swimmer as well. By design, we try to use our dual meet opportunities to build confidence in the individual, the team and the program. Our goal is not only to beat the other team but to also challenge ourselves.

Another kind of success is what I call "total team success". This involves taking full advantage of meets where the chance for optimal performance is great. Physically we don't do anything special for any dual meet, not even the dual against our biggest rival. The dual meet history with Evanston goes back to around 1912. It is the longest running high school swimming rivalry in the nation. (You can find the history of this rivalry on the boys' web page.) Physically we don't do anything special before invitational meets.

However, mentally we do try to help the athletes increase their focus and concentration before the bigger meets. We let the competition increase the performance. I tell the guys “You swim fast when you want to swim fast”. I believe this is very true. In these situations the team success builds the individual.

Sun-Tzu said, *“Make your commands easy to follow. You must understand the way the crowd thinks.”*

Is there any doubt that as a coach you need to understand the way the “crowd” (your team) thinks? Both in a general, adolescent, female or male way, but specifically as it relates to your team and the individuals on your team, you need to understand your team. How do you understand the heart and mind of your team? I find it very helpful to really teach what I want them to know and explain things I want them to understand. Explain the why, how, where, when and what of everything. Do it early and often. When athletes understand the “why” of what they are doing, they more easily follow your commands. These explanations elicit questions. Questions are very helpful in gauging what the team and individuals are thinking, where their heads and hearts are. There are times when it is possible to ask for incredible sacrifices and times when only the normal sacrifices can be expected. Know those times by knowing the team. Don’t put the team in a position where they aren’t mentally or physically prepared to follow your “commands”. As a side note, always make sure the “tough” are on board when asking for extraordinary sacrifices.

Sun-Tzu said, *“Make it easy for them to obey your orders by training your people.”*

George Block, NISCA member and ASCA board member, gave a speech at the ASCA World Clinic in 2000 concerning teaching leadership skills to athletes. He outlined specific roles for each grade level of athlete. He said that the role of a freshman was “basic training”. They needed to learn how things work, team procedures, expectations, terminology, traditions and special policies. A sophomore’s main responsibility, according to George, was cooperation, they should “actively support” the team leaders

and coaches. They should stay away from cliques and not undermine leadership. Juniors were to lead by example. They should be the first ones there and the last to leave. They also should take an active role in lane leadership. They should be issuing and accepting practice challenges. It is the seniors' responsibility to lead by voice. George said that not everyone who is eligible will choose to lead. If they don't lead, seniors should be the bodyguards of the verbal leaders. My staff and I take time to lay out this "hierarchy" to the team during our pre-meet and post-meet meetings as well as at practice early in the season.

The careful and thoughtful development of routines and procedures also makes compliance with demands easier. The teaching of routines and procedures is an integral part of practice, pre-meet meetings, and post-meet meetings. Of course it is easier the longer you are at a particular high school. After a few years at New Trier, the experienced athletes do a great job "teaching" the expectations to the new swimmers. The attitude is simple, "This is what we do and how we do it." There is very little resistance, if any. By allowing the upper classman to be so involved with the indoctrination of new athletes, we make it easier for everyone to follow the commands. This is another opportunity to develop leaders and followers.

Sun-Tzu said, *"Military officers that are committed lose their fear"*

Your swimmers and divers lose their fear when they are committed to the program and the team. Commitment to something bigger than themselves allows athletes to train and prepare so their fears are confronted, questions are answered or worries are quelled. Preparation is a key to the athlete's success. If you question everything you gain nothing. Asking questions is fine but questioning everything in their own minds with little chance of answers is not. Confidence can be lost in idle worry. Committed officers, because of their preparation, have confidence and lose their fear.

Sun-Tzu was not talking about high school swimming and diving when he set forth his principles of war 2500 years ago. His ideas on team-building are applicable today to athletics in general and swimming and diving specifically. His thoughts on common

team goals, a higher shared purpose, organization, esprit de corps, momentum, the use of war (competition), clear direction, training of men, and commitment speak to the core of solid coaching. Too often as coaches we focus on the task of making swimmers faster while we totally ignore the fact that there is more to this than just making them stronger, improving technique and optimizing conditioning. I have found, and truly believe, that the most important thing athletes “get” from being on the New Trier swimming and diving team is the feeling of belonging, of contributing to the greater good, realizing that they matter. You build the individual by building the team. How many state champions are you going to coach, how many All Americans how many state championship teams? If you are a mere mortal like most of us, not very many and not very often. I realized this the hard way after winning three state championships in four years in Iowa. I moved to Texas, and the going got a little harder. Frankly, I had to find a “meaning” in what I was doing. There had to be more to my life’s work than winning state championships. This meaning that may be obvious to most, though I am not too sure, was obscure to me for a long time. What is the purpose of double practices, yard after yard of swimming, dryland, weights, if you don’t win the state championship? The big picture is the purpose. There are things more important than going faster, special honors and awards, beating the other guys and chalking up wins. It is what the athletes take away from the experience. This includes everything, the skills, the knowledge, the memories, goal-setting, perseverance, commitment, dealing with winning and losing, working with others, standing up for what you believe in, and being part of something bigger than yourself is what you are teaching them and the experience you are providing. If you have swimmers and divers you can provide these things. You -can- make a difference. Of course, it is a lot like being a parent. You can’t always expect to see immediate results. Take the time to instill some of the peripheral things and some day they will be quoting you to their kids. You might want to think about that as you talk to them! You might also realize that swimming and diving are really peripheral to the -true- big picture! The team feeling makes going faster just that much easier. Sun-Tzu has similarly pertinent ideas on Leadership, Meet Strategy and Training.

