

# SWIM BC MENTORSHIP REPORT

**MENTEE:** Julia Veidt, Whitehorse Glacier Bears (WGB)

**MENTOR:** Rod Barratt (and assistant coaches), UVic-Pacific Coast Swimming (PCS)

**DATES OF VISIT:** January 15-20, 2018

## OVERVIEW

My original objectives for the mentorship were to learn more about creating a positive club culture, learning more about season planning, and incorporating age-appropriate dryland into my practices. I will expand on these original objectives, as well as other aspects of coaching that I learned about during my visit to PCS.

In Whitehorse I coach three different groups of athletes ages 7-18 years old. Although my mentorship was with Rod, I made sure to visit all of the other coaches and groups as well so that I could gather ideas that would be applicable to all of the athletes that I work with. Although each coach brought their own style and philosophy to their groups, they had consistent expectations regarding effort and technique across the club. This was one aspect of creating a positive club culture.

## BUILDING A CLUB CULTURE

When discussing the goals and focus of my mentorship, Rod and I chose to focus on creating a positive club culture, because once you have a good environment everything else in coaching falls into place more easily. Before my visit, Rod challenged me to write a couple sentences of my ideal philosophy towards club culture:

*Ultimately, I want to learn how to develop a culture where athletes step outside their comfort zones and realize that hard work is fun and worthwhile. If I can create a culture where everyone is always eager to try harder, learn more, and help those around them,*

*then all of the other small things that I teach and do as a coach will be taken up more easily by the athletes.*

When visiting PCS, I found that most of the athletes I interacted with fit the above description. There seemed to be a high level of intrinsic motivation, and a high level of respect between the coaches and athletes. The athletes understood that the coaches designed a program to help them reach their goals – if they didn't understand the intent of a drill or set, they would discuss it with the coach. Additionally, there was always a balance between having the workout athlete-driven vs. coach-driven. For example, the coaches would be deliberately picky regarding dryland technique for a month, then back off for the next month to see how much of the technique the athletes could maintain on their own.

When I returned to Whitehorse, I aimed to better explain how the design of my practices related to swimmers' goals. I found that this did indeed increase interest and "buy-in" for my athletes, with less complaining about a set being difficult because they now understood how completing it to the required specifications would be a step towards their goals. My athletes had a higher level of intrinsic motivation to complete the workouts as specified, which helped create a more fun and positive culture of everyone working towards their goals together.

One of the interesting aspects of PCS is that the club was built in the last two decades in a city where there are other options for swimming. So everyone who joins the club has to make a conscious choice to join not only swimming as a sport, but PCS as a specific club. Rod and the other coaches expressed how once the club had been around for a few years, they established a critical mass of athletes who wanted to train hard and be competitive which then attracted other like-minded people. It started with a young group, but they have now built into a club with successful senior-level athletes because the original coaches and athletes established a positive culture that others then bought into.

In Whitehorse, WGB is the only competitive swim club. However, athletic pursuits are very valued in the community, and it has one of the highest concentrations of Olympians per capita in Canada. There is a lot of potential to develop swimming to a higher level in Whitehorse. I hope to show my athletes that the same level of performance is possible in swimming – for the younger kids this included having them

attend finals at local meets as spectators, and getting them together to watch the Olympics and Commonwealth games. For the older kids this included helping them research varsity swimming options, and encouraging them and their parents to attend the highest level meets that they qualified for.

## SEASON PLANNING

While my previous experience as an athlete and summer swimming coach gave me a strong technical foundation and enthusiasm for teaching, I wanted to strengthen my coaching by learning more about how to plan in the longer term. I found that it was difficult to translate theory from reading and NCCP courses into practice, so I discussed different planning strategies with all the PCS coaches.

It was very helpful to see how each workout built on the next over the course of the week, and then the week fit into the overall season plan (approaching each week as a step in a staircase). It was also reassuring to see that even very experienced coaches treat their plans as living documents. All the coaches expressed that looking back on your plans and changing things is good, because it means that you and your athletes are learning and progressing.

Towards the end of the season, I increased my involvement with the senior swimmers at WGB, and found the weekly planning of their workouts much easier due to the exposure to different approaches I had at PCS. I am currently pursuing my Level 2 certification, and seeing how different coaches approach planning has given me more ideas in creating my own plans.

## COACHING TO DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES

Although I am a visual learner myself, I find that I often do not include enough visual or tactile learning in my coaching – despite the fact that visuals can help younger athletes learn technique faster than auditory learning alone. I discussed with the other PCS coaches how visual learning does not have to be just video work - It can be drawings (done by the coach or swimmers) on the whiteboard, looking at a picture or a still frame of their technique to hone in on corrections, or watching and correcting a teammate during a practice or a meet. We also discussed how kinesthetic learning is often

involving equipment to help them “feel” the right way, which may include activities such as:

- Swimming with tennis balls in hand will emphasize pulling with the lower arm and keeping elbow high
- Naked paddles for breaststroke pull will help athletes feel smaller areas where they are slipping during the pull.
- Using tubing in the water or on dry land to correct a dropped elbow or shortened pull, as well as providing additional visual confirmation of a correct pull pattern.
- “Dead whale” drill of pushing a naked paddle with the top of the head in freestyle and backstroke to fine-tune head and body position, and also discern if there are any moments of deceleration within the stroke cycle.

I found tactile land visual learning most beneficial for my 7-10 year olds. Some of the things I found most helpful were:

- Having them push against my hands to feel the correct high elbow pull for freestyle and butterfly.
- Breaststroke kick physical manipulation
- Use of mirrors on the bottom of the pool to learn the correct sequence for breaststroke pullouts.
- Having them watch older swimmers to see correct technique

For the older swimmers, I found the following most beneficial:

- Taking the initiative to do more videotaping in training.
- Asking them to evaluate their own technique instead of just directly telling them something they are doing wrong.
- Use of “super slower swimming” and naked paddles to increase their feeling for the water.
- “Dead whale drill” or using popsicle sticks in the backs of their swim caps to correct head position.

## MENTAL TRAINING

I was interested in learning different methods of goalsetting and self-analysis. Rod and I discussed how he has used many methods of evaluation with his athletes, and that there are pros and cons to each of them. He believes that the most important thing is to just choose one method as doing something is better than nothing. Any kind of self-reflection should be slightly uncomfortable, but as a coach you can help to make it a routine thing that pays off in the end. Building this habit benefits the athletes in life beyond swimming.

I was also interested in evaluating myself as a coach – how much of what is happening in a workout situation is under my control, and how much of it comes from the swimmers? One of the most interesting evaluation tools that Rod had was the advice to listen to the workout with your back turned – you can often sense the energy and effort this way much better than you might be able to visually. From here you can choose to make changes or corrections.

I really appreciated how the coaches at all levels of the club incorporated “talk time” with the athletes. This time was spent at the younger levels helping them understand and learn about the sport. For example, leading up to a meet, the younger ages might discuss as a group ideas of what they would ideally be doing two days before, the night before, in warmup, and then two minutes before their race. This not only helps them learn from the coach and each other, it also helps to teach them mental rehearsal skills which will help them to ease anxiety at swim meets or in stressful life situations. At the older levels, “talk time” took on more of a training-specific focus with guests coming in to speak on topics such as sports psychology or nutrition.

## DRYLAND

I originally set the goal of learning more about dryland to increase the postural awareness of my athletes, which I found was an area where they had a lot of potential to improve. The dryland routine was kept simple at all levels, and focused on basic athletic movements such as pushing, pulling, and squatting. I visited mid-season, but Rod said that at the beginning of the season he spends as much time as needed having everyone learn their dryland movements perfectly. He believes that there is no point in having them doing an incorrect movement, as this will just create injuries or translate to

poor technique in the water. There was also a fair amount of attention given to balancing the routine between strength, power, and mobility. Rod said this balance as well as including “prehab” activities before practices has done a lot to reduce overuse injuries in his athletes.

All levels did some type of dryland, usually before or after practice. This instilled the idea at an early age that it was an important part of the training regime, no different than time spent in the water. As many of my athletes compete in at least one other sport, placing this level of importance on dryland will help them become more well-rounded athletes. I plan to start next season having my athletes at all levels doing dryland regularly, performing simple movements perfectly, and then adding age-appropriate challenges once they master the basics.

## THANK YOU

I would like to thank Rod and all of the other PCS coaches for welcoming me into their club for the week. I would also like to thank Swim BC for supporting my mentorship. Lastly, I would like to thank the coaches, board members, and swimmers at WGB for their support of my mentorship trip.