

Let's Keep the Tech Suits With The Senior Swimmers

An opinion... by John Leonard

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The last two weeks I have been at our LSC Junior Olympic Meet and our LSC "Division II" meet, which is a nice way of saying, "the last B meet where you can qualify for Junior Olympics", without making any of our supposedly delicate children swoon upon hearing that they are in a "B" meet. (but that's another story.)

One of the most disturbing trends that I have seen is age group swimmers, particularly 12 and unders and 10 and unders, in the new hi-tech suits made by all the swimsuit companies, in prelims and finals of these local meets.

First of all, congratulations to Speedo, and all the other swimsuit companies. Some have done real and very expensive research and come up with fabulous suits that clearly assist the swimmers in swimming faster...much faster. Others have simply done the "Burger King Thing". (Burger King does little to no demographic or other studies when it locates its restaurants.....it lets McDonalds spend its money on those expensive studies and then Burger King just opens across the street from every new McDonalds....saves them a lot of money and they get there 3 months later....so what? Good bottom line approach. Trust your best competitor to do the heavy lifting.)

Now, the old man coach in me sighs at the sight of the new suits on anyone, but lets face it, they are here, they are good and they work. When it comes to setting World Records, American Records, Ugandan Records, Finlandian records, and making Senior/International Cuts, you'd better have one of these suits on, because the people swimming the fast times and setting those standards for the meets, are wearing them. If you don't wear them, you are out of it. Unfair for you if you're NOT wearing one.

Case in point, over 440 College Women have qualified for the NCAA Division I meet this year with the "A" cut..phenomenally fast. The biggest number in any prior year to make the NCAA Meet with BOTH "A" and "B" cuts has been 259. Every college conference meet in the country was incredibly fast....why????The Suits. Again. Good for the companies, Good for the Senior/International Swimmers.

Now, we get to the Division II Age Group Meet where the goal is to swim fast enough and well enough to qualify for the Junior Olympics.

And low and behold, here are the high tech \$150-\$450.00 suits on 10 and unders and 11 and 12 year olds.

"B" Level 10 and unders and 11 and 12 year olds.

With some terrible stroke technique.

And going to practice 2-4 times a week, for an hour.

And not working all that well yet, in many cases.

And not paying attention to the coach all that well yet, in many cases.

And coming late to practice in many cases, because Mom and Dad don't understand yet, the importance of being on time for practice.

And coming late to warmup for the meet, because Mom and Dad don't understand the importance of warmup yet.

But Mom and Dad want to "support" their child, and they are told that those \$150-\$450 suits "work" and will make their child faster. And good parents help their child swim faster, right?

Right?

Right?

SO....."honey, get the American Express card out and lets get Clarence one of those fancy new suits, so he can beat _____."

Meanwhile, some of those same parents are objecting when the club wants to raise dues from \$50 a month to \$70 a month, because the club wants to pay their coach some more, so he can get rid of that 15 year old car, and actually drive to practice in something safe. He does the teaching of the swimmers.

Some of those same parents don't respond when the coach says "Clarence really would improve a lot faster if he came to practice 3 times a week instead of twice."

Or, "Gee, if you could get Clarence to look up from his cell-phone and text messaging when I am trying to talk to him, I'm pretty sure he'd listen and learn better."

Or, "Please help me get Clarence to understand that hard work in practice is what will help him swim better and faster in the meets".

Or, "You said that you'd like Clarence to turn better and can I fix that? Yes, I can, but I need Clarence to pay attention to his turns when he's practicing if he's to improve, and not just slop his way through practice without attention to details like turns. I'm here to teach and I need him to be here to learn".

By buying the Tech Suit for Clarence, his parents are teaching him that you can buy the things you want in life. You don't have to work for them.

You can simply buy speed. You can fix anything that you lack with enough money. No need to work hard. No need to Pay Attention. No need to Learn.

And, of course, reassuring themselves that they fully support their child in swimming...."you know what we did at the meet this weekend? We bought Clarence a \$400 swimsuit? Can you imagine that? When I was a kid, i swam in my underwear and now my kid has a \$400 suit! But boy, did it work! In his old suit, he hadn't beaten " _____ " in the 200 free all season, but with this new suit, he dusted that boy!"

So Clarence, who all season has gone 2:25 in the 200 yard freestyle, puts on the suit, goes 2:18 and qualifies for the JO's where he puts it on again and low and behold, drops ANOTHER 2 seconds and gets to 2:16.

Hooray for Clarence! Mom is happy. Dad is happy. Clarence thinks its pretty cool...for about 10 minutes, until he gets out his \$200 cell phone and goes back to texting his friends. Since he's really more into that than the swim meet, or swim team, or practice.

Now what happens? Well, there are a couple of scenarios.

Lets say Clarence goes to a meet, (a regular, ordinary, one session age group meet) about two weeks later. Mom says, "oh honey, you did so well in your new suit, put that on again and lets see you GO!".

So Clarence does. and surprisingly, he just goes about the same time...and actually, it maybe took some more work to get there. And his next swim is worse. And the one after that is worse still.... Clarence is disappointed. Mom and Dad are disappointed.

Coach walks over and says "let me see that suit. How many swims have you worn it for? Twelve? Well, these things wear out you know...they're only good for just so many swims before they no longer do what they did do."

Now Dad is just a tad suspicious..... "what did you say?"

"I said, these tech suits are not intended to be worn all the time. The material fatigues, wears out and you need a new suit if you wear it very often"

At this point it dawns on Mom and Dad that another \$400 suit is going to make this a pretty expensive swimming month. And they haven't even paid their club dues yet. Or their entry fee escrow account. And they are \$800 in the hole.

Mom puts her foot down. "No more tech suit. Back to the jammer. We'll buy you the tech suit for Championships only."

Good. Firm decision, reasonable for the family finances. Very fair.

So two weeks later, Clarence goes back to his next age group meet, in his old jammer. And his 200 free slips back to 2:23. Long face on Clarence. Long face on Dad. Mom says, "maybe you're just not cut out for this sport"

"or maybe your coach just didn't prepare you properly for this meet". Or, "he's not really a very good freestyle coach anyway, did you see Clarence's stroke fall apart in that 2nd 100, honey?"

NOOOBODY IS HAPPY!

Clarence says to himself (or maybe even out-loud) "I can't swim fast without the suit."

What is lost in all this of course, is that the reason his parents got Clarence into swimming was to make him more "fit" and "healthy" and give him a chance to "compete" and "learn to work for things" and be part of a good group of hard-working, dedicated kids.

What Clarence and his parents should have been doing is working to improve his practice attendance, his love of the sport itself, his ability to focus and learn, and his technical swimming skills...his strokes, his starts, his turns. His improvement should have been coming from "real stuff" and not a \$400 swimsuit.

Then when he dropped to 2:23 from 2:25, it would have been a real improvement and everyone could have been happy and he would have been ENCOURAGED to work harder, pay more attention, and focus on the tasks he needed to improve.

Instead of relying on the "magic pill" of the suit.

The solution to all this? Very simple.

Ban the suit for age group competition. Nothing below the knee nor over the shoulder in any competition except Senior/International Swimming events.

Keep age group athletes focused on improvement coming from hard work, more practice, more attention in practice and quality coaching of good strokes, starts and turns. The real stuff. The right stuff. The only stuff that matters.

And make a rule to do this. Not just "an agreement among coaches". We know there are always renegades who will do whatever a parent wants to get their kid to swim fast...whether a \$400 suit or a hypodermic needle full of HGH.

Its like the arms race....if Johnny has a \$200 suit, then Clarence has to have a \$400 suit.

The problem is not with the suit manufacturers. They're in business to make money. And by getting senior swimmers to do marvelous times, they do that.

But lets not allow commercial considerations to DESTROY the purposes of age group swimming.

Again, Applause to Speedo and the others for a job well done. Let the suits do their magic at the Senior/International Level of swimming. At the age group end, the magic is in the process of working and learning.

Lets keep it there. *John Leonard*

Postscript: Southern California swimming has had this rule in place since 2000. The Rule reads....."swimwear in age group competition...The swimsuits worn for all age group competition, shall conform to USA Swimming Rule 102.9 and shall not extend past the top of the shoulder (the acromial process of the scapula) nor further down the leg than the top of the kneecap (Patella)."