



Some Thoughts on Team Travel

By Rod Barratt - Former Swimmer, Current Parent and Coach

Back when I was a swimmer, a million years ago, as we parent types like to say, things were different. At least they seemed different. For example, everyone on my team went on team travel to away meets - primarily by bus to places like Regina, Saskatoon, Thunder Bay and Minneapolis. When you live in Winnipeg there aren't a lot of options for traveling without driving 6-8 hours or flying.

Now that I am a little older, I do remember a few swims here and there. I may even still have some awards tucked away. But mainly what I remember is being with my teammates and traveling to and from meets. These are the times that caused me to grow up as I did, caring for others, having bad and good days, and having to figure stuff out mainly, but not all, on my own. Sure my parents were involved with the swim club. They did timing and officiating, record-keeping and organizing, but other than in-town meets they were rarely at competitions. They settled for paying less than if we all went, and getting the stories from me.

Things were fun on the road, although not without the odd mishap. Sometimes we did not sleep all that well. One time the bus windows froze open and we had to haul out blankets and towels to keep everyone warm. There were bad meals and good times, disagreements and adventures.

Nowadays, we parents experience more trepidation than our parents did sending our kids away with others, in part because there is more news than ever, from more places than ever, letting us know how dangerous the world can be. And it can be dangerous - and yet, you know in the twenty-seven years I have been coaching and the eight years I swam, I have yet to hear of, never mind experience, anyone on a team being seriously hurt or endangered.

Some parents tell me they are concerned that if they are not there for their kids then their kids will not eat or sleep, and therefore come home disappointed. Sometimes parents may feel that they have "wasted" good money on lousy swim performances. Yet I have never heard of anyone starving on a swim trip, and while not every meet will result in personal bests or medals, what you really get from all that team travel is ... better kids.

Kids are great learners, and they do learn from their mistakes. Eating poorly and staying up a little too late in spite of the trip manager's efforts is a mistake. Good judgment comes from experience, and as the saying goes, experience comes from bad judgment. In life, this is unavoidable. The aim of team travel is to swim fast, build team spirit and bonding, and to help kids learn to take care of themselves in a controlled environment. The odd mistake helps influence the development of these qualities.

The other day I ran into a dad who is still involved with swimming through the Swim for Arthritis. His daughter has been out of the pool now for nine years. His daughter was not a top swimmer - in fact, she struggled to reach the regional level. In our brief conversation about his daughter, now finishing her Masters degree in Marine Biology, he quoted her saying that she has depended on the discipline she learned in swimming to complete her studies. The dad said, "I tell parents I meet today that if they want their kids to grow up out of trouble and independent, put them in swimming".

The costs of swimming mount up and families sometimes look at the team travel costs and say "Hey, I could do that trip for less". My long experience on both sides, as both parent and coach, tells me that this is simply not true in the majority of situations. Team travel arranges dinner out infrequently and often on a group deal. Parents generally pay for the meals in a restaurant for three or four rather than one. Hotel costs split out at corporate or team rates generally are less expensive than rates for single families. Deck food bought in bulk is another way that team travel ends up saving money.

Sometimes children are nervous going on their own with their coach and a trip manager. I remember my parents being nervous the first time I went off at eleven years of age to Thunder Bay to be billeted. I called home the second day to tell them what a great time I was having - the billets had put my underwear in the freezer overnight (!) and we had gone smelt fishing in the river between heats and finals. Great times and great memories!

As a parent, I remember the first time we sent our eight year old daughter on team travel. She was billeted too and stayed with another wonderful family. The kids still say hi to each other on deck. The wonder of friendship is special, and swimming provides life-long friendships between people who understand the language of the 400IM, shaving down, heats and finals and negative splitting - it is like a secret code.

Having written all this, I would have to say that perhaps things have not really changed all that much since I swam. I mean we did of course have to ride our bicycles both ways uphill through driving snow storms to get to practise, but our kids will never believe that (until they are a little older). And as a dad I have learned this much: all of the great things I got out of swimming and traveling with the team still exist as opportunities for my children. I still think I could not have chosen a better way to spend the years from 11-20 than spending them in swimming and with the good people on my team. That is why I encourage my kids to swim and to go team travel - they will make mistakes (develop good judgment), get dirty and maybe along the way learn a thing or two about being independent and happy to compete. (Perhaps they will even swim faster.)