

From School to Pool: How Strong the Connection?

By Tom Slear

Chris Johansen has been swimming year-round since he was a freshman in high school. In that time – nearly seven years now – he has come to accept the notion that competitive swimming enhances academic performance. The rule doesn't apply universally, of course, but enough that he noticed a difference in classroom achievement between those who swam only for his high school in Indiana and those who continued on the rest of the year with a club team. As for those who swam and those who didn't do any outside activity, the gap was even more pronounced.

"I think the habits of swimming carry over," he says. "I approach academics much like I approach swimming. I have goals in mind, and I realize what it takes to reach those goals. In swimming, it's showing up for practice and taking care of myself. In school, it's showing up to class, doing the papers, staying on task."

Johansen sees other similarities: "Swimming is very much guided by the clock," he says. "That's the way I handle things outside the pool – watching the clock, guiding myself by deadlines and getting what I need to get done. It's momentum. When you are in the peak of your training, it takes up so much time. Who knows what I would be doing if I had the extra time."

Counterintuitive

"I know it sounds counterintuitive, but the busier you are, the better you work," Johansen said. "This fall I had an injury that required stitches, and I was out of the water for 10 days. I had extra hours of my day back, but I found that once I started relaxing, I didn't want to start up again. When you're training, you don't have much time to relax. If you are constantly on the move, you just kind of keep on moving. It's a routine: practice, class, practice, homework. I'm tired, but I keep going until I get done what I need to get done."

When Johansen arrived at Saint Louis University in the fall of 2002, he was warned that he could never survive as an electrical engineering major and a scholarship athlete. In the intervening two and a half years, he has set two individual school records, and he has not only survived in EE, but thrived. His GPA is 3.9.

"It's not easy," he says, "but it's certainly possible. As you go along, you learn to make good decisions and make good use of your time. A lot of that comes from swimming. Swimming teaches you so much about yourself. Without it, I don't know if I would have had the success I've had in the classroom."

Just about any director of academic services at a college with a swim program will support what Johansen says.

“All of our sports teams perform consistently well,” says Randa Ryan, associate athletic director for student services at the University of Texas, “but of the nine women’s sports here, the swimmers are always in the top three when it comes to cumulative GPA. They’re smart.”

“Swimming tends to be among the top performing sports (in academics), right up there with tennis and track and field,” says Russ Yarworth, the head men’s swimming coach at the University of Massachusetts. “They learn time management at a very young age. There are not many kids in high school out there who get up at four o’clock in the morning for practice, then go to school, then go to a second practice and then do homework. Sometimes in spite of themselves they learn that intelligence is important, but the ability to manage time and to study efficiently is as important. Don’t get me wrong. We have some swimmers here who cause me to worry, but overall they do very well.”

The academic performance of swimmers is not unique among high school and college sports, or even unusual. It has long been the case that athletes as a group do better in school than those in the general student population. Researchers come to many disparaging conclusions about sports and academics in America, but they don’t dispute this one. When the GPA of athletes in high school or college is compared to that of the student body as a whole, the athletes invariably come out ahead.

Ambiguous at Best

The easy leap would be to fall into line with Johansen’s belief that the skills taught by swimming transfer directly to the classroom. However, those who closely study the American sports scene hesitate to make the connection. Support for such a concept is anecdotal. The research data are ambiguous at best.

“The clearest stuff that has come out of the data is that sports like swimming do attract kids who have higher levels of self esteem, higher socioeconomic backgrounds, greater identification with the school and better cognitive skills,” says Dr. Jay Coakley, a professor in the sociology department at the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs and author of *Sport in Society, Issues and Controversies*. “You would expect them to do better in their GPA’s than the student body as a whole. Unfortunately, we have a real tough time saying this happens because of swimming.”

The problem is that most studies compare the academic performances of athletes to non-athletes at a specific point in time instead of over the entire course of a school career. That’s the equivalent of taking a snapshot of a swimming race at the halfway point. How the swimmers got there and how they will finish can be only educated guesses. Who finishes strong, who had better times going into the race, who is better trained – they all give reasonable indications of how the race will turn out, but nothing more.

“There are a number of possible reasons why athletes get better grades,” says Dr. Dave Feigley, chairman of the Department of Exercise Science and Sports Studies at Rutgers University in New Jersey. “We can’t say for sure what it is.”

It's a chicken/egg situation. Which one comes first? Do swimmers evolve into goal-oriented individuals with time management skills because of participation in sports, or are they drawn to a sport that demands such skills because they already have them? The GPA gives a false positive. A large amount of helpful selection takes place before an academic average is computed. Those who don't have time management skills aren't able to maintain the grades that will keep them eligible to compete on a varsity team. At that point, their depressed GPA goes into the non-athlete mix.

A Selection Process

"It's the same situation with fraternities," says Feigley. "They have higher GPA's, but it's not because fraternities are a Mecca of academia. It's because if you don't have a certain grade point average, you can't pledge."

Feigley points to several factors that athletes have over their non-athletic peers when it comes to academic performance. Athletes oftentimes get treated more leniently by their teachers. Athletes tend to be experts at navigating the less demanding courses. Then there's the matter of extra help, which can be a significant advantage at the college level.

"There is counseling on what classes to take, on how to study, group and individual tutorials and mandatory study hall," says Yarworth. "It used to be that most of this help was allocated to the revenue sports, but it has filtered to the non-revenue sports. And there are regular grade reports to the coaches, which is a big help in keeping the swimmers focused."

"At Texas there is a very strong support program of encouragement and structure right from the beginning," says Ryan. "Also, we hold our coaches accountable for the academic success of their athletes."

This accountability imposes itself on recruiting. Coaches won't bother pursuing high school athletes who represent an academic risk. It's one more way that ensures a higher GPA overall for the athletes on campus.

"There is a selection process across the board for all varsity sports," says Coakley. "Those selected have characteristics different from other kids in the schools. The ones selected are the ones who tend to study anyway."

Few Direct Connections

Carry Coakley's reasoning a step further, and it would seem that the connection between sports participation and academic achievement is tenuous at best. With swimming, in particular, he and other researchers are hesitant to link the two. Swimmers tend to come from more favorable socioeconomic settings, which means better schools for the most part and parents who are more prone to emphasize academics. Add in the demands of club swimming – the expense, the travel to practices and meets, the volunteer work – and you have parental commitment way above the norm.

“The parents have to take you places, both literally and figuratively,” says Dr. Kathryn Jay, assistant professor at Barnard College in New York City and author of *More Than Just a Game: Sports in American Life Since 1945*. “You don’t see that as much with basketball and football, where participation is connected to the schools and generally free. So, yes, absolutely, swimmers come from backgrounds that encourage academic success.”

The only direct association Coakley sees between sports and academic achievement is that athletes on varsity sports are more connected to their schools, and therefore, more inclined to get caught up in academic pursuits. As for club swimming, even that link doesn’t fit.

“These kids are learning something,” he says, “but how it gets applied to the rest of their lives is unclear. They may say this is how it applies, but we don’t have the data to support it. I’m not saying that what they believe is untrue, but I’m not willing to make a generalization.”

The implication is that athletic participation has little merit, other than the activity itself. Swimmers learn to swim and how to get into top shape, but as for becoming better students and more mature men and women, well, who’s to say? Swimming might help, but then again, it might do no more than occupy an enormous amount of time and teach life skills the swimmer already has.

“Our society emphasizes sport so much that it has to justify it somehow,” says Jay. “So we emphasize the character-building aspects of sports. But are these aspects of teamwork and dedication any more than kids can get from being part of an orchestra?”

The Right Reasons

Coakley, Jay and others aren’t dismissing the value of competitive sports, just putting it into proper perspective. They see sports as similar to many other activities – not inherently good or bad. The value comes in the application. If the program stresses hard work and improvement instead of winning at all costs, if the coaches sincerely believe in the importance of academics and rigorously apply rules of decorum, then the athletes will be better for the experience.

The athletes, on the other hand, must be participating for the right reasons. Learning is never painless, but for sports to teach lessons, says Jay, the participants “must generally like what they are doing. If they are doing it strictly to earn a college scholarship or because they feel pressure from their parents or friends, then there probably won’t be much value. But if they enjoy what they are doing, there will be tremendous value in teaching life’s lessons.”