



American Swimming
Coaches Association

Reality Check: You Will Probably Never Coach an Olympic Champion

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Categories

- [Coaching & Teaching](#)
-

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As a Coach You Can Change the World, but Probably Not in the Way You Think

Very few of us will ever coach a young student all the way to the Olympics. Yet, for many coaches, this is the ultimate dream. Training an Olympian is a chance to leave our mark on the swimming world, especially if we, ourselves, never made it to that level as competitive swimmers. But in being ever on the lookout for the next swimming superstar, are we actually failing to truly serve those less-than-Olympian athletes that continue to show up to our practices and give swimming their all?

We coach almost exclusively with the goal of preparing for competition, and we focus almost exclusively on the competition-related aspects of swimming, such as stroke technique, physical conditioning, training, nutrition, and what it takes to succeed in swimming both as an individual and as part of a team.

But what difference does it make to our students if they're fast swimmers, if they eventually stop swimming, as most will, without ever learning to apply the lessons of the sport properly across other aspects of their lives? We can best serve our serious students – whether they are Olympic material or not – by actively and consciously preparing them to achieve their own logical and realistic goals not as swimmers, but through swimming. Several such goals that bear every coach's consideration are higher education, career opportunities in coaching, and for a small subset of students, the possibility of immigration.

Achieving a higher education will make our students more productive and more successful members of society. The National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) or National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) swimming can be saviors for some students. Many athletes in the United States have been able to get their degree due to their physical abilities. These are not only Olympic-level athletes, either. A student doesn't even necessarily have to be a national champion to get an athletic scholarship at NCAA Division I/Division II schools. There are many opportunities at the NAIA level that as coaches, we can make our more serious young athletes aware of. Helping our students to train and succeed at securing one of these competitive scholarships is not only a worthy goal, it is far more achievable than even getting as far as Olympic-level tryouts.

Some of these student-athletes that graduate can go on to get their master's degrees and work as Graduate Assistants (GAs). A GA in swimming is essentially an Assistant Coach in a university swimming program. This is a clear and achievable path for students who choose to remain involved in swimming through coaching others. There is a big demand for coaches across the country, from learn to swim programs to more competitive options such as; club, high school, college, and professional swimming. We can also make students aware of the existence of swimming-related aquatics careers like quality assurance roles around the delivery of aquatics training courses. Individuals working in this capacity ensure that both the courses themselves and the students being assessed are meeting the standards of the course.

Though not all of our students may be interested in an aquatic career field, most of them, at some point, will have to do something for some extra money, and an accomplished swimmer can get paid far more for their time by teaching swimming than they can for flipping burgers or waiting tables. Teaching others can also help the teacher hone both their people and public speaking skills, which is a benefit in any career they might ultimately choose to pursue.

Finally, the sport of swimming can be a viable way for foreign-born students to remain in the U.S. and attain U.S. citizenship. One of the official sponsors/partners of the American Swimming Coaches Association is the law firm of immigration attorney Joshua P. Bratter, who specializes in the representation of Foreign Nationals of Extraordinary Ability, National Interest Waivers, and Entrepreneurial Investors. I got my own U.S. residentship through him, and many swimmers—not all of whom have been in Olympics—have gotten their green cards through him as well. In fact, as of the writing of this article, according to his website bratterpa.com, “over 200 competitive swimmers have successfully secured their visas.” They may not all still be really fast swimmers, but today, most of them work for really good companies and have built successful lives because they were able to leverage their athletic ability to create a non-athletic opportunity for themselves.

What it comes down to is that how fast a student swims doesn't matter nearly as much as how much they can apply their athletic and non-athletic skills in other areas of their lives. When we coach competitive swimmers, regardless of how far they may go, we are not just building athletes, we are building character. When we encourage our students to improve as swimmers, we are teaching them how to persevere, improve, and succeed in anything they choose to pursue. Our students aren't just learning how to be fast swimmers, they are learning how to learn and how to master a skill that has a physical dimension. They are learning that ability and success in any field begins with getting foundational skills and concepts right. They are learning why the right foundation matters, and they are learning how to build from there.

I believe that part of every coach's job is to see potential in our young swimmers across all of these areas and then offer them as many options as we can for what they can do with it. We can influence all of our charges to think of swimming not just as something that they will either "make it" at or not, but as a sport that can and should be part of what shapes their lives. Yes, we should do everything we can to develop our students' athletic abilities, but we should also not neglect to teach them that the most important thing about swimming isn't how fast you swim but what you get out of it.

All of the young swimmers that we coach are on a path, and as coaches, it's our responsibility to recognize that those paths are varied and that all have great value, not just to the young swimmers themselves, but to the world. The Olympics is merely one of them.

Slava Fattakhov is an ASCA LEVEL 2 coach providing swimming lessons to students from babies to more competitive swimmers in the South Florida area. A former award-winning competitive swimmer himself, Slava is a graduate of the University of Bridgeport, where he also coached

NCAA Division II national-level competitive swimmers. To learn more about how Coach Slava is shaping young lives around the sport of swimming, visit www.coachslava.com.