**Moving like a Swimmer**

by **Sean Heath**

*“You love it. Your heart is in it. If you leave you really miss it, unless you hate it.”*

*– Hellen, aged 15*

Watching eight of the world’s top athletes stand up on starting blocks for a high level competitive swimming race, be it the Olympics, Canada Games, International University Games, or other international and national competitions, can be an exhilarating spectacle that lasts anywhere between 30 seconds to 15 minutes. Like any competitive sport this neglects the excessive commitment and the millions of kilometers swum in practice to get the chance to stand up on those blocks. For youth swimmers, the embodied experience of training daily and competing monthly and the social worlds in and around the pool may or may not stack up to internationally ranked competitive times. Many youth swimmers have hopes for the future in their chosen sport. Yet, they are also realistic about their social and sporting goals, commitments, and sacrifices that it takes to be a top-ranking athlete. Looking at youth’s experiences in competitive swim clubs anthropologically provides space where youth swimmer’s perspectives on their bodies and their social lives can be compared and contrasted. The resulting differences and similarities that may be observed among and between swimmers and other athletes can help broaden our understandings of an anthropology of youth sports.

In many sports, scholars and anthropologists such as Marcell Mauss and Greg Downey have argued that training the body with various techniques and disciplines in mind encompasses a seriousness in the embodied experiences and play of athletes. Embodiment here loosely refers to the ways in which people may develop and exhibit certain bodily movements and the ways those people express and understand those movements. Competitive swimming, like gymnastics or figure skating, requires a dedication to training in the early years of childhood and youth that stands out in comparison to other sports. In previous work I have posed the argument that play in the water at an early age can give an advantage to swimmers later in their careers. Something as innocuous as holding one’s breath underwater or spinning in circles while submerged can develop a ‘feel’ for the medium of water in a way that skating on a frozen pond or homemade rink can help develop a kid’s skating ability. If these kids didn’t really love the sport of swimming they wouldn’t be putting in six days a week of practices and spending entire weekends hanging out on pool decks at swim meets, or so one might assume. Yet even those youths who are attached to competitive swimming for the social and fitness aspects of the sport are able to describe their experience of moving in water

Scholars such as Jan Dutkiewicz use the term ‘beta’ to describerock climbers’ reenacted physical performance of a rock climb. This term also encompasses the individual experiences of each rock climber and how they interact with the whole climb and the individual hand and foot holds involved. From my own fieldwork observations on the edge of the pool deck with competitive youth swimmers over a four-month period in 2015-2016, I noticed that swimmers express a similar physical movement vocabulary of ‘feel,’ the embodied experience of swimming using the water as a solid object to ‘anchor’ their hands and forearms and ‘pull’ themselves to the end of the pool. These are not equivalent performances, yet in both cases to understand what is being communicated in these various movements can only be achieved through shared practice, either attempting the same rock climb or swimming the same race. ‘Feel’ or ‘feel for the water’ is both the technical ways swimmers moves in, through, and with the water as well as a metaphorical window onto the relationships in and social environment of swim clubs.

Even while continuing to engage with the slightly ambiguous and shifting nature of ‘feel’ for their sport, it takes more than just a hyper-competitive attitude to keep these kids coming back year after year while continuing to improve and push their physical boundaries. Over time a love for the sport and a closeness with swimming peers may keep an athlete involved in a club, either pursuing a career in completive swimming or for general fitness and sociality. Even youth swimmers who have had a successful competitive year do not necessarily go on to be at the top of their game the next year. They may choose to focus on their studies at school (elementary or high school) or put more time into other sports, clubs, and social groups outside of the pool. The move into high school sees a lot of kids drop out of competitive club swimming due to the high rate of other sports, clubs, activities, and chances for socializing that the diversity their home town engenders. Social pressures at school to conform to certain styles of masculinity or femininity, or for that matter to ascribe to either, can also be barriers for girls and boys continuing with sports as both C.J. Pascoe and Ann Travers have argued.

Ultimately, the youths involved in competitive swimming may learn specialized forms of movement that are constantly being adapted and shifting with the changes in these youths’ own bodies and the knowledge of their sport. This learning and adapting happens within clubs, which are social groups with people invested in the competitive sport of swimming to greater or lesser degrees. With the social support of peers, parents, and coaches, being able to train and swim at ever increasing speeds may become less of a hurdle for athletes. Feeling the water can be used as an apt metaphor for beginning to look at these social and emotional encounters youth swimmers experience on a daily basis while also training their bodies. Putting all this together may create situations where the hopes and aspirations of young swimmers to compete on the international stage can be fostered in environments where the embodied experience of swimming is as important to the growth of young athletes as is their sociality with others in and outside of the sport.

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