

Learning to Swim: Age Group Swim Clubs and Embodied Identity in Canada

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Introduction

The production of a swimmer's body is not an overnight process. It begins at a very young age and can continue at the amateur competitive level into one's early 30's. This Essay is concerned with the development of the child, from the age of five, when they can join club swimming, through to their maturation as young adults, where they have hopes of competing at the international level in the Olympics. This is a large age range, but one that is necessary to investigate if I am to be able to relate the nuanced creation of identity to the embodied activity of age group club swimming.

British Columbia, and the City of Vancouver in particular, is located at the hub of competitive swimming in Canada. The province has two of the four national training centres for swimming in the whole country, one in Vancouver and the other in Victoria. These training centres, combined with an almost religious notion of entering one's children into swimming at a young age in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, presents a hotbed for studying the production and reproduction of swimmers' bodies and embodied identities.

In the Greater Vancouver region, I have observed four different types of swim clubs, each of which has a different take on the diverse bodies that participate in their daily activities. There is the non-profit swim club that seeks to obtain high standings in the competitive world of swimming, provincially, nationally, and internationally. Another club formation is that of the for-profit business model of swim club, which also seeks to place children on the podiums of high level provincial and national competitions despite having significantly less resources than the non-profit model. The third type

of club is based at a single pool that has morphed into a non-profit organization with a board of directors managing the finances of the club, which seeks to develop child and adult bodies into competitors at the provincial, national, and international levels. Finally, we have a municipal recreation community development swim club that seeks to introduce swimming as a sport to children without the pressures of mandatory competition. However, the club has an intended design to produce competent swimmers who will have the capacity to move into higher levels of competition if so desired. In short, I will be looking at what Richards L. (2011) refers to as:

Research conducted within youth sport clubs, as essentially social settings, [for which] the social and cultural context assumes pivotal importance as a factor influencing all aspects of participation in youth sport including the development of personal identity and a sense of belonging (Pp.551).

In this essay I will argue that swimming is an embodied practice that affects the identities and bodies of those participating in it (i.e., athletes) and the social groups and institutions that support it (e.g., family members, peers, school mates). For some young boys and girls in Canada, swimming is not only a recreational practice and life-skill, but it may also dominate their families' lifeworlds and everyday practices.

Conceptualizing a Framework

A methodological framework that I have chosen to apply in my research is that of practice theory. Sherry Ortner, building on the works of Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens and Marshall Sahlins, presents a compelling and accessible take of practice

theory in her work. Practice theory is rooted in theories of constraint (e.g., Bourdieu's structure of habitus): human behaviour was controlled and managed by outside cultural and social formations. Ortner notes that what was overlooked by these early practice theorists was "attention to either human agency or the processes that produce and reproduce those constraints" (2006:2). Weaving considerations of power, historicity, and the reinterpretation of culture into her theory of practice, Ortner seeks a framework for understanding larger systematic constraints of society and culture, and the everyday practices of social actors that inform and transform the larger "system." This "relationship between the structural constraints of society and culture on the one hand and the 'practices'...of social actors" (Ortner 2006:2) on the other, became entangled in Ortner's framework of practice theory. This is dialectics at its finest.

Power unifies yet struggles to constrain social behaviour. This can be understood as the "dialectic of power". Power comes in many different forms. One way it is exercised in the swim club world is through hierarchies and hegemonic control, "the conscious systems of beliefs, [sic] the whole lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meaning and values" (Williams 1977:109). Whether it be a board of directors for the non-profit swim club, the head coach of the private business swim club, or the program directors of the community recreation centre, these bodies come across "as strongly controlling but never complete or total" (Ortner 2006:7). Social actors within these systems of control produce what Giddens describes as the "dialectic of control" where "those being controlled have both agency and understanding" (cited in Ortner 2006:5) and can avoid or push back against the hegemony. Thus, the head coach of the non-profit swim club has to work within the constraints of the board of directors. Even so, the coach has highly developed knowledge and uses her agency to affect change in the club structure.

While classic notions of culture (e.g., kinship, subsistence systems, social institutions) place culture

as enabling and constraining, it takes on new meanings when "embedded in narratives of power and inequality" (Ortner 2006:14). New notions of culture are constructed as "learned, shared symbolic behavior that functions as an adaptive mechanism as well as a guide for collective and individual human action" (Blanchard 1995:34). Another way of understanding culture is as "a critical construct that allows people to define their human experiences" (Weiss 2000:183). Some of the power relations and inequalities in the swimming world include one, the power of coaches, parents, board of directors, and national administrators; and two, the inequality of economic and social positions of families trying to get their children involved in swimming. A central concern of power dynamics in swim clubs is the availability of pool space. Does the club have a designated pool to swim at? Does the club need to rent space for their swimmers? Is there competition between clubs, each of which may vie for lane space and times? What practice times can be made available, and do swimmers and their parents have the flexibility to get their children to those times and places? These questions suggest that the "social reproduction [of swim clubs] is never total, always imperfect, and vulnerable to the pressures and instabilities inherent in any situation of unequal power" (Ortner 2006:7).

Pool Wars: Vying for Space

Having designated pool space is invaluable for a swim club. If your club is attached to a specific centre then there is a security in knowing that you always have your choice of times and spaces to run practices. If your club does not have this luxury then you must deal with renting out space from different pools. This can result in the possibility of having less than ideal choices for lane times and space. This can be a big hit to your swimmer and coach base if the only practice times you can get are during the middle of the day (i.e., during school hours) or just before and after school (i.e., during work hours). Coaches may find it difficult to manage a part-time coaching position if they are already involved in full-time work and parents might not be able to drive their children to practices. Depending on the

enrollment of athletes and availability or funding, for many non-profit swim clubs, "what is required in the way of facilities to stage a game or sporting event runs the gamut from temporary, informally used, and roughly demarcated spaces to expensive, purpose-built, and exclusive ones" (Dyck 2012:12). Exclusive swim clubs, which are found more often in the United States than in Canada, usually own the pool that they practice at, and rent out their space, and offer public memberships.

As previously mentioned, the growth of a swim club is constrained by the amount of pool space that they can access and by the times of their scheduled practices. Before further addressing issues of accessibility, I want to discuss community-run development swim club. This club model, focusing on semi-competitive swimming, has some leeway in organizational flexibility that other competitive oriented clubs do not. For instance, they can schedule practices and run meets due to the control of pool space and time that being a part of a recreation program body affords. Membership is more lax as children and youths can participate in practices from anywhere from once to six times a week. Competitive clubs, depending on the age and competitive orientation of the respective group, usually require a commitment of three to nine practices per week.

Coaches in the development club are chosen from available staff members of the recreation's body. Many of these instructors are certified to teach age group swimming lessons and are given additional resources in their coaching role but do not necessarily have their coaching certificate per-se. Their job is a part-time position based on an hourly wage. Coaches for non-profit clubs are paid a yearly salary. Coaches for non-profit competitive swim clubs have an additional advantage because they can plan the entire year since they know their groups will stay relatively the same with only one or two athletes leaving during the season for various reasons. This is not so for the development club as a new "series" begins every two or three months. Hence, there can be a large flux in the number and type of bodies that move through the program.

Competitive clubs' coaching staffs adhere to the notion that "practice makes perfect." Likewise, the developmental club's often younger and less experienced staff than that of competitive clubs, are encouraged to follow the "practice makes perfect" motto, but to a lesser extent. Both types of clubs recognize that swimming's embodiment, like any bodily activity, comes from repetition. Susan Brownell, in her study of Chinese body and training practices at the varsity level joked with her teammates that "'practice makes permanent.' By this we meant that once you learn a sport's techniques in a certain way, it is hard to change it later" (1995:12). Young instructors/coaches are less constrained by this principle than the older coaches of the competitive clubs. This is because the career coaches were trained in certain ways in their career as competitive swimmers. They had bought in, so to speak, to the older model of coaching. Now these coaches reproduce the training practices they experienced with their own group of swimmers. That is not to say that all competitive coaches were once swimmers but certainly the majority were at some point. Flexibility in a coach is a highly sought after quality. Young coaches often have the malleability to learn in new ways, but do not have the experience to be recognized in the hierarchy of Canadian competitive coaches. In this way, the practice of swimming as "sport is a part of the utopian striving of humankind because it is a liminal world of 'play' that offers an opportunity for controlled experimentation with new social structures" (Brownell 1995:33). Coaches, parents, and athletes have the ability to play around with varying coaching and training models as can be seen in the four swim club structures I have analyzed.

Performance and Bodies

The body is a discursive site with ever increasing webs of meaning ascribed to it by the social world. The athlete's body is doubly so as it is a contested site for the production of local and national symbols. As Brownell aptly puts it, "the horizons of an athlete's world never stray far from her body. The course of an athletic career entails development of

the ability to focus increasingly greater amounts of awareness on increasingly specific parts of the body" (1995:6). In the past this striving toward a "greater awareness" of one's own body has taken precedent over education of the mind. Divided into the camps of body and mind the "horizon of an intellectual's world lie[s] at the edge of an ever-expanding cosmos of ideas that seems to recede further and further from the body" (ibid:7). For today's youth this no longer needs to be the case, although many universities give great sums in scholarships to exceptional athletes with marginal grades. The education of high performance and elite athletes, particularly swimmers, can be structured in ways contrary to classic public school education. Special permission may be granted to young athletes so that they are able to continue standard public education outside of the classic nine-to-three schedule. With an increased emphasis on educating at the individual level and the flexibility of course hours, many of these children and youth do not have to sacrifice education for athletics. Rather both can be pursued at a high standard that leads to many more possibilities in the construction of an identity at an early age. Sport and academics both influence the construction of embodied practices in children. Yet these institutions no longer need to compete for space. This may allow children and youth more agency in creating an identity that is unique to their swim clubs and academic institutions of choice.

Taking a step back, it is not just how body image is constructed, but how people know how to use their bodies, what Marcel Mauss calls "techniques of the body" (Dyck & Archetti 2003:7). These are inscribed in the training of the body. Diving head first into water isn't the most natural of movements and is often accompanied by reactions of self-preservation, such as by any jerking or contorting motion that hinders the head from entering the water just after the hands (followed by the rest of the body). Dive training requires manipulation of the body and much practice. To "train the body," combines the two kinds of body, implying that one simultaneously trains the body-person and flesh-body" (Brownell 1995:17). The flesh-body is exactly that, one's musculature, ligaments, skeleton and

other organs required for the sport at hand. The body-person is one's individual identity manifested through body culture. Included under the umbrella of body culture are daily practices, understandings of bodies, lifestyles, and public displays of bodies – it is everything about one's social environment and culture that has been internalized and inscribed onto the body. Since training for swimmers most often occurs in groups of age and ability level, embarrassment, fear, and shame are emotions that shape the body-person and can matter a great deal in these social settings. Thus, we can "identify the body as a social as well as a psychological and biological phenomena" (Dyck & Archetti 2003:7).

As stated previously, training the body is a social event where athletes watch and learn from one another. Movements are mimicked by other athletes. Strokes and turns are scrutinized by coaches and spectators. Techniques are routinized and replicated in training regimes when they are valued or seen to give an edge to the athlete. Yet these movements are only one part of the practices in which we use our bodies. Sports are "part of the entire culture of the body" and are an arena for the display of the "body as a cultural artefact" (Brownell 1995:8). Brownell goes so far as to use the term "body culture" to describe the ways in which people use their bodies and how we can read those bodies:

Body culture is a broad term that includes daily practices... It also includes the way these practices are trained into the body, the way the body is publicly displayed, and the lifestyle that is expressed in that display. Body culture reflects the internalization and incorporation of culture. Body culture is embodied culture (ibid:10-11).

The meaning and significance of these bodies and performances are socially constructed in contested corporeal spaces. As any swimmer knows, a personal best or record breaking time in practice does not have the same meaning as a personal best or broken record at a sanctioned swim meet.

This moves my analysis of swimming from a recreational pursuit to that of sport. Noel Dyck and Eduardo Archetti argue that "sport and dance

combine techniques of the body, social practices and cultural imagination in ways that fuel the generation of embodied identities that reflect and address issues that do not necessarily begin or end on the dance-floor or field of play" (2003:15). Sports are seen to be appropriate areas for growth and development of the physical body. Sport can also be seen to inscribe the moral values of society. There is hope that sport activities will provide children and youth with skills that they can apply later in life as healthy, competent adults (Dyck 2012:4). Far from being the fun games which girls and boys engage in, their achievements in this realm of play can become the "objects and products of adults' work" (Dyck 2012:3). For, as Dyck argues, "children's sports in Canada revolve around various modes of work that are engaged in by parents and coaches as well as the boys and girls who venture" (2012:3) onto the pool decks of club swimming.

Light and colleagues have identified three stages that children move through in their sport development: sampling phase, specializing phase, and an investment phase (2011:552). The first phase of this process is where children "sample a range of different sports with an emphasis on fun and deliberate (structured) play rather than formal training" (ibid:552). This first phase is where the developmental swim club places its emphasis. Run by a community recreation centre this trend is not surprising. From this first stage, children and youths "move from deliberate play to deliberate (structured) practice aimed at improving performance, [they] play fewer sports and engage in serious practice[s], [yet these practices] still maintain fun and enjoyment as a central element of participation" (ibid:552). These are the characteristics of the second specialization phase. The third and final phase of sport development is centered on investment. This "involves an increasing focus on one sport with a commitment to intensive training and competitive success at around the age of sixteen. In this phase young people 'invest' in a single sport" (ibid:552). By investing in the embodied activity of swimming at an early age, competitive and elite swim clubs attempt to narrow the focus of youth's constructed identity. Of course this does not bypass

the sampling of sports that parents recommend for their young children. At any moment children do have the ability and agency to "move sideways" (ibid:552) into activities geared more toward recreation or to even completely remove themselves from all sport activities. From my own experiences as an athlete and from research with parents of other athletes, there is usually a push for children to see an activity through the entire season before making a final decision on whether to continue on or drop out.

The Affective Body

So far I have described the body as being socially and culturally constructed. Yet, the ways in which we view our bodily identities may be in part constituted on the physical form and idea of an enclosed identifiable entity. The body is much more than this. It is a fluid form, exfoliating the space it occupies. Our bodies house the potential to shape themselves and their surrounding context. A certain practice I have observed in swim clubs is that of training 'the *n* body.' Here, *n* represents the potential of a young body to be formed into a range of swimmer types. Continued training applies the four strokes (i.e., butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke, and freestyle) to the *n* form: $n+x$, $n+z$, $n+y$, $n+v$. Yet, there are long, short and middle distances, relays, and individual medley (IM is a combination of all four strokes) races for all of the strokes in competition. Now we can take this body and add distance for all the strokes, $n+y+1$, so as to perfect the short distances before moving into longer swims, $n+x+2$, $n+z+3$, $n+v+4$, and so forth (Gil 1998:134). We now have a formula for producing from the abstract body any type of swimmer. Once we accept the possibility of being able to deduce all the relations between the body and objects we come to an abstract form, or abstract body. This body has the capacity to translate contexts and codes being itself an infralanguage. Jose Gil's infralanguage consists of an "abstract body [which] translates as it follows the totality of [the]...forms that compose it. It is in this sense that it can be said to be the 'basis' and 'matrix' of meaning" (1998:135-36). This fluidity of the body allows for it to be open to technological

investment. By applying these technologies to the body coaches seek to harness the affective potential of the body image. In the international spotlight of Olympic competition the Freestyler or IMer's body (say, Michael Phelps) can translate codes and contexts of national dedication. In Phelps' case, this is an American 'all or nothing' attitude. The US credo of "winning at any cost" combines a single mindedness of training regimes that attempts to break down swimmers by having them fail constantly in order to breed a frustration and desire that strives for something greater. I am not promoting this type of training ideal of the body, nor am I suggesting that it is the only coaching method used in the US. Instead, I am using it as an example of the way the infralanguage of the body conveys meaning without the use of standard language.

Gender and Affect

Gender is a point of high contention when discussing any athletic practice. Male and female athletes are separated in international tournaments. While we may think of the ideal body as tall, lean, muscular and defined, the swimmer's body can be presented as problematic for the "self-consciousness of individual performers" (Dyck & Archetti 2003:10). The exact dimensions of swimmers' bodies are as varied as snowflakes, yet they all have similar defining features: broad, muscular shoulders and latissimus dorsi muscles (lats), a tapering toward the waist, lean and muscular legs, lean and muscular arms, large feet, and hairless when racing. The reason I term this body image as problematic is because of popular media images of ideal bodies. For women, such a body is tall and skinny with little muscular definition, not unlike the supermodels who stride down *Victoria's Secret* fashion show runways. For men, the ideal body is the muscular body-builder, bulging muscles that seems to defy the human skeletal frame, such as that of Arnold Schwarzenegger in the 1982 Hollywood film *Conan the Barbarian*. Culture in the West is infested with Hollywood images of bodybuilder men and supermodel women. Advertising industries of all sorts use these images to create consumer demand

and "circulate affective energy in an affect economy" (Wissinger 2007:233). The surfacing of an affective sense that ideal body images can bring about demonstrates for Elizabeth Wissinger that "affectivity occurs between bodies, between physiological arousal and the conscious realization of it by bodies. Affect is social in that it constitutes a contagious energy, an energy that can be whipped up or dampened in the course of interaction" (2007:233).

To understand affect more closely I turn to Brian Massumi's *The Autonomy of Affect*. It can be hard to grasp Massumi's difference between emotion or feeling and that of affect. Using the autonomic nervous system as a starting point for his empirical study, combined with a theoretical grounding of affect, demands that readers have a grasp of psycholinguistics and anatomy. Not surprisingly, most anthropologists did not minor in neuropsychology or do not read widely in this field. Thus, Massumi's work requires some background research in psychological theory to begin to understand the distinction between intensity and "form/content (qualification)" (Massumi 2002:25). Intensity to me seems close to the affective, in so far as it is a full body response that is autonomic.

Language, relevant to the production of knowledge and discourse, falters when attempting to describe affect, which is a wholly felt sensation. But Massumi does provide a good differentiation of emotion and affect: "Emotion is qualified intensity" whereas "affect is unqualified... not ownable or recognizable" (Massumi 2002:28). To put it simply, emotion can be targeted, infused with function and meaning, and be ordered into semantic and narrative structures. On the other hand, affect denies linguistic trappings while being relatively autonomous in nature.

Hard to grasp is the realm of the virtual. The half second of space between perception and action composes the virtual realm. This all happens before perception in a liminal space. Simply put the virtual is a "realm of potential" (Massumi 2000:30, emphasis in original). This idea of potentiality comes into play when trying to define affect in relation to its own

effects and conscious knowledge. If you have affective potential or are caught in an affective state then the inclusion of the idea of this potential creates affection. In essence, this makes affect a virtual process. This tie to the virtual is what makes affect autonomous as we cannot pinpoint where it happens. It has the potential to happen or fizzle out like quantum particles. Akin to this virtual realm is Wissinger's example of the "x-factor," that supermodels cultivate or have naturally. It is "in some ways immeasurable, but constitutes a necessary ingredient nonetheless" (2007:237).

Gendered Bodies

I have strayed far from the gendered body of the youth club swimmer. But the affective potential of images in popular media has an immediate effect on the embodied identity of swimmers. As stated earlier, the inverted triangle on top a popsicle-stick that is the swimmer's body has an impact on the self-consciousness of young athletes. Girls may think that they need to lose weight, slim down, wear makeup, or be curvy thanks to the technological transmission of the ideal model by the affective economy. The affective economy is everything used to create, transmit, and sell us an ideal image, an image that plays off the emotional intensity that we feel. Yet, this is opposed to a healthy, strong swimmer. Not unlike the gymnast, the swimmer's well-defined musculature is considered unattractive in the fashion industry. A broad shouldered female swimmer may think that her embodied identity is more masculine than feminine. This may become problematic when identity is so malleable in the early years of development.

Many coaches understand the vulnerability of the self-conscious identity creation of young athletes, but some do not. That said, all coaches and parents know that the human body goes through much change come puberty. Parents and athletes often do not comprehend the full ramifications of physiological growth. The female physiological body is special in this regard. Male bodies tend to be easier to predict through the growth phase of puberty as they often get taller and fill out to accommodate muscle growth. Female bodies do the same but have

the additional complication of breast and hip growth. From the conversations that I have had with different coaches, puberty for a female places her swimming career in a liminal zone. Different coaches have noted that female race times in certain events do not decrease (that is, get faster) between the ages of 14 and 18. Perhaps these coaches didn't have great female swimmers in that age group. More likely, though, is that this shows that the growth of a female's body hinders her performance in the pool. This lack of increased performance is doubly problematized if we look at the example of a female triple-A breaststroker who grows large breasts during puberty. Essentially, this can end her career path as a competitive breaststroker, not from her own lack of practice and dedication to the sport, but rather the sheer amount of drag her body now creates in the water. For this reason coaches cannot accurately predict whether a female athlete will be able to compete at the Olympic level until she has reached the age of 16 or older and has gone through the initial stages of puberty. The development of the young female athlete in the swimming world is done as roundly as possible, attempting to make them competent at all strokes and distances. If this is done well it can place them on a competitive track with the hope for advantageous physical growth during puberty.

For men there is a different reaction to the affective-economy body-image industry. Earlier in this essay I suggested that the body image presented to young boys and men today is that of a body builder. When this is not the case, and the media lens is focused on athletes, the body image still is presented in a body builder's spectrum and the body's ability to lift raw weight. Take for example popular television commercials for Reebok. This sports gear company uses hockey players to play on the affective force that these cultural heroes, such as Sidney Crosby, have in Canadian society. In one particular recent commercial you can see hockey players pulling sleds piled with weights and doing squats and jumps while carrying Olympic bars with weights on the end (Brown 2012). The narrator in the background mimics an internal dialogue with 'the self.' He asks, "How do I want to live my life?"

To live my dream or to dream bigger” (Brown 2012). During this narration, viewers are shown images of hockey players scoring goals and players doing weight training off the ice. For young athletes their dreams and ambitions are presented to them as involving weight training and building the strength of the body. But this body is a hockey player’s body. This body moves along the medium of ice and its techniques involve physical contact with other bodies vying for position, an exfoliation of the body into the surrounding space. These images affect the self-identity of young athletes, many of whom are unable at the age of 12 or 17 to compartmentalize the different embodied forms of athletes in different sports. Thus, a desire to build muscle and put on body mass may crop up in a swimmers mind as the proper way to become a successful athlete and superstar.

Power and strength are not tied to weight training, bulking up, or being physically powerful in the embodied identity of the swimmer (that is to say, to be able to knock someone bigger than you to the ground using your own body weight). A streamlined and lean body is the ideal body for the competitive swimmer. Streamline is a hydrodynamic term denoting the efficiency of an object to move through a body of water. Strength is associated with the body’s ability to anchor hands and arms in the water to pull the body forward, exfoliating the space in a linear direction. The legs provide the kick out the back end, sort of like an outboard motor on a boat. To maintain the continuous pace through the water over short and long distances requires every muscle to be strong. Bulk muscle mass will not make one faster in the water. In fact, it will most likely slow a swimmer down. Any extra weight one has to move is represented in a larger profile which, in turn, creates extra resistance in the water. The ideal male bodybuilder form that the media presents to young athletes is anathema to their success as a swimmer.

Efficiency of the swimmer and the male body involves shaving or waxing down excess hair before competition. Shaving and waxing is most readily equated to female practice in Western society. Next to the burly lumberjack type of the manly man

hockey player image, which seems to constitute masculinity in Canadian society, the shaved, slim swimmer body in a skin tight swimsuit can look wimpy. Young boys and teenagers probably wouldn’t want their school peers to see them shaving their legs let alone standing on a starting block in a small Speedo suit that resembles underwear. What does this do for the body image, the identity of young athletes in the swimming world? At this point in my research I have not been able to discuss this with young athletes. But this does point to the socially mediated nature of individually experienced “body discoveries” (Dyck & Archetti 2003:10) as young males and females immerse themselves into the embodied practices of swimming.

Swimming with Others, Performing as an Individual

What would a swim meet or practice look and feel like if you were the only one there? Is racing the clock or attempting to beat a record valuable if it is done as a solitary endeavor? Dyck and Archetti make a penetrating observation when they say, “an individual’s embodied discoveries or achievements cannot be readily verified or discursively celebrated without the assistance of knowing witnesses” (2003:10). To strike this point home, does the time of 59.54 seconds for an age group swimmer in a 100-meter breaststroke race mean anything to non-swimmers? If one is a non-competitive swimmer, without getting into a pool and trying it yourself, it simply is an amount of time. Swimming can be a leisure activity, but it can also be a sport and “like ritual, dance, and theatre, sport is a performance genre with a certain audience appeal” (Brownell 1995:28). It requires participants, both in the pool and on the deck, to create the spectacles which are swim meets. Without the comparison of another body attached to a name and identity, swim times mean little to age group swimmers. Coaches who have been involved in the sport for many years may have a different take. These same coaches are equipped with developmental charts that display times which athletes should be accomplishing in their respective events as they develop at different ages.

Michael Phelps, with his success at the 2008 and 2012 Summer Olympics and his standing as the winningest Olympian of all time, placed the world of competitive swimming at the forefront of people’s minds around the world. The name “Michael Phelps” is now commonplace in North America, demonstrating that “an individual’s body is not entirely his or her own, but rather, is subjected to demands and pressures that constantly challenge the notion of individual autonomy” (Brownell 1995:23). For Phelps is an American national hero, no longer just an elite American athlete. Before the podium placements, not many outside of elite competitive swimming knew or even cared about the athlete from Baltimore, Maryland, which emphasizes how “sports practices mediate between the private world of everyday body techniques and the public world of shared performances and, thus, play an important role in the formation of public opinion” (Brownell 1995:29).

More attention is being brought to bear on the athlete in sports such as swimming because of its seemingly individual pursuit. Even relay races can be broken down to the individual swimmers’ performances with blame or fame being cast on a particular athlete’s leg of the race. All practices and races are watched intensely at the elite competitive level. Likewise, “easy” developmental meets are also watched closely even though everyone is declared a winner to some extent. As a lifeguard myself, I have noticed how “coaches monitored swimmers by pacing along the poolside while external surveillance also operated through authority figures such as lifeguards, poolside helpers and parents with numerous individuals monitoring the poolside during training sessions [and meets]” (Lang 2012:25-6). Fellow athletes are not removed from this monitoring gaze. At younger ages, this gaze rarely results in self- or peer-disciplining and routinely results in joking, teasing, chatting, and tomfoolery that children engage in on a regular basis. Coaches and parents try to:

...regulate [children’s] behaviours towards accepted standards. For swimmers, exposed to a discourse of physical preparation that equates compliance with strict training

regimes and controlled lifestyles with success, these standards included undertaking frequent, intense training sessions, adhering to strict discipline and recording their times, stroke and heart rate, session attendance and weight. Guided by this discourse of physical preparation, athletes learned to submit to these normalized training protocols and were sculpted into compliant, docile bodies (Lang 2012:32-3).

I am not in full agreement with Melanie Lang’s “docile body” analysis of how swimmers are developed. Docility, to my mind evokes notions of a master-slave relationship whereby the slave is meant to be docile, easy to control, and not impassioned in their bodily practices.

The swimmer-coach relationships that I have observed are anything but this. Both parties are often highly enthusiastic in their training of bodily techniques, in the construction of identity, and in the embodied practices surrounding swimming. Swimmers may decorate their kick boards with club mottos or inspirational sayings, cookies are baked by team members and parents with club insignia, and club caps and other clothing is worn with pride. If docility of the body can be equated to the potential which is Massumi’s “abstract body” (1998:136) then Lang’s training regimes still are more closely related to military rule rather than the “mentor-swimmer” (2010:33 emphasis in original) relationship that her participants sought after.

Conclusion

I have described some of the ways that the body is constructed in the world of swimming. Media, Olympic heroes, coaches, parents, and peer groups all have a hand in shaping the way children see and use their bodies in and out of the pool. The training practices that children are subject to shape their physical bodies and often their identities as they pursue excellence at the elite level, or participate “just for the fun of it.” Either way swimmers go through extensive exercises not only in the pool, but also on dry land in the training of their bodies. “Activation,” what other sports term “warming-up,” is required before every workout in the pool.

Activation involves loosening up joints and muscles by swinging arms and legs through their full range of motion. Most warm-up routines are designed to get blood flowing to areas not used outside of the water, which can help prevent injury. Children take full advantage of these moments to socialize by catching up on the day's school activities and discussing what will or has happened on their precious days off and while away from their peers. Here is a place where children bond, make closer friendships within their groups, and establish a sense of belonging. It is during the pre-workout activation sessions and the post-workout mandatory stretching that children often exhibit the varying levels of a swimmer's embodied identity. Some have bought into the training regimes required of them, while others pretend and put on a show of complying with the demands of the club and coach they are attached to.

Age group club swimming can be far more than a recreational activity that parents put their children into. It can include a large assortment of activities and practices that range from the developmental club enrolled swimmer to that of competitive international podiums. Inside these fields, identity is contested and shaped and bodies are subjected to regimes of discipline and training, all in the attempt to form individuals who will embody the identity of their sport in and out of the pool.

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