

Bodies in Water: Embodiment, Social Worlds, and Fluid Motion in Competitive Age-Group Swim Clubs

by

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Abstract

This thesis undertakes an anthropological examination of the everyday sport practices of boys and girls who belong to swim clubs in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Specifically, it considers how the social worlds of swimmers can be understood as complex forms of community in which participation in, and swim clubs themselves, represents more than a sport. It examines how boys and girls come to understand and use their bodies in the water, and how, through the processes of training and play, they come to acquire embodied knowledges of swimming and motion in the water. Finally, it argues that by training together and yet competing separately, boys and girls experience gender as a subtle but salient marker amongst and between young athletes enrolled in swim clubs.

Keywords: swimming; child and youth sport; embodiment; body; anthropology of sport and childhood

Dedication

In memory of Ronald Bertram Heath, a loving grandfather and mentor.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

To understand the everyday lives of young athletes in swim clubs is to engage in a discussion concerning the physical motions of swimming up and down the pool uncounted times in a season, mapping out the various relationships between different actors inside and outside of the pool space, whether it be the kids' swimming peers, non-swimming peers, parents, coaches, or officials. Community sports¹ in North America are often depicted as "natural and appropriate" (Dyck 2012:4) activities for children to be involved in, where they can develop healthy bodies, healthy relationships with peers, and form their identities. Through hundreds of hours of repetition swimmers can develop complex understandings of their bodies and how they effect and are affected by the water. This embodied knowledge and haptic² vocabulary is transmitted from coach to swimmer, where it is reproduced and refined until swimmers develop a 'feel' for the water.

Being a boy or girl in a swim club involves negotiating a balance between swimming as a sport, interacting with swimmers of different genders in a joint participation training environment, and developing relationships with peers, coaches, and other adults involved in swimming, on top of the demands of attaining an education. Navigating the intricacies of youths' involvement in swim club includes, but is not limited to, learning about sport, sporting bodies, acquiring a sense of the pool, and meanings of swimming. This thesis undertakes an anthropological examination of the everyday sport practices of boys and girls who belong to swim clubs in the Lower Mainland of British

¹ Following Dyck (2012:17) I define community sports activities as those outside of 'intermural, extramural, and school based curricular physical education sports,' and other short 'camp' programs and high performance clubs. Community sports require parents and volunteers to create and operate leagues and teams, and they often serve as referees during competitions for children. It is with the extended role of parents and volunteers that competitive age-group swim clubs share similarities with 'community sports' while remaining sport programs that remain outside the confines of community sports due largely to the professional-paid positions of the coaches and the fees for club affiliation.

² Haptic, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is: "Of the nature of, involving, or relating to the sense of touch, the perception of position and motion (proprioception), and other tactile and kinaesthetic sensations" (Oxford English Dictionary 2017). For swimmers, a haptic vocabulary has to do with the physical sensation of touching the water and the ways in which they know where and how to move their bodies in water to accomplish forward movement, and subsequently can demonstrate while out of the water.

Columbia. Applying a critical lens to the embodied and situated meanings of community and identity generated by social practices in the world of the pool, I will argue that ‘community’ and ‘identity’ cannot be understood without deep immersion in the respective contexts in which these arise. I also seek to pursue an anthropological inquiry into the operations of age-group swim clubs arguing that a one-way vision of child socialization, wherein society and adults are perceived to shape children is a widely shared but far from complete version of what actually happens. What I follow is a well corroborated approach (Dyck 2012; Thorne 1993; Grasmuck 2005; Anderson 2008) that recognizes children as active social agents who also have an integral impact on not only their own behaviours and embodied performances, but also how society is shaped by youths.

1.1. Research Methods and Methodology

During the 2015-2016 winter swim club season, I conducted four months of research with three different competitive age-group swim clubs—‘Eel,’ ‘Humboldt,’ and ‘Oarfish’³—in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. I employed observational and semi-participatory methods throughout the research process, becoming a detached-participant (Thorne 1993) in the practices and swim meets of the swim clubs. In addition to employing these familiar methods of ethnographic research, I conducted twenty-three open-ended interviews (fourteen with ‘kids’ and ‘youths’⁴, four with parents, five with coaches), and had dozens of conversations with swimmers, parents, and coaches, to acquire an understanding of what participating in the embodied activity of swimming

³ The names of the people, the swim clubs, and the levels in the clubs are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the participants in this research.

⁴Barrie Thorne (1993) makes the point that when adults talk about children they create an age specific category to define younger persons. Yet children refer to each other by their first names ('Kelsey,' or 'Johnathon') the very same way adults do, or they use context specific language to describe people (that guy with the clipboard). Another important point here is that kids don't tend to talk about adults as '*fully grown humans*' or use other age generic terms the same way we talk about '*children*.' Following Thorne, I refer to my informants as '*kids*' rather than '*children*,' as that was the language they used when describing themselves in an age based way, although I still use the term '*children*,' most often in cases when I am discussing young swimmers with parents and coaches. All the swimmers I spoke with were between the ages of 8 and 21, a wide age range, thus, it was hard to make a distinction between '*kids*' and '*youths*,' although there is analytical merit to the categories. I outline the age and training groups further in this chapter and generally follow the convention of referring to swimmers as '*younger kids*' in the pre-LMR (Lower Mainland Regional swim meets) levels, '*older swimmers*' in the LMR and above categories, and '*youths*' to designate the broader category of young people.

means for young athletes, parents, and coaches. These ethnographic interviews (Bernard 2006; Skinner 2013; Spradley 1979) combine conversation with a detailed set of questions one wishes to explore, which allows for much play in the direction, the responses, and the questions that may be asked over one or more encounters. This approach allows anthropologists flexibility in constructing their theoretical framework once in the field.

As the swim club provides a program of activities for children and youths, I approached their social worlds within this setting mainly by observing from the margins of their activities (Anderson 2003). Since I am an adult, equipped with a physical size and other markers of age that distinguish me from them, I would never be able to fully integrate into the practices of these youth as a full participant. Thus, this detached-participant aspect of my research resembles Thorne's (1993:12) ethnographic research model. Specifically, I sought to sustain an attitude of 'respectful discovery' and an 'open-ended curiosity' when approaching children's daily practices. This approach respects Thorne's point that "kids are competent social actors" (12), who actively participate in the formation of their everyday lives.

Using this detached-participant approach was essential in applying for ethics permission for this study. Fear of 'stranger danger,' pedophilia, sexual harassment, not to mention a host of other 'bad touch' scares in the past few decades, have made western populations, and especially parents, wary of any person who is in close contact with their children (Lang 2015). Swimming is a sport that requires a substantial amount of physical manipulation of swimmers by the coaches, particularly at the younger chronological ages, to help the former understand how to use their bodies in the water while achieving proper physical swimming technique. I did not want to place myself in a position of authority over the kids and youths, and I wanted to be able to move around with relative freedom between training groups in the clubs. Thus, I maintained a position as a non-participant observer throughout the course of the research. This allowed me the freedom to speak with younger and older swimmers during warm-up and warm-down sessions, ask questions of parents while sitting on the bleachers observing practice, and converse with coaches and observe the athletes swimming from the edge of the pool deck.

While several other disciplines may use ethnographic methods, or purport to label their projects as being ethnographic, they do not necessarily follow the same schema as anthropological ethnography. Admittedly, many sociologists produce impressive works of ethnography (e.g., Julianotti 2005; Chambliss 1989), so the method and the written work based on it are not exclusive to the discipline of anthropology. Full immersion in the field of study, whether through participant-observation or through living in a community, begins to get at the heart of much ethnographic research.

Fieldwork, based upon extended personal immersion in the field of study, usually entails some form of participant-observation. Participant-observation spans a continuum from detached observation to fully participating and experiencing people's daily lives (Hume and Mulcock 2012; DeWalt and Musante 2010; Okely 2012). The use of fieldwork as the main research tool is indispensable in exploring the complexity of everyday actions but also for branching out and making larger connections to social contexts where other forms of sports and games are played and debated (Dyck 2015). In this context, the plasticity of a research topic is bolstered by the research methodology. If we conceive of sport as a malleable category, more in line with anthropological analysis (Dyck 2015; Dyck and Hognestad 2015) rather than a concrete entity, it allows ethnographic inquiry to flourish in the in-between spaces that would otherwise go unnoticed. To that end, Dyck (2015) argues that by widening the range of possibilities for recognizing and considering such activities as 'sport,' anthropologists can better create conceptual and analytical linkages between sport and other embodied athletic activities. Ethnographic inquiry into these various embodied activities allows for a space where practices such as dance can be examined as being in some respects similar to athletic and embodied practices without needing to be labeled as sport, while leaving open possibilities for drawing heuristic comparisons between given forms of dance and sport. In connecting the everyday bodily practices of games and sports, anthropologists seek out the commonalities and in-between spaces that are encountered in larger social and behavioural contexts. It is this academic tradition of anthropology that I have attempted to follow in pursuing my studies into youth swim clubs.

1.2. The Fields of Sport

Sport has recently become an accepted field of study in anthropology (Downey 2005; Dyck 2015; Dyck and Hognestad 2015). This includes research into children's sport (Dyck 2012; Anderson 2008), a field which attracts a fair amount of attention within sociology (Grasmuck 2005; Messner and Musto 2016; Thorne 1993; Swyers 2010). Still, in much of the sports world outside of anthropology and sociology, the focus has been primarily on elite level athletes competing at national and international levels and little attention has been given to child and youth athletes, their goals, desires, and experiences in sport. In fact, there is a relatively small literature pertaining to swimming, produced mainly by sociologists and focusing primarily on elite-level athletes, who compete at national and international levels (Fisher and Roper 2015; Guttmann 1978; Chambliss 1989; McMahon and Barker-Ruchti 2015; McMahon et al. 2012; McMahon and Penney 2011; McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2011). Researchers in the physical and medical sciences have been concerned with the prevention, maintenance, and rehabilitation of sports injuries, including those associated specifically with swimming, for many decades (Madden 2010; McLeod 2010; Scuderi and McCann 2005). Yet there has been relatively little social research (Lang 2015; Lang 2010; Musto 2014; Heath 2014) conducted on swimming as a social activity, let alone on the experiences of children and youths in age-group swim clubs. I will aim to explore this gap in the social science literature on non-elite swimmers and seek to rectify it to some extent through the use of an anthropological perspective.

In this thesis, I will explore not only the physical activity of swimming but also the meanings that swimmers, parents, and coaches create and the behaviours they exhibit in and around the pool. By viewing sport as a set of social practices and relationships that reach beyond the physical actions executed on the 'fields of play,' we can identify the different goals and orientations to these practices held by the different actors involved (Rollason 2011). The purposes for being involved in these activities may have less to do with the embodied performance of the sport and more to do with the social relations that the sport sets up and highlights in the particular cultural setting where it is practiced. The adoption of this methodological approach involves viewing people, their relationships and behaviours as part of a complex web of intertwined interactions.

As stated above, there are certain differences between sociological views of sport and anthropological approaches to the studying of sports and games. Dyck and Hognestad (2015) assert that for sociologists, sport is mainly connected to modern secular practices or physical games that developed during the era of industrialization in Western Europe. These modern sports are contrasted to the athletic practices and pre-sports of the pre-modern world. For anthropologists, there are differences in the ways ‘sport’ has been understood and taken account of through time. Yet their inquiries tend to leave open whether an activity is or is not counted as sport, which allows a space for the exploration of activities that may be ‘sport-like’ but do not necessarily fall under a narrow sociological view of ‘sport’ (c.f., Guttmann 1978). Anthropological studies of sport and games tend to focus on the larger ‘contexts’ in which these social and cultural practices take place. These studies are also explicitly ‘comparative,’ in that they draw lines between different sport-like activities, and other social phenomenon to make connections across borders, boundaries, and years (Dyck and Hognestad 2015).

Interpretations of sport within sociology have generally tended to adhere to Allen Guttmann’s definition for modern sports. Guttmann’s (1978) seven-part designation of modern sport certainly narrows possible definitions of what social scientists can study under a sport framework. Guttmann’s principles for modern sport specify: 1) its secular nature; 2) an equality of opportunity to compete under equal conditions; 3) that roles within modern sport are specialized; 4) the standardization of rules of competition; 5) a bureaucratic organization to manage the rules and competitions; 6) quantification of results from competition; and 7) the establishment of performance records. In this tightly structured definition of modern sport we can see where some of the cracks and borders form and where certain limitations of studying sport in this way are likely to occur. Anything that resembles a ‘pick-up’ game of, say, football on one or another type of ‘playing field’ will not readily satisfy all seven requirements, so cannot be classified as sport and thus receives less attention than would a formally organized sport. I use the term ‘playing fields’ metaphorically here to denote all playing spaces where sport occurs, whether that be in a pool, an ice rink, on a boulder face, or an actual grass field.

The larger contexts of organized sports for children situate games and competitions within an adult directed and organized domain. Yet based upon my research observations, it is clear that kids and youths in swim clubs are not passive objects merely waiting to be socialized by adults, although there is much instruction and

knowledge presented by adults to children. Individual members of these often-presumed-to-be uniform social categories (i.e., child, youth, adult) are indeed not homogenous. Individual adults and children sometimes behave far more like one another than like other members of their respective age categories. Moreover, kids may create and develop their own sets of rules and practices both inside and beyond the boundaries that adults ostensibly set out for their activities. Kids learn much more than how to score goals and win in sports. They learn both of their own volition, while also being 'expected' to learn, for instance, how to set priorities, manage time, play on a team, shake hands with strangers, and graciously accept victory or defeat (Lareau 2011:39). Sherri Grasmuck (2005) argues that despite the weight of adult and community involvement that targets the socialization of children through certain sports, children have their own particular rhythms, generated meanings, and practices in this process of enculturation.

In Grasmuck's (2005) study of youth baseball as it pertains to boys' understandings of masculinity, the outcomes of this combined adult and kid socialization was important to explain how an adult-orchestrated activity came to feel for all of those in the baseball community (Grasmuck 2005:198). It is the 'feel' of the activity, which is of interest to me. This comprises the quality of sociation of participants and the generated meanings and everyday practices of swimming. What the kids make of this activity and what adults prioritize when enrolling their children or in helping to coach in youth sports may be similar. Or it may not be. The decidedly adult uses of community sport as a vehicle for instilling social ideals, socializing children to new cultures, and developing life skills has been well documented (see Dyck 2002, 2003, 2007, 2012; Anderson 2003; Broch 2003; Messner 2009). Yet these are adult goals pursued through the devices of adult-controlled sport for children. If we look at the practice of swimming as being less about the sport itself and more to do with the relationships people encounter and generate within a distinctive social space, then we may find that swimming is rather more than an activity to create prospective Olympic champions or, less grandly, to tire out rambunctious kids and keep them fit and active.

1.3. Thematic Questions and Organization of Topics

In Chapter 2, *Defining the Fields of Play*, I outline the basic form of the not-for-profit clubs that I researched, including their board of directors, coaching and swimming

training group structures. Intertwined with the design of each club is the philosophy of its head coach who shapes his understanding and implementation of Swim Canada's Long Term Development policy for athletes. Finally, I consider the daily practices that parents of swimmers partake in the course of organizing, funding, and running the swim club and its monthly competitions (swim meets). Swimming demands more from parents than just dropping one's kids off at practices and watching competitions on the weekend.

Arguably, parents put in almost as much time into their children's athletic activities as the kids do. This is especially the case in swimming, where parents are required to volunteer for a variety of jobs within the club. From discussions with parents it became apparent that the competitive sport of swimming could not function without the volunteering efforts that parents put into the swim meets and everyday tasks associated with being a swim club parent.

In Chapter 3, *Water, Bodies, and a Feel for the Water*, I examine the embodied practices of age-group swimmers, as swimmers. Swimmers employ a plethora of specialized terms to break down and describe the various components and intricacies of swimming strokes. They also use their bodies communicatively, physically mimicking the movements they have practiced literally tens of thousands of times, to supplement their descriptions and as stand-ins when words fail to convey their meanings. Since swimming commences in the medium of water, it is an acquired or learned skill that requires, as Marcel Mauss (1973) famously termed it, a different set of "techniques of the body" to move through a liquid. These techniques of using one's body are learned and trained into the body through mimicry and repetition by the athletes. They come to know and understand their bodies in relation to the water through their physical practice and the knowledge that coaches impart to them.

In Chapter 4, *The Worlds and Lifestyles at the Pool*, I delve into the everyday social worlds of the youths participating in age-group swim club. More than just an adult-organized activity, competitive club swimming, I argue, can become a dominant phenomenon in many of the youths' lives. Maintaining a balance between school, swimming commitments, friends, and other extra-curricular activities can be challenging. Indeed, most of the swimmers that I spoke with had multiple engagements in addition to swimming. Still, within the sport, the close social bonds that youths make with each other and with their coaches can be nurtured into lifelong bonds. Ultimately, kids tend to stick with a sport or activity for a variety of reasons: parental pressure, love of the sport,

because their friends are enrolled, a personal drive to win, and even the promise of scholarship and job opportunities are a few such factors. Swimming is not exceptional in this regard. Finally, I discuss in this chapter how the different actors involved within swim clubs come to forge a sense of community within the team, the training groups, and the larger sphere of swimming in the Lower Mainland.

In Chapter 5, *Boys and Girls Training with Girls and Boys*, I focus on swimmers' acute awareness of their own growing and changing bodies, both when talking about their strengths and pitfalls in both musculature and body shape. In competitive swim clubs in the Lower Mainland, as in many track and field and gymnastics programs, there is joint participation by girls and boys during practices all the way through to varsity (university team competition) swim clubs. Yet formal competition in swimming remains a gender separated space where kids can only compete against members of their own gender (i.e., girls versus girls, and boys versus boys). I argue that this joint participation in everyday swim practices sessions provides a space for inter- and intra-gender association in ways that are equitable yet complicated for all of those involved.

Privileged as I was to be granted research access to swimmers, parents, and coaches, I steered clear of change rooms at the different facilities during the course of my research. While I do discuss gender and how kids in swim club interact with each other (girls and boys, boys and boys, and girls and girls), the social interplay of gender and how joint participation activities differed or were similar to gender-segregated sports remained my main focus when looking at gendered interactions⁵. During the course of the research I stayed out of the change rooms and coaches also tended to stay away from these spaces. Thus, I was not privy to the conversations youth have amongst themselves nor the body surveillance and possible harassment that occurs in these spaces (Kehler 2015). Despite this purposeful exclusion of space, I was still able to discuss some of the distinctive and telling practices that swimmers perform across gender boundaries, such as body shaving and swim suit choices, with the youths.

⁵It is imperative that further research be conducted on those public facilities where swim clubs practice that have gender-segregated change rooms and spaces that have transgender-friendly change rooms and how this affects all kids, particularly those who identify as trans. While outside the ethics permission and scope of this study others are doing good work in this area (Kelhler 2016; Travers 2016).

Chapter 2. Defining the Fields of Play

2.1. Introduction

“This is a sport of momentum. So hard to get, very easily lost.” Kyle, head coach of the Oarfish Swim Club.

While the formal structure of a swim club may not be something that kids’ and youths’ have an active process in creating, nonetheless, their participation, their skills and abilities as swimmers, along with the social dynamics generated between training groups and amongst individual swimmers, do factor into the overall shape and ambience of a swim club. This chapter begins with an overview of the structures of the three not-for-profit swimming clubs in the Lower Mainland within which I conducted my research. I was interested in learning: 1) How coaches structure their training groups and clubs?; 2) What guiding principles individual coaches follow and implement when organizing their training groups or a club as a whole?; and 3) What are the different roles and responsibilities of swimmers, parents, and coaches in swim clubs?

In this chapter, I will outline the structures of the three clubs I studied and provide a description of the various categories of participants that come together within this sport. In age-group swimming, children’s peers, those in the same competitive group, under the direction of the same coach, are training partners regardless of gender or age. The youngest aged training groups in a club tend to have a minimum age requirement, while some of the senior training groups at the top of clubs have a minimum age restriction for moving up into that group⁶. If there is an exceptionally fast boy or girl, they may be allowed to swim ‘up’ an age group in order to challenge them. Although not frequently the case, swimmers may also move ‘down’ an age group or stay in the same group when their peers advance. This most often occurs during puberty when extensive physical growth forces swimmers to re-calibrate their changing bodies in relation to the water in an effort to get faster without causing injury. Injuries, which can occur if athletes are pushed to compete and train at higher levels than they are ready for, are another

⁶ Training groups are determined by each club and are based on both age and speed. I provide a more in-depth description of the training groups further on in this chapter.

reason why swimmers may move down a group⁷. Suffice it to say, physical growth has an impact on young athletes, yet coaches are still able to find ways to balance out the strengths and weaknesses of the individual athletes in a joint participation team environment.

2.2. Pool Space and the Winter Swim Club Season

The swim clubs with which I conducted my research were all situated at different municipal pools; that is, they rented pool space and deck space from local municipal recreation centres. Indeed, swim clubs are one of the largest clients of the recreation agencies that manage and operate the pools in the different geographical areas around the Lower Mainland. These municipal pools were designed so that activities in the pool can be watched by the public, either from large bay-windowed viewing areas, workout gyms, or bleacher sections for spectators. Depending on the size of the pool, whether it was a fifty metre or a twenty-five-metre pool, swim clubs can share lane space with other members of the public who wish to swim. Typically, a swim club would rent out four of six lanes in a twenty-five-meter pool or about seventy-five percent of the total in-the-water space.

Deck space around the pools is usually at a premium. Most of the deck space houses an array of equipment (e.g., pool buoys, kick boards, pool noodles, foam mats and other toys, and flippers of various sizes), the lifeguarding chairs and first-aid equipment stations, and sometimes bleachers where parents and the public sit and watch the goings-on in the pool. Still, all three swim clubs had what might be described as small storage sheds where they keep their own club equipment, such as medicine balls, rubber tubing bands, and mats for the swimmers to stretch on out of the water before or after practices. For the top training groups in the clubs, there is also usually space to leave their mesh bags with personal training gear inside on top of or around their storage shed lockers.

⁷ Injury to athletes and the effects on youths' continued sporting careers was not something that I was able to delve further into during the short time duration of this study. This is an area which certainly is understudied and in which more research needs to be done.

All of my child and youth informants, from the youngest at age eight to the oldest at twenty-one-years of age, participated in competitive Winter swim clubs⁸, which run ten-month long seasons from September to late June. The demographic trend of the swimmers of each club depended largely on the geographical population where the club was situated. In neighbourhoods with people of predominantly Asian and South Asian descent you could expect to see more phenotypically Asian and South Asian people as well as the smattering of white athletes. Towards the more predominantly white neighbourhoods the majority of swimmers tended to be white. There were also more white coaches present at the clubs where I conducted research than perhaps a statistical analysis of the populations in those geographical areas would show to be representative of the population in those areas.

Getting back to the length of the Winter swim club season, ten months is one of the longer training seasons among various community sports offered for boys and girls. Swimming demands a high level of commitment from athletes, parents, and coaches over the course of the season. During the ten-month season, depending on which training group a child is registered, there may be as many as ten large-scale competitions (swim meets⁹) that are attended by hundreds of kids, parents, and coaches, from a dozen or so clubs in the Lower Mainland.

As noted above, each club rents space from a different municipal pool. In cases where the supply of available lane space is in high demand at one pool, a swim club may have to schedule training groups to practice at multiple pools, sometimes even in different municipalities. For high-performance training groups that do not have access to fifty-meter lane space at their main training pool, it is necessary for the club to rent fifty-meter lane training space from a pool in another municipality or city. This is due to most international swimming competitions being conducted in fifty-meter pools. Thus, some of the swimmers need to train in that length of space, resulting in sometimes significant amounts of travel to attend practices and swim meets.

⁸ There are also summer swim clubs in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia but they are not featured in my research. Additionally, they run on a four-month season from May through August and compete in separate meets from the winter clubs.

⁹ I provide further detail about swim meets further on in this chapter.

2.3. Parents' and Coaches' Roles

The winter swim clubs that I studied were all non-profit organizations run by an elected board of directors composed mainly of parents of the kids on the swim team. Most swim clubs in the Lower Mainland conform to the not-for-profit model of business, with members of the board of directors performing such functions and roles as accountant, fundraising coordinator, president, treasurer, webmaster, and general member. There are also a few swim teams that appear to be tied to private membership clubs¹⁰. The head coaches of the clubs within which I conducted my research are responsible for the everyday running of the club, the business of booking pool times, setting up meet schedules, designing the training group structures, and hiring additional coaches. The head coaches were also in charge of a high-performance training group of swimmers¹¹: This involves creating a one-year or multi-year plan for the athletes, designing the daily workouts (including pool and dryland sessions), and deciding in which meets their swimmers would compete. In the Lower Mainland, the head coach is usually in charge of the training group with the highest level of competitive proficiency, although there are some head coaches who prefer to run the introductory, 11 and under, or the 11 to 15-year-old training groups of their club. All of these clubs are competitive in nature, and there are requirements specifying that the kids try to attend the various meets that they are eligible to attend throughout the ten-month season, September through to June.

Head coaches of the clubs that I researched were all white males between the ages of 35 and 60. They had all been competitive swimmers when they were younger and had all competed at the varsity¹² level of the sport. All three men were university educated with at least a bachelor's degree and had completed their 'Level 3: Senior

¹⁰ As I did not spend any time with these teams I am not sure how they operate as businesses. Further research needs to be conducted on the differences, and similarities, between not-for-profit swim clubs and swim clubs attached to private member clubs.

¹¹ Each club had different naming schemes for their training groups, from their introductory programs to the top group of swimmers. Senior, senior national, or high-performance training groups within the clubs were composed of athletes with the highest level of competitive proficiency. The ages of these athletes ranged between 16 to 21 years old.

¹² In North America, athletics programs and sports run by and at universities are referred to as 'varsity' athletics. One of the most well known varsity leagues for sports is the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) of which many American and Canadian university athletics teams compete.

Coach' certification through the National Coaching Certification Program (Swimming Canada 2017a). At the time, all three men had been head coach of their club for over six years. Of course, these three men cannot be assumed to be statistically representative of the overall field of coaching in competitive age-group swim clubs in BC or in Canada. Nevertheless, the majority of high-performance level head coaches and the coaches at the national training centres are white men.

There may be an 'old guard' of male coaches in head coaching positions in the Lower Mainland, but at the age-group level (i.e., prior to national and senior national levels of competitive performance) it tends to be younger coaches, in their early twenties, relatively evenly split between men and women, who are doing the hard work of getting kids excited about swimming. Tristan, thirty-six, head coach for Humboldt swim club, believes in empowering and mentoring younger coaches as they may one day be head coaches themselves:

I find younger coaches are more..., younger people in general are more open minded. They want to see all the different sides and angles. They are big picture oriented a little bit more. And it is so funny 'cause it is a world of instant gratification that we live in, but they are also, at least in the small niche market that is competitive swimming that I see, it is that with the young coaches there is this thirst to learn how to do things properly. And the reason they are getting into coaching in the first place, yeah, A) they need a job of some sort, but B) it is something that they enjoy doing. If I give someone like Suzanne or Kendra at 20 years old..., give them all the knowledge that I have; what they can do with it, plus they have an extra two decades on me of how much time they have left likely [in their coaching careers]. Like, that is really where our sport is going to move forward. So, I start targeting those coaches in their 20's so that I can mentor and develop [them]. And I can invest in [them], 'cause that is how we move our sport forward. Our under-30 [year old] crop of coaches in Canada could be so good if we take the time to develop them and invest in them. Our sport could be great.

From my conversations with swimming coaches, I learned that it takes about ten years of service as an age-group coach and an assistant head coach before the transition to a head coach position occurs. So, it would be possible to invest nearly a decade of resources into developing young coaches, through paying for coaching courses, spending time mentoring young coaches on and off the pool deck, teaching them how to program in swim meet entries, and to find written resources on swimming techniques, introducing young coaches to other head coaches, and a host of other activities that go into the mentoring of the next generation of coaches. Hopefully this investment would result in attracting a diversity of coaches, perhaps with a widening of candidates in the recruitment of head coaches in Canada. Once coaches attain a head coach position,

they tend to move horizontally between positions at the head coach level. There are not, in consequence, a lot of opportunities for younger coaches to try their hand at developing a club and applying their knowledge of what Tristan calls ‘the bigger picture’ of swimming in Canada and the world.

All of the coaching positions of the three clubs I studied were paid positions. From conversations I had with head coaches, I gleaned that holders of the position of head coach of a swim club, which is a full-time position, in the Lower Mainland can expect to make a salary of between 50,000 to 120,000 dollars Canadian per annum, depending on the size and location of their club. There is usually also a full time assistant coach who works with the head coach, with a salary ranging from 40,000 to 80,000 dollars Canadian. Either the head coach, or assistant-head coach are responsible for the high-performance training group at their club. They must, therefore, have attained their Level 3 NCCP coaching certificate. The rest of the coaches are hired on a part time basis and can expect to make approximately twenty dollars per hour or more with a NCCP level 1 coaching certificate, which is often paid for by the club (a total cost of \$400 CDN). Many of the coaches I spoke with were current university students or had recently graduated with a Bachelor’s degree. To my knowledge there are no full time (i.e., standard forty-hour work week) coaching positions other than those for head coaches and assistant coaches in the Lower Mainland.

2.3.1. Parental Volunteer Labour

Parents of kids enrolled in swim clubs may struggle with the lifestyle of being a swim parent. Getting a son or daughter to practice three times a week can be a struggle even for two parents. It gets ever more complicated when there is more than one child involved in one or more activities. In cases where there is only one parent, keeping track of and finding transportation to and from kids’ activities may resemble a circus act. On top of getting a kid (or kids) to and from swimming practice and swimming meets, parents are also required to do volunteer work for the club their kids are enrolled in. All three clubs that I studied in the Lower Mainland required the parents of swimmers to volunteer with the club. Depending on the ability level of their child or children, parents are expected to complete a predetermined amount of parental volunteer labour for the season. This volunteer labour was usually calculated on the number of hours or type of labour being conducted, which was subsequently broken down in to a point based

system. Volunteering to ‘run food’ or ‘time keep’¹³ at a meet was worth one to four points per day, while being qualified as a stroke and turn judge at a meet was worth 8 points per day. Parents are expected to complete between 10-48 ‘points’ worth of volunteer labour hours during a single season. In a vacuum, this may seem like quite a lot of volunteering. When put in the context of age-group swim clubs, where a three-day swim meet can have upwards of fifty volunteers on the pool deck at any one time, and when there is usually at least one swim meet a month, completing the volunteer point-hours in a single season seems to be somewhat easier than it might initially seem. Service by a parent on the board of directors for the club exempts that family from having to contribute additional pointed volunteer hours. Volunteering may also be a purely monetary transaction; that is, if parents do not have the time to donate to their kids’ swim club on a regular basis, they may instead pay the club a pre-set amount for those volunteer hours not completed. While this is an option, the swim clubs I researched preferred the extra set of hands volunteering their time and energy rather than the money in-lieu of volunteer service.

Due to the high cost of this sport, both in terms of money and parental volunteer labour hours, most of the families involved in the three competitive swim clubs were either middle-class, or upper middle-class with respect to socio-economic standing. The socio-economic positions of these families are further highlighted once their children enter the higher performance levels of competitive swim club, where enrollment fees range between 4,000 to 6,000 dollars per year. The enrollment fees for the high-performance groups do not include swimmers’ travel and accommodation costs which can easily reach double the enrollment costs depending on which meets swimmers travel to and compete at during a given season.

In families with two parents and two or more kids, it requires good scheduling and communication by all parties to get everyone to their sport, class, work, or school on

¹³ During multi-day swim meets the host club will staff a small kitchen area. Throughout the day coffee, water, and juice will be brought around by volunteering parents for the coaches and officials on the pool deck. As there is rarely a break in swim meets, usually only at the end of the day between placement heats and finals, coaches and officials need to be fed and hydrated if they are to perform their roles well. Time-keepers are parent volunteer officials who manually time swimmers with stop watches at the end of the lanes. Usually this involves a timer using the stopwatch and a time keeper recording the times of the swimmer in their lane. This manual time-keeping is necessary as a backup system is in case the electronic touch pads, which record when swimmers have touched the wall at the end of a race, malfunction.

time. The clubs I studied had a predominantly maternal contingent who volunteered their time, although fathers were not entirely absent from volunteer positions and the mundane work of watching the swimming practices of their younger child(ren). From what I observed of the three swim clubs, men were more likely to volunteer their labour during weekend swim meets and in-house competitions while women tended to have a more visible presence on the bleachers, watching practices. From conversations I had with parents, I gleaned that many of the fathers are not available to watch daily practices due to work commitments¹⁴. Single parents with a child in swim club often relied heavily on relatives or carpooling with other parents in the club to get their child(ren) to practices during the week. Yet both men and women had approximately equal representation on the board of directors for the clubs with which I conducted my research.

Many community sports are run by volunteers as Dyck (2012), Messner (2009), and Grasmuck (2005), to name but a few, have demonstrated. Similar to swimming, track and field is another multi-disciplinary sport that requires a substantial number of volunteers to run a successful competition over a single day or a weekend. My point is that volunteering takes a significant amount of time, energy, and resources from parents who may or may not want their child to focus heavily on sports. While some parents have backgrounds in competitive sport, others may never have played an organized sport. Given such a wide swath of experience with sport, or lack thereof, parents' priorities are highly varied for what they want their kid(s) to get out of swimming. These priorities can range from a desire for their child to be consistently physically active, to their child attaining a university scholarship, to instilling Canadian values in their kid(s) (Dyck 2002, Dyck 2006), or the simply logistical convenience of transporting both siblings to one location for sport. Thus, parents encounter the world of competitive swim clubs with varied goals and expectations. In this way, the pool becomes a contested site of meaning-making practices where kids, parents, and coaches all have vested interests in the activity at hand.

¹⁴ The division of labour between parents was something that there is considerable social stigma directed towards stay-at-home-dads (Gatti 2016), yet there is research to suggest that this can be changed (Rehel 2013). Further research suggests that social shifts in America, with a rise in the popularity of feminism in recent years has focused attention on fathers to become more than just wage earners when contributing to the raising of their child(ren).

2.4. Structure of Training Groups

Early in my research I asked coaches, ‘What is the general structure of your club?’ in order to understand how they organized the different training groups. The training groups in the clubs I observed mirror a system of time standards set out by Swim BC (2016) and ‘on track’¹⁵ times posted by Swimming Canada (2017b). These organizations are the governing bodies of swimming in the province and the country, respectively. Younger categories of athletes are organized into training groups by skill and speed standards set out by the clubs. They also use colour schemes to designate the different age and skill levels (e.g., red for ages 5-6, orange for ages 6-8, white for ages 7-9, blue for LMR qualified kids aged 9-11, green for single ‘A’ qualified swimmers aged 11 and under, yellow for single ‘A’ qualified swimmers 12 and older, or black for triple ‘A’ qualified swimmers aged 16 and older). Newcomers to the club usually receive a screening of their swimming skills and then are placed in a lane with other swimmers that the screening coach deems appropriate to their skill level. This is because newcomers to swim clubs usually do not have established qualifying times, unless of course, they participated in summer swim club before transferring over to winter club swimming.

In age-group club swimming, kids begin participating in larger meets between the ages of eight and ten. For kids under the age of eight, most clubs host ‘in-house’ swim meets at the main pool where the club rents lane space. These are fully sanctioned meets with volunteer officials, many of whom are also new to the world of competitive swimming. ‘Mini-meets’ introduce younger kids to the competitive side of the sport in an environment they know well and gives them the opportunity to measure how fast they can swim. Kids receive participatory ribbons with a printout of the events they have swum, their places in those events (first, second, third, fourth, and so on), and the time it took them to swim those races displayed in minutes, seconds, and hundredths of seconds. These races tend to be gender mixed with girls and boys competing against each other. Once the swimmers get to an age where they compete in the larger meets,

¹⁵ “On Track Times” are posted by Swimming Canada as a tool to “define development pathways for swimmers leading to potential Olympic podium performances” (Swimming Canada 2017b). These are designed to identify athletes who are between five and eight years away from competing at national and international levels in swimming.

girls and boys are separated and compete only against members of their gender. One example of this is the Lower Mainland Regional Meets.

Lower Mainland Regional (LMR) meets refers both to a time standard and the name of the meets where kids can compete if they have attained that time standard. The LMR meets that require swimmers to be able to swim a 200 metre Individual Medley race (fifty metres of each of four different strokes in a specific order: Fly, Back, Breast, and Free strokes) in under four minutes. There is no minimum age restriction for competing in LMR meets. Usually, swimmers are between the ages of 9-to-11 when participating at the LMR level. This is followed by single 'A,' double 'AA,' and triple 'AAA'¹⁶ meets and time standards, for which youths are expected to meet the required qualifying times when they are 11 and 12-years-old. To participate in these meets swimmers must be qualified in at least one or more events¹⁷ at the specified 'A' level of that calibre of meet. After these come the junior nationals, nationals, and finally senior national time standards. There are also fitness programs at these clubs provided for swimmers¹⁸ who do not wish to compete at meets¹⁹. Individual swimmers must attain the next pertinent time standard to move up to a higher-level training group in their club and to be qualified to compete at single, double and triple 'A' meets. Over a week, an 11-year-old in winter swim club who is LMR qualified can expect to spend about 5.5 hours in the water swimming, and 1.5 hours out of the water doing dryland training. This leaves kids only two days per week where they do not have to be at the pool. And even this can

¹⁶ Swim BC time standards for 'A' qualified swimmers are organized into four categories: 11-and-under, 12-13, 14-15, and 16-and-over, including senior-level swimmers. Qualifying times for these categories and levels decrease, the speed at which one completes a race, as swimmers become faster. For example, an 11-and-under 'A' qualifying time in 50m Freestyle, short course (25m pool) is 00:37.56 and the 'AAA' time standard for the same event is 00:32.51 (Swim BC 2016).

¹⁷ 'A' Qualifying events for boys and girls are as follows: 50m, 100m, 200m, 400m, 800m Free; 100m, 200m Back; 100m, 200m Breast; 100m, 200m Fly; 200m, 400m IM. Additionally, 12-and-up boys can compete in the 1500m Free, there is no 1500m event for women.

¹⁸I did not interview anyone involved in these programs as my main focus in this research project was on the age-group swimmers in the competitive tracks at their clubs. It would be interesting in another study to look at the swimmers involved in these fitness programs but unfortunately that was beyond the scope of this project.

¹⁹ There is the potential for tension between the mandate of a competitive age-group swim club to produce high-performance swimmers while balancing early swimming training that emphasizes speed, fun, and life-long participation. This is where programs like a fitness group for swimmers who do not wish to continue competing, but who can swim at a higher level than can be accommodated by public recreation swimming programs, may end up, if such training groups are offered.

be usurped when kids attend swim meets that can be anywhere from an afternoon affair to a ‘3-day weekend’ event²⁰. Those slated for high-performance levels of competitive swimming have much less ‘free’ time than most other swimmers, for they can take part in up to 14 workouts (3 dryland, 2 gym, and 9 pool practices) per week, totalling some 25 hours of training, in addition to time spent in weekend-long swim meets.

LMR meets, as well as most other Short Course Meters and Long Course Meters (SCM and LCM) ‘A,’ ‘AA,’ and ‘AAA’ qualified meets are all structured in terms of a number of considerations. Firstly, these meets take two or three days to complete, usually occurring between Friday and Sunday. Secondly, these are streamlined, with the slowest group of swimmers gathered in a heat to begin each event, culminating in the fastest group of swimmers competing in the last heat. Heats are organized by grouping together swimmers in terms of their previously recorded times, and if they do not have a recorded time for that particular event, then they swim with the slowest group of swimmers. The events are organized and titled in terms of the stroke and distances that the athletes will swim (e.g., 100 metres backstroke; 200 metres individual medley; 800 metres freestyle; 400 metres backstroke). Thirdly, from what I have observed during my fieldwork and from watching other local swim meets, the girls’ heats precede those of the boys. This makes for a competition landscape that highlights gender differences, nearly the opposite of what occurs during training practices.

Technical officials at swimming meets are all unpaid volunteers, even the two certified top officials who serve respectively as the Starter and Head Judge²¹. It is the responsibility of the swim club hosting the meet to reach out to those qualified as head judges who are registered with the provincial swim organization, Swim BC. It takes approximately fifty adults to run a given LMR meet: 8 stroke and turn judges (one per lane), 24 time keepers and recorders (2 to 3 per lane), 2 people double checking the times and places of swimmers, 2 people working the computer timing system making sure that there are no timing glitches, 2 meet officials/starters, and another half-dozen people doing an assortment of other tasks such as handing out food and drinks to all the officials. It is important to note that each host club is responsible for assembling the

²⁰ It is not only the kids and youths that have their weekends taken up by swim meets, but their parents also contribute a significant amount of resources to these competitions as I have outlined in Chapter 2.

²¹ Top officials at swim meets wear red shirts, while all other officials wear white shirts.

technical officials and volunteers for its swim meet. Each club takes on the responsibility of mobilizing parent volunteers a few times per season to support and run large swim meets with upwards of swimmers from 10 clubs participating.

2.4.1. Goal Times, Provincial and National Standards

Swim meets provide the perfect opportunity to mingle and talk with the various actors (kid and youth swimmers, parents, coaches, and club officials) as there are long periods of downtime between races for the kids participating and the coaches who are watching those kids. At one particular meet, walking by the clusters of teams on the pool deck I approached Kyle, a forty-two-year-old coach with Oarfish swim club, as he sat at a table waiting for the meet to begin. I asked how many swimmers he had that year at each level of the club? He explained to me that for every 40 swimmers, you get 10 good ones. But those ten good ones, the superstars of the club, the ones who will most likely go on to hold scholarships at university or swim in international events, are not the ones that keep the club afloat. It is the younger kids, those assigned to 11-and-under training groups, that in effect pay the bills. In that sense, the shape of the club is a pyramid²² that supports its top athletes, but not to the detriment of the younger swimmers in Oarfish swim club, as far as he indicates.

Since few athletes ever become international competitors and podium contenders, the prospects of relying on that slim margin, the few select athletes, to help support your whole club from the top-down is not a realistic goal. Instead there is, ideally, a relatively equal distribution of youths from the youngest swimmers (5-8 years old in the three clubs I researched) up to the senior group: this would resemble a rectangle rather than a pyramid. Due to the drop-off in the numbers of swimmers in the Lower Mainland that tends to occur during high school years (when other sports and activities, with either more or less stringent time demands compete for youth's time), the clubs I studied maintained a larger base of younger swimmers compared to their top-level training groups.

²² The pyramid shape occurs in many sporting activities when comparing the number of grassroots participants in a given sport and the number of top level competitive or professional athletes in the same sport. Within the swim clubs I researched in the Lower Mainland there tends to be many kids at the introductory levels and a tapering toward a handful of swimmers in the top training groups.

Increasing the numbers of swimmers at the top levels of clubs also depends on getting kids committed to their swimming at a young age and remaining keen through high school. Ella, a twenty-four-year-old coach and ex-swimmer with the Eel club, pointed out that even at the younger ages not all kids are fully committed swimmers.

For the younger kids, it is such a wide variety. For the parents, sometimes for some people it is a daycare, and for some people it is just like, '*Oh, I just want my kid to be happy and healthy and learn to be healthy*'. And with some parents it is like, '*My kid is a swimmer*'.

As kids try new activities and find what they like and what they are good at, which can involve two or more competing activities, they are liable to participate on their own terms despite what adults may have in mind for them in a given activity or sport (Grasmuck 2005; Dyck 2012; Broch 2003; Anderson 2003). Some kids put a lot of effort into a given activity and were quite focused on it, while other kids goofed off, and did the minimum that the coach asked. And this could shift on any given day, with the usually 'focused' kids ending up playing around rather than listening to the coach. There was a lot of variety day-to-day in how individual kids approached their swimming practices.

Even the kids that didn't take their swimming all that seriously understood the structure of the training groups they swam in and the standards required of them to maintain their place in a specific group or excel further and reach a higher group level in their club. The majority of kids, like Norm, an eight-year old with the Oarfish club, knew where they were in the club and what they currently were working toward in their training groups. Norm let me know how his training groups differed from the past season to this one:

[In] Red we went at different times and it is a bit easier. And when you come to Orange you [are] starting to do harder sets and learn more about swimming.... It is my first time doing actual meets. Like after we are going to do actual meets. Not mini-meets.

Participating in swim meets and attaining time standards for the next level was a driving force for many swimmers. In swimming, which is an individual sport when it comes to competition, success and accomplishments for kids were often based on the time standards set out by Swim BC and Swimming Canada. Not surprisingly, moving from mini- or in-house meets to full meets at other pools was a point of emphasis for Norm. He would be able to judge his own progress against a larger field of competitors from

other clubs in the Lower Mainland, travelling to different pools to do so, rather than only against his peers at his home pool.

When Shaun, an eighteen-year-old high-performance swimmer with the Humboldt Club, first began to swim, he focused on achieving the next goal time as set out by Swim BC and Swimming Canada. Yet he didn't differentiate between attaining his 'A' time standards when he was younger and reaching his national time standards the previous season. For Shaun, they were always just the next goals to strive for and attain:

Getting my senior cut²³ or my trials cut... honestly feels the same as like a double 'A' cut when you are ten. It really does because it is the same, it is the next level, right. So, like no matter what level you are at, you want to get good at [that level]. Like we always had this saying like, '*Accept where you are and like try and be the best at where you are.*' ... You don't need to be an age group swimmer right away, right. Share the moment. Like learn where you are and then go. But definitely, like getting that next cut or making that next, even the next group or whatever it is, like it feels the same, it is that same joy and everything comes together.

For those youths who enjoy attaining their currently applicable 'goal times' in a competitive club, the progression through their club's training groups can seem familiar at different stages as it did for Shaun. But attaining the next Swim BC time standard in a competitive environment is not what every kid seeks, nor is it what parents necessarily look for when enrolling their child(ren) in sports programs. Yet the majority of swim clubs in the Lower Mainland are designated as competitive clubs and seek to foster a competitive environment where youths can develop and succeed at swimming while using the Swim BC time standards as goals to be achieved.

Despite the focus on attaining times, the true goal is, as Shaun put it, to "accept where you are and like try and be the best at where you are," whether this means you succeed in attaining the standards in your current level or whether you are still working towards them. Beyond giving kids an education in fitness, a guiding principle of any sport (and sports club) is the matter of securing the continuation of the club itself and of the sport. This ties into some of the values that swim club members (youths, parents, coaches, and officials) hold, which they articulated to me during my research.

²³ Getting one's 'cut' refers to attaining a set time standard in competition.

2.4.2. Coaches Corner

Swim club ‘culture,’ a term sometimes invoked by my participants during the course of my research, included the values and rituals established and maintained from one year to the next, many of which tend to stem from the priorities of the head coach. From an anthropological perspective, ‘culture’ is a term that is more complicated than might initially be apparent to analysts as well as those using the word. What coaches see as the ‘culture’ of swimming may be very different than the priorities of youths and parents involved in the sport. While competitive results, achieving time standards, and commitment to the sport of swimming are goals that coaches expect their swimmers to strive for, there are also spaces such as the fitness programs that clubs provide that seemingly are outside of this regime of competition. Still, there are sets of priorities set out by the governing bodies of swimming to which coaches must adhere.

As I will outline in Chapter 5, the coaches whom I interacted with all adhered to Swimming Canada’s basic guidelines of the Long Term Athlete Development Strategy (LTADS) (Swimming Canada 2008). The basic tenets of the LTADS can be broken down into two statements: 1) Provide a developmentally appropriate structure for the development of skills across physical, technical, tactical, mental and lifestyle categories; and 2) Create a sport experience that provides each young participant with the opportunity to achieve success to their highest capabilities, and to continue a life of active living (2008). These objectives are put into the daily practices of how to run a club and produce winning athletes while at the same time perpetuating club culture, a love for swimming, healthy and active living, and a lifetime enjoyment of the sport.

With the LTADS in mind, I wanted to know: How do coaches implement the various values and goals of healthy and active living, a lifetime enjoyment of sport, and a love for swimming? Tristan, the 36-year-old head coach of Humboldt swim club, finds that a simple approach works the best when trying to maintain continuity within and between the training groups at Humboldt swim club. Tristan strives, as he put it, to “Develop and teach the kids and set a goal for them,” (e.g., pushing off the pool wall and performing underwater dolphin kicks in a streamline position for at least 10 meters before beginning to swim freestyle, backstroke, or butterfly). He seeks to set the standards and teaches them how to reach it. Along the way, he motivates them and encourages them to pursue those standards. Once they can achieve these standards,

the swimmers internalize them and begin to expect the standard amongst themselves, through self- and peer-monitoring. It becomes part of the swimmer's group training regime. In this way, swimmers take on something that their coach initially expected of them and come to expect it of themselves and to teach the new inductees into the group. This is not just a physical standard but also a behavioural standard. For Tristan, a core principle in his approach is respect: respect for one's self, for teammates, coaches, officials, parents, and friends in one's life. Following through on this core principle in practice means that all the athletes are expected to be responsible to themselves and each other for working to achieve their highest potential within the sport²⁴.

Building a certain regime into a club, a program, or a group is not only about the goals of having all your swimmers be perfectly well behaved, following directions, self-governmentality, and self-monitoring their teammate's efforts in practice. While these are all parts of a whole, what gets many swimmers coming back to the pool season after season are the social aspects of participating in these training groups and the activities they share. Despite the large numbers of kids who do carry on with swimming, there are others who are not interested in pursuing a competitive career in the sport. A few of the teenage swimmers that I spoke with were swimming more for the fitness training it provided rather than the prospect of pursuing a career in competitive swimming after high school. Will, a coach for this age and training group, knew that these particular kids were not interested in being the next international-podium-attaining swimmers.

Regardless of that, Will, believes that

If I can motivate them to push themselves hard enough [to] where they are out of my group, excellent. But, otherwise we are looking to have a fun environment where I am trying to teach them more about swimming and more about fitness in general, right. I don't want any of my kids leaving the pool, leaving their time

²⁴ While not setting out to do a Foucauldian analysis of swim clubs and swimming regimes, I nevertheless acknowledge that there are exercises of power in effect in the relationship between coach-and-swimmer, and swimmer-and-swimmer. The coach sets up a situation where the kids eventually begin to self-monitor their own actions and behaviours, without the constant gaze of the coach. The swimmers will even exercise their own limited form of power in this structure to police the actions and behaviours of their teammates once the larger group has internalized the set of rules and practices as set out by the coach. The dominant power structure is therefore maintained without the coach having to be the disciplinarian on a constant basis. While it is not within the scope of this project to perform an in-depth Foucauldian analysis on the exercise of power as conducted through the bodies of children it certainly merits further consideration. For an in-depth Foucauldian analysis on the uses and exercises of power on the body of youth swimmers see McMahon and Dinan-Thompson (2011); McMahon and Barker-Ruchti (2015); and McMahon et al. (2012).

swimming and not knowing basic things about fitness and how to structure a program and the importance of technique in anything you do.

Part of this ‘fun environment’ Will was attempting to create contained space for socialization amongst the youths, especially during the dryland training, the exercises and stretching that athletes were required to do before and after a swim practice, which contained some basic movements such as squats and push-ups. A basic fitness competence was a core principle of the swim club programs and coaching that I observed in the Lower Mainland. Even if the kids did not return the following year to swim, coaches attempted to teach them basic principles of fitness that they could apply to other sports.

For those youths who have ‘bought in’ to the system, and perhaps even for those who have not, the work that youths, parents, and coaches put into making swim club a fun and memorable experience for athletes provides dividends to the sport and the club. The hope is that those athletes who do have a positive experience in a swim club will remember that and give back to their club and the sport in some way in the future, whether it be a financial contribution to the swim club or sport, returning to coach, later in life signing up their own children to participate in a swim club, or volunteering as a board member. Youths and parents who do not have positive experiences in swimming may never return to the sport and might carry that negative experience with them through adulthood (McMahon et al. 2012; McMahon and Penney 2011). Creating an amenable community and perpetuating the sport, the club, and/or those social bonds that one makes in swim club was not something that I heard parents or kids talking about. Rather, it was something that the coaches, all of whom had been competitive swimmers at some point, brought up.

2.5. Conclusion

In this chapter I outlined the underlying structures of the swim clubs where I conducted my research. They all fall under the not-for-profit model which is popular in the Lower Mainland. The three clubs are similar in a few respects but their geographical location and the pools that they have access to dictates the respective populations they draw their swimmers from and the types of training and swim meets they can host. Overall, the structure of their training groups was relatively similar. The names and colour coding that each club used for their groups was not identical, yet the age-ranges

of the swimmers in the different groups followed the pattern of time standards as set out by Swim BC.

While I did not interview the board members of these not-for-profit groups, I did have an opportunity to see that the coaches, who were in charge of the day-to-day running of the poolside activities of the clubs, fostered an inclusive atmosphere where the emphasis tended to be performing to the best of one's potential. The clubs were not primarily in the business of producing Olympic athletes, but instead were developing a long-term program for their training groups and clubs that would generate a competitive environment. If that produced a top-level athlete or two, then all the better. But the focus was on all of the swimmers, not just the top athletes at each club.

Coaches put a fair amount of effort into setting up training regimes and behavioural practices in their training groups with the goal of producing high-performance swimmers. Yet it is not only about producing podium attaining athletes, as there needs to be a breadth of swimmers at the younger and middle training group levels of a club to sustain club swimming as a paid profession for coaches and high-performance competitive arena for swimmers, rather than just a community sport. While there is a certain necessity to 'buy in' to the training system of one's coaches, there is also something incredibly social about the everyday interactions at the pool that may sustain an interest in continuing to swim year after year.

Chapter 3. Water, Bodies, and a Feel for the Water

Water sports such as swimming, water polo, synchronized swimming, and underwater hockey, are unique as they take place immersed within (versus sailing and rowing/paddling) a liquid medium. This distinctive medium, water, requires a completely different physical skill set than other sports. Buoyancy, surface tension, hypoxic conditions, and hydrodynamics must be taken into consideration when dealing with water-based activities. Since humans spend the majority of our time as land based creatures, through evolution we have developed and embodied a skill set designed to move us on land. Running, walking, and jumping are everyday motions for humans, and our bodies have developed over millennia to be able to accomplish these tasks against the pull of gravity and to work at different altitudes. Ice sports and snow sports tap this latent ability while applying various forms of equipment to reduce the friction between athlete and the sporting medium. Figure skating, hockey, ringette, speed skating, bobsled, and luge all use blades to move across ice with speed and precision. Curlers use special shoes with toe grips and heel slips to slide down the length of ice while sweeping in front of a thrown stone to produce heat and lessen friction between the stone and ice sheet. Snowboarders, skiers, and cross country skiers all use specialized flat blades with wax on the bottoms and steel edges to reduce friction on the snow and move down the course. In this way, humans have developed an appreciation of the science of friction which displays itself in the technology (be it physical tools or the shaping of the body) which we employ in the effort to reduce friction with our play surface. This has the desired outcome of making athletes faster and more precise.

The technology employed in swimming to reduce drag, the friction of the body against the water, has less to do with physical tools (swim suits, goggles, and caps being the only equipment allowed in competition), and more to do with the shaping and molding of the human body. Athletes in this sport can embody a way of moving and interacting with a medium that most people do not experience on a daily basis: total immersion in enough water to buoy the whole body. While many people either shower or take a bath every day, this relatively brief and partial immersion in water differs from the ways in which swimmers come to know the water and use their bodies.

In the first section of this chapter I begin with a discussion of the training techniques used to shape and sculpt the body for swimming. Mauss' (1973) concept of "techniques of the body," which are trained and inculcated in the mind, muscles, and ligaments of the body, are the "ways in which from society to society men know how to use their bodies" (70). For, as Mauss argues, the body is "man's first and most natural technical object... and technical means" (75). The position of the body and the training of it as such forms the base of a social acclimatization to the ways in which one is educated in 'proper' swimming technique. Following Mauss' arguments that training of bodies is transferred through both physical and social means, learning the techniques of swimming is not an exact transmission of knowledge from coach to swimmer. It is in some respects, perhaps, more of a "discovery or reinvention" (Downey 2005:49) highlighting that swimmers do not learn exactly or only what their coach knows but that they may improve on and modify that knowledge. Downey notes that "training offers opportunities to perceive things and develop skills; it does not inject an unvarying body of tacit knowledge in the student" (49). I will not go into a lengthy discussion concerning the training of swimming technique here, although I do discuss some of the principles that are commonly identified by coaches further in this chapter. Suffice it to say there are many coaching manuals²⁵ that describe the physical mechanics of the body and how it ought to operate for maximum efficiency in the water and the sport of swimming. Techniques and training are thus transmitted from the coaches to swimmers.

In the second and third sections of this chapter I explore what 'a feel for the water'²⁶ means to swimmers, parents, and coaches. Young swimmers spend an inordinate amount of time in the water compared to non-swimmers, so I was curious how this experience would be depicted in the words of the athletes. A 'great feel for the game' or 'feel for the ball' are expressions used by sports enthusiasts when describing particularly talented individuals in other sports. In swimming, 'feel' means something slightly different. To begin, working *with* the water rather than *against* it is what coaches try to teach their young swimmers. Kyle, a coach, put this principle of efficiency into

²⁵ *Championship Swim Training* by Bill Sweetenham and John Atkinson (2003) is one of the more well known compendiums in the swimming world.

²⁶ This is a term that I heard from coaches in each swim club where I conducted my research, as such, it is an emic term. I will henceforth use 'feel' in parenthesis to stand for 'feel for the water.'

context for me. When asked about ‘feel for the water’ he brought forth the concept “economy of effort” in relation to another sport, track and field running.

So, when we deal with a sport where economy of effort is really a very big part of it, [be]cause [in] our sport, [swimming], there is no race shorter than fifty metres, which is still, you are looking at twenty-five seconds for these age group kind of kids, more or less. If you are in track, that is 200 metres, right. And that is the shortest race we have. And there are still lots of races after that, that are longer.

Kyle emphasizes that in water you are moving upwards of one fourth slower than on land, at least when comparing the fastest and shortest events there are in competitive swimming and in track and field sprinting. For this reason, he cross-trains his athletes by making them run up hills and do wind-sprints, something they are not accustomed to doing, to change up the economy of effort. Kyle’s concept of an economy of effort can also be found in the work of Marcel Mauss (1973).

What is being sought by coaches in swimming and other sports is an economy of motion: “The techniques of the body can be classified according to their efficiency, i.e. according to the results of training. Training, like the assembly of a machine, is the search for, the acquisition of an efficiency. Here it is a human efficiency” (Mauss 1973:77). Like a soccer player walking, rather than sprinting, on the pitch during a match when the ball is far away from him or her, or a wrestler circling an opponent looking for an opening to attack, the swimmer economizes their motion by using the least amount of effort in any action that does not move them forward in the water. Learning and acquiring this efficiency is done through training the body.

In the fourth and final part of this chapter I discuss the embodiment of swimming as presented by the athletes and coaches with whom I spoke. While discussing the different strokes and what a ‘feel for the water’ meant to them, younger and older swimmers and coaches presented their knowledge verbally and at the same time kinaesthetically. The latter entailed going through what might appear to the uninitiated to be an out-of-the-water interpretive-dance-like-expression of stroke and swimming techniques using their bodies to convey their knowledge. This haptic vocabulary, the re-enactment of physical technique, is akin to what those in the rock climbing community term ‘beta’ (Dutkiewicz 2015): “Gestural-linguistic forms of representation” (30) which encompass the social conventions of the rock climbing community and the physical relationship between rock and climber. Social constraints and conventions of the world

of the pool limited the embodied expressions of ‘feel’ swimmers demonstrated. A variety of other experiences with water also impacted how each athlete perceived their physical relationship to the water. For many of the swimmers I spoke with there is an emotional element to the way they experience their time in the water and how that manifests in their embodied expressions and knowledge of swimming.

3.1. Training the Body

An economy of effort, of motion, of efficiency, is subject to the bodies that seek to achieve this. These are not like the bodies of a car, which can be shaped, cut, bent, and molded until they reach the desired specifications. Where humans and their bodies are concerned, we have to take into account the social forces that also shape and mould the body. It is not just the coach but the society in which the individual belongs and the space they occupy in it that serve to educate the human to the constant physical or mechanical adaptations (Mauss 75:1973).

This education very often begins at an early age with swimmers. They are introduced to the water at a young age and develop basic abilities to hold themselves up in the water and propel themselves in different directions under the direction of swimming instructors, coaches, parents, and older siblings. They must become familiar with the water before their technical training can begin:

Thus, even before they can swim, particular care is taken to get children to control their dangerous but instinctive ocular reflexes, before all else they are familiarized with the water, their fears are suppressed, a certain confidence is created, suspensions and movements are selected. Hence there is a technical education and, as in every technique, there is an apprenticeship in swimming. (Mauss 1973:71)

Most swimmers at higher levels of competition have been participating in the sport since between six and nine years of age. There are always exceptions to this, of course, but for the vast majority swimming training begins before the age of twelve if they are to have a competitive career in the sport, be that a varsity scholarship, national competition, coaching position, or a shot at the Olympics. Other career opportunities

such as those of a lifeguard, swim instructor or pool manager can be pursued regardless of age-group club affiliation²⁷ or an early education in competitive swimming.

Becoming accustomed to the water and learning to swim can be accounted for in terms of the amount of formal training received, yet learning to swim comes from an experiential knowledge of the water and ability to be comfortable in it. Shaun, who is eighteen, has been in swim club for nearly thirteen years and has difficulty comprehending people who have no ability to swim.

Whenever I meet someone who is over like, [the age of] sixteen, and they don't know how to swim, like, I don't get it. I fucking don't. Like, you have been in the water forever too. Like, how does someone not know how to swim? Like, I just can't, like, fathom that. I don't care if you are an athlete in the water or a swimmer, that is not the point. It is just something that you should learn right. And that is a part of it, learning the water.

Shaun's comments point toward a constant education, a learning and refinement of techniques by athletes and non-swimmers alike. He is unable to see the processes that, as Mauss (1973:71) describes, 'assemble the machine' to create a 'human efficiency' for moving in and through water. It is also a poignant comment on a basic 'swim to survive' motive in teaching children to swim, especially in view of considering the number of large bodies of water, lakes, rivers, and oceans to which Canadians may have access.

Several swimmers I spoke with came through swim lessons provided by local recreation centres. These recreation centre pools, which are where the swim clubs practice and hold swim meets, were also the field sites where I conducted my research. Once kids had finished their different levels of swim lessons, many would continue their swimming education with the local age-group swim club at the same pool. This transition happened at the age of six for Alexis and Dave, and the age of nine for Angelica and Erin²⁸. So, this education begins early and requires a fairly long apprenticeship to reach the higher levels of the sport. Whom and what I am most concerned with in this study are kids and youths in age-group swim clubs (pre-varsity) and the mundane goings-on in their lives at the pool. But even these young athletes have been enrolled in swim club for

²⁷ It is not necessary to have been a participant in competitive club swimming to attain one of these positions at a public or private pool. However, it is advantageous to have good swimming skills which participants often learn during their time in swim club.

²⁸ At the time of my fieldwork all four had been swimming with their clubs between three and six years.

upwards of six years. The amount of time they spend in the water and under the tutelage of coaches has a profound effect on the ways in which they both experience the sport and come to know their own bodies. From this intense and prolonged education, swimmers' may develop a certain 'feel for the water,' a way of understanding their bodies in concert with the water²⁹.

3.2. Being in the Water

'Feel,' or a 'feel for the water' is not something that I heard about very often on the pool deck either at swim meets or practice. Spending many hours standing on the pool deck observing swim practice, sitting on the bleachers talking with parents, and shadowing coaches on the pool edge, I only ever heard 'feel' mentioned when particularly talented athletes were pointed out to me. And it was only mentioned in conversation by coaches. Yet every swimmer that I asked, 'what is a feel for the water?', gave me an answer. They all knew what a feel for the water consisted off, although their answers were often quite different. This concept of 'feel' can be understood as an opening into the world of the pool and age-group swim clubs. While specifically referring to the ways in which an athlete moves in, through, and with, the water in a technical sense, 'feel' pervades all aspects of a swimmer's experience in swim club. From their social worlds to their emotional states³⁰, from the physical movement and technical knowledge to understanding their own growing bodies, and lastly, the mental and physical rigors of club swimming on a daily and weekly basis are all part of feel. To begin to understand what feel for the water means on a technical level for coaching and training purposes, I think it is necessary to explain what being in the water for so many hours per week and on such a consistent basis is like for these young athletes.

²⁹ Coach Kevin expressed that his older swimmers struggled with running long distances and sprinting. All this time in the water did seem to affect swimmers and their experiences of the 'feel' of certain aspects dryland training.

³⁰ It is possible to draw parallels between the affective, multisensorial, and embodied movement of bodies in both swimming and cycling. While this thesis does not go into depth regarding affective states, other researchers are writing interesting ethnography connecting sport and affect (e.g., Larsen (2014)).

As mentioned above, immersion water sports are vastly different to all other sports because of the medium within which they perform. For Nadia, a twelve-year-old with Eel swim club, swimming is unlike other sports:

It's so different from any other sport. Like, when you are in the water it's kind of you and the pool. It's not all about your competitors or your coaches or talking with people. It is this genuine feeling you get. Kind of like you versus the water and like motion. And how you have to train yourself to be comfortable with everything. It's something that kind of grasps onto you. It's really different.

This grasping effect Nadia mentions may be an outcome of the additional pressure water exerts on bodies. As a liquid, water is heavier than air and exerts additional pressure on every square centimeter of swimmer's bodies, with an increase of one atmosphere of pressure every 10.33m of depth in water below sea level. Water holds onto you, it slows down your movements and makes progress and speed in any direction difficult to attain, and even harder to maintain.

As winter swim clubs train at indoor (rather than outdoor) pools in the Lower Mainland, the pool atmosphere and conditions are also a factor in how one feels. With indoor pools, there is a constant hum of machinery, lights, and the sounds of people on the pool deck and in the weight rooms. Pools are enclosed spaces, unlike soccer fields, where those outside of the space cannot view the activities going on within. Pool spaces also comprise social places where haptic vocabularies, the motions of swimming strokes outside of the water, and the jargon of the swim world is understood and communicated within those clubs and the wider communities of swimmers. When asked about the feel of swimming, twelve-year-old Alexis, a 11-year-old with Humboldt club, said that she liked the environment of club swimming, particularly that it is an indoor sport:

Well the water is nice. You don't have to go outside at like night time to run soccer or something. You are in a pool. And it's all nice. It's nice the feeling.

Outdoor pools tend to be open only during the warm and sunny Summer months in the Lower Mainland and are most often used for leisure and play purposes.

Being in the water does not have to be a stressful experience. A few swimmers talked about how swimming makes them feel emotionally, what it does for their sense of well-being. Hellen, a fifteen-year-old with the Eel Club, described going to the lake with her family and swimming in the morning as a relaxing experience:

I kind of miss being able to relax like that in the water just to be able to lay back and not have to think about doing laps or anything. But I get that during the summer we go camping and I swim in the lake. It is fun. But when I am at the lake I end up swimming laps too. Its' just, it's fun. It is relaxing. Like if I got up and swam in the morning it feels nice. Especially when there is no time limit or speed it is just: back and forth and back and forth and back and forth. It is relaxing.

Being in the water can be a relaxing experience if immersion takes place daily. Having the ability to relax in the water and perceive the pool as a comfortable space can provide a healthy retreat from the stresses of life, especially during the transition between primary and secondary school, when moving through puberty, or experiencing troubles at home or deaths in the family. This adds another dimension to the pool space and swim club swimming beyond the potential of acquiring the healthy physical benefits of swimming.

The experience of swimming becomes more comfortable when significant time is spent in water, training the body and mind. To be buoyant and move in liquid, in a way becomes a normalized experience or sensation that has the effect of inducing more than sensations of cold, warmth, anxiety, or fear in people. For Sam, a nineteen-year-old swimmer with Oarfish club, a lifetime of immersion in water has shaped the medium into a safe space where he can feel like himself and be himself: As he describes it, it is his “happy zone,” it makes him comfortable. When asked about his favorite part of swimming, Sam responded:

Probably just being in the water, to be honest. Yeah, everything about being in the water just really makes me happy. It has always just been a quiet place, [the pool and the water], where I can keep my head in. I never really, I can always get lost in a train of thought when I am practicing, but whenever I am home I am kind of just [busy]. But at the pool I can always just get a nice train of thought. Think about what I want, think about something that is bugging me, I can figure it out and think about it while I'm at practice. It is just a really nice place that I can just be myself, to myself, if that makes sense. It is my happy zone, my comfort thing to do.

Continuing the theme of a safe and comfortable space, Shaun, a high-performance swimmer like Sam, tells me that a feel for the water is not just the way that the water moves or the way you interact with the water; rather, for him, it has an emotional quality. This is connected to the way he is feeling, swimming, and the relationships around him at the pool. It must ‘feel good’:

I'm in [water] every day. Clearly like it is not a conscious thing that, '*Oh water is safe for me*,' but it must be. I clearly feel comfortable in water. I am not like consciously diving in thinking, '*Oh this cold water feels great!*' But it is something that I feel comfortable in. So, like feeling, like swimming is all about feeling good, I

guess. You have off days, and good days and bad days, but you want to feel the water. By the time you race, you want to have a feel for the water, like a good one. You will always have, be able to dive in and feel smooth in the water compared to other people. Like feeling, like you are going to feel water is kind of tight, right. It has elasticity on you, which is something that you can get used to if you swim every day. But if you are not, like if we miss two days, our feeling is gone. For sure.

For Shaun, there is some trepidation to being out of the water for multiple days. His comments about the water feeling “kind of tight” and having an “elasticity on you” may evoke images of a second skin, a pressure from outside his body that is not natural, akin to a too-tight wetsuit which hinders movement.

But spending time in the water, having it run over your skin, and playing in it is no less a part of developing good feel. A lifetime of being in and around water develops a connection, a feel for how to move with and against this substance Shaun, who also coaches part-time with his club, believes that for younger kids joining the sport, it is incredibly important for them to learn how to move in the water, understanding the different ways that they can move themselves in all directions.

It is just something that you should learn right. And that is a part of it, learning the water. You are not just going to learn how to swim, you want to learn how to push off the wall in streamline and just glide. See how far you can go. See how streamline you can go. You are learning, like, the density. Like, it is not science but I am not thinking about the science of it. You want to just kind of like learn if you push off and you are not even going to the flags there is something you should work on. But if you push off and you are near the ten-metre mark [on the lane-rope], and you haven't done any kicks, well there is something that you are good at. Use it to your advantage. So, if you are six years old and you are just thrashing in the water, instead of thrashing, put your hands under water and see what they do. See where you can take yourself, right. Just learn how to be in the water, I think is a fair thing to say.

So, what do we gain or learn by listening to the words of these athletes about their descriptions of immersion in water? It helps us to understand on an intellectual level something of what it is like to spend anywhere from three hours-per-week in the pool, at the introductory level for swim club, to upwards of twenty-five hours-per-week, for senior national level swimmers. As in the case of every other physical activity and sport, repeated motions and consistency of training develops certain habits in the athletes, habits which are not easily broken. Mauss (1979) observed that techniques of the body, while ingrained, can change completely across generations. Take swimming, he says: “the habit of swallowing water and spitting it out again has gone. In my day swimmers thought of themselves as a kind of steam-boat” (1973:71). Despite generational shifts, techniques enter “every attitude of the body” and resist personal change. Of swimming

like a steam-boat, Mauss observes, "it was stupid, but in fact I still do this: I cannot get rid of my technique" (1973:71). Thus, the experience of being in the water is essential to grasping the nuances of what these swimmers are describing.

Being in the water was so essential to understanding these swimmer's meanings that I spent upwards of seven hours a week of my own time swimming in a pool over the course of my research. With some help from the staff and a Master's swim coach I worked on drills and techniques to improve my swimming and to try to further understand what is involved with a feel for the water. I learned that there is a fine 'edge' between exerting enough pressure on the water with your hands and forearms to effectively move yourself forwards and having your arms slip through the water without supplying you with adequate propulsion. I also noticed that if I did not practice swimming techniques on a regular basis that my ability to 'feel' where that 'edge' was decreased with every day I spent away from the pool. Not everyone who reads this paper will be able to, or will want to, commit themselves to seven hours a week of training in a pool. In this regard, we can learn much then from the swimmers themselves as they discuss the absence of a thing. Here the absence is the loss of feel for water due to time spent away from and out of a pool.

3.2.1. Losing Your Feel

Having a 'feel' for the game is not unique to the world of swimming. The concept of 'flow,' the simultaneous mind/body connection where the athlete is completely absorbed in their activity, where their body moves and works for them, often in a heightened state of awareness, is well discussed within psychology (Chavez 2008; Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi 1999). The game and the movements sometimes all merge into one smooth sequence for the athlete. Arguably this heightened state of performance comes from deeply engrained habits and training. If this daily regimen of drills and practicing of technique is interrupted, be it for vacation, injury, or time off between seasons, it follows that it could be increasingly difficult to maintain a sense of flow. Any athlete who has spent significant time away from their sporting medium, be it grass, water, ice, snow, sand, or wood, can lose their sense of feel³¹. Thus, even a week

³¹ 'Feel' and 'flow' are similar but not identical. A swimmer may have good flow on a given day, competition, or during a particular training set where they perform the correct techniques and are able to reach all of their goals for strokes per length, number of metres underwater off of each wall,

or a few days away from the pool can lead a swimmer to lose their feel for the water and to fear their re-encounter with the pool.

After coming back to the pool from the one-month summer holiday that winter swim clubbers are permitted in August, sixteen-year-old Hellen recounted for me her first moments getting back into the water.

I remember jumping in and completely going under and coming back up and I turned to my friend, she is no longer on the team, and I was like, '*Oh my god, the water feels so nice!*'

Despite her coach telling her entire group to swim at least once over the break, none of her fellow teammates did. For Hellen, the distinction between being off for that whole month and being off for a week during spring break was that of losing to some extent the finer points of one's ability to swim and, thereby, losing your feel for the water.

For spring break, we have two weeks off, right. One week we have off of swimming, the next week we get back in the water. And when you are off swimming for a month you lose your ability to swim and everything. You come back and you are like, '*Oh my god, it is a new year and I can't swim.*' But when you are away for a week you just lose the feel for the water. So, I don't know, it feels good to be back in the pool.... When I got back into the pool though, after that week off, it just felt really right. It was a hard practice that day but it just felt right to be back in the pool and swimming. Going a long time without swimming is really hard because I just, I love it so much.

Hellen had heard about 'feel' from her coach although she couldn't quite explain what it meant. For her it was an embodied knowledge: "You just know when you are a swimmer, you know the feel for the water." Larz, a twenty-one-year-old senior national training group swimmer with the Oarfish Club, also described losing his feel for the water when being away from the pool for a week.

When you are not swimming for a week, like you might feel like you know where your arms and your limbs are and everything. But [in] the water, you feel like you are pulling nothing and then you feel like you are pulling through air almost. And when you get the feel back it feels like you are actually pulling *through* the water.

and speed per length. Sometimes these same swimmers may experience bad training days where flow does not occur or where it 'clicks' on and off during practice, often depending on which stroke they are swimming and if it is their 'specialty' stroke (e.g., Michael Phelps' specialty stroke is butterfly). With 'feel' you may have it or you train consistently to hold it. And even those who have it can lose it without the consistent training.

This feel is more than a tactile sensation. It is an awareness of your body and how it is moving in a technical fashion. It is also a sense of your performance as judged against those of your peers and your memory of past practices.

Fifteen-year-old Erin told me about an extended absence from swimming that she had in the middle of a season. She also had a difficult time putting a feel for the water into words. It was not so much a technical term with a set of characteristics she could list, but rather, like Hellen, a felt experience.

I know it feels really weird when you are off swimming for a really long time and you get back in. And I guess then you don't have a feel for the water. It feels really weird. It feels like, I don't know, it is just weird. I just feel... like my body is all stiff. 'Cause I was recently [away] for a month and when I came back, oh, it was terrible! I just felt like I was not even moving and everyone was surpassing me by miles... I just know that when I came back it was really weird, nothing came naturally to me..., usually it comes naturally. Like, you just know when to breath. You don't really have to think about it.

Through training their bodies, these age-group swimmers have developed an embodied knowledge of swimming and a feel for the water. When consistent training and connection to the water is removed, then those habits that they have inscribed into their bodies lose their refinement.

3.2.2. Embodiment of Feel

For the swimmers and coaches that I talked to, a feel for the water is more than an intellectual concept. It is the culmination of hours and hours of practicing techniques in the attempt to refine their economy of movement. Athletes often talk about training and technique by using embodied expressions and movements. They would demonstrate swimming technique, different movements in the water, while standing on the pool deck. Swimming is a sport where the athletes spend the majority of their time looking at the bottom of a pool. Although at swim meets they may scrutinize how others swim, they do not have extended hours of viewing how their own body looks when moving through space. They may occasionally have seen recordings (made by their coach during practices or by their parents during a meet) of themselves swimming. While coaches can partially see swimmers from the pool deck, they may also have access to underwater cameras, and they may change their vantage point around the pool deck to be able to see certain parts of a swimmer's stroke as they move through the

water. But as Shaun put it, you don't have to 'actually look good' above the water while you swim. It is all about feeling good.

Being able to use everything you learned and actually, like, be very comfortable and feel like you look good. I guess is something that I think about, like you actually trust that '*I look good swimming right now.*' You know what I mean? It doesn't matter what you look like.

Part of the difficulty swimmers encounter when attempting to explain technique and feel to a non-club swimmer is an apparent disconnect between the physical act of doing the movements and the verbal one of trying to explain this visually using words. Similar to the ways that Greg Downey (2005) describes *capoeiristas*, these age-group swimmers opted for miming the action when words failed to convey their meanings, implying that they "may not possess a visual image of themselves when they master a skill. They know well how a movement feels and how to do it without knowing how it looks" (43). In contrast, however, Larz did have a clear mental image of how his body was moving in the water when his feel was good, and a blurry image when his feel was off.

So, if you are not feeling the water well, it is like you are seeing through muddy water. When I swim, in my mind's eye, I know exactly where my wall[s], well I know where most of the time my arms are, my legs are, how they are moving, right. Because in my mind I can sort of... when I am swimming I can see and feel the water. I can see and feel where my hands and legs are, right. So, when you are not feeling the water as well, like the picture is, if you wanted to visualize it the picture would be kind of muddy. Like, you wouldn't be able to see that well. Your arms feel less clear to you. And then when you can feel the water really well everything feels crystal clear. You know exactly where your arms are. You know exactly how they move.

By explicating feel for the water in swimming I attempt to make explicit an embodied understanding, a way of being-in-the-water, learned by immersion in the water through rigorous and consistent training.

Rod, a twenty-year-old coach with Oarfish Club, talked about feeling the water as a consistent immersion in water. As discussed earlier in this chapter, without the constant immersion in the water and a daily practice schedule that requires winter club swimmers to be in the water on average five times-per-week for an hour or two each time, one's feel and one's ability to move through the water efficiently decreases significantly with any prolonged separation from that medium.

Whereas with sports that are just on land, I guess you could say you don't really, you are always [moving] around, you always have a feel for the land³². It is similar. Whereas if you don't swim for a week you already feel different. When you get to the higher level[s] swimming nine times a week, if you don't swim for a week you can already tell you have lost your little touch, very precise. Like [your] feel for the water. These are things you can't describe. You have to know [them].

Using a haptic vocabulary to describe 'feel,' Rod still managed to convey a subtle understanding of the concept through his physical movements. While mentioning 'you have lost your touch' he demonstrates a 'catch'³³ motion for freestyle³⁴. His arm extends out straight in front of him at shoulder height, his torso slightly turned so as to allow for maximum extension of his arm forward in space. He then presses his flat hand down at a thirty-degree angle from his arm as if he were swimming freestyle and beginning the catch phase of the stroke. Extending both arms out in front of him, slightly wider than shoulder width distance, he then performs a pressing in motion with his hands and forearms, as if they are turning around the outside corner of some invisible object, demonstrating what he would do when actually swimming breaststroke: the beginning catch point of the stroke³⁵. Finally, there is a bit of sculling motion to his hand gesture indicating that this scull action is imperative to his understanding of feeling the water. This can be described as swimming's version of rock climbing's 'beta.'³⁶ While rock climbers' 'beta' and swimmers' haptic vocabulary of 'feel,' or the embodied experience of swimming, are not equivalent performances, in both cases to understand what is being communicated about performance movements can only be achieved through shared practice. Meaning is conveyed in the demonstrated physical movements these youths use to describe the concept of 'feel.' Again, I fear that the words I use to describe these

³² While I may disagree that people in general "always have a feel for the land," it is not totally inaccurate as humans have evolved as land-based bi-pedal organisms. Yet when I have spent a few days, or even a few hours, on a small sailing vessel and disembarked onto solid ground again, I have the sensation of needing to re-acquire my 'feel for the land.'

³³ The 'catch' is a technical term in swimming used to denote a particular part of a swimmer's stroke. The basic parts of any swimming stroke, here referring to the arm action alone, are the 'entry,' 'catch,' 'anchor,' 'propulsion phase,' 'finish,' and 'recovery.'

³⁴ See Appendix A, figure A.1 for the full phases of freestyle arm positions.

³⁵ See Appendix A, figure A.2 for the full phases of breaststroke arm positions.

³⁶ According to Dutkiewicz (2015) the term 'beta' "supposedly derives from climbers watching Betamax videos of difficult climbs to learn correct ascension techniques, but the details of its emergence into the vernacular, as well as this entire etymological description, are contested" (2015:38). Suffice it to say, it is a set of hand and foot holds on the rock, the size of the holds, the vocabulary related to the movements and techniques used to use the holds, as well as a physical reenactment of a particular climb, what Dutkiewicz has called a "linguistically incomprehensible interpretive dance" (2015:30).

athletes' movements still do not fully capture how they may be moving in the water and experiencing full body immersion.

A love of water at an early age culminated in a life passion for Sam. When describing feel and the ability to move and displace the water, he does so less with words and more so with actions: for example, demonstrating sculling and breaststroke pull. These physical movements, these trained and embodied actions that Sam demonstrates are part of his lexicon when describing feel. Without knowing these movements by virtue of having experienced them one would be at a loss to understand what a feel for the water really is. In his case, it must be "clean" and "crisp":

Ever since I was younger I used to love diving for rings at the bottom. And so, the feeling of water is the motion of, you know how frogs' kind of go through the water? They kind of use every single muscle they can to go through [it]. I guess to me that is what water feels like. So basically, anything that your hands can move or displace the water kind of thing. Or basically, how you can move your body to just get yourself through the water fastest, like agile. So, I guess that is what it feels like to me to move through water. Just being the most clean and crisp you can.

Clean and crisp are normally descriptors of vegetables. Placed here in this context Sam conjures up visual images of the surface of the water being smooth and little disturbed by his passage. The crisp cutting-in of his hands at the arm entry of freestyle is another evocative image that comes to mind from this description.

Sam, like Rod, is another athlete who displays an embodied knowledge of his sport when talking about his hands moving through and displacing the water. When asked about 'feel,' Sam demonstrates the catch phase of breaststroke pull and some sculling: Holding his large hands out at arm's-length with finger tips pointed down and palms facing him, he 'pushes' the imagined water, as if spreading soft butter on toast, sweeping his hands and arms out past shoulder width. He also begins by starting the pull phase of breaststroke, having his elbows and hands sweep in together in front of his torso while his shoulders shrug. He then changes his movements and demonstrates a freestyle catch and the beginning of the pull as his hand drops down, *pressing* the imagined water, and his elbow slides in over his hand. Movements and motions in the air have great potential to serve as descriptors, but to see what these motions actually accomplish when the swimmer is in the water brings a new dimension to how athletes are using their bodies with and against the water.

Some of the technical language that is used to describe ‘feel’ are terms such as ‘catch points,’ ‘edges,’ ‘spinning out,’ and ‘holding onto water.’ The sources of this swimming vocabulary and knowledge for coaches in British Columbia stems first from Swimming Canada’s Coaching Courses, but also from popular international swimming manuals, such as *Championship Swim Training* by Bill Sweetenham (2003), online journals, such as *Swim Swam*, and the annual BC Swim Coaches conference. The terms circulated within these literatures and venues suggest that water is a substance that can be acted against not only as a liquid but also a solid.

For twenty-year-old varsity swimmer and coach Will, ‘feel’ is independent of fitness. You may be well cross-trained; you may be in excellent physical condition, but you can still be lacking that ‘feel.’ Small movements in the water and different positions, ‘catch points,’ and ‘edges’ make up, in Will’s view, the bulk of how you feel the water. This all requires a good amount of time in the water. Of course, absence from the water on the swimmer’s part can quickly lead to a loss of ‘feel’:

It is definitely independent of fitness, both cardiovascular and muscular. And it is just, as far as I can tell, a result of being in the water all the time. If you can feel, if you take the time to pause to sort of think about your strokes, you can feel all the edges of the water, where your catch points are, where you can leverage yourself past those catch points, all of those sorts of things. If you take time out of the water, it is really hard to find that connection again, and I will get tired faster ‘cause I am swimming inefficiently because I do not have that feel for the water. I have not been in the water in a long time.... It is all the catch points, it is all the areas of resistance, it is all the areas where the water is fighting you. That is kind of what makes up the feel of the water.

Mentioning “edges of the water,” Will demonstrates a sculling motion with his hand, palm flat facing at a slight angle towards his body, sweeping his hand back and forth in the air as if moving it through water: The catch points being out to the sides where his palm further presses into the air, on the left, on the right, and in front Will’s movements here are to show a freestyle arm entry, sliding his arm through the air, catching the ‘water’ by pressing his hand down, and then the elbow sliding in over the wrist so as to make the whole forearm and hand become a solid paddle where his arm will ‘anchor’ in the water. Instead of working against gravity the swimmer is working against the water. As Shaun puts it, “You learn the most efficient way for you to get through the solid substance, right. Because the water is always going to be there. Yeah it moves around, but it is always there.” So, they use the water to propel themselves forward, interacting with it as both a solid, where catch points and arms are anchored, as well as a liquid they move through.

Developing a feel for the water where it can be deemed to be both a solid and a liquid requires that a swimmer put in the time in the water to develop a good feel. Acting upon the water as a solid is not an easy concept to grasp. Shaun explained his understanding of this duality of water using his body more effectively than words. “If you were taking a stroke, your hand enters here.” Shaun sat up a little taller and extends out his arm from a recovery position: Elbow bent and high palm facing backwards with finger tips pointed down, to having a straight arm, flat, with finger tips and palm tilted slightly down and forward. He moves his shoulder forward so that his arm reaches further in the space in front of him. “And then you want to get your body past your hand.” He *anchors* his hand and then forearm on an imaginary surface in the air and moves his whole body forward to meet that hand and forearm. “You are not pulling your hand here.” Shaun motions again a freestyle pull but instead pulls his arm in freestyle towards his body while his body does not move. “I am not pulling my hand to my hip. With everything else I am moving my body past where my hand is.” Again, he demonstrates, moving his arm towards his body, and then having his arm and hand anchored and moving his body to his anchored hand. “If I stood up, my hand stays there.” He stood up and again demonstrates keeping his hand and forearm anchored in a freestyle pull and moves his body forward to be in line with his hand and forearm. “That is what I am trying to, it is a solid substance in a way, right. Kind of like if it were cement, in a way it sticks there.” Shaun has an embodied knowledge accumulated through years of practicing, and training with the same club, and playing in the water. He has come to understand not only his body but what amounts to his particular ‘playing field’ in an intimate way that, for him, is best shown physically rather than described orally.

I have attempted to create a visual picture for the reader of these athletes’ haptic vocabulary, their embodied knowledge, and how they demonstrate and communicate the meanings of feeling and moving through the water. Without physically experiencing these motions, it is hard to translate their knowledge from movement into words. There is something lost in translation from the embodied knowledge and experience when its meaning is conveyed through the written or spoken word. For older swimmers who are somewhat experienced with using words to describe swimming, the visual and kinesthetic are very much a part of the way they communicate meaning and learn from one another. For the younger swimmers who are just beginning their formal swim training, unstructured time to play in the water and move their bodies in all directions, to

practice holding their breath, can be a boon when coaches begin formalized instruction and kids already intuitively understand how to move through the water.

3.3. Conclusion

One way to unpack the variety of ways feel for the water has been described above is to think of working with the medium of water in a specialized way. This means treating the water as a liquid that resists your forward movement, as well as using it as a solid to anchor your arms and hands to pull your body forward. The way a skateboarder plants his or her foot against the pavement and pushes him or herself forward to gain momentum, might provide a useful analogy for beginning to understand how these athletes are using and interacting with the water. Will summarized this interactive play with the water as a liquid-solid, noting that a regular connection with water is vital to maintaining this way of feeling.

You spend time in the water, the water feels like a very solid entity. Something you can pull against, that you can, that you can use to propel yourself through the metres you need to do. When you get, if you haven't been in the water for a long time it suddenly feels very liquid. You don't have anywhere, you don't have any catch points. You, all you can feel is the fact that your arms are rushing through the water, the water is sliding past you. So, when you are in the water day-in, day-out it feels like a solid. When you are out of the water and you have to get back in it feels like a liquid again.

I find it fascinating how an age-group swimmer acquires a specialized knowledge of a substance that every human needs in order to survive. They are instructed by their coaches and go on to learn how to anchor their hands and arms in the water, how to hold the water as if it were a solid object. Learning how to perform these various techniques, they share some of this knowledge with their friends when they have time to go to the pool outside of practices. Or they share their understanding with the adults on the pool deck, as was the case during an evening practice for an eight to ten-year-old group:

I am standing on the side watching the kids practicing flip-turns by swimming into the wall, summersaulting just before they touch with their hands, and pushing off again underwater. Sarah, a young girl, one of the better swimmers in her group, asks me whether I can flip turn. I say, "Yes." She seems kind of astonished, as though she assumed she would be better at swimming than me. But she proceeds to explain what a flip turn is to me, regardless of my admission. She explains in a matter-of-fact tone that you do an underwater summersault and then put your feet on the wall and push-off.

Yet many people are unable to swim because they have not been introduced to the water, have not spent the hundreds of hours playing, floating, and moving in the water that these athletes have. To conceive of a something that flows through your hands and at the same time you are able to interact with it as if it were as solid as wood is unique to the world of water sports.

Chapter 4. The Worlds and Lifestyles at the Pool

4.1. Introduction

Training together, competing beside each other, and growing as people, the kids and youths, parents, and coaches come together to make club swimming happen as a sport. In doing this they spend time with each other on and off the pool deck and meet other swimmers, parents, and coaches from other clubs in British Columbia. Some become close friends while others remain only acquaintances. I was curious to know how they defined their team, training group, and social interactions within the confines of their particular training groups and the club as a whole. Together, the people involved and their ensuing interactions create for them a form of community. While community is an often-over used word for describing vastly different groups, following Amit (2010), I would argue that the ambiguity of the word ‘community’ can be used as a useful tool to describe some of the actual relationships that I observed and that my participants described in age-group swimming clubs.

A large portion of what underlies a sense of community are the social interactions and socialization that occurs in competitive club swimming. Not only are the kids socialized into the club where they swim, but so too are the parents and coaches. As swimming requires a commitment of time, energy and resources that rivals those which kids and parents put toward scholastic endeavors, I had multiple questions: How do kids, youths, and parents balance their school and swimming commitments? Do kids and youths have separate ‘friend’ categories between school and swimming or do these overlap and intermingle? What sorts of other activities do kids and youths who swim competitively also engage in outside of their school and swimming commitments? The final part of this chapter will look at how kids and youths, who are so very often viewed by adults as being incapable of performing complex organizational tasks and of generally being passive participants in youth sport, in fact contribute actively to shaping and defining their sporting activities and their social groups. Kids and youths seek to balance both their commitments to their scholastic studies while performing and competing at high levels in swimming, and they often even find time to hang out with their friends and participate in other extra-curricular activities.

4.2. Unpacking Community

Michael Messner (2009) noticed a frequently repeated slogan when talking to and interviewing adults associated with community youth baseball. The pronouncement “it’s all for the kids” was often said jokingly, which implies that it wasn’t, in fact, *all* for the kids. Rather it also was about parent’s sense of ‘self-importance’ and attempts to elevate one’s child into a position of importance, on and off the fields of play (186). Noel Dyck also encountered the rhetoric of “it’s for the kids” (2012:156) from parents commenting on the moral directive, which they believe ought to guide and regulate the involvement of parents in kid’s community sports. This points to larger social implications in youth sports that go beyond the physical benefits of these activities. While some parents’ drop their children off at these adult-run activities and pick them up once these are over, many other parents invest hundreds of volunteer hours each season, many more than may be required of them. Those that stick around during practices and socialize with one another can create a casual form of community, either intentionally or through the everyday practices that go into being a ‘committed’ parent of a child in community sports.

One example of community in children’s sports are the momentary, ephemeral ‘communities’ that form out of consociate relations between parents and children within community youth sports, often for a season of play or during a road trip (Dyck 2002). Consociate relationships may form through the everyday interactions that kids have with other swimmers, parents, and coaches in their own, and with other clubs at swim meets. Dyck (2012) describes consociate relationships as requiring “putting names to known faces and telling stories about mutually shared experiences in the world of community sports” (67). Following Dyck, I would argue that swimmers and parents may use these relationships to further their own ends. They can also choose to cultivate these relationships and develop them into other types of friendships. Swimmers who go to the same meets, whether in the same levels of competition or in the same swim club, are able to share their stories of victory or defeat in their races against their club peers and those kids from other clubs. Parents may also use their own consociate relationships and cultivate them into deeper friendships, which may help when it comes to carpooling and transporting kids to and from practices and meets. All of this socializing between

and amongst the people involved in swim clubs create what can be understood as falling under the heading of community or communities.

Community can be defined in many ways. Holly Swyers (2010) defines community as “a set of practices through which participants arrive at self-consciousness of themselves as a group with a particular relationship to the larger world” (3). This definition allows room for flexibility in the changing social relations that can shift what a community looks like and how it operates over time. It also gives the definition some analytical weight that moves beyond an ahistorical fantasy of ‘community’ and more towards the mundane habits and actions that make up and define a community. In a similar way, Anthony Cohen (1978) argues for the definition of community as a “discrete entity with a self-consciously distinctive culture and strictly codified social process, [that] ... sees itself as occupying a particular niche in the wider world ... and thus acquires a strategic imperative for the presentation of its collective identity” (8). By studying a group of people for extended lengths of time, the anthropologist can gauge and probe to see if ‘self-consciousness’ of shared cultural beliefs and habits, in fact, arises or is present in the behaviours and actions of a given group of people as a social unit, thus resulting in community as a reality. Rather than defining or labeling a group of people as automatically comprising a ‘community,’ I have presented two arguments that point toward a self-defined version of community that is self-conscious and understands its cultural beliefs and practices. Attempting to understand community as a generative process allows us to open-up the hard definition of community and look at something that may be ‘community-like’ without an etic labeling of the groups we study.

Vered Amit argues for the further expanding of a definition of community. Amit argues that the proliferation in the use of the term ‘community’ in newspapers and everyday discourse should not be assumed to diminish the analytical usefulness of this ambiguous term. Rather, Amit (2010) suggests that, “the ambiguity linked with the ubiquity of references to community might just prove to be a useful vehicle for thinking about certain classes of sociation” (358). The participants in my study had varying degrees of commitment to their club and their swimming. They also had different reasons for being a part of the club and participating in its practices, either going to or abstaining from competition and practice. Describing each of these swim clubs as a single community or the competitive swimming scene as an overarching community might gloss over the subtle interactions and forms of sociation that occur on and off the

pool deck. By looking at the everyday interactions between the different actors involved in youth swim club, the meanings that kids, parents, coaches and officials ascribe to the term community when they are referring to their club and the sport are made clear. In the next sections I present some of the varied ways that swimmers, discuss, think about, and form communities of their own outside of the confines of the adult run, and organized, competitive swim clubs where they are enrolled.

4.3. Social Bonds

If you sit on the bleachers and watch kids swim up and down a swimming pool, their faces mostly in the water, it is hard to believe that kids have much time to socialize as peers. For older swimmers the time between school hours and swim practice, stretching sessions before and after practice, and the few moments of rest in the middle of a swim practice, nonetheless, become sites of social interaction where ‘swim friends’ catch up with each other on how their days have gone, what happened at school (if they go to different schools), what their respective plans for the weekend are, the latest scores and times for national and international swim meets, how the local hockey team is doing, what shopping they plan on doing with their spare money, and the list goes on. The younger swimmers tend to practice their flips in the water, blowing bubbles, trying to talk to each other under water with hand signals, or splashing in the water. The time in between the work segments of swim practice was dominated by such moments of unstructured play. Yet kids may create deep social bonds during their time in swim club.

It is not just about the good times enjoyed when winning that develops these bonds. As coach Kyle put it to me, “I think there is definitely a sense of togetherness just because of all of the tough times that you have put through together with your friends, whoever they be, guys or girls.” In response to my question “Is swimming a team or individual sport?” Hellen jokingly said that her group was, “only a team when you are getting punished.” There is some merit to her statement and the bonds these swimmers create while dealing with hardships in life, whether that be a tough swim set at practice, a bad performance at a swim meet, troubles at home, or a death in the family. Sharing hard experiences, such as a practice that pushes you physically, or not reaching your goal time at a swim meet are only two examples of what Kyle refers to as “tough times” which youth swimmers may experience.

Rod, who transitioned out of varsity swimming and into coaching, told me how the mutually shared experience of swimming and fitness was what helped create and maintain social bonds between himself and his teammates:

Whenever you are working on something, when you are doing work with someone else, or swimming for example, or working out and you are both going through the same thing, that is what creates that bond and you keep going.... You got through the same things together and that just, that alone gives you this certain kind of bond that is a lot stronger than anything else that I have experienced. So yeah, in terms of social life, swimming [and being in swim club] became my social life. It was the lifestyle, it was, the social life was part of swimming as well, or swimming was part of the social life.

Dave, seventeen, who revealed to me that this would be his last year of training, sticks with his club because of the social bonds he has nourished. Thus, his commitment to swimming is mostly for the social aspect, considering he is in his last year of high-school and has multiple athletic options to choose from:

I enjoy swimming, it is great. Especially in the Oarfish team it is really kind of great and close friends together [in a] team, right. Like really close, like even with coaches and stuff like we are talking about random things. We don't only talk about professional swimming, right. But we [are] also kind of being friends and stuff, right. And I like that a lot. And that little bit helps, like definitely helps you feel comfortable in a team, right.

Most of the swimmers I spoke with had multiple social groups they were in contact with on a daily basis and each group provided them a different form of sociality. Their main social groups tended to comprise their friends in their swim club, friends at school, and friends from other extracurricular activities. I was initially surprised by the diversity of activities that these young swimmers participated in outside of school and swimming considering the amount of time required for both of these activities³⁷.

Swimming is a sport that takes an incredible amount of commitment from kids, parents, and coaches. Spending such an extended period of time with the same people—between 3 hours and 25 hours training per week—the kids developed friendships and consociate relations (Dyck 2002) with their fellow swimmers, as one

³⁷ Kids in elementary school in the Lower Mainland tend to move up through their early grades with a single classroom of peers from between the ages of 5 and 12 years-old before moving on to high school. Once at high school, students can pick from a variety of elective courses outside of the main curriculum as well as many options to participate in various sports through their schools. Thus, your classmates and sport peers are most likely not the same ones you had throughout elementary school and your social base may grow or shrink accordingly.

would with work colleagues or classmates. For Erin, being forced to “talk with them [teammates] all the time” eventually fostered more than a shared respect for fellow competitors or teammates:

So, it is like a little community, kind of thing. Like especially swim meets. You are there for twelve hours-a-day for 3 days and you are with the same people, and there is nothing to do.

Following Cohen’s (1978) notion of community, shared practices and habits are, according to Erin, present during the swim meets in the behaviours and actions of the swim clubs, which are small social units within the larger swimming community in the Lower Mainland. For the kids and youths, it may seem like there is “nothing to do,” but the swimmers did not exactly have free time between races either, as they had to keep track of when their heats and events would be held, tracking the progress of the meet to make sure that they did not end up missing a race. They also spend this time together discussing their race performances and anything else that comes to mind to pass the time and make conversation.

Alexis described her swim team companions as being like her school peers: “Like a bigger version, here [at the pool]. And you like spend your whole week with them. So, you kind of get to know them more than the people at school.” They may be similar in respect of both being joint participation activities³⁸. Yet swim clubbers all participate in some form of public or private academic education until the age of sixteen in British Columbia, while on the other hand, there is no mandatory swimming programs for kids and youths in the province³⁹. Thus, there is some discrepancy about kids’ respective levels of knowledge of the different sporting activities outside of basic physical education program in schools. When I asked Erin if her school friends understood her commitment to swimming, she emphatically exclaimed that they did not:

No, they talk about waking up early at seven o'clock. That is not early! 7:00 is not early at all. They don't really get it.

³⁸ I go into depth concerning the joint participation and lack of gender segregation when it comes to winter swim club practices and early competition in chapter 5, *The Salience of Gender*.

³⁹ Some schools in British Columbia do provide programs in conjunction with close by public pools where students may sign up for lessons through their school. Unlike the Netherlands, Canada is far from implementing a mandatory country wide *Swim to Survive* program.

As noted earlier, there are distinct social groups for these youths: school and swim club. Balancing school and swimming is not as easy as it would seem when these are in competition for youths' spare time. Yet swimming often takes up much of the time spent outside of school for these young athletes. Their non-swimming counterparts may use this free time to hang out with friends outside of school or to participate in other extracurricular activities, and sports not available to those in swim club.

4.3.1. Balancing School and Swimming

As I outlined in Chapter 2, LMR meets and those at higher levels of competition can last as long as three days. Usually these competitions involve half a day of swimming on Friday—which may require missing school—and anywhere from eight to twelve hours of competition on both Saturday and Sunday. Alexis competed in a three day meet early in the swim season for which she had to sacrifice some time from her scholastic studies to participate: “Friday was [in the] afternoon, but I had to, to prepare. I had to leave early from school and sleep a lot.” Managing sleep patterns, time use, and the mundane everyday practices of athletes is nothing new in the discourse of professional sports, let alone swimming (Chambliss 1989). It is, however, quite another thing to have 11-year-olds monitoring their sleep patterns and their schooling, yet surprisingly, this is a regular aspect of being involved in winter swim club. The demands of the sport require young swimmers to take on tasks that adults are characteristically expected to meet in their sporting careers. This is not to say that all youth swim clubbers are equally aware of their own needs concerning sleep and homework. Certainly, there were youths that I spoke with who had never been to a competitive meet or who would miss practices on the weekends to attend birthday parties. Still, many of the swimmers I spoke with took their responsibilities as an athlete seriously, whether these involved waking up early for practice and knowing on which days swim meets were held, or knowing best-times in particular events that they swam.

Waking up at five o'clock in the morning can be a trying experience for most adults, but for youth swimmers it is a regular affair. Nadia described her early morning swim practice and school routine for me during a conversation we had:

Friday's and Monday's I go directly from the pool to school, so I am always a bit more tired, and in a bad, [and] groggy mood. But like, it is all worth it in the end. And my friends are always taken aback like, '*Why would you do this? Why would*

you go swimming before you come here?' and it's like, '*Why don't you skip?*' When people ask you that, I mean, when you don't feel like it you don't skip school or you don't skip work. I mean, it's something you adapt to. It's something you take pride in doing. I'll never be like, really excited and pumped to wake up at 5am but it is definitely something that I am used to.

Adapting to the situation was something that Dave, a 17-year-old swimmer in Oarfish, also talked about in regards to school and swimming. The early mornings may be difficult initially, and the school work may be a lot to handle, as both the demands of homework and swim practice increase as these youths got older. Still, they were able to adapt without outright sacrificing one for the other.

Well, I do have spare time. Um, the point is you get more productive 'cause you have less time to work, for example, like school work, right. And I just get more productive with that. I just do more school work with a shorter amount of time and um, it is not like, I get used to it, you know. It is not like, um, it is really like maybe stressful at first 'cause you maybe have a practice five times a week and you need to like talk to your friends and be with your family and like do lots of school work with your graduation year, for me right. But yeah, you adapt to it.

Much as their bodies adapt to the physical demands that swimming places on them, they adapt to the mental pressures and everyday demands of both school and swimming.

Youths in swim club do get some down time while hanging out on the pool deck during swim meets, while waiting for their races to start. To someone not involved in swim club this may seem like an opportunistic moment to get a few questions done on one's math homework or memorize a few European countries for a social studies test. Unfortunately, it is certainly not an ideal location and atmosphere for getting these things done. In fact, most of the swimmers spent their time chatting, hanging out on their phones or tablet devices, or listening to music while waiting between heats. Nadia has quite a focused outlook on how she ought to be spending her time at swim practices and meets:

When you are at a swim meet, you are there to swim. You need to sacrifice everything to be there. You need to put your mind set. You shouldn't be able to stress about something else. 'Cause that is your priority when you are there, is to swim, to do your best. So, you can never really go into a mode of '*I have to finish this and this.*' And I know it's hard not to sometimes and we all do it. We just have to remember, we just need to try and balance things somehow. When I am at school I can't always be thinking about swimming and when I'm at swimming I can't always think about school. It's about balance and they are two very different things.

Having such intense demands on your attention is difficult. Yanik, age 15, hoped to advance in his swim club despite the fact that he had never been to a competitive meet.

For him this was tempered by the fact that he was enrolled in a pre-International Baccalaureate program⁴⁰ at his high school. He was well aware that his swimming might take a back seat to his scholastic pursuits: “So a few of my friends that were in [my group] last year, they stopped going to swimming during pre-IB when they were 10 – year-old], so if I have the time to do it, [to compete, I might].”

Attending school and acquiring a good education were important to the kids and the parents in winter swim club. 10-year-old Norm had a private tutor come to his house once a week. He received what he thought was a lot of homework throughout the week from his public-school teacher, “and from my extra teacher that we pay to come help us, [my sister and I] [sic]. Yeah and [she] helps [us], gives us extra lessons and stuff to do.” Elise, a mother with one of her kids in swim club, was adamant that both school and recreation were important for her kids’ growth.

Most of the times too many parents say, ‘*First it is school then it is...*’ eh, which is good, right. But for myself it is fifty-fifty. Eh, it is not always, but my idea, I have never been a swimmer but all my life doing sports, right. And I think it is, if you are doing sport and you have a regimen of practice, and practice it is a little bit hard [sic] to keep the other ways of teenagers in your life, right. So, I don’t know, it is more healthy if you are, if you like to do some sport and you try very hard. For me it is very important the sports, any sport you decided to go [into], [that my kids] do something.

This balancing act between school and swimming was something that was mentioned to me by many parents and coaches during my research. (Indeed, I hear it regularly as a graduate student: the school and life balancing act.) As a kid, I had the opportunity to try a wide variety of sports throughout my youth, and balancing my homework after school, on weekends, and between different sports was a constant battle. These youth swim clubbers have a similar struggle, but they must also manage early morning practices and weekend long meets on top of school and other extra-curricular activities.

Yanik and Norm both receive more education through pre-IB programs and tutors than the public school system offers. The cost enrolment in swim club, private tutors, and the other extra-curricular activities that many of the kids I spoke with partook of begs the question, what social classes can afford this lifestyle? Club swimming is not a cheap

⁴⁰ The pre-International Baccalaureate program is directed to students in grades 9 and 10 or between the ages of 13-15. The program, which is globally offered, is designed to provide enriched learning environments and a consistent pedagogical approach and equip students with the skills and tools to excel at higher education.

sport in terms of the monetary and labour hour costs of the sport. To be able to mobilize this type of capital families need to be relatively secure in either the middle or upper-middle class and higher echelons of social class stratification. Similar to hockey (due to the costs which can range upwards of 10,000 dollars a season for an 11-year-old), swim club presents a privileged space of community making which certainly has its own challenges for kids and parents.

Shaun, who despite being self-admittedly not the best student has finished secondary school and is now applying to attend university, was excited about the prospects of continuing to swim while furthering his education.

I am going, I don't want to say I am going for swimming or I am going for school. I am going for myself. Like, I am ready to go to school now. I know that.... And now it is not like '*That is on me.*' I am going for me. When you are in grade school you just go because you go. You are in school [and] you have got to go. And now it is like I am old enough to make the decision.

Looking back on his career as a competitive swimmer, Rod noted that his study habits might not have been the best. Due to the amount of swimming he was doing at the time he didn't have many extra hours for studying.

I mean it really depends on your study habits. A lot of us because we swam we don't really, maybe I am just speaking for myself but I am going to guess this is more than just me. It is definitely more than just me. So, I am going to say most if not all swimmers they, to make it up to grade 12, for example, you have to be fairly smart I want to say 'cause naturally you are swimming so much you are not going to be able to do as much homework. So, basically in class, my strategy was to go to class and pay attention and pick it all up there because I knew I wouldn't do my homework. I'm just being honest now. I went through some of the courses barely opening that textbook, only like before a test and for me that was enough. I got through that.

Youths and parents can have similar and conflicting ideas of what is most important in their immediate everyday lives and in their futures. Often kids are not given credit for their agency in choosing their activities and taking on the responsibility of following through on sport and school commitments. Conversations that I had with these youth swimmers and parents demonstrate that youths are anything but passive participants in their swimming and their schooling. They actively negotiate which activities they want to focus their efforts on, and often this forces them to adapt to changing schedules and reduced time for homework. The responsibility for waking up on time for practice and swim meets, for getting their homework done on time falls on these youths, and they rise to that challenge.

4.3.2. Friends, School, and Swimming

Adults have multiple categories of social relations: consociate relations, friendships, acquaintances, childhood friends, work colleagues, and the list goes on. Youths also have multiple circles of relationships with various categories of people they know. For youths in swim clubs these categories of people with whom the swimmer interacts on a daily basis, as previously stated, often fall into the categories of school, swimming, and ‘other,’ where those listed under the category of ‘other’ may include family friends, childhood friendships, or friends from extra-curricular activities. It can be hard to give equal social time to friends from all of these categories when your everyday schedule is full of school, swimming, and other extracurricular activities that youths are involved in. I asked Alexis whether she ever mixed categories of friends or kept them separately? Her heavy sigh after I posed my question indicated that it was more complicated than I had initially expected: “Well, kind of. Well, I don’t really get much time to play with my friends from school ‘cause I have swimming. But I prefer to go swimming than stay home doing nothing. I like to keep myself busy. So, that’s why I like swimming.” Alexis is inferring here that her 11-year-old friends at school would be doing “nothing” with their free time, as she would also be doing if she didn’t swim. Choosing where to focus your attention, energy, and time, whether it be with school peers, or on a sport, the struggling to choose between an individual physical pursuit or a social one, causes tension in the lives of adults. Seeing a youth in visible conflict with her (or his) situation re-iterates my argument that youths take on the activities and sports in which they participate and they sometimes struggle with the social implications of their choices.

Dave occasionally spends some time with his swim club teammates outside of the confines of the pool. It may help, as Dave put it, that “there are a lot of people on my swim team in my school, so whenever I see them I sort of greet them and stuff.” This daily contact in a different space could facilitate more opportunities to organize activities outside of school and swimming, and for Dave it did.

Um, yeah sometimes we are going out, we go out with other guys [in the club]. We go biking and hiking together. Yeah, like doing all those sport activities. Yeah, but it is really hard to hike and bike with them ‘cause they are so competitive. And I just can’t keep up. I just want to relax and like... yeah, so, that is kind of a little bit of an issue with hanging out with them.

As Dave's experience suggests, hanging out with your swimming peers outside of the pool was not always the relaxing escape from the competitive pool environment that swim clubs so often generate.

Talking about balance, Nadia said that for her there was a time for seeing swimming friends and a time for seeing school friends, which was either at or outside the pool or school, respectively. Dividing activities between circles of friends was not uncommon for youth swimmers:

The thing is with school plus swimming, like, that's the balance of it all. You see those friends at swimming and you see those friends at school. So, in that sense it's balanced out but in a matter of 'Oh, these are closer to me,' if I get the chance to hang out with them over my free time it is very equal with both of them. They all just have their different places. They are all equal but there are different concepts of when I'll see them and what I'll do with those people I guess, like hanging out wise.

With some of her school friends being athletes they, "kind of get the concept of, like, why I am always busy and why it's not always easy to just come out and have more social time with them." Even those school friends who are also athletes in other sports only "kind of get" what it is like being a competitive club swimmer. Practices throughout the week and weekend-long swim meets take up much of a swimmer's life. Club swimming in this respect is more than a conventional activity or sport that other kids may participate in. In the case of swimming, it is an everyday part of participants' lives. Kids develop and build bonding social capital and bridging social capital, a dynamic pattern that shifts depending on who they spend time with, and which friend groups and activities they choose to prioritize. What is more, winter club swimming involves a lifestyle that kids are at the core of actively creating.

4.3.3. Outside the Pool

The winter club schedule does not allow much wiggle room for participating in or committing to other sports and activities. This is because many programs for youth compete for enrollment and time slots, as they must run after school during the week and on weekends. Despite participating in a sport that requires a large time commitment, youth swimmers in the Lower Mainland still found time to do things outside of going to school and swimming. Many of the youths I spoke with played an instrument or were involved in another sport or club activity outside of swimming.

When I asked Hellen about how she spent her time outside of school and swimming she laughed and countered with, "What social time?" Yet she didn't let a busy swim schedule stop her from going to school activities. "I go to school events when I have time. I will often skip practice for an event if I really need to. Um, for example this week on Wednesday, my theatre company had a Christmas party. I went to the Christmas party, we did a Secret Santa, and I was like, 'Well I'm going to go to that 'cause that is really fun.'" The theatre company she was a part of also organized group activities throughout the year where Hellen would go and spend time with her non-swim club friends.

At the age of twelve, Nadia did not have much time to spend with friends outside of junior high school and swimming practice. Those friends that she did spend time with outside of the pool were mainly from elementary school or close family friends. Club friends were a little different: "And then my swimming friends, like hanging out with them is kind of just like coming to practice really.... So, it's something you adapt to. You are okay under these circumstances, you get the flow, and you just adjust to everything." The split between school friends and swimming friends was sometimes designated by the space of those two activities, school and the pool.

Angelica at twelve years old had to see those two categories of friends at those locations due to a busy school and swimming schedule:

I spend my time with my friends here [at the pool] and then at school, 'cause I don't really have that many friends at school. Like, I have three of them, three really good friends who understand now. But here [at the pool] I have so many people, not so many, but I have over, I have ten at least who understand; who are going through the same thing as I am; competitions and striving for their strength.

Even during the summer where she had summer swim camp she would elect to spend time with her swimming companions: "[After] summer camp, me and my friend Jane in Blue, after morning trainings we would go for breakfast together. We would spend hours in McDonalds." According to Angelica, her busy swimming schedule affected an existing relationship with a long-time school friend. Her friend would ask, "Hey, why don't we hang out? Like we never hang out. Maybe this weekend?" Angelica would reply, "Ah, I have a meet.' 'Well how about after school?' 'Oh, I have practice.'" It can be a struggle to find free time to spend with your friends when you are a swimmer and they are not.

Free time here means ‘time when these youths have no scheduled activities or homework to do,’ so they can do what they want with that time available to them. Erin gets around this lack of availability by spending more of her free time with her friends from school.

Outside of [swimming] I spend more time with my school friends. I don't know. I don't really know why. They are just free more, well in swimming, they are swimming all the time they need to spend their other time doing things like homework. But my school friends they are free all the time.

Nina, a ten-year-old with the Eel club, told me that her and her sister, who is also enrolled in the club, don't spend much time with their friends from swimming outside of the pool: “The friends here [at the pool] are usually busy or we don't have time. And really, we spend more time with our school friends. We kind of know our school friends better.” With the choice of which friendship group to spend their time with, either from school or from swim club, the kids I researched chose the friends that they knew better. As these kids move up through their clubs, become faster swimmers and more competitive, more and more of their time will be spent at the pool, which can result in closer bonds with those in the club, although this isn't invariably the case. Ultimately it came down to a range of factors, including age, swim level and ability, other extra-curricular activities, and common interests, when these kids were deciding with whom to spend their discretionary time for socializing.

Since Sam, nineteen-years-old, did not grow up and go to elementary school in the area where he currently swims, this created a natural split between his categories of friends, one located on Vancouver Island and the other in the Lower Mainland.

Usually what I like to do is keep my hangout time for the holidays. Since [I am] coming from Vancouver Island, I have basically, my main friend group is from [there]. And I like to keep it that way. I like to have my social time [on the island], there is where I can have fun. Here [the Lower Mainland] is work, where I can swim and have fun with these guys, kind of thing.

Larz liked hanging out with his swimming group at the pool but preferred spending time with his school friends when he had free time to spare:

I mean, I feel that a lot of athletes use working hard at sports as an excuse to not work hard at school or at work. And, yeah um, they will be like, ‘Ah, I am good at this thing. Why should I be good at something else? Why should I need to try at the other thing?’ So, um, yeah, I mean, also they do devote a big chunk of their time toward sports. Whereas the other people they have more time to do leisurely,

I mean to study, right. As a result, I tend to find athletes are at least for me less intellectually stimulating.

Even after graduating from university with a bachelor's degree, Larz retained access to many different categories of people he could socialize with. He chose to keep swimming and opted to socialize with his scholastic friends when he did not have any swimming commitments.

Social time for these youths was not always about going to swim practice and meets, although it did dominate their time. As a way to provide a social space for the kids in these clubs, their coaches would organize special activities throughout the year. This could take the form of a group rock climbing 'practice' or a Halloween swim involving pumpkins floating in the pool. Norm, ten-years-old, particularly looks forward to the month of December as his club has an out-of-pool activity planned for every Tuesday evening after swim practice: "I love the part about swimming every Christmas, like every Tuesday. Like every Christmas [on] Tuesday this week we go rock climbing." Norm had only one friend from swimming that he spent time with outside of the pool. That friend also happened to be in the same class at school as him, making it easy for him, and his parents, to organize hanging out as the two kids had the same swimming and school schedule.

The youths' accounts can tell us a lot about the everyday dynamics of balancing their friendship groups and their spare time⁴¹. If a family friend comes over with their parents for dinner, is that the kids' choice of how they might spend their free time? Should their other friends be mad at them for not coming over to watch a movie or go for a bike ride? Do you try to make closer friends with your swim peers and keep only a few close friends from school? Are other social categories and activities more important for you to spend your extra time with? And is it worth skipping practices and swim meets to spend time with friends who don't swim? These are some of the questions that young swim clubbers must tackle on a daily basis.

⁴¹ As my field sites were restricted to the pools where practices and meets commenced I do not have any observational accounts of what the kids did with their time outside of school and swim club.

4.4. Conclusion

In many ways, swimming is similar to other sports in which kids participate in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. It is when we take a closer look at the everyday practices of the kids, parents, coaches, and officials involved in each of these sports that we can begin to distinguish and specify them from an aggregate of ‘sports kids do.’ The past history of these clubs⁴², the head coaches and how long they have been at their respective club, the club’s location and the swimmers, parents, and coaches involved in it all shaped the social and organizational dynamics of the clubs. Community can be depicted as being tightly focused, with each club constituting a distinct community, or as overarching, as in the ‘community of swimming in the Lower Mainland.’ It can also be much smaller, as in a grouping of parents in a ten-and-under group, or the age and training groups themselves within clubs. If swim clubs, which by definition are a set of organization forms, relationships, and practices, are self-conscious and looking out on the rest of the world and defining themselves accordingly then Swyers’ (2010) definition of community is invaluable. Yet hers is not the only definition to apply to community. Cohen’s (1978) notion of community, which sees itself as a self-consciously distinctive culture and having a set of codified social processes, fits neatly with the way some coaches and parents understand the swim club they are a part of. As I have argued in this chapter, diverse meanings of community and the ambiguity of the word allows for kids and adults alike to use it to describe how they understand their training groups and meaning making practices. These communities are also malleable and can shift and change in accordance with the shared understandings of those participating in age group swim clubs.

From speaking with youths in swim clubs, it became abundantly apparent that swimming is an activity that is central in the lives of many of them. For some it was their only sporting activity, while for others it was one of many extra-curricular activities. Either way, one of the threads that kids made apparent to me in our conversations was the necessity of having some form of school and sport life balance. As both swimming and school can take up the majority of kids’ time, many found it hard to participate in other

⁴² Enrolment in swimming clubs has been steadily climbing in recent years in the Lower Mainland. I gleaned this information from conversations with the head coaches of the swim clubs where I conducted my research.

extra-curricular activities and would have to sacrifice time from swimming in order to attend social gatherings with their peers from school. Even with the pressures from school peers, attending classes, participating in swim practice, competing at meets, and other sports and clubs, the kids were able to cope with the workload expected of them, and some even thrived in this high-pressure environment.

Ultimately 'kids' in swim clubs sometimes exhibited capacities that parents hope will be instilled in children when they enroll them in sports (Dyck 2012), and they developed social bonds in their swim club as well as at school and in other sports and activities. The swimmers could prioritize attending different social events or taking part in swimming, and understand the consequences, both social and physical, of not attending a birthday party or missing a weekend practice. Choosing where to invest one's time and with whom to associate is a continuous struggle for the 'youths' in swim club who must balance multiple complex relationships with other kids and adults. What the 'kids' goals were, who they had developed close social bonds with, and what they were passionate about were deciding factors in their decision whether to continue swimming or withdraw from the sport to some extent.

Chapter 5. Girls and Boys Training with Boys and Girls

Swimming in a competitive club is one of the few sports where girls and boys train together until university, and sometimes beyond. This is not dissimilar to how track and field, paddling and rowing, and gymnastics are run, with athletes of different genders training together. In competitive swimming, the training of athletes of different genders in the same groups is sometimes taken for granted and has become a naturalized phenomenon for the youths and the parents. My earliest questions concerning the gendered aspects of swimming focused on the experience of joint participation training: Do you enjoy swimming with girls and boys on the same team? Have you done other sports in which girls and boys practice together? Is it different to play other sports with all girls or all boys than it is to swim with a mix of boys and girls? In this chapter I examine the responses that swimmers, parents, and coaches provided to these questions and how more generally this approach affects the experiences of swimmers: How does a joint participation model of sport shape the sociation of swimmers, parents and coaches? How does this expand intra- and inter-gender interaction and conversation? Additionally, this chapter also explores practices that blur the borders and socially normative boundaries between what it means to act as a male and female.

When discussing gender, the media tends to focus on the physical body, the biologically visible characteristics of people. In contrast, academic scholars weave a more complex examination of gender, which includes masculinity and femininity, as well as the spectrums across and in-between these categories, and the categories of 'male' and 'female' (Pascoe 2012[2007]; Travers 2016). My focus was on youths' embodied experiences of swimming and thus, I was mainly concerned with how they understood and used their bodies in and out of the water. In the first section of this chapter I explore some of the theory concerning kids' understandings and applications of gender on school playgrounds and in swim clubs. Sports like American football, baseball, and rugby are synonymously identified as male dominated sports with particular styles of enacted masculinity. Due, in large part, to a joint participation model in the three swim clubs, I argue that swimming is a sport that provides a space where borders surrounding what it means to act or play like a boy or girl (Musto 2014; Thorn 1993), can be challenged. One of the reasons is that girls and boys practice together, thereby making

gender a less salient factor than during competitive events, which remain gender divided.

In the second section of this chapter I begin with an examination of swim suit styles and how this affects youths' body images and the wearing of small and tight swim suits. All new recruits into swim club are instructed to buy 'proper' swim wear by their coaches. This includes skin-tight swim suits of different lengths and cuts, usually with the club colours and logo somewhere on the swim suit. Loose swimming shorts were only worn by the younger kids in the clubs, and usually not for long after getting settled into their training groups they bought competitive suits. I did take note of the practice of removing body hair by shaving in preparation for races. Both older male and female swimmers, those who had started puberty and beyond, removed body hair before swim meets. Neither shaving one's legs, armpits, or arms nor the wearing of skin tight garments is usually equated with traditional versions of masculinity, where heteronormativity and physical prowess reign supreme. For young male swimmers, practices such as these did cause some tension between the requirements of the sport and the social construction of a macho-style masculinity, which is often championed by full contact sports (e.g., football, rugby, and hockey).

Youths I spoke with who had started puberty tended to have a good understanding of their own growing bodies and how that growth would affect their swimming progress and potential. For those who experienced the physical changes of puberty sooner than their peers, it could often be hard to re-calibrate swimming skills after plateauing, or even decreasing in speed relative to their peers, until they developed the muscles and strength suited to their new frames. Swimmers and coaches work constantly to reduce the time it takes to swim a given race. Thus, going through a growth spurt and seeing one's potential stagnate can conflict with a coach's goal in developing an athlete long term, let alone with a swimmer's own personal goals in the sport. The short-term effects of this change occasionally push swimmers into less competitive streams or out of the sport entirely. Some of the young swimmers I spoke with were content with their growing bodies, while others struggled with the current shape of their own body and that of an idealized type, a 'swimmer's body.' There are still many young

swimmers who stay committed to swimming despite stagnation or “drop-offs”⁴³ in their performance during a given season and who go on to compete at higher levels within the sport.

The final sections of this chapter are devoted to my questions concerning the structure of practices and competition in the swimming world. Competitions for the clubs that I researched were gender separated once LMR qualifications were attained, yet practices featured joint participation at all ages and skill levels throughout the three clubs. Race heats were split by gender so that females would swim and compete against each other in an event before the males competed against one another in that same event. Joint or mixed participation meets would have both girls and boys racing against each other in the same heats. This split between gender separated competition and mixed participation competition coincided with LMR time qualifications. The swimmers I spoke with tended to see this as a normal practice. Even those athletes who had competed in other sports in which one trains and competes on entirely female or male teams were, nonetheless, so familiar with the joint participation system and gender separated competition characteristic of swimming that they took it as an everyday occurrence in sport. The concept of joint participation training is not unique to the world of competitive multi-event sports such as gymnastics and track and field. Yet, asking about the joint participation model of practice at their swim club proved to be an interesting topic of inquiry as swimmers, parents, and coaches often had different opinions about the effects of such a model on the social lives of the ‘kids.’ Ultimately, I argue that a joint participation model for practice and a gender separated model for competition can provide an equity within competition and equality⁴⁴ in practices.

5.1. Bordering on Competition

Despite the mixing of all kids during practice, gender becomes a salient character marker in the competitive spaces of swim meets. Given the dichotomous split between

⁴³ ‘Drop-off’ is a relatively common parlance in swimming referring to a swimmer slowing down in a race and not being able to hold a certain speed over increasing distance (as in ‘they dropped-off their split time’ or ‘drop-off the pace time’). It is also used to refer to the time when many swimmers leave the sport, usually between the ages of 12 to 17, during high-school in British Columbia.

⁴⁴ Equity, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), is: “The quality of being fair and impartial” (OED 2017), while equality is defined as: “The state of being equal, especially in status, rights, or opportunities” (OED 2017).

'male' and 'female' changing rooms and the highly visible differences between 'girls' and 'boys' swim suits, it is no wonder that gendered conventions are initially unchallenged upon entering this space. But what about the children who do not fit into these neat categories of 'boys' and 'girls'? There are children who do not conform to these gender dichotomies and who may even challenge them in their everyday actions. It is not that these children were not present in my study, but more that I purposefully stayed away from the change rooms and locker rooms during my research and I wasn't attempting to find these individuals. Yet gendered performances are necessarily blurred in age-group swim clubs. Barrie Thorne (1993), when looking into gendered play among nine- and ten-year old's, noticed that some individuals engaged in 'borderwork' that challenged stereotypical conceptions of gendered activities. Borderwork can be understood as any activity that spans the imaginary gap, or crosses the border between female and male practices.

Historically speaking, swimming developed as a male sport in the early 1800's in Great Britain and has become vastly popular in the British Colonies (e.g., Australia and Canada). It was, and still is in many ways, a majority white sport dominated by men which makes swimming a sport where borderwork is an ongoing activity. With the creation of FINA in 1908, there was established an international rule set surrounding competitive swimming. Still, the first women's Olympic competition in swimming did not occur until the 1912 Summer Olympics in Stockholm, Sweden. Thus, it still took nearly half a century from the introduction of swimming in the Olympics for women to have equity in swimming competition at the highest amateur levels of the sport and to blur the borders between male and female sporting practices. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, we still see male events in swimming dominate much of the attention of audiences today.

To be clear, boundaries across and between genders are not static, but rather are episodic and ambiguous. "Crossing practices," (Thorne 1993:83) where girls and boys move across gender boundaries to participate in the activities associated with the other gender, are affected by the type of activity and the extent to which individual boys and girls have established networks in groups among the other gender. Thorne (1993) argues that 'borderwork 'should be coupled with 'neutralization,' where girls and boys (and adults) may undermine the divisions and oppositions of gender (84).

Larz, a senior national training group swimmer, revealed to me that one of his main training partners with whom he swam with for several consecutive years, was female.

It was me and this one other girl, Linda, and we were the, like the, we were training partners and everyone else was way, wasn't as fast as us. So, like for two or three years it would basically be me and her and the other people [in our group] try to join in. But they wouldn't be able to do our sets anyways.... Maybe that is why I have a lot more female friends than male friends right now. Yeah, I feel like I get along better, not better, just as well with females as with males.

This is an example where gender is of low salience. It is primarily about the speed and intensity of training these two athletes are able to attain and hold, rather than their gender. Following Thorne (1993), Linda's participating on the terms of the majority are as a gender token considering she is able to keep up to Larz, who being a male is expected in the swimming world to be faster because of his gender.

For Michela Musto (2014) there was a noticeable difference in the contexts within swim clubs she observed first before and after practice where 10-year-old swimmers are unsupervised and have some free time, and second during the structured space during practice. This difference constitutes a 'gender geography' (363), or a gender temporality, in the way we understand how the construction of gender by youth occurs in these two spaces:

When gender was less salient and children could "see" athletic similarity between the genders, children interacted in ways that undermined hegemonic beliefs about gender. Yet when the salience of gender was high and structural mechanisms encouraged kids to engage in borderwork swimmers affirmed beliefs in essentialist and categorical – but non-hierarchical – differences between genders. (363)

This is most noticeable during competitions where girls and boys are separated and compete against swimmers of their own gender. Later in this chapter I discuss the everyday implications of gender separated competition and joint participation practices and how swimmers, and coaches navigate gendered dynamics within swim club.

5.1.1. Borderwork and Gendered Interaction

The borderwork that 'kids' undertake within swim practices presented a space where gendered meanings can become blurred and ambiguous, especially in structured activities that place girls and boys in direct competition with each other. When I asked

research participants, ‘What do you think about the co-ed nature of swim clubs?’, many of them were initially perplexed. They had either never thought about their sport as being different than others due to joint participation in training, or they were so used to the fact that girls and boys train together through the duration of swim club careers that mixed training had for them become normalized. Alexis, an 11-year-old ‘AAA’ qualified swimmer, made a comparison between her swim club and her public school, public school being another space where youths of different genders are placed together.

“Yeah it is usually like girls stick with girls and boys stick with boys in school. In swimming, you are just like all, you are like a family so you all like get to meet each other and stuff. Everyone knows each other basically.”

Many of the extra-curricular activities in public schools are joint participation, with students of different genders working together (e.g., drama, band, yearbook committee, and debate clubs to name a few). Sport is often an exception to this. Although you can find a few sports (e.g., wrestling, rugby, badminton) where joint participation by different gendered athletes occurs, they are by far the minority. In rugby, the physical growth of boys during puberty is where genders are usually split with regards to both practices and competitions. During my own high school rugby experience in the Lower Mainland it was the case that the boys and girls formed separate teams after grade 9, at about 14 or 15 years old. Thereafter, there would be a ‘girls’ team’ and a ‘boys’ team.’ Wrestling is another sport where physical size and strength is a factor in training and competition, but members of different genders may practice sparring together on the mat, as was the case on my high school wrestling team.

In a social environment where most competition and training is separated by gender, swimming stands out. Swimming can be a potential model for other sports looking to incorporate equality and equity into their training and competition, bringing both girls and boys together to practice and compete against one another. Equity in training is easier to achieve in individual sports because the coach can train all athletes together while still focusing on the goals and achievements that each athlete is striving to attain. Of course, another form of equity is the division of teams by gender. By having an all-girls league and all-boys league, say in soccer or rugby, then differences in height, weight, strength, and speed can be mitigated to some extent. There is also the potential social stigma to have to ‘race against a boy’ or to be ‘beaten by a girl,’ two phrases I overheard from younger ‘kids’ during my research. If this example of equity is to be

reached, then the focus ought to be on creating equal opportunity participation, where members of different genders have equal access to training and competition against their peers. This would include not forcing a constructed equality on 'kids,' for example having all 'kids' of a particular age compete against each other regardless of weight, speed, or skill levels.

All the swimmers that I spoke with were able to say something about the collective training of their sport. Nadia, age twelve, believed that swimming as a sport was a leader in mixed gender participation in a world of otherwise gender separated competition.

I really appreciate that [swimming] is co-ed because I hate like, stereotypes with like football or hockey, like 'only guys can play this.' Or with dance and gymnastics, 'only girls can do this.' That's something that is truly great about swimming is that it doesn't, there is no shame in it if you are like this specific person. Anyway, like gender or appearance, it is very equal, there is no like, 'oh, if you are not THIS you cannot participate.' That's what I'm happy about 'cause, like, it is good in the sense that we both [girls and boys] feel that there is no, like, extra competitiveness with the opposite gender.... But in general, it is a very equal thing and that is something that I think everyone should appreciate. Because I don't want to feel that I am awkward because I am here [in Eel Swim club] or [that] I should feel ashamed. It's something that is great. I really want to break those stereotypes for every sport.

The attitude that 'everyone can participate' is admirable. As Nadia is not in the senior elite group at her club and she is still of a relatively young age, there may not yet be the pressures to conform to a certain body standard in her training. An additional layer of complexity are the goals and activities of the club in which one swims. Eel Swim club, for instance, is not exclusively focused on the top-end objective of producing international level athletes⁴⁵. Instead they are building the base and breadth of their club, increasing participation numbers with younger kids between ages six and ten. They also cater to boys and girls aged 10-18, offering a variety of programs with varying levels of participation, commitment, intensity, and opportunities for competition. By fostering an environment of equity and equality, swimming can perhaps set a precedent for other sports when it comes to joint participation training.

⁴⁵ All three clubs where I conducted my research had a number of focusses when it came to the growth of their particular club. Each club did have a senior nation group being groomed for or competing at the national and international level with the ultimate goal of training medal winning and podium attaining swimmers. But each club was in a different state of growth and development during the course of my research.

5.2. Jammers, Single-suits, and Swimmers' Bodies

Uniforms for athletes are usually designed to provide maximum mobility while offering comfort, and in some cases even providing armour against physical contact. Hockey or football pads may resemble armour worn by warriors preparing for battle. On the other end of the spectrum we have the wrestling single-suit or the swimming Speedo, which are both skintight and incredibly revealing of the body. In North American culture, which is hyper sensitized to covet the idealized female or male body, thanks in large part to advertising and the media, wearing a small swim suit might get a young boy ridiculed and called a 'fag' by his peers. In a way, the adoption of skintight swim suits may provide a certain equality between genders, especially for females who are more often forced to wear skintight and more revealing uniforms than men (i.e., beach volleyball uniforms⁴⁶).

While there are many different types and cuts of swim suits for boys and girls, there did not seem to be much discussion or consensus on what was the 'best' or 'fastest' suit for boys or girls. Choice of a swim suit for younger kids reflects considerations of comfort rather than the calculated fractions of a second advantage that a specific swim suit cut would allow⁴⁷.

While attending a weekend swim meet, which is a near monthly occurrence for swimmers aged eleven-and-up, I spent time sitting on the bleachers chatting with youth swimmers. Donny, age thirteen confessed to me that tight swim suits were a barrier to him when he considered joining swim club at age eleven or twelve. He thought it looked "stupid" and that he would be laughed at if his non-swimming peers knew what he was wearing. Now that he is in the club and swimming competitively he does not care what others think. In this way, Donny and his club mates define what masculinity meant for them despite prior participation of the potential joking and ridicule that boys could receive if school peers knew they swam and wore tight Speedo swim suits (Pascoe 2012:166). The matters raised by Donny were discussed when I raised questions

⁴⁶ This is beginning to change with the adoption of full coverage uniforms in multiple sports by some Muslim women and girls.

⁴⁷ Another factor is the prohibitive costs of specialized 'racing' swim suits, which can fetch prices of 400 dollars Canadian (CAD) or more depending on the brand and cut, while 'training' suits go for 40 to 100 CAD.

regarding swim suits rather than being voluntarily communicated by kids. I can imagine that conversations about body images may have occurred more regularly in change rooms where their bodies could be even more visible.

Continuing to ask about the variety of suits that I observed at this same meet, I was advised by Larz, to take a look at the Fédération Internationale de Natation (FINA)⁴⁸ general rules and regulations. According to Larz, “The first rule says that you must wear something. You can't swim naked.” On closer inspection of the General Rules book, under section G5 Swimwear, it does state that swimwear must be in ‘good moral taste,’ suitable for the sport at hand, not displaying offensive symbols, and all swim suits must be non-transparent (FINA General Rules 2014). Looking at the approved swimwear by FINA for competitions one sees a discrepancy between men’s and women’s suits. Women’s suits cannot cover the neck, extend past the shoulders or below the knee, while men’s suits may not extend above the navel or below the knee. For the kids that I observed, the boys mostly wore jammers, and the girls wore the classic cut Speedo swim suit for women with an open back. Either way, not much of the body is hidden by such outfits (not unlike a wrestling singlet). In other sports, it is possible to hide one’s body under layers of protective padding in sports like ice-hockey and football. Having the ability to hide one’s body while participating in a physical activity can be appealing to athletes who are highly concerned with their body image. Of course, there are always the spaces where this equipment is being put on and taken off, specifically the locker rooms⁴⁹, where kids bodies may be revealed to their peers.

To bring it back to the example of Donny, his reticence about joining swimming has much in common with a few of Pascoe’s (2012) findings in her study of masculinity in an American high school. Pascoe (2012:9) argues that masculinity extends beyond the male body as a variety of practices and discourses that both girls and boys can mobilize.

Any boy can temporarily become a fag in a given social space or interaction. This does not mean that boys who identify as or are perceived to be homosexual aren’t subject to intense harassment. Many are. But becoming a fag has as much to do

⁴⁸ FINA is the international governing body for swimming and other water sports rules and regulations.

⁴⁹ It was not a part of my research to investigate these spaces. Studies focused on looking at locker room spaces would surely shed light on issues of body image and gendered interactions among youth athletes (Kelhler 2016).

with failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess, and strength or in any way revealing weakness or femininity as it does with a sexual identity. (Pascoe 2012:54)

This fag discourse, or being labeled as a fag was a factor in Donny's initial reticence to join a competitive swim club. He did not want to be on the receiving end of his non-swimming peers' jokes and ridiculing if they happened to see him in his skin-tight swim wear. As I explain further on in this chapter, North American sporting culture has presented skewed images of body shapes and gender ideals, with men being displayed in football or hockey pads while women adorn magazine covers of *Sports Illustrated* in smaller swim suits every year. In this social space, it is not surprising that wearing tight and revealing swim wear is a potential barrier for other male and female 'youths' considering joining swimming at the club level.

5.2.1. Body Image

Examining the socialization of swimmers in Australian elite and amateur competitive swimming, McMahon, Penney, and Dinan-Thompson (2012) argue that bodies of athletes become repositories of learned culture, be it negative or positive, all for the sake of performance. The notion that a slim and lean body is faster and more desirable for swimming can have a lasting impact on how swimmers perceive their selves and their bodies. According to McMahon and Dinan-Thompson (2011), a socially constructed normalized "slim-to-win" (39) body-image which circulated among competitive athletes in Australia can develop into a certain 'role identity' that their body should be valued and desirable according to swimmers' constructed characteristics (39). The body in this instance is an active participant in constructing what one perceives of as the 'self.' Dinan-Thompson explicitly connects her body shape to how she perceived herself:

So, my body and its subjectification to self-regulatory practices contributed to the construction of my swimmer self. Hence, being slim was part of swimming culture and so it was that I learned about the shape of the swimmer body and the strong connection between slimness, performance and social acceptance within the elite culture. (2011:39)

Here the practices in and around swimming had a lasting effect on the participant and shaped the way she saw herself and understood her identity. The physical sport, combined with the social encounters and competitive discourse in swimming, challenged Dinan-Thompson to conform to the Australian elite swimmer's culture by undergoing

skinfold tests, which measure body fat, weekly weigh ins, as well as dietary restrictions and intense physical training.

McMahon and Barker-Ruchti (2015) continue to explore the connections between body image and identity in swimming. They note that the fat free, “swim-to-win,” and sexually immature body ideal that circulates through the discourse of competitive swimming is often enforced by coaches, peers, and parents, through a rotating regime of regulatory controls, such as dieting, weigh-ins and fat measurements. This body image is antithetical to natural growth developments that occur at puberty in swimmer’s bodies, especial for women. The pre-pubescent body, or boy shaped body, is the ideal pushed in the swimming world. McMahon and Barker-Ruchti (2015) argue that gender does play a significant role in shaping the ideals and practices that go into the achievement and goal of attaining the “essential elite performance” (2). Overall, McMahon and Barker Ruchti (2015) argue that “through a process of subjection, enforcement, and self-regulation, the swimmers had come to manipulate their bodies to demonstrate boyishness” (15). They were able to ‘see’ some of the forms of gender discipline in swimming culture that idealized the male-swimmer shaped body. Gendered bodies in this research were indeed a salient marker for identity construction within swimming.

In my research, I did not observe there to be an idealized gendered body to which swimmers were expected to conform. There are a couple reasons why my observations and McMahon and Barker-Ruchti’s might differ. First, their research finding stems from their experiences as competitive swimmers during the early 1980s, and swimming has dramatically shifted during the intervening decades. Second, the philosophies of the head coaches of the clubs I observed centered around developing the potential in every individual athlete, rather than creating idealized swimming bodies. I am not arguing that McMahon and Barker-Ruchti’s findings are not applicable to North American club swimming. I think their findings certainly are relevant and highlight body image as an integral issue in sports, which continues to be an issue today (e.g., body shaming of Olympic athletes⁵⁰). What I found in the clubs in which I conducted research in the Lower Mainland is that coaches were looking at long term development models for their athletes so that they could be successful throughout their swimming careers and continue to enjoy or give back to the sport after their competitive swimming careers were

⁵⁰ See *Rio Olympic Athletes and Body-shaping* (BBC News 2016).

over. This is in line with the declared objectives of Swim Canada, the national swimming organization, which promotes long term athlete development (Swimming Canada 2008).

During one of the many swim meets I attended during my research I was able to talk with coaches from several of the clubs in the Lower Mainland. Standing at the edge of the warm-up/warm-down pool, I asked Sally, a coach with Humboldt swim club, about the young swimmers and the struggles they encounter as their bodies grow. For Sally, coaching is all about building an athlete, starting from their swimming ability, physical and mental capabilities, upon entering the club. She gave me the example of one swimmer who looked like he had peaked at eleven years of age, which is quite common in swimming. Other coaches thought he wasn't going to continue to go anywhere in the sport. But Sally had patience and knew that he would grow, hit puberty, and then his coaches would have to rebuild the swimmer, re-teaching him how to swim with proper technique for his new and developing body. 'You have to have patience, and allow the space for the athlete to develop as a swimmer and as a person' (Sally). Not only is Sally concerned with the performance of the 'kids' she coaches, but she also attaches a fair amount of significance to the growth of the individual swimmer, their personality, and values. The swimmers are not just bodies to be shaped to an idealized type for the sake of performance. They are individual humans with goals and desires, shaping their identities and constructing what swimming in a swim club means for them.

Kyle, head coach with the Oarfish Club, echoed similar sentiments about the scope of educating these young swimmers and coaching them through the physical rigors of the sport as well as everyday life occurrences.

This is a sport of momentum. So hard to get, very easily lost. And it can come from a number of different factors. Ah, like you just mentioned, like if you go through puberty. Somebody grows into their body, it takes a bit of time, they get injured, there are a lot of different things that occur that we would rather not see happen. Somebody has a devastating loss for some reason or another and they are a bit gun shy. There are so many different corners and forks in the road and ways that kids can get lost in the sport as much as that victory or that confidence building moment occurred for them and they are off to the races in the same way. So, ah, we have to be, ah, able to head all of them off in a way.

Both Sally and Kyle put the 'mental health' of their athletes first, allowing for their bodies to grow and develop through the regular practices in the pool and dryland exercises. This coaching style is arguably healthier as it focuses on improving the strengths of the

individual kids, developing their potential, and not rigidly adhering to an idealized body shape that all swimmers should strive to emulate.

Sitting on the bleachers and watching an evening practice at Eel Swim Club I spoke with Rose, a mother of a thirteen-year-old girl who had not participated in any swim competition or meet, despite her age, being in high school, and the fact that this is the second year for her in the club. Her mother says her daughter prefers wrestling, to which I replied, "It is a good sport." She immediately countered with, "NOT FOR GIRLS!", aghast, as though certain sports are supposed to be designated for different genders, and that there are certain sports which are more appropriate than others for boys and girls. Clearly, for this mom, wrestling is a strictly masculine sport. Rose wants her daughter to stay in swimming, but her daughter is still struggling to change her mother's mind even in the middle of the swim season. Rose thinks that it is because swimming is too difficult and takes too much time (five practices a week) whereas wrestling was only three times per-week. Unfortunately, I was not able to talk longer with Rose and ask about her impressions of the two sports. Still, this small moment demonstrates the diverging views that can exist concerning the appropriateness of certain sports for people of different genders and the way bodies are viewed in various athletic endeavours.

5.2.2. Kids' Body Knowledge

My impression from observing the 'kids' in the swim clubs is that they all exhibited varying levels of embodied understanding of their sport and how to use their bodies in effective ways to move them through the water. This physical understanding and competence extended to their knowledge of their own growing and developing bodies. Nadia was highly aware of the ways in which her own body was growing and changing due to the work she put in during practices at the pool and as her body changed through puberty.

I think every season your body and your technique always changes, so sometimes it changes a lot.... Sometimes with other sports you just progress over the years. Your technique, your strategies, [you] become a better athlete. With swimmers, you have to change everything every once in a while. Your technique and your strategies are never like, consistent really. You like, have to learn what you are

good at and improve at what you are bad at. With all these new standards⁵¹, you have to work towards something completely different. It's frustrating sometimes.

These changes were not always easy, especially when 'On Track Times' (Swimming Canada 2017b) standards for young swimmers have a progressive and incremental curve and swimmers' own progress and abilities may be plateauing. Having an age and gendered set of standards for young swimmers to conform to, in some respects forces them to assess and manage their own performance within the sport. For those who cannot achieve the time standards of a specific training group, they may never advance and either stagnate without progress in the same group, be moved down a group, leave the club, or move to a non-competitive group if the club has such a group.

Angelica is a swimmer who had to move down to a less competitive group due to her growth spurt at the age of twelve.

[My growth spurt] is kind of the reason I dropped down. [Be]cause when I grew, I grew really fast and my muscles haven't yet got used to the length of my body and stuff. So, for them [in my old group] they don't, didn't have their growth spurt yet. Literally all of them, they are still all the same size. So, I grew and I had to go in this group to get my body used to [the work]. And right now, I am getting my [Double 'A' qualifying times]. So, that is kind of the reason, when you turn older times get harder. So, I did have six doubles when I was 11 but when I turned 12 it all changed.

While technically 'off' the time standards for her age to achieve potential Olympic podium performances, Angelica understood that it would take time to learn about her growing body and re-develop a feel for the water. If that meant swimming a few less practices a week so that she would not get injured while training her new body, then she could accept that.

Ava, fifteen-years-old and in the fitness group at her club, was another girl who had a realistic and practical understanding of her own abilities as a swimmer and where her participation in the sport could take her.

With being behind everybody, I am constantly trying to, and if I miss a practice or something I have to make it up through something else. I am also, like when I was younger I was out of shape, way out of shape. Like, I was pretty fat to be honest. So, that definitely didn't help. But I, ah, think I have accepted it throughout the

⁵¹ Nadia is referring to the 'A' time standards in BC and how the times get progressively faster as chronological age increases.

years as just like um, I am not fast. So, I just have to accept it and I just have to swim to my best ability.

While not the fastest member of her training group she has incredible determination to succeed and was able to find a place in her club and practice group that suits her needs. Acceptance of one's body and performance are not easy things to accomplish. Much of the encouragement to persevere came from her coaches and her father who began working towards a healthy lifestyle, including regular fitness sessions at the gym.

Fitness was another way in which swimmers expressed understandings of their bodies. Lad, a parent of a ten-year-old in Eel Swim club, was amazed to see his son and the other kids in the club during practices. He described the swimmers as being "already athletes," that "these guys are just way ahead" in terms of fitness levels compared to kids their age in other sports. Yanik, a fifteen-year-old with the same club, was visibly proud of his fitness levels and physique since joining club swimming. While he thought that the first few years were "torture" and he wasn't "mak[ing] the pace times or anything," he kept coming back week after week.

After each week, like during the weekend after Saturday practice, I would get this sense of accomplishment that I hung in there. Even though it was super hard I still went to the practice and then, look at me now!

While talking to me he visibly indicated his body, well-muscled and trimmed down with large shoulders. He revealed that he had also been "rather fat" when he was younger. So, after putting in several years into his swimming he was reaping the rewards of consistent exercise and general fitness that his club promotes.

Dave, a seventeen-year-old with Oarfish, put forth an interesting example when describing the changes his body had gone through while being a swimmer:

For example, I give the situation of, like, people who go to space, right. So, when you are on the planet Earth your muscles are bigger than if you would go to space for a year. Your muscles like shrink, 'cause you don't need them anymore, right... The organism wants to learn how to better adapt to the environment, right. Same with swimming, you get taller. Your arm's reach gets farther. And also, one thing I learned, is that the veins grow because the supply of oxygen in the muscles has to be faster. Yeah, and I guess it kind of helps that I am in the fastest growing stage of my life right now... and I am probably growing faster than I will ever grow in my life. And with all of those changes and all of those practices they are kind of getting implemented into the growth. And they help me out and like my body it grows in the way for it to be well adapted for swimming.

Dave understands some of the environmental factors that have contributed to the growth and shape of his swimmer's body. He is well adapted to moving through the water after years of practices and he has a deep understanding of the physical limits of his body. Knowing this and knowing that different bodies grow and adapt in complex ways has given Dave confidence in his own body, the way he looks, and his performance in the water. He may not have a 'slim-to-win' figure, being a bit bulkier in his upper body than many of his teammates, but as Dave is more concerned about the fitness aspect of the sport rather than the results, this suits him perfectly well.

Through the examples of the swimmers I spoke with and observed over part of a season, we can see that individual girls and boys talk about their bodies in different ways. Sometimes they responded to my questions and inquiries in systematically gendered ways that society has come to expect when girls and boys talk about their bodies. In response to my research questions about swimming bodies (What does it feel like to swim? Has your body changed during your time in swim club? How does it feel to be immersed in water?), boys tended to discuss their physiological prowess, noting how their muscles had grown or how their body had 'leaned down.' Girls talked about the reality of their changing bodies during puberty and the changing time standards from year-to-year. From the few examples that I have provided, the boys I spoke with tended to have a more consistent curve in their competition times as they go through puberty, get older and stronger, while girls often plateau during puberty and the next few years before their times become faster again. This is not always the case with all swimmers. Each swimmer goes through puberty at different times and it affects their lives and their swimming in varied ways. From year-to-year swimmers may have good or bad seasons, break best times in races, or have a poor series of meets. Yet it remains that all human bodies change during puberty.

The ideal of a 'slim-to-win' body and body image also affected boys in different ways than it did for girls. As many of the boys already had this type of body or grew taller and lankier as puberty hit, conforming to a certain model was less crucial for them, as they already fit that model. Rather it was the social stigma of participating in a sport that might be considered emasculating due to the shaving requirements for competitions and the use of skin-tight, revealing swim suits. Many of the girls had a harder time during puberty as their bodies changed more dramatically than the boys' bodies. Yet with a long-term development model underlying Canadian swimming, these girls had a good

foundation of support to draw upon from their peers, parents, and coaches, which helped keep some of them in swimming and performing to their highest athletic potential.

While girls and boys do train together and do the same number of meters the slight differences in the ways in which they are coached can have a pronounced affect on the way they train and their performances. Because of the plateau that many girls go through in their speed and performance in competitive swimming during puberty there is more emphasis placed on retaining female swimmers during those years of maximum physical growth. There is a focus when coaching girls on working on re-building stroke techniques, adapting to their new bodies and making incremental gains while engaging with their changing feel for the water. Boys tend to have more of a gradual curve in their training trajectory due to their desired ‘slim to win’ bodies.

5.3. Joint Participation Practice and Gender Separated Competition

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, sports that are ‘individual’ in nature may allow for a more equitable training environment where girls and boys mingle and train together than in ‘team sports.’ Swimming is an individual sport, and there is potential for less intra-club rivalry since most athletes have their own specialties within the different events and distances in which swimmers can compete. The number of events ranges with respect to the distances swam. Most meets include a minimum of twelve events: three distances (50m, 100m, and 200m) for all four strokes (butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke, freestyle). Swim meets may also include 400m, 800m, or 1500m, with the 800m and 1500m only being swam using the stroke freestyle. At the age of 12 in BC there is a shift in the maximum length events in which both boys and girls compete. Boys drop the 800m freestyle as an event and pick up the 1500m freestyle, while girls are left to continue competing in the 800m freestyle. This is similar in some respects to speed skating and track and field running where only men compete at the longest distances. Yet women tend to dominate when it comes to longer distance events while men dominate at sprinting events. So why the shift in training at such a young age when swimmers tend not to peak in speed and performance until the age of 26? Not to mention male 50m sprinters competing up to the age of 36 in the last 2016 Olympics which pushes the viable age of competition even further. There may be equality of opportunity to train and to do the same number of meters in practice for girls and boys,

but there are still some discrepancies when it comes to the training for competitive events early into these youth's swimming careers and the slightly different approaches coaches take to training the girls and boys who swim under them.

The structure of joint participation within swimming practices works, according to Dave, "because the results are only based on individual work and effort, right. The results are not based on teamwork." Swimming with Oarfish for fitness rather than as a route to another career path, Dave enjoys the fact that the club's training groups swim both girls and boys together during practices.

Uh, I don't think that it interferes in anyway with the practice. And I think it even helps because if you, because the girls are so organized, they always know what time [on the pace clock] they have to leave, in the pool, right. So, for example, we are going like every 35 seconds we go 25[meters] right. There and back. And for example, if I don't see the clock or something [the girls] always got it. They [are] always on the point. They [are] always like on top of their game. They always know. So, I just ask, 'When do we leave?' And she is like, '5 seconds.' So just follow the girl and just like leave 10 seconds after.

To a certain extent, Dave both seems to enjoy and to depend on the gendered differences that he highlights between himself and his female peers within his swimming group. Rather than focusing on the similarities between male and female swimmers, Dave reifies a social stereotype that girls are more focused and, as he puts it, "on point," while boys are presumably less focused during practices.

Angelica, a twelve-year-old swimmer with Oarfish swim club, is aiming to compete at the university level or higher in her sport. Like many other swimmers I spoke with, Angelica made sure to tell me that during competition boys and girls compete separately.

Well in swimming [meets] we don't usually do co-ed. Usually we do like the girl's events and then the boy's events we do separate. But in practices it doesn't really matter, 'cause most of us are the same speed, boys and girls. But like, boys are usually faster when they are younger but then girls speed up after. That is why we separate them. But [in] practices it doesn't really matter. I think it is good. You get to race different genders, why not. Go over your limits try it.

Nearly every time I spoke with swimmers, parents, and coaches about the joint participation nature of club swimming in the Lower Mainland, they began their responses with a statement containing some form of disclaimer that when it comes to competition girls and boys are split and compete separately, and that there is no mixing of genders in races when it comes to official results. Boys do tend to be faster than girls overall, but

this doesn't mean that this is the climate that athletes do or ought to work in. As Angelica put it so succinctly, "go over your limits." This pushes all swimmers to strive to greater heights of achievement in swimming.

Until puberty and the early teenage years, boys and girls are relatively equal in speeds in all swimming events. There are certain athletes who are more competitive than others and who strive to be the fastest and reach the pinnacle of their performance at a young age. This can create rivalries or challenges within swim training groups. This is what happened with Erin, now in her last year of high school, with a boy she has swum with for many years.

I normally do not try and compare myself to the guys in our group because at this age they are supposed to be a lot faster than us. So, I just think "*Oh, I shouldn't be as fast as them, they are supposed to be faster than me.*" Um, for a while though, when I was younger, I always used to try and race Billy. We would always try and beat each other.... He got really fast and I am really proud of him. But yeah, definitely before I would race the guys more, but now I don't even try to compare myself to them. They are supposed to be faster, even their time standards are faster. Usually at meets they have it separated: girls and guys.

It can be challenging for swimmers who for many years trained together and challenged each other to suddenly have different standards and be at different speeds.

Hellen, sixteen-years-old, commented that when the girls and boys are thrown together in a meet and have to compete in the same heats against each other that, "No one ever likes that⁵². They are like 'Aw, I'm not racing people that represent my speed.'" As swimmers grow older the competitive side of belonging to a swim club becomes more pronounced. Swimmers I spoke with preferred not to race against athletes who are much faster than them during meets. Despite the fact that results are individually based and swimmers race against themselves and the clock more than they race the other people in their heats, there are still placings (first, second, and third) in each event. The ideal of

⁵² During swimming meets there may be situations where few swimmers have registered to compete in a particular event. If there are events where they may only be one or two heats, the meet organizers sometimes place both boys and girls together in the same race to maximize the lane use during a heat. For example, instead of having two heats of boys and two heats of girls with only three or four swimmers competing in each heat, the meet organizers may place boys and girls together in the same heats. This would reduce the number of heat races and the time of the whole event, reducing the overall length of the swimming meet.

gender mixed competition with the younger swimmers begins to crumble as time differences between girls and boys becomes more pronounced as they grow older.

5.3.1. Parents' Impressions

Not all parents sit on the bleachers and watch their children's practices on a daily basis. In fact, the majority of parents do not watch the hour or longer practices after their son or daughter turns ten. They drop the 'kids' off at the pool and pick them up but do not sit on the bleachers. My observations of parental presence and activity on the bleachers does not suggest a lack of interest in their children's athletics. Some of the factors that constrain parental attendance on the bleachers during practices on a regular basis are as follows: school and work commitments for parents; availability of outside school care, such as extended family members; single parenthood; multiple sport participation by sons and daughters; and, the number of children in a family. Those parents whom I spoke with while sitting on the bleachers during the hours of practices generally said that the joint participation structure of the swim club their daughter or son was enrolled in was beneficial for the 'kids.'

Elise, who regularly attends her daughter's practices when she gets off work, likes that her daughter's sport is joint participation:

For me it's, I like mixed together [the] boys and girls. Not just for swimming but for schools. Boys and girls together. You know it is really strange but it's always, Sally can talk, you know, more with...boys in swimming, they are like brothers and sisters.... Here everyone is like a brother and sister at that age. I don't know about the older kids, but Sally's age, [for] Sally [it] is not any problem to swim together with boys and girls, no. And I prefer it mixed. Yeah, both together.

Aria, a mother of two swimmers in Eel Swim club was also quite positive about the mixed gender structure of the training groups in the club where her children trained:

I love that [it is mixed]. That is the one thing that works, it feels more natural than to separate them and make it, segregated, I don't know. I love it.... And it is nice, it is good because sometimes guys can push girls, and girls can push boys. And it is within the group.... Yeah, so far it has been great.

For Lad, the father of a ten-year-old girl in Oarfish, it didn't matter that much whether the swimmers trained either mixed or separated by gender, since the results from official competitions were gender separated.

At this level, I don't think it makes any difference. You know she can swim faster than some of the boys.... [I]n the environment that you are in here it is, ah, it is also an individual sport. So, um, and you know you get to a level where eventually the guys and the girls just aren't going to be the same in speed. The boys are going to be faster, just naturally, because of their strength. But when it comes to racing they get to race their own gender anyways, so, I think the co-ed aspect is; I don't think it really plays a detrimental role. You know, socially it is probably good they are, you know, around the boys and girls, mentally they get to see each other swim and support each other, because when it comes to racing they get separated anyway.

Lad highlights the physical differences in these young athletes as they grow and reach puberty, with girls' and boys' performance times tending to drift apart as they get older. Again, the distinction between an individual sport and a team sport, the difference between practice and competition is almost always mentioned in the conversations I had with swimmers, parents, coaches, and officials. Lad, mentions that it is mentally and socially good for these young kids to swim and practice mixed and that they provide a lot of support to each other. This was generally how most of the parents viewed the sport when I asked them about the joint participation nature of the clubs where their child(ren) swim.

5.3.2. Swimmers' Experiences of Joint Participation

Bringing it back to the 'kids,' they were all adamant about the social benefits of having their swim clubs be joint participation. Whether it is the relationships they establish with their peers or the mirrored environment of the school system they are used to, the swimmers I spoke with liked being in an athletic environment where girls and boys swam together. Sam enjoys swimming with both girls and boys during practices. He is hopeful that the Olympics will eventually introduce mixed relay events where both men and women are able to compete both with and against each other. Until then, he enjoys the interplay of interaction between genders.

I think it is awesome. It makes the atmosphere at the pool really good. It is also nice to have a couple of girls in your group too, 'cause if you are always swimming with guys that is the only interaction you get. It is nice to have that one or two, or however many girls there are in your group just so that there is another, you can talk to a female.

It provides a 'different perspective' to the sport that would otherwise not be there if the training groups in age-group swim clubs had gender separated practices and swim meets: "You need girls in your team too. Otherwise there is just only guys. It's not a

hockey team." For Sam, joint participation training is an essential and distinguishing aspect of the sport he loves.

Socializing and developing relationships in swim club helped to broaden swimmers' social base by giving them skills to talk to those of other genders and provides a safe environment where this is encouraged. "It definitely broadens my friend group, I guess," Hellen told me when I asked her if she liked the mixed gender nature of age-group swim clubs. "If it was only girls I would probably, like, not talk to any of the other girls, like, I would stick to one or two people. I wouldn't talk to anyone else. But with this just huge array of people, like different genders and stuff, it is really easy to talk to people. Like, 'Oh hey, how are you? How did your race go?', you know. It is a lot easier." Social mixing can provide a certain measure of equity and equality among genders. In Hellen's experience, having to share the space with both boys and girls served to make possible, and enhance intra-gender conversation and interaction that might not have occurred in a space where different genders were separated. These young swimmers grow up knowing that on a regular basis they will be training with swimmers of different genders.

Joint participation swimming has been a part of Shaun's life since he joined a swim club when he was six. Over his career as a competitive swimmer in an age-group club he has grown fond of having both girls and guys on the same team.

It has been really, like really, really good. Like, I have really good girl friends everywhere through this sport. Like, on different teams.... I think of it, like, I watch a lot of hockey and I always think what it would be like to not [have girls on the team] because I have never not had girls around. When I started swimming here, like, before all these guys were here... it was literally me and like eight girls. And like, they are all now at school.... I just never questioned it. Like, it is just your team, which is cool.

Swimming and training with girls is an everyday occurrence for the boys, and vice-versa, in these age-group swim clubs. Senior training groups in the age-group clubs I studied continued to train mixed gendered even when those swimmer's peers on varsity teams trained separated by gender. Currently, the clubs that I observed during my research tend to have more male swimmers in the senior training groups, although this fluctuates in waves as younger swimmers move into the groups and older swimmers retire or move onto varsity teams and into national training centers.

Referring to mixed gender swimming as a normalized social experience may be a bit of a stretch if taken outside the confines of these training groups, these clubs.

Neither males nor females tended to dominate (except in head coaching positions). So, for Shaun, spending time with girls has been a normal practice throughout his public-school education and in his swimming career:

You are going to train with her and see her every day. So yeah, you might race each other in practice but it is like never, there is never that competition factor. But it is someone who is always there doing the same work. So, it is like the same thing as the respect factor. Everyone respects each other in the pool. Like everyone has got each other's back. No matter if it is the slowest girl or the fastest guy, or vice versa. It is just, you are all in it together. And you develop like, just like special relationships, for sure.

Shaun's philosophy and practice culminates in a field of mutual respect for all athletes regardless of ability or gender. The passion and commitment that these young athletes show by attending early morning practices as early as five o'clock in the morning and spending whole weekends at least once-a-month attending swim meets galvanizes the respect these swimmers have for each other. The whole group, even the whole club, according to Shaun, ought to stand behind its athletes regardless of their performance. This translates into a social attitude that would be well deserved outside of swimming and placed in context with all sports. A lofty goal, certainly, but one that Shaun and his club aspire too.

It is interesting to note that neither swimmers, parents, nor coaches had a ready-made answer to my queries into the joint participation and mixed gender nature of swim clubs in the Lower Mainland. They did not have a scripted or set answer, such as the often-touted parental line, "it's for the kids" (Dyck 2012; Messner 2009). Rather, my questions about swimming as a mixed gender sport elicited much introspection and thought from participants. Many answers had common elements but none were exactly the same. At least in the daily practices of these youth swimmers, swimming and being a part of a swim club, gender inequalities and differences seem to be challenged and changed. Yet part of the sport, the competitive portion that is featured during meets, still reproduces what Messner terms a "gender comfort zone," where "continued sex-segregation" (2009:171) in competition among youth swimmers makes gender a salient marker of difference in age-group club swimming.

A ‘naturalized’ view of participation in a swim club as a joint participation or mixed gender training experience was another theme that surfaced when talking with those involved in age-group swim club. I made reference to the public-school system in the Lower Mainland as an example of another co-ed space where these ‘youths’ spend the other majority of their time. As gender segregation is often naturalized in many other sports and not questioned, bringing the everyday joint participation experience of ‘youths’ in swim clubs to the foreground may provide an opening for more people to question why other sports do not also train in such an inclusive and mixed way.

5.4. Conclusion

This chapter considers the daily experiences of swimmers of different genders who are enrolled in joint participation swim clubs. The experiences of different gendered swimmers and the stories they tell about themselves could encompass a lifetime worth of material to unpack. Yet in this chapter I have highlighted the meanings that swimmers, parents, and coaches, create in swim clubs in the Lower Mainland. Musto’s (2014) argument that there is a ‘gender geography’ in swim club, that kids will reproduce gendered stereotypes or challenge gender norms, is generally accurate when applied to the swim club I studied. When discussing team or individual sports the challenges of making equal ‘fields of play’ for all athletes becomes quite difficult. For example, world records for the 100-metre sprint or 100-metre freestyle swim are faster for males than females. The same is true for the 10,000-metre running races and speed skating events. Having separate competition events for women and men creates a more equitable field of competition where athletes with similar time standards may compete against each other. At younger ages, it is easier to have both girls and boys competing with and against each other as they have not been socialized into a world where girls are made to feel inferior to boys in physical pursuits as well as scholastic subjects such as sciences, technology, and math. Perhaps more sports could follow the lead of gymnastics, track and field, and swimming and train in mixed gendered groups. The swimmers I spoke with found it to be beneficial to them both socially and physically.

The physical side of swimming, and perhaps in most sports, involves sculpting the body through rigorous training and dieting to conform to the requirements of that sport. In this way, the body becomes especially suited to a given activity. For the older swimmers I spoke with, their embodied knowledge of their sport and their understanding

of their own bodies was highly developed. Observant of the other athletes around them, their coaches, as well as of international icons in the swimming world, some of these ‘youths’ had to struggle through both social and physical ‘hurdles’ through their development as swimmers. While going through puberty, human bodies change shape and this can be a detriment for young swimmers as they have to adapt to use their new body’s shape in the water. Becoming slower is an initial side effect of this growth and that loss of speed occasionally may push athletes out of the sport. While there are struggles for many athletes, some of the swimmers had a relatively easy time in puberty as their bodies either didn’t change much or changed advantageously to allow them to become faster in the water.

The swimmers, parents, and coaches I spoke with agreed that it was socially beneficial for swimmer to train in a joint participation environment. The social aspect of swimming was such an important part of what made swimming a welcoming sport for many of these athletes that the prospect of segregating clubs by gender, having an all-boys, or all-girls club, would act as a social barrier. Both inter- and intra-gender sociality and the potential for relationships to develop between and among swimmer of different genders may be stifled if swim clubs chose to train gender separated rather than their current joint participation model for training groups. Further research on the differences between gendered language and the enactment of various femininities and masculinities, as well as challenging or reproducing gender stereotypes, by ‘kids’ within swim clubs needs to be conducted if we are to better understand the lives of ‘kids,’ especially those who participate in swim clubs.

Chapter 6. Conclusions

This thesis has outlined some of the daily practices involved in winter swim clubs in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, Canada. My approach to the lived worlds of swimmers is centered on the everyday meaning-making practices of youths. I have argued that to understand and label these activities and relationships as forms of community requires prolonged ethnographic fieldwork and exploration of the self-conscious recognition of group members of their shared beliefs and practices. To understand the meanings that people ascribe to their social realities takes time and commitment on the ethnographer's part as well as on the part of those in the community. Developing a 'feel for the water' is an apt metaphor for specifying what is involved in conducting fieldwork. When I initially arrived in the field my 'limbs' (i.e., my anthropological tools and approach) felt cumbersome, as though I was moving them about haphazardly, thrashing in the water, trying to find purchase and move my research forward. After some initial conversations with head coaches who allowed me access to the clubs, I received instruction and experience about how to move through the 'water' (or social medium) of the swim club, where to sit to watch practices, which training groups were which, and who the other gatekeepers of the training groups were, whether it be the coaches or the parents. I applied some of the knowledge that the coaches attempted to transmit to their swimmers to my own swimming training to better understand the nuances of movement through and with the water. The experiences of observing practices and meets, and speaking with the various participants of swim clubs, and of swimming on my own, brought me into the everyday practices and the lives of those who swim and the meanings that people ascribe to competitive age-group swim clubs.

Waking up at 6 o'clock on a Saturday or Sunday morning to attend a sporting competition is all part of being a 'youth' athlete in the Lower Mainland. If you were to drive by a pool during one of the many swim meets that occur throughout the winter swim club season, you would not see the commotion that is occurring inside the walls. Dozens of swimmers, parents, and coaches may be present at a pre-LMR meet where three or more clubs congregate to give their swimmers the chance to compete in a more formal setting, away from the comforts of their home pool. With the support of their swimming peers, parents, and coaches, these young swimmers are expected to get up

on swimming blocks alongside other boys and girls, dive into the water, and perform a variety of complex motions that will move them from one side of the pool to the other in a relatively quick fashion (and within a pre-determined set of rules for how each stroke is to be judged).

Unlike many of the community sports in the Lower Mainland, which are run by volunteer coaches, the three swim clubs where I conducted my research all had paid coaches, as is the practice throughout the Lower Mainland. For younger coaches, the job provides part-time income at a rate roughly double that of minimum wage in British Columbia. It is also a way for youths who have finished their careers as competitive swimmers, either during or after high school and university, to give back to their sport and stay connected to the worlds, lifestyles, and communities at the pool. Club swimming provides a few full-time positions as head coaches and assistant head coaches where one can make a comfortable annual salary. Although there are many swim clubs in the Lower Mainland, the turnover rate for head coach and assistant head coach positions is very low. Thus, a swim coach may have to work a decade or more before attaining one of these positions. Finally, parents of children in swim club take on the role of parental supporter to their child's sport and are required to perform volunteer labour hours for the swim club as part of their child's enrolment. Parents become a necessary part of swim club, helping out with the daily tasks assigned by the board of directors, who are also parents of swimmers in the club, so that the children can train.

Swimming from one side of a pool to another may not look very difficult from the vantage point of the pool deck, but neither does kicking a soccer ball into a net past a goaltender. When physically attempted, the act of swimming 'properly,' in accordance with the sport's rules, is a much more complex activity than merely 'getting to the other side of the pool.' Looking at winter age-group competitive swim clubs through an anthropological lens allowed me to see some of the varied practices involved in being a swim club member from the perspectives of those who participate in this competitive sport. 'Youths' in swim club learn the 'proper' ways to use their bodies to move through the water. This knowledge is transmitted through play and exploration of the water at a young age and then transmitted by coaches and other swimmers as youths' advance in age and through the training group levels of their club. Developing a feel for the water may take time for a given swimmer, while others may acquire this feel in a way that makes it seem as if they possess a natural propensity to move easily in water. Using feel

as a window into the lives of swimmers, I have attempted to show how swimmers articulate complex sets of embodied experiences and knowledge about ‘feel,’ using a combination of words and the motions their bodies make when swimming. Yet to get in the water and swim ‘correctly’ and consistently, as these youths do, helps to develop a deeper comprehension of ‘feel’ and how it permeates the sport of swimming.

Swimming is a highly social sport even though it is competed in individually. Swim clubs may be ‘teams’ and the total combined scores of their athletes at an ‘A’ and higher level meets may be tallied to establish which club has ‘won’ a meet, but ultimately individual swimmers race against each other, their own previous results, and the clock. Competitive age-group swimmers spend upwards of twenty-five hours a week together, not including weekend swim meets. This shared time and socializing between and among training groups and swimmers may cumulatively develop close social bonds between athletes, as well as parents. The amounts of time swimmers spend at the pool may also cause conflicts with their other non-swimming friends, even those who are engaged with other competitive sports. Balancing social obligations between school, sport, and family can be a struggle for swimmers and parents alike. Ultimately this balancing act pushes swimmers to maintain distinct social groups, on the one hand, with those in their swim club training group and, on the other, with their friends from other non-swimming activities. There are competing and conflicting, as well as separate forms of community being defined within these social struggles. This split then gets compounded when swimmers begin moving into the higher levels of their sport, attaining ‘A’ time qualifications and subsequently spending more time training and competing at larger meets, perhaps even travelling to different parts of the province to compete. Yet each swimmer I spoke with actively sought to shape their social worlds, deciding for themselves, to a certain degree, what priorities to focus on in sport, school, and other extra-curricular activities.

6.1. Interconnected Contributions

Social conflicts between swimming friends, school friends, and other friends, have the potential to bleed into internal body conflicts surrounding sudden losses of skills related to growing bodies. During my high-school years the taller kids were often approached by the basketball and rowing coaches as potential recruits to those sports. Some parents revealed to me that they placed their child in swimming to keep them

healthy and active and to help them lose weight. Coach Sally, revealed to me that her body ‘betrayed her’ at fourteen while she was going through puberty. These three examples demonstrate the complex interactions that can occur between athletes and their growing bodies and the social pressures that come along with participation in swimming. Watching friends put on muscle and go through growth spurts faster can discourage kids from wanting to continue training. This is especially true when one’s training group peers begin advancing in the training groups and swimming faster, all the while one’s own progress and speed stagnates. Then younger kids begin moving up to enter your group and begin swimming as fast as yourself. For girls, the beauty industry as proliferated by the media has the potential to focus attention on physical appearance, while peers may focus attention away from sports. A muscular athletic frame that swimmers can develop through prolonged training has the potential to conflict with the idealized ‘slim’ body images that the media portrays. All this attention on bodies can have myriad social consequences and spark conflict in the lives of youth swimmers.

Long term athlete development (LTAD), as set out by Swim Canada, provided an outline for coaches to invest in kids’ swimming over an extended period of years. Once swimmer’s bodies change, either drastically or minimally, there is a dynamic re-attunement of technique through body development. Learning these ‘techniques of the body’ (Mauss 1973) from listening to coaches and watching their swimming peers, youths may not experience success at an earlier stage in their swimming apprenticeship. Instead, they begin to understand and develop a feel for the water through exploration and discovery (Downey 2005), in certain cases reinventing their swimming techniques from one season to the next, rather than having a tacit body of knowledge transmitted directly from coach to swimmer. This whole process happens in a highly social environment for age-group swimmers, as they learn and re-learn techniques along side their peers.

Throughout this thesis I have showcased the agency of youth swimmers in competitive age-group swim clubs. ‘Feel’ is one way of approaching the swimming worlds, which encapsulate not only the physical motions of bodies through water, but also the meaning making practices, the sociality of kids, parents, and coaches, and how they come to create ‘communities’ through their relationships and everyday practices at the pool. Deep immersion, in water and in the social worlds of swimmers, is an essential component to the anthropologist’s toolkit when investigating the connections between

the myriad components (some which I have highlighted in this thesis) that make up age-group swim clubs. Youths' understandings of their own bodies, in terms of physical growth through puberty, technical acquisition of swimming skills, interactions between and amongst genders in a joint participation environment, are all interconnected. Arguably, these components of participating in swim club can have lasting affects on youths, their sense of identity as athletes and swimmers, and their everyday social worlds, whether those be at the pool or elsewhere.

6.2. Further Questions

But what about those who decide to leave the sport? More research needs to be done in this area in kids' sports overall. A potential factor in this is injury. While there is no body contact between athletes in swimming there are quite a number of overuse injuries that plague swimmer's bodies. Shoulder injuries and knee injuries are some of the most common ones occurring in swimming, raising questions about how such injuries impact youth swimmers, both socially and physically. If the injuries are 'career ending,' terminating their potential prospects of becoming a varsity or national athlete, how do youths cope and deal with this likelihood? Do they continue to swim at a lower level of intensity or do they leave the sport? There are some clubs that offer 'fitness' group programs that are intentionally non-competitive, making it possible for kids to swim less frequently than their same aged peers. This is where some of the swimmers who move away from the competitive stream either by virtue of an injury, other extra-curricular commitments, or a lack of interest in competing and swimming at a high-performance level, end up. Injuries from swimming are usually linked to overuse of certain joints, muscles, and ligaments. So, additional inquiry could look into the causes of these injuries, how coaches seek to minimize injury to their swimmers, and what rehab for swimming injuries looks like and how it fits into training programs for youth swimmers.

There are other important questions to be asked of swimmers, parents, and coaches involved in winter swim club. Issues concerning gender, while touched on in this essay, are far from exhaustively researched. A particular location for further study are the change rooms athletes use. How do they see themselves 'fitting in' to the 'male,' 'female,' and 'family/universal' change room designations in many facilities? What sorts of discussions and interactions occur in the change rooms, a place where the full body

may be revealed to same-gender peers? Swimming is a sport where the body is ever-present and revealed due to the size and fit of most swim suits that swimmers wear in an attempt to reduce drag. Do the hyper male and female designed swim suits allow a space where gender non-conforming athletes feel safe and comfortable? Another argument in this essay was that gendered language and institutional spaces with which and where heteronormative gender roles are expressed do not do much to shift the discourse and ways in which people interact with gender stereotypes. Yet the kids, coaches and parents in youth sports may perform 'gender maneuvering' where they actively challenge and manipulate the ways masculinities and femininities are enacted in public spaces (Pascoe 2007:116). The meanings that are associated with gender norms and stereotypes are perpetuated through daily contact, behaviours and discussion within communities.

Competitive age-group swimming is a sport organized around speed. Yet swimmers, parents, and coaches may be less concerned about the qualifying times that the swimmers are striving for and more interested in other aspects of the swim club experience, including the social and/or physical opportunities that may arise. I have endeavored to show that joint participation practice and gender separated competition presents an interesting 'field of play' for young athletes who are both re-learning how to use their growing bodies in the water and who may be cultivating their social skill and relationships with their peers. To experience and understand the world of the pool through the concept of 'feel' in swimming, of being introduced to movement in water, is one way that researchers may approach the study of swimming and swim clubs in the future. It allows for a complex and nuanced angle from which to approach the everyday life worlds of the girls and boys, parents, coaches, and officials who all have varied reasons for being involved in swimming. For in swimming, like any kids' sport, the contested practices and meanings created, the relationships among participants, the experiences on and off the 'fields of play' all take a certain 'feel' to navigate and understand, which shows that kids' sports are much more than adult organized games, but are actively shaped by the kids who compete in, practice and play them.

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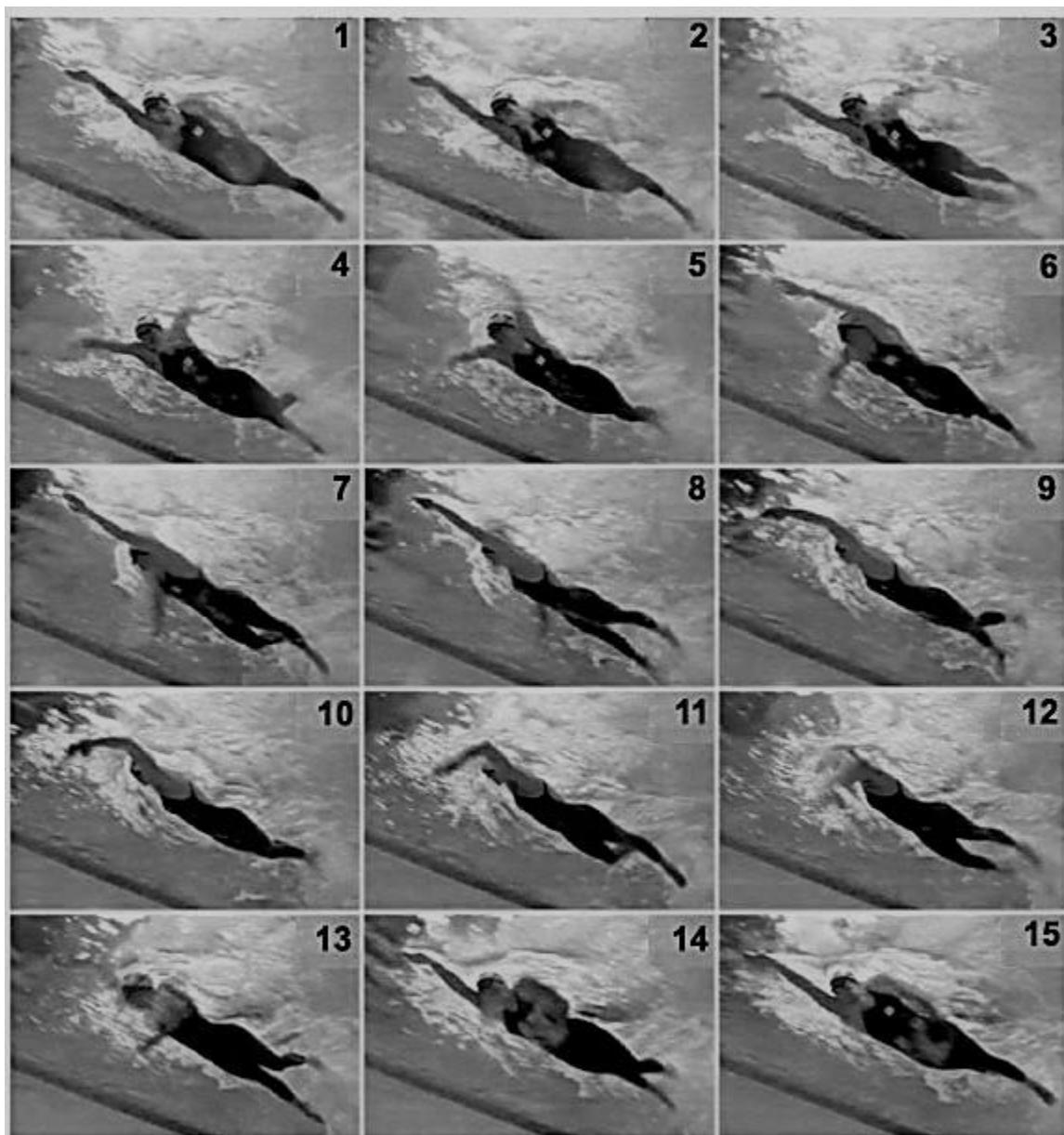
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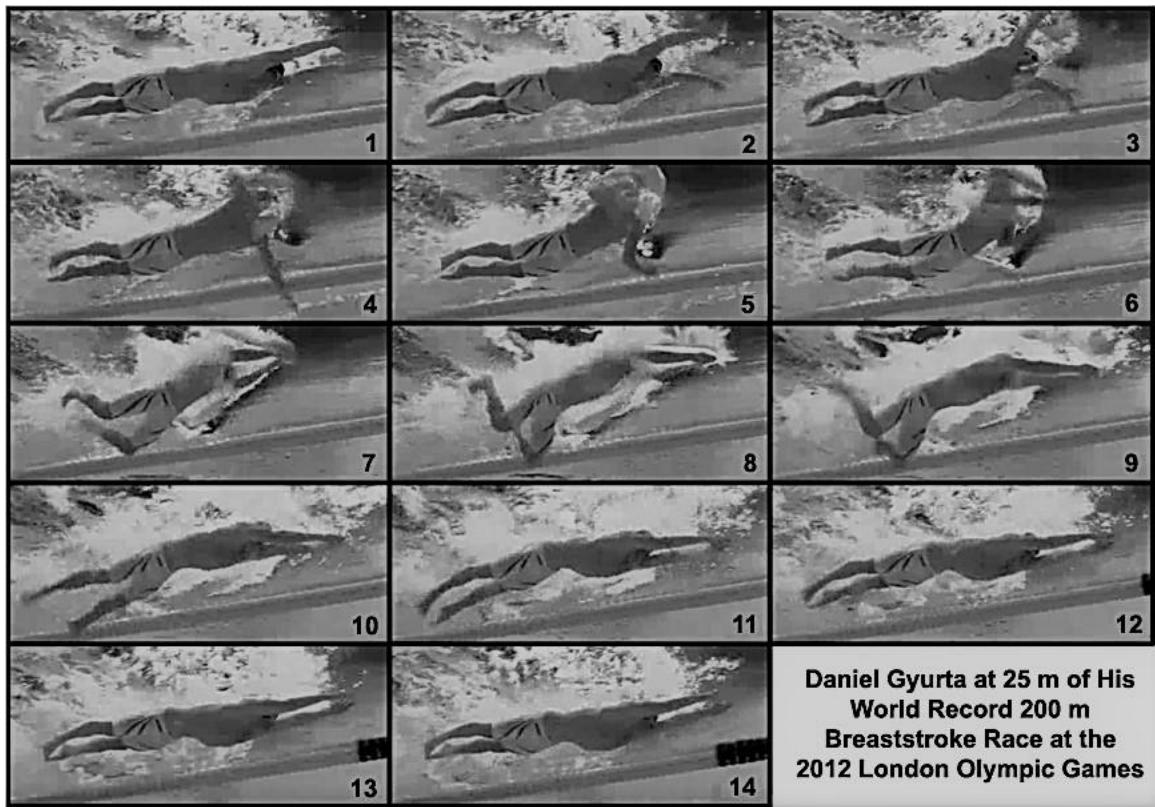
Appendix A

Freestyle and Breaststroke Arm Positions



**Rebecca Adlington at 775 m of Her World Record Gold Medal
800 m Freestyle Race at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games**

Figure A.1 Freestyle, two full strokes with a breath from 'catch' to 'finish'
Source: Rushall 2016. Retrieved from <http://coachsci.sdsu.edu/swim/champion/ra775800.htm>



Daniel Gyurta at 25 m of His
World Record 200 m
Breaststroke Race at the
2012 London Olympic Games

Figure A.2 Breaststroke, full stroke from 'catch' to 'finish'

Source: Rushall 2016. Retrieved from <http://coachsci.sdsu.edu/swim/champion/dg30200.htm>