

SWAZI SWIMMING

Vision and Reality

By *Don Heidary, Orinda Aquatics, USA Swimming*

I recently learned that there is a swimming world outside of the one we know, that in small pockets around the globe there are kids with dreams, coaches with passion, and communities in need of the core benefits that this sport offers. There are challenges and triumphs that may not resemble our own, but they are equally significant and inspirational. And that the formula of pools, kids, and coaches equals the great sport of swimming, anywhere in the world and in all of life's circumstances.

Background

A former Orinda Aquatics swimmer went on a six-month church mission trip to Swaziland, Africa after her high school graduation. That was the first time I had heard of this small country. In early correspondence, she described her experience as invaluable and life changing. After a few months, I received an email from her saying that there was a local swim team and that she was excited to swim and compete with the group. She talked to her coach about our team, Orinda Aquatics, and asked if we would be willing to help their team.

A plan was formed for the coach to travel to California to spend a few weeks with our staff and our broad summer-league network. At the last minute his visa was denied, and in his email he asked if I would consider coming there. After a few weeks of consideration, I thought that it was the right thing to do. I asked Christina Risso, a dear friend of twenty-five years and a learn-to swim guru, if she would have an interest in going. "Are you kidding me!? I am so in!" was her reply. The trip was planned for the last week in January.

Swaziland

As I mentioned, I had virtually no knowledge of Africa beyond what one would read in the newspaper or see on television. The country of Swaziland has a little over one million citizens and can be driven through in a day.

It is comprised of breathtakingly beautiful green country side, rolling hills, and the most gracious people I have ever encountered. The purpose of our trip was to help educate this humble swimming community, and as is all too often the case, we were the ones educated.

Welcome Nhlabatsi (the coach)

Four pools, over seven hundred children, no staff, no parent support, no heat, no pace clock (one in the country), no lane lines, a coach with no home (he stays with a friend), no car, no split stop watch, no manuals, books, DVD's, no computer, email/internet, no briefcase – and no stopping him.

Welcome to Welcome. He is a man on a mission. He seems to know everyone in the nation that has put their toe in a pool. It is almost like he is the "chief" (a reference to the head of the large family units in the rural areas) of this nation's swimming family. You are one of his kids or are somehow related to him in a swimming sense. The main request he makes of his pupils has nothing do with dues or streamlining, but to just show up. He moves from pool to pool by foot, friend, or bus. He will arrive at a lesson two hours early because school bus transportation at 7:00 AM is the only way - so long as he, and they, are there.

One morning he made or received at least ten calls trying to confirm lessons for first to third graders because it had been raining. He looked at us after each call and said he hopes they do not cancel. When it was confirmed, we drove an hour in the rain to the small pool. For this he is paid a modest hourly wage that I can image barely covers the gas and the prepaid phone minutes to confirm the session. He arrives, greets the teachers, gets in the pool, shuffles six groups from fifteen to fifty children in thirty to forty-five minute sessions. He directs the kids with motions and phrases, transitioning language from local Swazi to English, of which all kids are fluent. They move quickly and always obey. There is no discipline problem and no question as to who is in control. As for this man's giving nature and moral code, it is rock solid and embedded in family and religion. He started a swim school at an orphanage and he plays the organ in church on Sunday (the one he grew up in, an hour and a half away). And with regard to the kids, he never turns a child away. He is here to teach, to promote swimming, to serve, and in a very real sense, to save lives.

Mdu Xaba

He was with Welcome when we were picked up from the airport. I soon found out that he was a swimmer. He was one of the finest young men I have ever met, anywhere. He is overwhelmingly impressive (in the sense of, is this guy for real?). I was immediately impressed by his maturity, humility, and gentle nature. He had handsome, chiseled features, was very muscular (with no weight lifting), looked you in the eye when he spoke, and seemed to always know the answer to questions before I could ask. You could feel the loyalty that he had to everything important in his life.

As the trip went on I learned more. He is twenty years old. He lost his mother and his father to TB while in high school. In a later conversation about grades, he said, "I didn't do as well as I would have hoped during that time."

What swimming means to him, "it has become my mother and my father", he says. And who looks after him now? Of course, Welcome. He taught him how to swim at eight years old and has never left his side. This young man could represent the sport of swimming or the nation and anyone would be impressed. As a swimmer, he has smooth strokes, a beautiful butterfly, a relentless work ethic, and unwavering discipline. He speaks with purpose and clarity, whether talking about losing his parents, a better streamline, or his dream of swimming in the Olympics and then coming back to help swimming in Swaziland.

This young man could be a team captain on any collegiate team in the United States, and I would hire him on the Orinda Aquatics staff today.

Big Bend

I was told of the main swimming site at Big Bend – the Blue Whales. We drove an hour and half through rural countryside and came to a humble community that surrounds a Sugar corporation. The company provides modest housing and schooling for the employees. A part of the school is the community pool.

There we met James. His schedule looked similar to Welcome's – all day, all ages, over 800 kids in a week – one guy. Another salt-of-the-earth man, painfully humble, and appreciative of everything. We had brought one of the new TYR stop watches for James. When we gave it to him, he reacted as if he was just handed the keys to a new car. He was overwhelmed. He clutched it to his chest with both arms. He would not even let go of the plastic packaging.

I asked about equipment. He said they had some and were trying to obtain more. He took me to the equipment room. My eyes welled up as I looked into a wooden structure that leaned to one side with a few kickboards and pull buoys scattered on the muddy floor. The lane lines were ropes that James explained were OK but the ends had frayed so much that they could not get them into the hooks on the deck. The pace clock was a small, older, worn, box, with a clock face with no motor or sweep hands. He said they were trying to find an old wall clock to use as a motor and paint some plastic strips for the arms. I asked where there is a pace clock. Mdu pointed up with one finger (for north), "Mbabane", he said, "the capital". I asked where you get a pace clock, "Durban, South Africa", he replied. The black lines were completely worn out in part of the pool. With no lane lines and faint black lines, swimmers spent most of the lap looking for their oncoming teammates. Backstroke was a challenge and even streamlining posed a risk. But as with every other group, these kids, from twelve to eighteen years old, were disciplined, talented, motivated, and appreciative. I ran the workout that afternoon.

The Pool Bar

There were several sessions at the public community center. Welcome explained that as well as a local center, the main aspect of the building was a community bar. This was the home pool for the government school program. The pool was located behind the bar. The patrons and music began at 10:00 AM. The grounds around the pool were littered with beer bottle caps and a resident chicken roamed the grounds and the pool deck. I felt a little uneasy as we waited for the kids.

Soon, a stream of young students, ages 5-8, came running into the gate. School was a ten minute walk away. Here they came, in uniform, excited and adorable (see photo). There were over sixty. The pool is humble but good for teaching. Welcome has a brief meeting and the kids begin changing. Changing is actually not accurate because they have nothing to change into. The boys and girls remove their clothes to their underwear and again wait for instructions.



No suits or goggles, but neither affects their eagerness

or ability to learn. Welcome has them sit on the deck and wait their turn. No complaints. It was raining. They floated, did "bubble, bubbles, BIG breath" and "big kicks" with "Auntie Christina", and finished with two minutes of pandemonium, AKA, "free time". And as quickly as they were in and organized, they were out, dressed, and on their way back to school. The talent, enthusiasm, potential, and adorability overload would be any coach's dream.

Visit Summary

The four of us, Welcome, Mdu, Christina, and myself spent each of the five days together. For some (not me), the day started at 5:30 with a morning run. My day started with a morning coffee. We met for breakfast and talked about the day ahead. We had extended meetings on Learn-to-Swim progressions and on the "bigger picture" of adding vision and structure to their challenging daily routines. We were at private schools which were beautiful and extremely nurturing, public pools, and a pool at a club that Welcome uses for the Dolphin team. Christina got in the pool with Welcome during each session. She did her patented "suit, circle, squeeze" for breaststroke kick (works every time), and Mdu followed her lead. By the end of the week, Mdu was a bona fide assistant and I believe a national role model. One night in our room, we watched the American Record breaking DVD by USA Swimming. They were mesmerized.

We also had the good fortune of meeting with Cobus Louw, the President of the Swaziland National Swimming Association. He is a volunteer in this position and he drove an hour and a half to meet with me. Another startling reminder of the real need, "resources, knowledge, and costumes (their term for swim suits)".

"Don, it's not money, we need costumes for these kids. We will take anything, no matter the condition.

We will patch and sew".

We did visit a beautiful Game Reserve nearby, coming within twenty feet of a lion that seemed more interest in a nap than an early lunch (us). And we spent the afternoon on Friday driving around the panoramic countryside, visiting the major cities of Manzini and Mbabane, the King's Palace, as well as a local marketplace. The drive had brief interruptions for unescorted cows, sheep, and donkeys crossing the road. Less may really be more.

The most significant thing that I have taken away from the country and my experience is not the rate of aids or TB, not economic strife and limited means, or the overwhelming challenges facing the swimming landscape, but the incredible kindness, sincerity, and humility of the people.

From children to adults, men and women – there is an ironclad respect for everyone. We did not hear one word of profanity, see one altercation, see anyone lose their temper, intimidate anyone, or have an attitude about anything. There didn't seem to be a presence or a psychology of crime, gangs, violence, theft, drugs, alcohol, or depression.

When they receive a gift, they accept it with two hands and a subtle bow. When they shake your hand, the opposite hand supports the elbow of the shaking hand as a sign of respect, again with a subtle bow. The family unit is the country's foundation. While they may live in the communities, there are homesteads in the rural areas. Everyone has an extended family unit which offers structure, authority, love, and support. You are connected. At the schools, the children all playgames and sing songs – not typical playground activity but these have national and cultural significance.

There is a true sense of pride. We watched several and it was a precious sight. The children, to a person, were polite respectful, appreciative, and bursting with energy and excitement. All children wear a uniform to school (public and private). When I asked why, Mdu said that if a child has two shirts to wear to school for the year, they should not feel less of a person. And they don't. In high school all students, men and women, wear a tie. On most roads you could see children (in uniform) walking for what I was told was one to three miles each way to and from school - no doubt a reason for the fitness and discipline of these children. But most significantly, these kids seemed content, if not happy. There didn't seem to be a material chase that never ends or constant competition with each other. I feel that a lot can be learned from this humble country, their rich culture, and yes, evening their swimming community.

The Reality

I went there to talk about club development, staff training, parent structure, training plans, stroke drills, race strategy, to stand on the deck and assist with training groups and to talk about the subtleties of swimming in the United States. The reality was that they had little or no exposure to the world of swimming and the vast and indomitable resource of United States Swimming. Our conversations quickly centered around club survival, getting kids into a used swim suit (as opposed to their underwear), getting kids to the pool as most families do not have cars, surviving financially as most cannot pay, and just keeping children from drowning. There was no staff, parents, or finances to manage.

I met with a woman who ran a team and who was very well versed in the community's swimming. I started the conversation with the need to establish a parent committee, website, and a dues evaluation. She leaned toward me, looked me in the eye and said, "let me tell you about the swimming community, most can't or won't pay, most can't or won't transport their children, soccer is the national sport and it is free. Good luck."

I replied with something I do know - great teams and great swimmers can be created with water, motivated kids, and passionate coaches. That they have. There is hope and I firmly believe that there is great potential. I would go as far as to say their future is exciting, and I would be honored to be a part of it.

Why help?

I know there are countless needs and causes in the world and they exist in our own communities as well. This is not a humanitarian effort and it is not monetary. To me this is about supporting children to enjoy the immeasurable benefits of our great sport. Here are my thoughts, recommendations, and vision.

A Vision for Swimming in Swaziland

Overview

- There is extraordinary talent, potential, and opportunity.
- The children are athletically fit, talented, disciplined, motivated, respectful, and love the water.
- Although not heated, the pools are available at little or no cost.
- The schools offer and support swimming.

Support Recommendation

- Establish a national marketing campaign and brand, "SWAZI SWIMMING"
 - Free advertising, stickers, pencils, etc.
- Create a strong organizational structure with facilities, staff, programs
- Determine the Sports Council's commitment and budget
- Establish willingness and commitment of Boost (a willing sponsor)
- Enhance and update the SWAZI SWIMMING website with links to each pool (see USA Swimming site)

Program Structure

1. Create a "No Child Left Behind Policy" for all children to learn-to-swim in:

- "Government" Schools
- Private Schools
- Clinics in rural areas (free of charge)

2. Create an Introduction to Competitive Swimming (Swazi Swimming)

- Technique – Fundamentals and Progressions
- Training – Principals and Education
- Competition (healthy)

3. Incorporate the Education of Life skills

- Work ethic/discipline
- Character/Integrity
- Teamwork

4. Create a National Development Group

- Men - fourteen plus, Women - thirteen plus
- Offer Year-round training (at separate sites and at the new athletic facility)
- Create a year-round dry land program for this group
- Hold this group as the pinnacle of swimming/role models for the nation
- All swimmers receive a "National Team" jacket (note: you have an excellent captain in Mdu)

Vision: Five- Year Plan

100,000 Children Taught to Swim

Vision: Five-Year Plan

100,000 Children Taught to Swim

Training Sites

- Seven to ten throughout the country
- Progression plan (3-8 Learn-To-Swim, 8-13 develop technique/efficient training, 12+ increase training, race development)
- Staff of five to ten (Head Coach, Assistant Head Coach, Assistants, LTS staff)
- Staff is ASCA (American Swim Coaches Association) certified
- Staff is outfitted (Jacket, stop watch, etc.)
- Staff has email, internet access (communication and research)
- Swimmers have caps and T-shirts
- Standard pool equipment (pace clock, kick boards, paddles, etc.)
- Lane lines at each site for training (makes technical development much more efficient)
- Standardized teaching techniques, training principals
- Parent support at each site (one to three: Membership, Treasurer, Misc.)

A National Development Group of 100 swimmers

- With a Head Coach and site assistants
- Mbabane Training Center is home pool
- These athletes will be leaders in and out of the pool

Out of the Box Thought

Purchase or lease the "Bar/rec center" in Simunye for the home of Dolphin Swim Club

- Do some mild cosmetic upgrades
- Add equipment to pool – lane lines, flags, equipment, etc.
- Turn it into a positive youth center for swimming and the community
- Develop it as a training/athletic center with a dry land facility, meeting room, day care, offices, etc.
- Create a facility that would build champions and high-character athletes.



We can help // anyone can help

For a start: fins, caps, swimming costumes, goggles

Send to: Russell Parsons, North West Athletics

2/72 Hopwood Street

ECHUCA, 3564

Australia

03-54-801-705 nwa@iinet.net.au www.nwaswimaths.com

North West Athletics has been involved in a similar developmental process at Pallikoodam School, Kottayam, Kerala, SOUTH INDIA

You can decide for yourself:

www.nwaswimaths.com > PRESENTATIONS > General Presentations >

Pallikoodam 2005

Pallikoodam 2006

Pallikoodam Nov.-Dec. 2007