

That Ninety-Nine Percent



Most readers will not know who Sean is. His name does not appear in any record books. He is not on any list of National Team members, National Championship participants or All-Province athletes. He has never waved for TV cameras. He's never discussed his triumphs on radio or basked in the glow of an adoring public. He has never graced a magazine cover, never been the subject of articles or interviews, never earned mention on-screen, on-line or on any other kind of media that I am aware of. Even within the relatively narrow confines of the grassroots swimming organization to which he once belonged, his presence through the best part of a decade has passed largely unnoticed.

There is no note of Sean in any of this association's old newsletters or announcements. As far as I know, if you were determined to find his name in this small

corner of the world, you would have to excavate meet results from the mid-1980s. You'd have to dig out heat sheets and final tallies from some of the competitions that were held on this island during those long-ago years. Scanning through stacks of what would now certainly be yellowing pieces of mimeograph, you would need to find the older boys' results for each event. Then you would have to take your eye all the way to the very bottom of each page before his name finally showed itself.



Sean was not a very successful swimmer - not in any conventional sense. He was sixteen when I coached him, and while a typical peer might complete a 100 meter Freestyle in one minute and five seconds, Sean needed more than a minute twenty to complete his four lengths of the pool. Long after his nearest competitor had touched the wall, ripped off his goggles and looked up at the timeboard, Sean would still be churning his way down the lane. He would be tossing his arms and dragging his legs and twisting his body. Inevitably, he'd be slowing a little with every stroke.

He used to make fun of this. He would joke about how his breathing labored, about the way his head scraped bottom off near every dive, about how all the other guys got to rest for a bit after swimming. There

was a monologue he performed after many races. He would describe how he'd finally come in to the end of his swim and the Referee - feeling a little impatient, no doubt - would immediately blow his whistle, signaling for everyone to leave the pool. "So I'm, like, totally exhausted and can barely drag myself onto the deck," he'd say, making penguin-like gestures with his arms and legs. "I'm exhausted and can barely even drag myself to *safety* while everyone else is feeling like they can just go bouncing onto the blocks again."

Here he would gather all his stuff with a huff. He would pull in his several towels and t-shirts, his cap and goggles, his oversized swim bag, his liquidation sale flip-flops. He would put on his science guy sunglasses and his ever-present sunhat, and begin tottering away with a Chaplinesque swagger. That something would drop from his arms while making this departure seemed a carefully scheduled part of these dramatics. "You see that?" he would ask after letting everything loose in order to pick up the errant sock or sweat shirt. "See what I mean?!?" he would exclaim with all his possessions now scattered in a chaotic circle. "This never happens to anyone else! Never!"

I used to laugh myself silly whenever he started one of these routines. His delivery was so well timed and his inflections so perfect, his gestures so communicative, that I used to laugh until tears came into my

eyes. We all did, actually; Sean's teammates used to appreciate his brand of comedy every bit as much as I.

All conversation would stop when he came up after a race. A group of us would be taking apart a completed event or getting ready for the one to come. We'd be gathered around the drawings and graphs I was sketching. I'd be miming actions with my hands and feet, and when Sean approached all this would halt. Everyone would step back and give him room. Our chests would fill with expectation. And we would just stand there, waiting for the pin-sharp point of his performance to puncture the moment and offer all of us some amusement.

"Did you see what that guy did?" I recall him beginning once. He was pointing toward a white-clad gentleman who seemed a little uncertain of the attention now coming his way. "Did you see what he did, that starter guy? 'Take your...' he said. 'Take your...' and that was it! No '...mark,' no nothing. And then I'm left standing there like an idiot waiting for the next word. And everyone else is, like, halfway down the pool before I figure this out!"

When Sean then threw his stuff down on the sun-warmed pool deck, a sudden gust picked up around us. It grabbed one of his discount-issue sandals, pulled it over the water and dropped it into the lane nearest us. We all stood silent for a few seconds as the neon green shoe started its descent toward the bottom. We watched it flutter down through clear

blue water. “You see that?” Sean asked with what I took to be mock exasperation. “See what I mean?”

Everyone exploded at this. We all laughed and gasped and coughed until Sean gathered all his stuff and turned and limped away. Then, after we’d collected ourselves, after we’d cleared the moisture from our eyes and recovered from the pleasure of his distraction, we resumed our work with all those drawings and charts. We returned to the more serious business of racing.



I liked Sean a lot. Beyond his sense of humor, I appreciated his ability to draw our team together. I liked that he showed up at practice with some regularity and attended a fair number of meets. I was thankful that he was always on time for meetings and enthusiastic during cheers. It didn’t matter that when results were posted, I had to run my finger all the way to the very last lines in order to find him. It didn’t matter that when I finally got there, there would be a 1:21 marked in the column across from his name - and a relatively swift 1:13 penned beside the second to last finisher.

Or, at least, I didn’t think this mattered.

Not until another coach observed that, after putting on his usual post-race show for us, Sean would often recede to some quiet place and sit all alone for

a while. She had noticed, too, that he took his pre-race preparations as seriously as anyone, and that at the end of every swim - as the Referee's impatient whistle cut the air - he would swing expectant eyes toward the scoreboard and show obvious disappointment upon reading the time. "I'm not sure it's all that fun for him," she said to me during an evening practice.

"What do you mean?" I asked, surprised.

The sun was beginning to set behind the trees surrounding the swimming pool. The day was cooling, providing welcome relief from an oppressive summer heat. I was standing where I usually did, over in the corner by the fastest two or three lanes, with one foot resting on the dull silver railing that helped people in and out of the water. From there, I was looking out over the water, the deck, the stands. From there, I thought I was looking out over everything - including the whole of our training group.

"Why don't you just do a little coaching over on that side for awhile," she suggested, gesturing toward some of the slower lanes, toward the lanes where people of Sean's speed swam. "Just spend some time over near those swimmers," she said, "and see for yourself."



I hear a lot of talk about Canadian hockey right now. Several of our National Hockey League teams have

left the country in recent years and others are hinting they might do the same sometime soon. More and more of the league's athletes are coming from outside our borders and, as if this were not difficult enough, the owner of the once-fabled Montreal Canadiens is now an American of all things. At the grassroots level, the sport is losing some of its long-standing popularity; internationally, we are no longer the world's indisputable force. A great many people are concerned about these developments and are voicing some hard questions as a result - are asking themselves what, exactly, has gone wrong? Listening to the radio the other day, I heard someone suggest the problem is one of focus. "All our attention," the commentator argued, "is at the top - on the pros, on the elite. Not enough is given to the rest of the hockey players. To *most* of those players out there. To that ninety-nine percent who will never play a second of professional hockey in their lives."

As a coach, I know how easy it is to give all my energy to the top ten percent in a program. It matters little whether we are concerned with the line drawn between professional and amateur, all-star and journeyman, between 'A' level and 'B' level, first place or sixth - there is something almost irresistible, something magnetic, that draws most coaches toward those who reside on the higher side of these marks. Not immune to this pull, I see the tendency manifest in my own work on occasion. It is just too easy for me to give the bulk of

my time and attention to the fastest, the strongest, the most talented among us. It is way too easy and, fifteen years into the game, I am now painfully aware of this fact. Though this certainly was not always the case.

Before Sean, I had little sense of this inclination. In fact, I was somewhat offended by my co-worker's insinuation I did not spend much time "coaching over on that side." Certain she was mistaken and that I already knew all there was to know about those swimmers, I switched to that less routine half of the pool more to save face than anything else. Wanting to prove I was not a coach with such predictable behavior patterns, I made that move not expecting any discoveries to come my way - yet this is exactly what happened.

From the very first workout, Sean impressed me with his effort. Virtually every set was completed to perfection. He paid close attention to turnover times, to pacing directions, to stroke instruction. If I made a demand such as, "Get faster with each one," Sean would usually accomplish this. When I requested the improbable by asking everyone to, "Do a best time on each of these," he would give his all in order to realize this. While his more accomplished peers stood around complaining there was just no way anyone could do a best time in *workout*, he would set out huffing and puffing, churning and bouncing. "Only missed that one by a second," he told me once, readjusting his goggles. "Let's see what I can do here."

One evening perhaps a week after my reluctant relocation, I was so struck by this intensity that I pulled him out of the water toward the end of practice. There was something, I told him, I couldn't quite figure out; something I really wanted to know. "Why are you working so hard?" I asked.

He opened his hand and slammed a palm against his forehead.

"Is that what I'm doing?" he joked.

"Sean," I said, not letting this go. "You're killing yourself out there. You're killing yourself like you do pretty much every night and I want to know what's going on for you. I want to know why you do this."

He narrowed his gaze then. He lowered his hand to one side and held me in his sights for a long time. His eyes flickered down toward the water for an instant before snapping back up and connecting hard with my own. "I wanna get under one twenty in that 100 Free," he answered forcefully. "It's like a curse - one twenty-one, one twenty, one twenty-one - and I want to break it. I want, actually, to smash it to bits!"

I didn't say anything to this. I couldn't, really.

"Can I get back in now?" he asked.

I nodded my assent while a fiery mix of embarrassment and regret ignited in my belly. Before that moment, I had never really taken Sean and his efforts seriously. I had never truly understood that something like personal improvement - not winning gold, not

breaking a record or amazing the crowd, but the simple fact of doing a little bit better than last time - might actually matter to “those swimmers” working away over on “that side” of the pool.



Things changed following that conversation. I worked to more evenly balance my attention between those two sides of the pool, for one thing. Sean and I began playing around with his breathing pattern, his body roll, the movement of his arms. We worked on starting faster, turning faster, finishing harder. We lowered his head and lifted his hips. We tried diving a little shallower. We even set up a formal goal setting process. He started thinking about how fast he wanted to swim and about how he might accomplish this, and began committing these ideas to paper. Instead of kidding around quite so much after racing, we sat together and gave serious thought to what might be improved next time. We made a couple of drawings, sketched a few graphs. And at one of the last meets of the season, something of these efforts finally showed itself.

It was a fine summer afternoon, as I recall. We were at an outdoor meet and a heat of Boys 100 Freestyle was in the water. Most of the competitors were resting their arms on the side of the pool. A couple were talking to friends who were standing behind the blocks, waiting.

One had turned his head in order to see the lonely body still chugging down the lane. Sean was last again. The time of the person before him had come on the scoreboard as a 1:11 and I remember feeling a tug in my heart at this - feeling a little let down for both of us.

With about five meters to go, though, Sean did something I had never seen him do before. His arms quickened, his kick came to boil, his body position lifted. From where I sat, it looked like he was actually speeding up toward the end of that race, gaining momentum where usually the exact opposite occurred. Moving to the edge of my seat, I straightened my back to watch the finish. The cluster of swimmers around me, the ones I was preparing for their next race or for finals that evening - these swimmers sensed what was happening as well and raised their attentions from the pages we were scrawling on together. I remember a surge of excitement sounding from the bleachers. Yells rose from the side of the pool where many of our parents were now standing.

I remember the board clicking off a 1:18.

When Sean swung around to this, his face did not darken under the usual cloud cover of disappointment, but instead burst open with sunny delight. "Yeah!" he yelled into the sky. "Yeah!" as his teammates cheered and our parents waved their hats, their towels, their rolled-up heat sheets. The noise was loud enough to drown out the ring of the Referee's whistle.

It was loud enough to win all of the competitors a few extra seconds in the water before they were told, lane by lane, to climb out on deck in order to let the next race begin.

“You see that?” he asked, coming up afterwards. “Did you see *that?*” he repeated, gesturing toward the water. All his possessions had been neatly stowed in his swim bag. Everything but those flip-flops and those neon sandals, those crazy sunglasses and that ridiculous sunhat had been carefully put away. His manner as he approached was also far more contained, far more dignified than I was used to. “Did you see that?” he asked again, and just then an old t-shirt broke free of everything else. It tumbled toward the deck as if drawn by force of habit.

The two of us looked at that shirt where it laid absorbing moisture. As another whistle cut the air, our gazes came up and we smiled.

“I did,” I eventually answered, both happy this was true and a little saddened for all the times it had not been. Sean bent to grab his shirt and put it away. “I saw the whole thing,” I said, gesturing toward my notebook with one hand, waving him forward with the other. “Now why don’t you come over here and take a seat so we can talk about what you’ll do the next time you race.”