

# Burnout or Choice

Coach Garry Nelson, formerly of the Plantation Swim Team, in Plantation FL advocates a broader perspective on one of the most common self-criticisms of age group swimming.

The term "burnout" is widely used in the sport of swimming. Many swimmers quit swimming every year. Many coaches and parents believe it is caused by burnout. The Physician and Sportsmedicine in a recent article, described burnout as "loss of energy and enthusiasm for the sport but that it is not caused by anxiety and stress. Sure, all of us have known that certain parent or coach who puts excessive pressure on a child to win or set records. Most of those swimmers quit because they no longer can handle the pressure and they need to quit because they need to get away from its cause. That is burnout.

At the Plantation Swim Team (Florida), we have approximately 30% to 35% turnover in our membership each year. I would think that our club is very close to the national average (Editor's note: U.S. Swimming Domestic Technical Director Bob Steele cites an average annual turnover of 33% of registered swimmers). People associated with swimming, group all of these swimmers as burnout. In fact, very few of these swimmers are really burnout cases.

There are hundreds of reasons why young people quit swimming. I believe that most swimmers who are no longer swimming quit because they are no longer improving as fast as they used to, and the results are no longer worth the time and commitment. Throughout my coaching experience, I know that I have had my fair share of swimmers leave the sport. Looking back, I can remember very few that I would consider in the burnout category. For example, if a swimmer is very successful as a young swimmer and has achieved success with limited commitment and a modest workload, when the swimmer begins to get older he or she must increase his or her commitment to remain successful. The athlete may not want to put the required time into the sport. At that point they face a choice of working harder, scaling back their goals, or doing something else with their time. But that's not burnout, it is rather a choice.

Not every young person who has left swimming is a burn-out case. Most young people who have left our sport, have simply exercised their freedom of choice.

In conclusion, let's limit our use of the term burnout, which is giving swimming a bad name. Coaches should strive to make their programs more creative and appealing to minimize loss of interest. Parents and coaches should know when to make kids work and when to let them play and not be afraid to have some fun. The next time you use the term burnout to describe a swimmer who has quit the sport, think again. Maybe they didn't burn out, maybe they just chose to stop swimming.

**Published by the American Swimming Coaches Association (ASCA) – September  
2009**