

triathloning for ordinary mortals

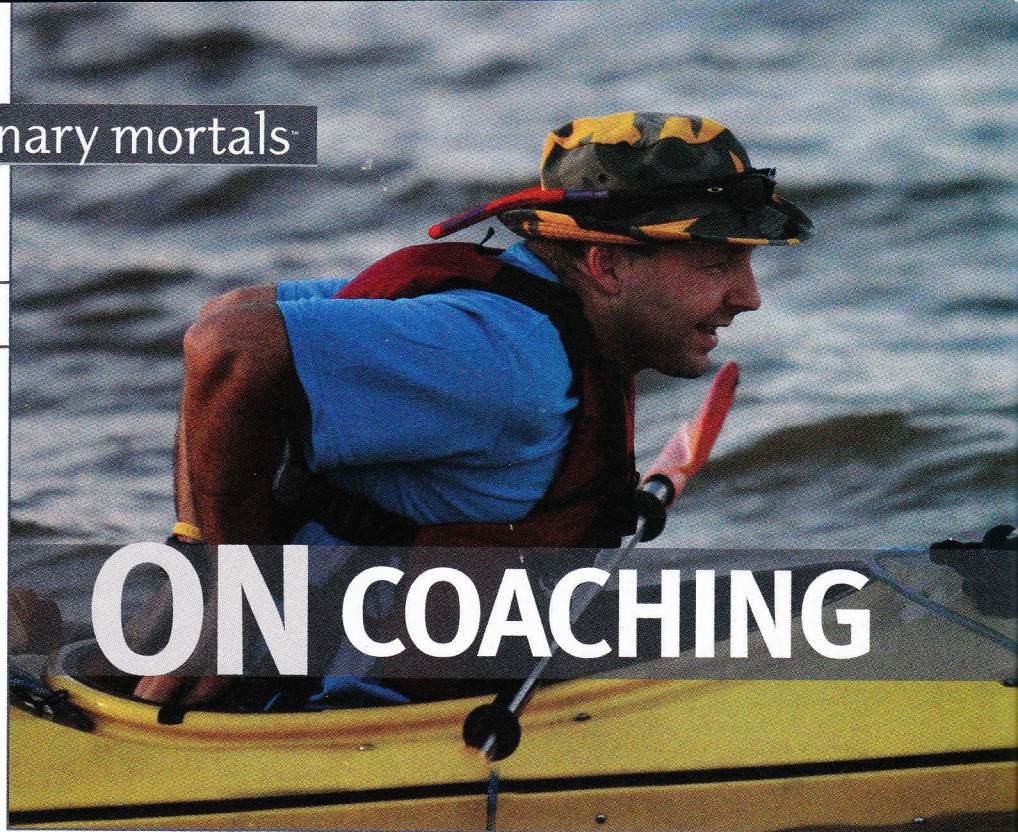
● By Dr. Steve Jonas

With the new spring season upon us, I feel like, "Hey, I already started my spring season." But that was a year ago. I also have the feeling that I was just writing the "spring" column for this space. But that was last year too. Ah well. I gather that having such thoughts is a natural part of aging; therefore, as long as I keep on thinking, writing, and racing, I'll just go with it. And so, in getting on with it, for this spring issue I would like to talk with you about coaches and coaching.

Just a year ago in this magazine, my good friend Coach Gale Bernhardt shared some thoughts with you about coaching ["a coach For You," USA Triathlon Life, Spring, 2006, p. 48]. They concerned types and levels of coaching, and where to find coaches. This column begins with a discussion of what coaching is. It then goes on to: how to decide whether you want/need a coach, how to choose a coach based on those needs (goals), how to talk with a coach, how to best benefit from coaching, and what good coaching is for you.

Here is a definition of coaching that I like: "Coaching is an art and a science, the purpose of which is to provide advice, instruction, and motivation-enhancement for both thought and action, with the primary objective of maximizing performance, in the context of the person's goals." With these concepts in mind you can then decide if you really need or want a coach that. If you do, using this definition of coaching tells you that your first task is goal-setting. (My, for regular readers of mine, what a surprise!) You need to know what your goals in our sport are before you can realistically and successfully set out to maximize performance in a way that makes sense for you.

To help you frame goals that make sense and make sense for you, I suggest that you spend some time thinking about and answering the following questions. Do you want to go faster? For what purpose? Set a new P.R., place in your age-group, qualify for Nationals, and maybe Worlds? Just for the fun of going faster, perhaps? Do you want to go longer? If you have been doing sprints, is the goal to do that first Olympic-distance race? In either example, why do you want to do it? For yourself? For someone else? Does setting such a goal elicit happy thoughts? Or are they more of the oh-my-gosh-why-do-I-keep-doing-this-to-myself



type? Perhaps you want to improve technique, such as in swimming, without necessarily going either faster or longer (although better technique should equip you to do both). And again, why? Once you have spent some time thinking about these questions, and others that will come up in the process, and set a goal or goals that you think coaching will help you to achieve, then it is time to move onto the task of choosing and hiring a coach.

Coaches come with a variety of skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Answering the questions above will make it more likely that you will choose a coach who is going to work for you, by working with you to meet your and not his/her needs. Regardless of your goals, the most important characteristic of a coach for individual sports is that he/she has the ability to both understand and realistically assess their client, that they have that central social work skill of "getting to where their client is." The good coach understands that the most important first element of coaching is goal-setting by the client and not by the coach. In contrast with team sports where the primary goal is to win and the coach must make decisions based on that desired outcome, a coach in individual sports must listen to the client and make decisions based solely on the client's needs, wants, and abilities realistically assessed.

A good coach will say to a client "What do you want to achieve? I will do my best to help you succeed." A good coach will realistically help a client define goals, as well. They will present such thoughts as: "Do you think that that is really a good starting goal? Let's look at your time availability, your present health status, your physical

skills, and your genetic endowment.

Maybe, at least for now, you should re-think that one about placing in your age-group. Given who you are and where you are, right now, I am pretty sure that if you set that as your goal right now, you are going to have a difficult time reaching it, at least in this season. Let's instead look at something that you can reasonably expect to achieve this year."

Although the good coach does not set goals for his/her client, the good coach should bring a strong dose of realism to the discussion of goals, and then in light of them guide the design of a training program suitable for each client.

Finally, if you are to be a good client, you will be able to talk to your coach about what you are getting — and not getting — out of the program as you move through it. If you feel that you don't seem to be communicating well with your coach, I suggest that you address the issues directly with him or her. After all, you are paying the freight. If talking things out doesn't produce the desired results, change coaches. Coaching can be very helpful for many athletes at all levels of ability and desire, as long as the right goals are set and the athlete and coach work together to achieve them in the right way.

Note: This column shares certain text with a column of mine entitled "Talking About Training: Choosing a Coach" published in the Spring, 2007 issue of the American Medical Athletics Association Journal. I am the Editor-in-Chief of that journal and write a regular column for it under the head: "Talking About Training." The shared material is used with the permission of the Managing Editor.