

O'Dea “Breakaway” Team Training Trip

by: Tom Schutte, O'Dea High School, Seattle, WA

Tom Schutte has been the Head Coach of the O'Dea High School Irish since 1992. He has been a NISCA member since 1999 and has been named the Washington State Coach of the year in 2000 and 2004. The Irish were the Washington State Team Champions in 2004.

Sometimes our best ideas are borrowed from others. This is what we did in building a fun and dynamic Christmas training team trip this past December. It all started with a summertime conversation with a football coach from nearby Shorewood High School north of Seattle, WA. Coach Mike Sherry told me about the exciting team trip that his football team had taken from the legendary football coach Frosty Westering from Pacific Lutheran University. The title of the PLU team bonding trip is “Breakaway.” As Mike informed me about his successful experiences in adapting the PLU model to his high school team, my mind was clicking on how I could learn more about it and tweak the same team building concepts from PLU into our swim team training trip in December 2010. Once the inspiration was sparked with the ingenious work from Coach Westering, the vision started coming together.

For a little background, Pacific Lutheran University is a top quality institution with a tradition of great football. Their former coach Frosty Westering earned numerous championships and distinguished honors

as a top level coach. Since his retirement his inspirational son, Scott Westering has kept the vision alive with great teams and purposeful athletic development. Their program simultaneously focuses on winning on the field and molding young men into champion people off the field. In learning about how to set up our own Breakaway trip, I read Frosty's inspirational book *Make the Big Time Where You Are*. Next I spoke

with Coach Scott Westering about the specifics of their long 30 year history of running their annual Breakaway team bonding trip. They take 90 college football players out to a Washington state camp area, get them into competitive squads, and they compete for four days in various challenges designed to get them to work together and strive to overcome obstacles.

When I heard the motivational ideas from Scott Westering and the setup for his program, I knew my high school swim team would be captivated by an opportunity to do a similar experience. Over the last few years I have been learning about gender differences in the brains of boys and girls through the work of the Gurian Institute. As a GI certified trainer, I have learned that one of the numerous insights in boy brains is that boys have 20 times more testosterone than girls and this sets boys up to be innately hard wired in the brain towards competition and accepting hard physical challenges. Giving boys a program of demanding challenges is an important aspect of their maturation process toward manhood.

With the tips from Coach Scott Westering and my background with the Gurian Institute, I was excited to put it all together for our first O'Dea High School Breakaway swim team travel experience. After a few months of planning this fall, we headed off to Central Washington University in Ellensburg, WA with 24





swimmers. All interested team members were included. I broke them into six squads of four with a designated junior or

senior squad leader in each group. The squads were evenly balanced in terms of maturity, age, and swimming ability. Each group created a squad nickname for themselves and temporary shoulder tattoos. Then the fun began.

Over the course of four and a half days our team had seven two-hour pool workout sessions for a total of 14 hours in the pool with each practice running between 5,500 to 6300 yards. Interspersed into the trip were 16 different squad challenges that we scored out like a standard duel meet 6-4-3-2-1. Some challenges were held at the end of our workouts like the combined time of a 200 Medley squad relay and 400 Free Relay and also the cumulative squad time for a racing 25 underwater fly kick. Squad Captain Nick “the Hammer” Hartsell said, “This trip was the most enthusiastic bonding experience I have ever been on.” Between the morning and afternoon swim workouts, we had dryland challenges like: the Navy Seal Fitness Challenge, Dodgeball, Ultimate Frisbee, soccer shootouts, and 4 on 4 basketball games. One



of the great features of Central Washington is that they have indoor facilities with a 50 foot rock climbing wall and a team building Challenge Course. Chris

Allen, one of our outstanding sophomores said, “This training trip not only improved ourselves in regards to strength and endurance, but it helped us grow stronger as a team.” Each evening we had great dinners, laughed, played games liked Pictionary, Taboo, Trivial Pursuit, a :60 cracker eating contest, and tabulated the running squad scores for the day. Although the team was tired from the training, the thrill of rising up to another challenge was one that kept them drawing on each others inner discipline and motivation. They learned to work together, compete, and do a “best effort” for each challenge. Our senior team captain Lee Rivers said, “The Breakaway trip showed us as a team that we can rise up in a challenging time or situation and grow stronger though all our combined efforts.” On our final evening we had our Fire Ceremony bonfire where each boy is asked to say one thing he is

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proud of himself for doing, to acknowledge the efforts of one teammate and make general comments on the Breakaway. It was a powerful evening that the team called “Manergy.”

Although we have taken three previous trips to San Diego over Christmas, this Breakaway vision is one experience that created a special lifetime memory that

our boys felt they would remember for years to come. Great team training and bonding occurred throughout the experience and their male brains were fed the “candy” of challenging competitions. “It showed us what it means to be mentally tough.” Danny Cavanaugh, Squad Captain. The winning squad was lead by senior Academic All American Ryan Kennedy and his “Kool Kids” squad.

We returned to Seattle on the afternoon of New Years Eve Day in treacherous mountain pass driving conditions. Nine days later we competed at the Kentridge Invite where the Breakaway training came to fruition. Our team earned dozens of best times and several new state qualifications.

Sometimes our best ideas are borrowed from others. I humbly share with you what was given to me. It changed our team for the better, maybe you can use some of these ideas in your own programs and have some success with them also!