

# A Winning Combination.....

## Learning for understanding could be the key to top level athletes

*By Case van Wyngaarden*

Former Olympic champion Cari Read understands what it takes to be a top-level athlete, but she isn't going to tell her students.

After winning a silver medal at the 1996 Atlanta games, Read has taken on the task of coaching some of Canada's most talented, national-level synchronized swimmers. While Read's successful history as a synchronized swimmer has lead her to coaching, it's the uniqueness of those coaching tactics that has opened the door to a master's research project in the Faculty of Kinesiology.

Instead of a coach telling an athlete what it takes to win, Read says "a true winning combination also includes athlete input; this involves thinking, reflecting, and asking questions."

The critical thought of an athlete has traditionally played a more important role in open sport. This is competition that requires an athlete to respond to an opponent's actions, such as in football or hockey. Read's research involves a qualitative assessment of how "learning-for-understanding" coaching methods will impact the success of closed sports (pre-prepared performances) such as synchronized swimming.

The demand for this type of coaching is at the national level. An extensive survey of coaches that found one of the most desired qualities in a national-level athlete is self-reliance. A great attribute for just about any profession.

Read believes the importance of the research is to develop an educational model to prevent people from becoming dependent on outside leadership.

"To understand your actions in a larger context, to be self-reliant, and to be able to critically think and reflect instead of relying on outside leadership are powerful attributes," she says. "These are qualities that I would want my own doctor or lawyer to possess."

The students participating in the research, aged 14 to 21, keep extensive journals on their progress, feelings, and frustration levels as they progress through their training. It's the feelings expressed in these journals that serve as the results for the research.

Although the study is too short to make any statistical matches between coaching methods and athlete success, Read explains the ideal follow-up would involve interviewing each of the athletes again in five years to see how these coaching techniques affected their careers.

Cultivating this critical thought has been a difficult road for both the coach and her athletes, says Read. But despite the student's frustrations, the importance of the teaching model is beginning to have an influence.

One of Read's students recently presented her with a quote by British novelist E.M. Forster that she felt accurately captured the importance of her research: "Spoon-feeding in the long run teaches us nothing but the shape of the spoon."

*Case van Wyngaarden is a masters student in civil engineering and writer in the University of Calgary SPARK program (Students' Promoting Awareness of Research Knowledge). He is also the President of The University of Calgary Medical Journalism Club.*