



One of the VAST's more experienced swimmers completes yet another lap during Monday's practice. Practice sessions for older swimmers typically last up to two hours. The younger team members enjoy the opportunity to get to know and interact with kids of high school age on a regular basis. (Photo by David Lias)

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jump in the water, that have never been swimming before, or maybe some that have just completed swimming lessons, and we show them how to swim."

Typically during a practice of the VAST team, held at the indoor pool at the DakotaDome, Mike is a constant presence, shouting encouragement and directions, giving instant feedback when he spots a swimmer who needs to improve a stroke or a technique.

And, there are the drills. On Monday night, Mike instructed his swimmers, at one instance, to swim the length of the pool at a moderate rate, but to finish their lap by pushing themselves to swim as fast as they could. The sessions may have been a bit more intense, with the state meet scheduled over the weekend.

VAST usually practices for an hour, from 7 to 8 p.m., Mondays through Thursdays. The team also gathers at the DakotaDome pool Sunday evenings, from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m.

The oldest members of the team – those of high school age – usually stay in the water for two hours each night of VAST's practice schedule.

Swimming is a sport that demands a degree of discipline. But, Mike recognizes that the true purpose of VAST is not to have young people win as many heats as possible, or come home from meets clutching as many trophies as they can.

He simply wants his kids to be at their best when they enter the water. So, he cajoles them to perfect each stroke. He asks that they work hard, to be in the best shape possible.

He also makes sure to not become so overzealous that he takes away all of the fun that his young athletes deserve to experience.

"At VAST, the goal is not really winning. It's about getting better, about improving, and about having fun. It really is. If you improve and you have fun, then we're doing a great thing," Mike said. "And I really think that is happening. Our kids go to meet after meet, and they are just happy."

"The majority of our kids are in the age range of between 9 and 12 years old," he said. "And so, the goal is developing them fundamentally in technique, stroke work, all of that kind of stuff. It's not so much on winning. That's the focus

right now, and that's okay."

Susan Hackemer was at the DakotaDome pool Monday, watching her daughter, Anna, go through her paces in the water. She is happy that Anna decided to become a member of the team.

"I think it's because of the regular exercise, and it's basically a year-round sport," Susan said. "There are a couple of short breaks but you basically are swimming all year round. The kids practice two, three, four times a week, so I think they learn that value of regular exercise."

Anna has been swimming a VAST member for two years.

"For my swimmer, I know that she prefers this kind of competition," Susan said. "You are part of a team, but you're mostly competing against yourself. It gives her, I think, a feeling of a bit more independence, rather than being on show in front of everybody and competing. It fits her temperament and personality really well."

"She's always loved to swim, and I had suggested that she try the swim time a couple times," she added. "But they had a fun meet in April two years ago, and she came to that with a couple of friends and just loved it, and has been a regular participant ever since."

Susan enjoys the fact that swimming, participants, including her daughter, can set their own individual goals that help not only the team, but also themselves.

"They are taught how to perfect this sport, to work on this, but then they are able to go out and work on it on their own, too, rather than having somebody right there," Susan said. "And the whole competition isn't based on whether you made the goal or the basket, or didn't, or whether your actions affect if your team won or lost a game."

Both Susan and Anna have discovered a bonus to the VAST experience.

"It's amazing how much camaraderie you can have in just three minutes at the end of the pool," Susan said.

John Smith sat outside of the pool Monday, watching the VAST team practice through the large glass wall near the facility's door. His 10-year-old daughter, Lexi, was splashing in the water. She's been a member of VAST since she was 6.

"We had an apartment behind Super 8, and when she

was 5, she liked to go swimming, and she didn't know how to swim, so I just told her to kick her legs, and that's how she got started," John said. "Then we brought her here (to VAST) and they gave her a tryout, and they worked with her on the strokes, and she's been involved with it ever since."

Swimming has become an important part of her daughter's life, he said.

"She likes it – we have to put the reins on her sometimes – she would go every day if she could. We have to kind of hold her back some, except for this week. This week is a big week."

"I thought it would be a phase that would only last for a little while, but she really likes it and she's sticking with it," John said. "She makes a lot of friends, and she has fun doing this. She has three other friends on the team that she's really tight with, and now they swim together on a relay team. That's pretty good. It's an individual sport, and she likes that, but she's a competitor, too. I think that's why she likes swimming in the relays."

Jennifer Martinez watched her daughter Madison, 10, go through her paces in the pool.

"This will be her third year on the team," Jennifer said. "A couple of her friends were swimming for VAST and she wanted to try it, and that's how it began for her."

"We came out and did the tryout, and she fell in love with it," she said. "She's very competitive, so she really likes it. It keeps in her shape, too – she also plays soccer and basketball. It all helps keep her fit year-round."

Jennifer is happy that her daughter has chosen swimming as part of the mix of athletic activities she enjoys.

"It's fun, and you can do it all year round, both indoor and outdoor," she said. "I thought it would be a phase – that she might just do this for a short time, but she gets to meet all of these high school girls that are on the team, and she's made some pretty good friends with those older kids. I think she can see herself swimming (on VAST) until she's at least as old as they are."

"Swimming is a life-long sport, and it's so good to give kids an opportunity to have regular exercise at such a young age, and they keep doing it as they grow older," Mike said. "Some of the kids stay active in the sport through high school, and compete as swimmers when they go off to college. That's pretty neat."

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to develop and process that oil then we pay other countries to ship that oil over to Pakistan. Then we pay Pakistan to use their port, and we pay Afghan truckers to transport oil and gasoline over the two overland roads that lead to Afghanistan," Victoriano said. "We're paying much more than \$2.50 per gallon (for gasoline) at that point."

The money the U.S. pays to Afghan truckers eventually winds up in the hands of the Taliban, Victoriano said. They are forced to fund Taliban activities in order to stay safe on roads controlled by the terrorists.

"The Taliban takes that money that we gave Afghan truckers to transport that oil, and they set up ambushes on those roads and destroy our (military) vehicles and kill our men and women over in Afghanistan using the money that we paid for that oil," he said.

The U.S. has paid approximately \$66 billion for oil from Saudi Arabia, Victoriano said. "Since the 1980s, they (Saudi Arabia) have spent \$70 billion on extremists, insurgents and terrorists – the same terrorists who are killing members of our military in Iraq, Afghanistan and throughout the world."

The U.S. military is taking steps to wean itself from such a heavy dependence on oil from countries that wish to put American troops in harm's way.

"On bases throughout the United States, the U.S. Army, for example, is transforming its fleet of vehicles and its installations to use alternative energy sources," Victoriano said. "It's our responsibility, as civilians, to also take action – to learn the facts, to discuss this with our friends, families and neighbors, and to influence our members of Congress to push through energy reform now."

In the words of Operation Free, oil addiction means the U.S. must fight just to "keep the lights on." The organization's literature notes that "the longer the U.S. remains dependent on fossil fuel, the more the U.S. will have to engage in tough fights just to protect energy supplies."

It is, as Victoriano noted, an expensive fight. According to Operation Free, the U.S. Navy budgeted \$28.1 billion to patrol sea lanes alone in fiscal year 2009, with much of that patrolling to keep trade, particularly oil, flowing.

"Our energy policy and our climate security are linked," said Patrick Bellon, a U.S. Army veteran who served in Iraq. He noted that many of the people across the globe who commit acts against U.S. troops don't fit the stereotype most Americans have of terrorists. Many times, people who set off roadside bombs or commit other sorts of violence, Bellon said, do so simply to earn money to survive.

The increase in the use of fossil fuels, and the subsequent climate change it causes will only make that problem worse.

"Climate change is going to increase the civil unrest around the world; it's going to increase the pool of potential terrorists that people who are against our best interests are going to draw upon," Bellon said.

Climate change will also exacerbate national disasters in some of the poorest nations in the world, he said, creating a situation where terrorists can effectively take advantage of people in desperation.

"That's why we are here today, to make this connection between our energy policy and consumption, the types of fuel sources that we have, and their effect on the climate," Bellon said.

Leighann Dunn, a USD

graduate student and S.D. Army National Guard veteran who served in Iraq in 2003-04, said every day while in that country, she would encounter long lines of cars and trucks whose drivers were waiting for just one thing: gasoline.

Something somewhat similar happened in the United States in the 1970s, when a fuel crisis caused long lines at gas pumps across the nation.

"Today, we import 70 percent more of our energy than we did in the 1970s, and what happens when that day comes when those countries turn off that resource? What happens to our military?"

It's time, she said, for the United States to invest in developing sustainable energy sources for the future.

"We need to put our money and resources into all different types of energy – such as solar, wind and biodiesel," Dunn said.

Eric Dunn, a USD student who spent nine years with the South Dakota National Guard, said the U.S. military needs two things to operate: water and oil.

"We have enough water right now, but we get 60 percent of our oil from foreign countries," he said. "Why are we getting 60 percent of something that we need to defend our country from other nations? That just doesn't make any sense, especially when you stop and consider that the billion dollars a day we spend on importing oil from other countries could be spent here in America."

"We could create jobs, and keep that money in our own economy," Dunn said. "The byproduct would be a safer America, a cleaner America, and an America that is better to live in. That's why we are so passionate about Operation Free."

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