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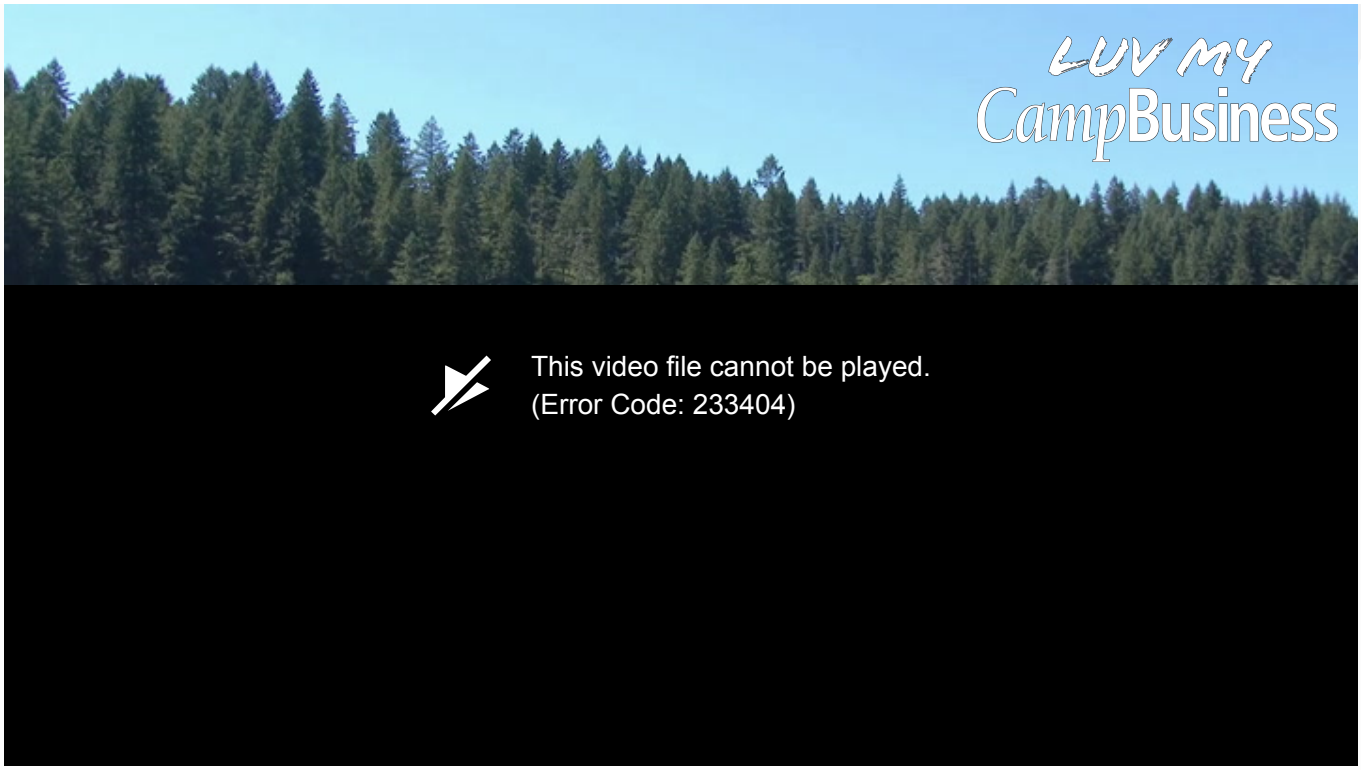
FEATURES I NEWS

On The Waterfront



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How to create the best experience for aquatic staff members and campers

By Jonathan Caflun

Photos: Camp Wekeela

The waterfront can be the most fun—yet dangerous—part of a summer camp. Whatever water elements camps have (i.e., pools, ponds, or lakes), water safety remains one of the biggest concerns for most directors. Aquatic-programs supervisors must follow a strict schedule and rotate

lifeguards to avoid burn-out and fatigue, while maintaining a level of swim instruction that keeps the entire camp community safe. That is a lot for aquatic team members to juggle, whether they are supervising, organizing, teaching, guarding, or mentoring. When Camp Wekeela in Hartford, Maine, opened during COVID-19 in 2020, a main concern was the extreme and necessary attention to the procedures for mitigating risk in the water. However, there was extra concern that the hyper-focus on COVID-19 would cause a distraction from the other safety elements associated with the waterfront. An experienced and tough water-safety trainer was brought in so lifeguards did not become complacent. In the new world in which we live, how can directors feel comfortable knowing that staff members have so much on their minds.

The short answer is they cannot. When lives and livelihoods operate on the safety of camp programming and the strength of staff members, directors must create an environment where everyone feels empowered while remaining focused. There are three ways that camp professionals can create a better environment on the waterfront, while implementing all aspects of beach, boat, and water safety.

1. Hire the best people possible.

While this is always the goal, hiring the best staff members can be challenging. Most camps did not have any international staff in 2020 or 2021, so hiring an all-American staff was difficult. Camp Wekeela relies on referrals and former campers in hiring American staff members. Although lifeguards can work at local pools or beaches during the summer for minimum wage, there are more benefits that a camp environment can provide, such as leadership opportunities, lifelong friendships and memories, and "bonus" benefits like meals and room and board. Making the job as enticing as possible for applicants is vital. Hire staff members who can teach and guard. Then trust that they can maintain a level of enthusiasm, safety, and responsibility for campers to have a good experience on the water.

2. Consider making the swimming program instructional instead of instructional swimming.

Most campers dread the words “swim lessons.” Although they are an important part of any water-safety program for camps—and an important selling point for parents—there are other ways to showcase this life-saving skill. For example, there are many other aspects of a great aquatic program, such as boating, beach games, and fishing. For camps that have these elements, consider shifting the focus from instructional swimming lessons to a more generic instructional program. The diversity in activity—and sometimes a simple, spontaneous change—can be exciting for campers. A shift from swimming to learning the skills of fishing, sailing, or stand-up paddle-boarding can be an exciting experience for campers and a great, lifelong hobby. For camps with a boating, fishing, waterskiing, or wakeboarding program, there is no more important level of safety than actual instruction in the activity. Being able to swim is paramount, but you would not want campers with no experience to take a sailboat into the water. Implementing an overall instructional program can be a fun, new option while building water-safety procedures.

3. Think about an on-site training

and/or CPR program.

If the budget allows, offering an on-site lifeguard and/or CPR program for lifeguards is a valued investment for aquatic safety. If they take the time during the off-season to complete a lifeguard-training program (Red Cross, YMCA, LifeGuard Pro, etc.), staff members may arrive with the physical certification and a good knowledge of overall/ general safety without a functional knowledge of your specific lake, pond, pool, etc. An on-site trainer during staff training can accomplish several goals, such as gaining experience in water-safety training and certification, as well as camaraderie and teamwork, which is a good return on investment. However, some staff members will undoubtedly have an up-to-date lifeguard certification (most U.S.-based lifeguarding certification lasts two years), or camps will not want to pay for individual certifications, which can be pricey. For those who are not interested or financially unable to pay for each staff member's training through an off-site course, training can be offered or required for members not previously certified. This can usually work with an on-site trainer for a discounted student rate.

Working on a water-safety program is one of the most important aspects of camp. Not only does having trained staff members who are prepared for the fatigue of the job, but providing staff and campers the right tools to make the job more fun can lead to great success for camps and programs.

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