

The NISCA Journal

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"Serving More Than 265,000 Athletes In Over 12,600 Programs"

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Cover Photo:

On the cover: The swimmers of Clearfield High School have a little fun at their morning practice. The Bison and Lady Bison are coached by Jackie Morrison, who also provided the photo.



FEATURE:

IMPACT OF COACHES

Michael J. Stott, Collegiate School, Richmond, VA



It is fair to say that the advent of COVID-19 altered, perhaps forever, the way coaches, high school or otherwise, go about their line of work. Many were lucky in that their teams had a championship meet or two. In Pennsylvania 2A teams had half a meet. Others, in Colorado, California and Nevada to name three, none at all.

Throughout the coronavirus days coaches stayed connected with their athletes, celebrated accomplishments, altered graduations and planned for a new season unlike any other in recent memory. It was also a great time for reflection.

In preparation for writing letters to my 2020 graduating seniors I chanced upon a treasured correspondence. Small of stature with tiny hands and feet, the writer was a feisty personality and a reluctant swimmer. She had below average swimming skills and stayed the course only two years. In time she became an outstanding libero on the varsity volleyball team. To my amazement, upon my high school coaching retirement she wrote me a letter.

"My first day of practice as a seventh grader you welcomed me to the swim team, and you quickly adapted to my sass. You were able to understand me as an athlete. You had me pegged from that very first day, telling my parents I was a 'fireball' after only knowing me for about two hours. You worked hard to always motivate me and make practices all the better with our banter. It never mattered that I wasn't the best swimmer on the team.

"You saw my effort, and you worked tirelessly to help me improve. You never let me give up. You always pushed me, and I am so lucky to have had the pleasure of having you as a coach. You truly made my two seasons as a swimmer wonderful. Your coaching style, constant enthusiasm and dedication to individuals is inspiring. You taught me that even if I hate something, for example the 200 freestyle, if I work hard and try my best I can achieve great things, like dropping time in an event I was unsure I could finish. You always believed in me even when I didn't believe in myself. You never let me compete at a level lower than you knew I could achieve. And even when I didn't get my best you always encouraged me and helped me constantly improve. I can't express to you enough the impact you've had on me not just as an athlete but as a person. I am grateful to have swum for you, and I wish you the best of luck in the next chapter of your life. Lots of love, Caroline Laskin."

Heartfelt Appreciation

The vignettes below offer glimpses into the lives of coaches and the gifts they have given their athletes. The words of Olympian Peter Varellas...“The most important choices I have made in my life have been based largely on the advice of my parents and coaches” are a powerful reminder of our influence. Hopefully, some of what follows will resonate with you and possibly spur you to reconnect with some of your charges from days gone by.

Other Voices

Polly Linden is head coach at Harpeth Hall in Nashville. In 2018 and 2019 her team was named *Swimming World* girl's national champions. Her Bearacudas have won 12 Tennessee state titles since 2001.

“I think coaching is hard at times,” she says. “As I have to remind my girls, it is the job of the coaches to push athletes to be their best, and sometimes in the moment it doesn't feel good to be pushed that hard. Inevitably we coaches hear the grumblings and those things tend to stick with me, longer than they probably should. This past season, after a particularly tough practice, I overheard one of my freshman butterflyers exclaim, ‘Why do I even swim?!’ and that stuck with me. I knew, in my heart, that she would be grateful in hindsight—maybe when she next went a best time or if she qualified for state. And I hoped she would see the payoff and understand that we push them because we care so deeply and want them to be their best and be proud of themselves. But let's be honest, those things don't always come naturally to teenagers.

“And so, when I receive a note of gratitude like Emily's (see below), it is a refreshing reminder of

why I do what I do and why I have continued to do it for 25+ years. Knowing how much she cherished every practice makes leaving the house for 7:30 p.m. practice that much easier. Even when the girls are grumbling about practice, it helps to remind me, if only for a day or two, how much being a part of this team means to the girls and how important it is for them in the moment.

“And then there are rarer notes that come from an adult who has had time to reflect on her life in high school. I think that is why teachers teach and coaches coach, because we believe we can make a difference. And so it is definitely gratifying to be told we did so. It's like winning a coaching award that no one else even knows about. It makes you happy and proud and content. And of course, it feels good to be appreciated.

“For as long as I can remember, I wanted to be a teacher and a coach. I imagine that has a lot to do with the teachers and coaches that I had in my life. I don't know that I ever penned a note to any of them, but I should have. Instead, I work to emulate them every day, that I might be for one of my students or athletes what they were for me.”

Note One

*“You have created a team that feels like home to me, and I truly count my blessings every time I hop in the car to come to practice. I am so endlessly grateful for all you do. Thank you for all your support, and thank you for putting us through all of the 5-4-3-2-1's and pyramids along the way. I can't wait for the last two months of swimming. Cuda fam forever ☺.
– Emily”*

And a second note from a long ago swimmer

“I just wanted you to know the impact you have

had on me. You gave me a community with whom I could relate and identify. I knew that I could come to you with any issue or concern and that you would support me in finding a resolution. At a time with such family transition and turbulence you created a space that was relaxed and steady on which I could rely. Thank you for being a part of my life and contributing to whom I am creating myself to be. – Ada”

Susan Mayfield was a 7x NCAA All-American while at Stanford. These days she coaches at Lakeside School in Seattle. She says “When I first started coaching just over six years ago, I felt the most significant impact I could have on athletes was improving their success in the pool. Being a former D-1 swimmer and someone whose experience is somewhat unique in the realm of high school swimming, I expected to gain the most satisfaction out of helping girls become stronger, faster and more successful swimmers. What I did not expect was how much mental growth I could offer these athletes that would transcend their time in the pool. By mental growth I mean a mindset of positivity and confidence in their abilities. The most rewarding experiences, I have found, are those where I see a change in an athlete’s perception of herself and her outlook on life. These life lessons that can be taught through sport bring me a tremendous sense of accomplishment and personal satisfaction. It is because of these moments, when an athlete shares with me how my coaching has impacted her life in a meaningful way, that I continue to coach.

“A couple of years ago I received a letter from a graduating senior. She wrote, *“I am beginning to reflect on those who have made a long lasting impact on me. I want to thank you...when I came to high school I felt I had a purpose and a place (on*

the team). However, with this I still had doubts about myself and struggled with my confidence. But you were my voice of reason. You have always been there to give me a hug and words of advice...I think the best thing I got out of Lakeside was meeting you because you have changed my perception of life and the energy I give out. I can’t thank you enough for what you have taught me, and I will cherish it forever.”

Another recent graduate wrote her saying, *“I genuinely think you are making so many people’s lives better through your role as head coach. You treat everyone as equals and, although swimming is a sport that tends to favor the people with the fastest time, you are so careful and dedicated to making everyone feel like they contribute important things. You are the biggest promoter of teamwork and support I have experienced at our school.”*

“Another former swimmer who struggled with keeping a positive mindset and tended to focus on setbacks and hurdles recently shared with me that I had helped her focus on the power of a positive mindset and reframed her way of thinking outside the pool. She talked about how this improved mindset was now helping her in the workplace and in her personal life.

“When I receive these types of messages and feedback, I am reminded how influential coaches can be in the lives of their athletes. Hearing I have impacted someone in a positive a way and potentially changed the trajectory of her outlook on life and herself is extremely gratifying. Of course not every athlete will be affected in the same way. Some athletes lean into the program and my philosophy more than others; and, naturally athletes connect with certain coaches more than others. Regardless,

when I hear from athletes as they reflect on their experiences, it motivates me to continue to find ways to evolve and grow my own skills as a coach.

Chris Van Slooten, head coach American Energy Swim Club

"Many of us have had at least one person who was instrumental in shaping our careers. My 8th grade United States History teacher was that person. Mrs. Bakita was an electrifying teacher who demanded the best from her students. She possessed the ability to look at each student, see who they could become and expect them to shine. This is when I decided to become a teacher. I soon began exploring a teaching career by serving as an assistant swim lesson instructor at my community pool.

"I am now in my 30th year of coaching. I have worked with some outstanding coaches who have taught me many lessons. And I have coached hundreds of young people who have helped shape my life, including multiple high school All-Americans, state championship teams and top ten nationally ranked age groupers.

"One of the greatest ways swimmers have shown their appreciation has been staying in touch. Ali Khalafalla (Egyptian Olympian, 10x NCAA All-American) spent this past Christmas with me and my family. That visit was a tremendous 'thank you.' And being invited to a former swimmer's wedding was really special. Excerpts from the letter below come from a swimmer who had just completed her initial year swimming for the University of Kansas.

"I learned what a relationship with a coach SHOULD look like: open, full of trust, support and encouragement. I can't thank you enough for supporting me, giving me the practices I needed,

pushing me past what I thought was the end, dealing with my tears and attitude, being present and invested at every practice.

"It is so crazy to believe that I went from not being able to do a push-up, afraid of distance events and kind of shy to the strong, confident, outgoing woman that I am today. I can't reiterate enough how much your guidance, life chats, prayers and support have change my life."

Conversely athletes can shape coaches lives as well. In a letter of recommendation Jim Koehr, head boys and girls coach at Seton School in Manassas, VA., captures what he saw in swimmer Lauran Curley who faced what seemed like insurmountable circumstances and found an inner strength to overcome, persevere and succeed.

"It is fair to say her season with Seton Swimming changed her life," says Koehr. "She was not going to apply to college, so when she sent me a request to write her a recommendation, I was absolutely thrilled. In part Koehr wrote:

"Lauran has persevered in advancing her education and generating opportunities like this one after the death of her father, who for years was treated for a rare and dangerous form of cancer. The process was a giant drain on the family, both emotionally and financially, and it led to a long struggle for everyone involved, even after his passing.

"Through it all, Lauran, a middle child of nine, has been a rock for her family and excelled academically, far beyond what might be expected given the circumstance. I've known Lauran since she was a young girl. She is a faithful Catholic woman who was always willing to put the needs of others before her own. Though she had never swum competitively

Lauran joined the swim team anyway. Swimming in the beginner lanes she brought joy to practice every day and inspired all – including the coaches.

"Each year, we have a swim-a-thon on New Year's Eve for Cystic Fibrosis. Swimmers raise money for CF research by swimming 200 lengths – nearly three miles. Having never gone more than a few hundred yards continuously prior to the event, Lauran came and started swimming. I only rented the pool for two hours and when time was up Lauran was still going.

I could see the determination on her face, so there was no way I was going to ask her to get out of the pool. Another hour later, this swimmer who had never even had swimming lessons persevered to complete the swim-a-thon. I have tears in my eyes just reliving the experience."

And sometime coaches get notes from parents like this one to Koehr.

"Just thought I'd let you know that whatever you did at practice on Tuesday was awesome! I had a man come home from school that day ready to take on the world, still buzzing from practice. However short-lived that may be it was nice to see he has it in him to really want to earn something.... your respect, pride in swimming, maybe a win... Anyway - thanks --

Let's see if we can get that boy to RACE this weekend!"

Lanny Landtroop is the winningest coach in Texas UIL swimming history. His swimming CV reads in part:

- Coached at five high schools, primarily at Clear Lake and Kingwood, compiling a career dual meet record of 543-15-2

- His teams won 67 district, 16 state championships, two state water polo and three Swimming World national championships
- 18x TISCA Coach of the Year
- NFHS Coach of the Year
- Texas High School Swimming Coach of the 20th Century, NISCA Hall of Fame, NISCA Collegiate Scholastic Award

One former swimmer wrote:

"How do I begin to tell you what an angel and inspiration you have been to me in my life. When I reflect back on my school years, no one comes close to the positive influence you had on me as a young adult. The foundation of positive principles has remained with me through the years and serve as a framework for which I strive to live my life.

"I still throw 110 percent of myself and strive for excellence into all that I do (career, projects, etc.) not accepting anything short of success. I still find it strange when other people don't operate from the same premise. This is how deeply ingrained these values have become to me.

"I want you to know how deeply grateful I am to have had your awesome presence and teaching in my life. You are a blessing to me in my life and in the world. Love," – Angie Lysandron-Kocurek."

Another said:

"You made a profound impact on my life – certainly as a swimmer –but also as a person... You are a living legacy. .. Your influence has lingered in my life after all these years. A few of your lessons that stuck with me.

- Compete with class
- Continuously innovate
- Recognize talent but don't play favorites
- Make difficult things fun

Ask of others only what you are willing to do yourself. You were a coach and also a counselor, bus driver and weekend chaperone to a bunch of excited, hormone-charged adolescents. Only now am I able to appreciate your personal dedication. Thank you for investing in my life and for imparting such useful lessons." -- Clear Lake swimmer David Reed, '77

Giving Back

For all the nice things an athlete may ultimately say to a coach (or not) there is a time when the mentor can return the favor. The writing of college recommendations is one such time when he can reflect on the laudatory characteristics of the swimmer/applicant.

Don Heidary has coached at Miramonte High School in Moraga, CA for the past 30 years. He is co-founder of Orinda Aquatics, two-time president of the American Swim Coaches Association and an internationally recognized speaker on character development. What college wouldn't want a candidate when his coach writes:

"Scott is truly a coach in the water making sure that his teammates and training partners are pursuing their very best as well. On a daily basis you will hear Scott motivating those around him. His attendance, work ethic and focus are unparalleled. He has the

demeanor of a businessman, a warrior, a servant, a cheerleader, a mentor and an inspirational leader. He truly has no deficiency. He has impeccable integrity and is the 'go-to' guy for everything I would recruit Scott solely for his leadership and extraordinary team commitment even if he would never train or compete with my team."

Sometimes coaches receive an affirming epistle indicating that those lessons they have sought to inculcate actually hit home. Heidary received one letter that told him "mission accomplished."

"I'm just writing to you because lately I've been thinking a lot about the influence that you've had on my life (which is huge!!) and I'm reminiscing upon the good old days of Mats swimming.

I believe there were more than a handful of times during my four years on Mats swim where I did NOT want to go to swim practice. I would dread it all day long—not because I didn't love swimming or the team, but because I was physically and emotionally exhausted. I think a lot of the time I doubted myself and my ability to work through even the most difficult workouts, and I would want to give up before I had even begun.

Of course, I'd go to practice. And I'd do my best to have a positive attitude too, because I truly agreed with the values and lessons you instilled within all of us. I wanted to push myself, I wanted to be a good teammate and I wanted to be a leader. But what I didn't realize back then was how much I would miss swim practice—not the big meets or the Millie's breakfasts or the team dinners, which were obviously going to be missed by everyone—but the day-to-day, grueling practices that made you want to stop on the wall and 'fix' your goggles or 'stretch'. I genuinely miss those and wish that I hadn't feared

them so much when I was on the team.

"I wish I had appreciated those practices—more specifically I wish I had appreciated my level of commitment to an exercise, a team and a set of values that I acquired I took for granted my dedication to, and responsibility for, showing up to a strenuous workout. Why would I have to do that? Because my coaches and teammates depended on me and held me accountable.

"Now, I hold myself accountable: I show up to the gym for myself. But I miss showing up for other people, like coaches, teammates and friends. I miss finishing a set, looking up, being given another set and hearing a mixture of groaning and laughter from the team. In swim practice, when I would want to give up, I knew I couldn't..... I miss having a team, and I remember you sitting us down one day before a tough practice and saying, 'One day you're going to miss having a high school sports team.' Well, you were right!

"You really did change my life and I think about the things you've taught me all the time. I really appreciate what you do for young people, and I hope that everyone on the team will love the heck out of it, and then miss it dearly years later like I do. See you soon!." -- Zoe Zebetian

Testimonials

And then there are the tributes that come in long after a high school athlete has left the competitive arena. Among other things Dave Barney, 53-year mentor (45 as a coach) at Albuquerque Academy, was an inaugural NFHS coach of the year who compiled a 1146-70 dual meet record. He also won 42 combined boys and girls New Mexico state championships and is one of three swim coaches in the NFHS hall of Fame.

Colin Martin says that his association with Barney transcends the usual coach-athlete relationship. "He has taught me much more about life than he has about swimming.... I was a mediocre swimmer at best coming into the Academy swim team, but Dave inspired me to become one of the best swimmers in the state. The passion he has for the sport and his swimmers is the essential ingredient to creating a unique, family-like atmosphere on the Academy swim team.

"Dave is far more interested in his swimmers as people than as athletes. Even when I swam for him, most of our conversations had very little to do with swimming. He was always much more interested in my music, or how my family was doing, than in anything I was doing in the pool. My sophomore year he even cancelled a team practice so the entire team could go to our school's music building to hear me perform. This has since evolved into an annual "Night of Music, Art, and the Spoken Word" that has become a team tradition for over a decade.

"He truly cares about people. He has inspired me to not only be a better athlete, but a better human being. In my mind, that is the ultimate gift anyone can give to another person, and Dave has given it to countless swimmers over his decades as a coach."

Bill Schifani, is 72 years-old. As "a skinny, lazy 10-year-old who did not like cold water" Barney taught him basics of aquatic survival. As a senior in college Schifani took up recreational swimming and subsequently began a lifelong "transformational journey" with multiple swimming programs. "My health and social well-being have never been better and the friends I have made through swimming are strong and true. None of this would have happened without the support and instruction I received from Dave way back when. I shall forever be in his debt," he says.

The Personal Connection

Dana Abbott's coaching career includes 25 years at Katy High School and 12 at St. John XII College Prep near Houston. He is a 2x president of NISCA and been involved in all aspects swimming since leaving Eddie Reese after two years as an assistant at Texas. Abbott has coached thousands of athletes. He retired once, got bored and returned to the deck. These days he serves as a coach/mentor for the coaching staff at Katy Aquatics. Why? For one, he missed the personal engagement and the appreciation he got expressed in notes like the following:

"I've told you before, but you should hear this again that you were my parent and father figure through high school. I looked to you for guidance in the crazy world of adolescence. You provided the sound advice and modeled kindness and firmness. You gave me approval when I didn't get it at home. You, Coach Abbott, are in the very fabric of my being. To be an educator is to do this very thing. I am forever grateful." -- With respect and appreciation, Eileen-Beaner ☺ (Later an assistant coach with Abbott).

Why Coaches Coach

Let's agree there is no ONE answer. Coaches coach for many reasons, among them: to win, to educate and to make a difference in all its forms. And often a coach may wonder if his words are gaining traction until he receives a missive that crystallizes his life's work.

Like the one Don Heidary received from his former swimmer Brooke Woodward, an Emory University All-American.

"It is extremely hard to write this letter because I am not ready to leave the team that has been my backbone through the past four years. Reflecting on my swimming career, I will never remember my times, the grueling sets or any important meets. Instead, I will always cherish the lifelong relationships that I built over my years on the team and how they have changed me.

"In life, we gradually shape our identities through our reactions to the people and environments that surround us, so we truly become that to which we are most exposed. For this reason, every swimmer is incredibly lucky to be influenced by the team's philosophy, have access to the coaches' wisdom and have the constant support of extraordinary teammates.

"This is not a regular team. The pool environment is a haven where passion, dedication, unity and character thrive. Our team truly lives its mission statement. This team has taught me how to live a life of value and leadership. Through commitment to this team we learn pride and purpose, sacrifice and discipline and love and passion.

"Coaches: you are blessings to our team, our families and our community. No description could truly do you justice. You are the cornerstone of the true purpose

of athletics. Thank you for passionately showing us life's most important lessons and changing our lives selflessly and humbly. Thank you for teaching us humility, integrity, compassion, respect, honesty, work ethic and commitment. Although you convey your wisdom through talks, quotes, stories and videos, we learn the most from watching how you live your daily lives. I could not have asked for better mentors, role models and coaches and I know my friendships with you will last forever. Love,"

-- Brooke Woodward, Emory University

Enough said?

Michael J. Stott is an ASCA Level 5 coach whose Collegiate School (Richmond, Va.) teams won nine state high school championships. A member of that school's Athletic Hall of Fame, he is also a recipient of NISCA's Outstanding Service Award.



The Lady Spartans of Rochester Mayo High School, Rochester, MN are observing CoVID-19 protocols for their team photo. The team is coached by Juliet Parlette with assistance from Scott Diercks and diving coach Greg Andrews.