

# THE DAILY LIFE OF A COACH

## WHAT DOES YOUR COACH DO ALL DAY?

Club coaching offers few tangible benefits. The pay is low, the hours are long, and the professional respect is minimal. However, many coaches couldn't imagine doing anything else.

Peter Daland, the long-time coach at L. A. Athletic Club and the University of Southern California (and twice an Olympic coach), bluntly asked an assistant several years ago, "What are your goals?"

The assistant, a former swimmer for Daland, replied, "I'd like to marry my girlfriend, Shelly, and have four boys."

Daland knew that Shelly came from a wealthy background. He also knew the immense toll coaching can take on a family. His divorce, which he blames almost entirely on the demands of coaching, was a case in point.

"You have no place in this profession if you are going to fund all of that," Daland warned. "You might enjoy coaching, but you can't afford it. Check your business contacts, get hired, and make some money."

As Daland suggested, the assistant resigned at the end of the season and entered business. For his part, Daland had no compunction over nudging a young coach out of the profession.

"It isn't worth the money you get," he says. "You are never home. Look at how many weekends you are committed. It all comes down to Do you have a life? As a coach, you don't outside of swimming."

A career as a swim coach offers all of the promise of a free fall without a parachute. The salary scale is lighter than air. The hours are crushing. What free time there is falls out of synch with the rest of the work-a-day world. Paul Yetter, a young club coach in Maryland, unwinds every morning at breakfast, three hours after he awoke and ran a morning practice. On weekends he often drives directly from meets to evening practices. When he's off, his girlfriend is invariably working, and vice versa.

The long hours and meager pay aside, there's the matter of wafer-thin respect.

"When I tell people that I coach swimming," says Paul Stafford of the Terrapins Swim Team in Concord, California, "they ask, 'And you can get paid for that?'"

Given coaching's downside, it's hard to imagine that Spirit Swimming, a mid-size club in Newtown, Pennsylvania, had 20 hopefuls apply last year for the head coaching position after Bob Platt announced that he would be leaving (he subsequently changed his mind). Club owner Sue Schmelz expected the new coach to oversee the entire program of 120 swimmers, coach the senior group, supervise four, two-hour morning practices a week and five three-hour afternoon practices, and spend weekends either at practices or meets.

That computes to roughly 40 hours per week on the pool deck, to say nothing of the time in the office planning practices, preparing meet line-ups, meeting with the assistant and part-time coaches, and taking calls from parents. Vacations would be catch-as-catch-can, perhaps ten days in early spring and two weeks in late summer.

For all of this, Schmelz offered an annual salary that ranged from \$32,000 to \$40,000, depending on experience, plus medical benefits. According to a 1999 survey of The American Swimming Coaches Association, Schmelz's expectations and compensation package were in line with the going rate at other clubs in the United States.

“I’ve never calculated what I’m getting paid per hour,” says Platt. “I don’t want to know.”

Like writing, modeling, singing, and acting, the coaching profession has few barriers to entry. The supply curve is skewed by wannabes and part-timers who can enter the field at any time. Need another coach? No sweat. Find a college student or a willing parent and pay minimum wage.

The net effect is not only depressed salaries, which the coaches who last eventually overcome with creative, outside business endeavors, but a dismissive attitude toward the profession, which coaches young and old detest.

“We are professionals, just like lawyers and accountants,” says Platt. “You wouldn’t call them everyday asking about tax matters. You assume that they know what they are doing. Yet, I’ll have parents calling me every day telling me how to do my job. It’s the thing that bothers me most.”

(Only slightly more than the inevitable question from parents, “What do you do all day?”)

Platt has never been married, so he can’t address the problem many other coaches will list as No. 1: a disheveled family life.

“This is a real tough commitment to have and also have a mate,” says Mike Bemis, who coaches the Thunderbird Aquatic Club in Anacortes, Washington. “I should know. I’ve been married twice (and twice divorced) and I attribute the majority of the problem to coaching. Let me say that it was pointed out to me. I was blind to it at the time.”

The root of the problem, Bemis says, wasn’t the hours so much as the swimmers. They became his surrogate children. He looked on them not just as athletes to develop physically, but young men and women to nurture emotionally. He avidly followed their progress in school, the company they kept, the goals they formulated. If a swimmer was in trouble, Bemis knew about it at least a day before the parents. He came to realize that there was no room in his life for kids of his own. He hesitates to admit it, but at 53, unmarried and childless, the conclusion is inescapable. A career in coaching extracted an exorbitant price from his personal life.

Yet when asked if he would do it all over again, Bemis answers, “I would try to change things, but I don’t think the outcome would be any different. All in all I really don’t have a lot of regrets. I got far more out of coaching than I gave up.”

Low pay, long hours, little respect, and no family life, yet Bemis has few reservations. More surprising, he parrots many of the full-time club coaches in America, and certainly every other coach interviewed. Go figure.

### **IT’S THE KIDS, STUPID.**

Arthur “Reds” Hucht tells the story with a laugh, though he is unmistakably embarrassed by that moment he lost control. Hucht is old, old school. He started coaching on the Maryland Eastern Shore in 1935, shortly after he graduated from high school in Baltimore. His swimmers that summer worked out in the Chesapeake Bay. Fifty meters was from that buoy to this pier. Three girls, short on experience but long on desire, finished the season by winning titles at the Southern Atlantic Championships. From that point on Hucht was a coach, and he adjusted his life accordingly. He did whatever it took--managing pools, painting pools, building pools--to sustain his coaching habit.

At 84, Hucht still runs two practices a day for the KCO Swim Team. Over the last seven decades he’s experienced the ups--two American record holders--and the downs--always struggling for money for the club. Prior to the outdoor nationals one year in California, he had half the airfare he needed for his seven

qualifiers, so he drove them in a Volkswagen bus to Chicago where they boarded a plane for San Francisco.

"I learned early on that there wasn't a lot of money in coaching swimming," he says, a problem exacerbated by the fact that until recently he charged no dues to join KCO. In the early years, the swimmers didn't even have to pay the entry fees for meets.

Through it all, Hucht managed to stay married and raise five children. When asked what kept him at it so long, he offers the pat answer: "I love swimming. I've loved it ever since I started."

Sixty-six years of coaching, with the exception of time out for service in the merchant marine during World War II. Didn't the practices and meets get old after a while?

The question prompts Hucht to tell the story.

In the mid 1980s, one of his swimmers, a boy 15 years old, gave Hucht some back talk. The coach warned him, and when the swimmer persisted, Hucht instinctively smacked him, knocking the swimmer off his feet.

Hucht eventually apologized to the team. The swimmer, however, never complained. As he says now, "I deserved to get whacked." He went on to compete for the Naval Academy and become a SEAL. Whenever he's in Baltimore, he stops by to see his old coach.

"I get letters; the swimmers keep in touch," Hucht says. "It's the kids and their feedback. That's what keeps you coaching."

## A NEW MODEL

While his motivation is shared by most other coaches, Hucht is an anachronism and he knows it. Administration has never been more than a notebook and a pencil. He still makes up practices as he goes along.

"Spontaneity," he says, "it keeps practices interesting."

His pocket change totals more than he ever made directly from coaching swimming.

"It's a sport, not a business," he explains.

Daland insists coaching today has gotten easier, but it's hard to understand how. When KCO needed an outdoor pool, a friend who swam with Hucht in high school paid to have it built and hired Hucht to manage it. When the team needed another indoor pool for morning practices, Hucht simply appropriated a local high school facility, unbeknown to that school's administration. His free wheeling style is as out of place today as rap music at an opera, replaced by a corporate model of by-laws and boards of directors with duties and responsibilities delineated in copious detail.

Bob Bowman remembers a matrix he operated under when he was coaching the Napa Valley Swim Team in California. A five meant the coaching staff had complete say over the matter. A one meant it was a matter for the board. A three indicated split responsibility. All tasks, from buying equipment to entering swimmers in meets, were numbered.

As this corporate approach has moved to center stage over the last 20 years, coaches have encountered an unnerving problem on par with low pay, long hours and negligible personal lives. The board often makes decisions that traditionally were the preserve of coaches. Control has slipped beyond their grasp.

The problem is particularly acute when the board consists mostly of parents of swimmers.

“In many cases the coaches are being evaluated by people who have absolutely zero experience,” says Dennis Pursley, USA Swimming’s National Team Director and a board member of a parent-run club in Colorado Springs. “They don’t understand what to look for in a good coach or what it takes for the long-term health of the program. At every board meeting we have things come up that make absolutely no sense.”

Bowman, who is now with North Baltimore Aquatic Club (NBAC), coaches Michael Phelps, an Olympian last year in the 200-meter butterfly and arguably the best young swimmer in America. At practice he sometimes gets a lane to himself so his stroke is unimpeded.

“If we did that at a parent-run club,” says Bowman, “we’d hear about it.”

The alternative is a corporation owned and run by the coaches. This ensures control over team policy, but demands a business mind-set, which can be an anathema to coaches who want to talk swimming times and stroke techniques rather than interest rates.

“Most coaches really don’t like the business side of it,” says Murray Stephens, founder and head coach of NBAC (six full-time coaches, 250 swimmers, four rented facilities) and president and owner of Meadowbrook Aquatic Properties (three facilities, \$100,000 monthly payroll). “But that’s what it has become. You can get into college coaching or you can turn coaching into a business. If you want to stay and prosper as a coach, you have to control you own destiny.”

For Stephens, the business angle has offered an exciting new layer to his 34-year coaching career. He recalls the 1980s, when he already had coached one Olympic gold medalist (Theresa Andrews, ‘84, 100-meter backstroke and the medley relay) and was about to coach another (Anita Nall, ‘92, medley relay). He was teaching high school English and coaching a high school team in addition to NBAC. His time during the week was squeezed so tightly that he spent eight hours on Sundays correcting papers and preparing for classes. His income from coaching in a typical year totaled \$4,000. Time and again he would ask himself, “Who would do this for \$4,000 a year?”

Now he’s on the other side of the hump. He has bought pools and retired from teaching. He has control. He has financial security. He has a staff of assistants to cover practices and meets. He has time to spend with his wife and four children.

He’s better off, no doubt. Then again...

“There comes a time when you have to step up,” he says. “It’s analogous to moving up from a teacher to an administrator. But it’s probably not at much fun as coaching somebody to swim fast, as watching a swimmer progress to the top level.”

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