

COACHING COACHES ... TEN THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

By Chuck Wielgus, Executive Director of USA Swimming

I have spent the past thirty years working in the sports business. I have coached basketball, lacrosse, soccer and swimming ... and I have had the opportunity to work with many other sports, including baseball, canoe/kayak, golf, running, snowboarding, tennis, triathlon and volleyball. I have observed coaches at all levels; young coaches and experienced coaches, lazy coaches and dedicated coaches, troubled coaches and wise coaches. Like every other profession, the ranks of coaches offer a full spectrum of personalities and styles. Recently, I was asked to offer some advice to a group of young coaches. For better or worse, here were my ten tips.

1. BE SERIOUS

Serious people are taken seriously. Be a thinker, a doer, and a leader. Take things seriously and treat all others with respect. This doesn't mean you shouldn't show a lighter side of yourself, but don't be silly. Silly people aren't taken seriously.

2. BUILD YOUR REPUTATION ON THE FOUNDATION OF ETHICAL BEHAVIOR

The absolute worst part of my job is being the recipient of Code of Conduct complaints against coaches who have been charged with abusing their position of authority and trust with young athletes. Coaches who cross the line have their reputation tainted forever. You can never undo a conviction for sexual misconduct or financial improprieties. Your reputation is the most important part of your resume ... protect it for life.

3. TAKE A BROAD VIEW OF YOUR ROLE AS A COACH

I've heard many coaches say, "I just want to coach" implying that they don't want to be bothered with all the "other" things that interfere with their on-deck duties. This is a narrow and naïve view. Mature, professional coaches understand that while they are a specialist in the particulars of their chosen sport, they must also be a knowledgeable generalist as a community relations ambassador, financial planner, fund raiser, guidance counselor, human resources coordinator, media relations specialist, politician, parent advisor, salesperson and strategic planner. Ignoring these other roles will limit your professional growth.

4. BE COGNIZANT OF THE OVERALL EXPERIENCES OF YOUR ATHLETES

When you're working with young athletes, be aware that there are many things that impact their life. Be interested in their world and try to recognize the other things that are impacting the way they think and feel. Engage them in ways that broaden not only their physical skills, but challenge their mental participation. As a coach, you are going to have an enormous impact on a young athlete's life, so think carefully about how you can foster an environment that will give each athlete the opportunity to grow as both an athlete and a person.

5. BE POLITICALLY AWARE, BUT POLITICALLY CAUTIOUS

In many ways, navigating your way through life is very much about political

awareness. Keep your antenna up and be cognizant of the issues and relationships that can impact your ability to do your job. And while it's very important to be politically aware, it's equally important to be cautious about getting politically involved. Pick your issues and your battles carefully. Keep yourself and others focused on philosophies and principles, as opposed to personalities and people.

6. GET INVOLVED IN THE COMMUNITY

If you're an isolationist, then you'll be isolated ... get involved! Cultivate friends and supporters in your community. As a coach, you are absolutely helping to improve the quality of life for young people in your community. Find ways to share the successes of your athletes with local business and civic leaders ... and then find ways to give these same leaders an opportunity to contribute to your program. If others understand that you are doing things to improve the quality of life for others, they will naturally want to help you and your program ... but, you have to go find them and you have to ask for their help!

7. FIND A MENTOR

We all need mentors ... people we can look to for guidance and inspiration. It has been said that the best way to be a good conversationalist is to ask somebody else to talk about him or herself. Identify the people you admire most and then seek them out. Call up an older coach and offer to buy them breakfast in exchange for the opportunity to ask them some questions and to talk about different teaching techniques. This is such an easy and effective way to expand your personal horizon, improve your knowledge and develop new relationships. You'll be surprised how receptive others will be, but you have to initiate the invitation ... so just do it!

8. BE A LIFELONG LEARNER

The day you stop learning is the day you start treading water ... and that's when others will pass you by. Perhaps the most common characteristic I've seen in all our top coaches is that they never cease to stop looking for ways to add to their base of knowledge. They are always looking for that next little nugget of information that they can use to help them improve the way they can help their athletes. Lifelong learners are always growing and evolving.

9. BE PROFESSIONAL

Be proud of being a coach. How you present yourself to others will determine how others will view you. If you're sloppy in dress, manner and speech that's how most people will perceive you. On the other hand, you can't expect to compensate for a lack of competence and substance simply by looking sharp and talking smooth. Be yourself and be proud of what you do for a living ... and then consistently present yourself to others with those thoughts in mind.

10. HAVE FUN

The #1 reason kids quit sports is because it no longer is fun. You can be fun without being silly. Fun and interesting people are magnets; they attract others and keep the big ball of life rolling along. If you're the kind of person who really loves what you

do, then share that love with others. As the old saying goes, "life's too short" so make the most of it for yourself, your family and the athletes with whom you work.

Thanks for reading ... and thanks for being a coach!