



>> THE PLAYING OF THE NATIONAL ANTHEM IS A REALLY BIG DEAL FOR COACH KOEHR, WHO HAS FIVE SONS PLUS A SON-IN-LAW WHO ARE OR WERE MILITARY OFFICERS. HE TEACHES HIS SWIMMERS THAT, FOR THE REST OF THEIR LIVES, WHENEVER THEY HEAR THE NATIONAL ANTHEM, THEY SHOULD STAND AT ATTENTION WITH ONE HAND OVER THEIR HEART, AND DO ONE OF TWO THINGS: SING ALONG OR PRAY FOR THEIR COUNTRY.

SETON SWIMMING'S SAMPLE FOR SUCCESS

Jim Koehr, head coach of the Seton School swimming team in Manassas, Va., has devised an ideal model for a winning high school program.

BY MICHAEL J. STOTT | PHOTOS PROVIDED BY JIM KOEHR

Nineteen years ago when Jim Koehr got involved with the Seton School (Manassas, Va.), basketball was the school's most successful and popular sport.

No longer.

Since 1995, Conquistador swimmers have secured four boys' and four girls' Virginia Independent Schools Athletic Association Division II state titles and 48 conference titles, including 25 straight for the girls.

One reason is the involvement of former corporate executive Jim Koehr, the father of 12 who was never better than a good high school swimmer himself. Coach Koehr was training for an Ironman triathlon when his oldest son, Kevin, started at Seton and showed promise in the pool. When his wife, Colleen, a former Notre Dame swimmer, suggested that he take over the Seton team, Koehr went all-in as a coach and team organizer.

SETON VALUE SYSTEM

First, some background:

Seton fields athletic teams—junior high, junior varsity and varsity—in 12 sports. Its 24 coaches are almost all unpaid volunteers. All athletic fields and swimming facilities are rented. And last year, 73 of the school's 350 students—more than 20 percent—were swim team members.

Why?

For one, Koehr emphasizes a value system that is informed by the Catholic faith that is the foundation of Seton School. The team subscribes to four basic tenants that Koehr calls, "GEMS: Gratitude,

Excellence, Meekness and Sacrifice." Guided by those values, he's made the swim team experience inclusive, fun and a place where classmates can be with friends and inevitably get better.

Rather than be limited by natural playing constraints found in most high school sports such as basketball (five players), lacrosse (10) and soccer (11), he's found ways to expand participation options. For home meets, Koehr handles rental agreements, where he encourages unlimited exhibition entries, especially relays.

"If you have a 10-lane pool and run an exhibition heat of a 200 free relay, you can give 40 kids a good swim with their friends in less than three minutes. And since we always use Colorado Timing, we can publish a time for all 40 of them. Why wouldn't you do that?" he asks.

"These days, we host three or four dual meets and a Northern Virginia Catholic High School Championship with unlimited exhibition entries. We try to get every kid four swims each week. As a team, we wait for the championship season before we start limiting entries," he says.

A PERSONAL SWIM EXPERIENCE

Koehr does an outstanding job of making the swimming experience personal for both swimmers and parents. Swimmers not going onto varsity championship meets swim one last time in the Junior Varsity Invitational. There, Koehr personally offers color commentary about the kids in the water as they swim. "As a result, they come back ready to work hard to make varsity the next year. I always tell them, 'It's not about good, it's about better. If everyone swims a personal record, the winning takes care of itself.'

"Swimming is a sport where the winner is often the one willing to endure the most pain. Our society spends too much time trying

GEMS VALUE SYSTEM

Gratitude:
"Who has it better than us? Nobody!"

Excellence:
"We focus on better. Good takes care of itself."

Meekness:
"We help our opponents over the bar we raised by winning."

Sacrifice:
"We offer it up. We love our teammates."

to remove pain from the life of our kids. Youngsters are not fragile. With hard work, they will break down on occasion, but properly supported, they recover stronger than ever.

“My former assistant coach, Rich Lowell, said it best: ‘Kids need to learn to experience discomfort.’ Counterintuitively, it’s a philosophy that keeps the kids coming back for more.”

Koehr acknowledges that a team needs some top USA Swimming swimmers to win at the state meet and in some top Virginia conferences. However, last year, Seton’s boys won the regular season and the conference championship meet by wide margins without any USA Swimming swimmers and without winning a single event at the championship meet outright. “In a dual meet, second, third, fourth and fifth wins a meet—a lot,” he says.

“If you have kids who are willing to listen and work, you can teach them to swim well enough to get fourth or fifth in a dual meet all day long. Every human being needs to feel like they are winning. That is especially true of a teenager,” he says. “There are many definitions of ‘winning’ that a high school kid is willing to accept, so I always push personal records (PRs).

“I’ve watched kids who have been struggling in school socially or academically come completely out of their shells by simply finishing the 500 free in a real meet. Doing so can be the highlight of their young lives. I always try to find a way to have a meet with empty lanes in the 500 free that I can fill with exhibition swimmers. In advance, swimmers are often terrified, sometimes to the point of nearly crying. But when they finish, the most common response I get through a huge smile, is ‘Coach, can I do that again? I know I can do better next time.’

“That’s because they just learned a few valuable life lessons:

- *You can always do more than you think you can;*
- *Sometimes you have to take a risk and not go out so slow;*
- *Your biggest limitation in life is usually yourself.”*

WINNING IN THE POOL AND IN LIFE

“In high school swimming with limited training time, the fastest way to get faster is to do the stroke right. I personally don’t even coach particular lanes. I spend 100% of my practice time from Election Day to Christmas rotating from lane to lane, building every stroke and every wall in a progression—from scratch every year. Swimming 3,000 yards a practice five days a week doing the stroke incorrectly just ensures that you can swim inefficiently better than you could before.

“If you want someone to go from 9:00 in the 500 to 6:50, it is only possible with technique. If you want to see a happy swimmer, watch them break :30 in the 50 free for the first time when they started the



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season at :38. You’ll never do that just swimming more laps.

“Our team had 605 personal records last year, not counting PR relay splits. That was 605 wins for kids, many of whom were desperately in need of a win in their lives.”

A majority of those “wins” were chronicled in Koehr’s weekly blog on Seton’s comprehensive swimming website—www.setonswimming.org. It is not unusual for a Sunday Koehr blog to reach 5,000 words as he chronicles the exploits (and times) of swimmers from weekend meets. His missives recognize both triumphs and mere improvements, all the while reinforcing the team’s values and recognizing the team-wide cadre of parent volunteers. At a state meet, it is often Seton that provides the most parents for meet staffing. Invariably, they greet meet attendees with pleasant smiles and project an air of “how can I help?”

WORKING FOR A COMMON CAUSE


The Seton success has hardly been a one-man show. Koehr has built a culture around inclusiveness, fun and hard work, and has



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done an exceptional job of getting a large community of helping hands to share the load. His leadership skills include recognizing his own shortcomings. He has had the benefit of consulting USA Swimming coaches, learning their techniques, recruiting talented parent assistants and developing a large corps of willing parent helpers. His vast village of similarly motivated people working for a common cause even includes two volunteer coaches whose kids no longer go to Seton.

An entrepreneur by temperament, Koehr quickly recognized that he needed to get out of the "basketball paradigm" if he was to accomplish the goals he laid out for the team. "You can't run a

program like ours without loads of parent volunteers, and you can't get them if you insist on afternoon practices and weekday meets. Seton practices at 6:04 a.m. each morning and hosts a meet every Saturday afternoon."

LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES

Early in his coaching tenure, Koehr was elected the Virginia Independent School Athletic Association (VISAA) swim committee executive secretary in which he served as an enabler and constant information source for the membership. In addition, he also assumed numerous other leadership roles, including multiple terms as state meet director.

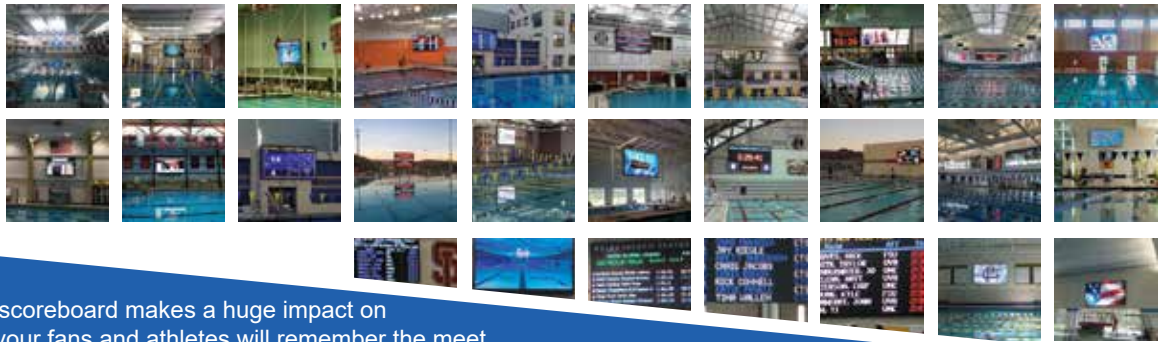
Koehr espouses four leadership principles. "Properly applied, I believe kids (and parents) will follow you anywhere..."

- If they know that you love them;
- If they feel like they are personally getting better;
- If they feel a part of something bigger than themselves; and
- If they feel like they are winning.

"High school swimming provides a unique opportunity to put those principles into practice. And kids will remember their high school swimming experience for the rest of their lives if you do," he says. ❖

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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.

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