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## Seton swim coach Jim Koehr creates a winning atmosphere

By David Fawcett



In the tight economy of Jim Koehr's world, time must be well spent. There is little room for anything extra and he has no tolerance for idleness.

Not when you are a father of 12 ages 4 to 25 who is a partner in at least seven different business ventures stretched from Richmond to Warrenton to Winchester and who also teaches two periods of math each morning at the Seton School in Manassas.

And certainly not when you add the title of varsity swim coach at Seton, where practices run three times a week starting at 6 a.m. at the Freedom Center and meets take place on the weekends from November until February.

In the rare moments when he does feel overwhelmed by the frenetic pace of his schedule, Koehr wonders if he has too many balls in the air.

One day Koehr's wife Colleen asked him exactly that and suggested that perhaps he should do less of it.

Koehr listened to what she was saying, but realized there was no way he could go into anything halfway. Koehr is an all-for-one, one-for-all type of person and if he's in, he's in 100 percent.

That's how the 47-year-old grandfather operates, full charge and energetic to the hilt. And the payoff is worth it.

"I can see the impact I'm having on these kids," Koehr said.

Since taking over as head coach in 2002, Koehr turned an already successful swim program into one of the state's best. The program by far draws the most participants of any athletic team at Seton (enrollment 350 students) with 76 coming out this year.

Last weekend, the Conquistadors won their 17<sup>th</sup> straight Delaney Athletic Conference title and this weekend in Christiansburg they will go for their third straight boys state title and their fourth straight girls title at the Virginia Independent State Swimming Championships.

Make no mistake. Koehr loves to win and brag on his team's accomplishments, but he makes it clear through his words and actions that swimming for Seton is more than just accruing titles and medals.

It's an experience that Koehr tries to make as fun and memorable as he can for each swimmer, whether that boy or girl is a state champion caliber performer or just someone who comes out to participate.

And the state meet is the highlight of it all where Koehr and Chris Cook collaborate like mad scientists to ensure the atmosphere leaves an indelible mark.

This is the fourth year that Koehr and Cook have run the state meet and each time out they look to top what they did the previous year.

Last year, things reached new heights when they introduced a fog machine and lasers that swimmers went through when they were introduced.

Music was also a staple of the meet.

Working off a two CD set called "Dad's Ultimate Rock Mix" that Koehr's oldest daughter compiled for him as a Father's Day present a few years ago, Koehr used the collection for warm-ups as well as for the championship finals. Van Halen, Rush, Jimi Hendrix, Molly Hatchet and The Knack blared from the speakers, joined at times by music that Cook allowed the kids to include.

Koehr didn't recognize any of it, which he jokes he wouldn't if it's something beyond 1987 that is not Guns 'N Roses. But the effect was still the same: to get the athletes pumped and the crowd fired up.

This year, the new addition is Swimming World TV coming and streaming the finals live across a JumboTron at the Virginia Tech Aquatic Center. To do this, the coaches had to pay \$3,500 to get them out here and do it, but it's an essential part of the show and what makes it special.

Purchases for the sound system and the fog and lasers also come out of the coaches' pockets. Plus, there is the setup. On Tuesday, Koehr and Cook loaded up a trailer and the back of a pickup truck with all their equipment and headed south to put their project into place.

“He gives 100 percent to this school and his family, team or job, but he’s also one of these people who gets 100 percent out of other people,” Seton athletic director Dan Vander Woude said. “He’s a fantastic manager of other coaches and he provides a blueprint for them and he develops them and that allows him to develop as much as talent as he does in the program.”

Koehr got into coaching at Seton by default.

In fact, if it had been left up to him, none of his kids would have attended Seton starting in the seventh grade after being homeschooled first. But Colleen overruled him and he’s grateful that she did.

What Koehr saw initially in Seton was strictly cosmetic. It was a non-descript, out-of-the way looking building that seemed almost archaic. Colleen, though, saw a dynamic place that would give their children a fundamental Catholic education that combined the spiritual and the academic without one being overshadowed by the other.

“I took the attitude that we could send our kids to any school, why send them to a school that looked like Seton?” Koehr said. “That was a reflection of my ignorance. It turns out that Seton has so much more than other schools. And they are important things that you can’t see by driving past it or walking past it. I’m a Seton convert.”

Koehr spent one year as an assistant on the swim team before taking over as head coach. The biggest draw for him was to coach his son Kevin, who went on to become a high school all-American and swim at Virginia Tech.

Koehr’s own swimming career peaked in high school, unlike Colleen who swam at the University of Notre Dame and comes from a family of gifted athletes.

In fact, Colleen Koehr competed last summer in a four-and-a-half mile race across the Chesapeake Bay.

While Koehr keeps active himself by participating in marathons and Iron Man competitions when he can, his abilities come more from his work ethic. He was the captain of the Groveton High School team in Alexandria for two years, but he said the teams were not that good.

Still, Koehr was never one to complain or pout or even feel like a victim because one of his legs was an inch and a half shorter than the other as a kid.

Koehr is the son of James Koehr, a retired rear admiral in the Navy. And if there was one thing that Koehr’s father always asked him, it was this: “Was that your best?” If it was, Koehr’s father was satisfied; if not then he wasn’t happy.

Over the years, Koehr has developed 10 Rules Of Success from various sources and his father’s influence has played a big part, especially in Rule 6, which says “Bloom Where You Are Planted,” and Rule 8, “Expect No Entitlements.”

There’s also Rule 5, which Koehr has considered changing from “Look to Yourself First” to something along the lines of: “control what you can control and never be a victim, even if you are.”

These rules are not original thoughts but more of a compilation of other people’s beliefs that Koehr feels strongly define a servant-leader’s life.

“It’s easy to get caught up in the pursuit of excellence at the expense of service,” Koehr said.

It’s a philosophy Koehr incorporates into his business as well as his coaching. In fact, the two are interchangeable. He runs his team like he would a company. He delegates, he organizes, he encourages, he plans and he includes everyone to make sure they feel like they are valuable contributors. He expects a great deal as well.

“I have a very low threshold for wasted time,” Koehr said.

Lauren Donohoe has competed for Seton since she was a freshman when she first came to the school. Before coming to Seton, Donohoe had never been on a swim team, but decided to go out and see what she could do.

After that first experience, she remembered Koehr running up to her and telling her immediately how much potential she had.

“Everyone wants to win after talking with Coach K,” Donohoe said.

Donohoe, who like a lot of high school swimmers, also competes for a club team, which limits the time she spends practicing with Seton.

Koehr, though, has no issues with that. If anything, he sees it as an opportunity for the swimmer to learn more from someone who has more experience coaching swimmers. There’s no tug of war between high school and club commitments, which is something Donohoe values because it reduces any potential for conflict between the two teams.

Donohoe is so indebted to Koehr that even though she doesn’t have to, she still comes out and helps coach the Seton swimmers three times a week in the morning, while still maintaining her club commitments at night with Occoquan Swimming.

“I don’t know I would do that for any other team,” said Donohoe, who lives in Woodbridge.

At the core, Koehr operates from a place of humility. He considers himself so blessed to have so many people around him who support him like they do. Of course, it starts with Colleen.

“There’s no way I could do this if I was married to another woman,” Koehr said.

Koehr also credits the parents who volunteer to help out any way they can.

Then there’s the relationship Koehr has with Seton’s founder, Dr. Anne Carroll, who Koehr affectionately calls “The Chief.”

Carroll has a swim jacket with that title on the back and signs all her e-mails to Koehr that way as well.

“Mrs. Carroll is as close as any of us will ever get to meeting Mother Teresa. She had devoted her entire life to excellence in the service of others,” Koehr said. “And she has done it with absolute humility, submitting completely to what she believes is the will of God. Isn’t that what it means to love? How could any faithful person fail to be inspired by the power of her example. I know I have been.”

How long will Koehr keep coaching? At least until his 12<sup>th</sup> child graduates from Seton, which at that

point will put him into his early 60s. Meanwhile, he's got plenty of time to conjure up new ways to improve the state meet or anything else related to Seton swimming.

Koehr doesn't know exactly what they will entail, but you can bet it will happen.

"He always giving of himself," Vander Woude said. "And he's enthusiastic about it. He's got big family commitments; he's a husband and doesn't get as much sleep as the average person does. But that never seems to slow him down."

And chances are it never will.

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