

Q&A With Seton School Coach Jim Koehr; Building a Successful Program





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by MICHAEL STOTT

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Q&A With Seton School Coach Jim Koehr

*Exposure to swimming changed the trajectory of **Jim Koehr's** life. As such, this entrepreneur/swim coach has made swimming the Seton School's (Manassas, Virginia) most popular and successful sport.*

Jim Koehr



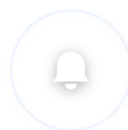
Gold medallist Adam Peaty hopes for a "new lease of life" as he decides to take a break from swimming.

Head Swim and Dive Coach

The Seton School

Manassas, Virginia

- University of Notre Dame, B.S., mechanical engineering, 1985
- Darden Graduate School of Business, University of Virginia, MBA, 2013
- Entrepreneur, private equity, venture capitalist and real estate investor
- 10x Virginia Independent Schools Athletic Association Division II state champions: girls (6), boys (4)



- VISAA Coach of the Year, 2018, 2019
- 43x conference champions for boys and girls since 2002
- 16x conference coach of the year
- VISAA secretary, executive committee member, 2005-19
- 7x host of the VISAA state swimming and diving championships
- Recipient of NISCA's David H. Robertson Excellence in Coaching award, 2012
- Creator and meet host for three separate multiple statewide championships since 2007
- Founded and/or coached swim teams at four other schools in Virginia: Trinity School at Meadow View (2023-24), Chelsea Academy (2023-24), Renaissance Montessori School (2016-17) and Highland School (2016)

SWIMMING WORLD MAGAZINE: How did you find swimming? Or did it find you?

COACH JIM KOEHR: As a kid, I had a significant leg-length discrepancy that required me to wear leather shoes with a 1.5-inch rubber lift on my right shoe. You can imagine how limiting that might be in sports that require running. Despite that, my parents had me playing football, basketball and baseball every season: The idea that I was handicapped or a "victim" in some way never came up. My father's constant refrain was, "Did you do your best?" He didn't seem to care how "good" I was, and that approach has been a great blessing in my life.

In the summer, I swam, eventually on multiple AAU teams. In the end, I was never better than a good high school swimmer until I



was an adult. My wife's brothers encouraged me to compete with them in triathlons. At age 39, I had competed in the Lake Placid Ironman Triathlon, the Great Chesapeake Bay Swim (4.4 miles) and countless other endurance events.

SW: Your wife, and mother of your 12 kids, was a swimmer at Notre Dame. How did that affect your gravitation to the sport?

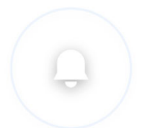
JK: I got married while I was still at the University of Notre Dame. My wife, **Colleen**, has been THE driving force in my life, so when she told me I needed to ensure our kids had a great high school swim program at Seton, I had no choice but to start coaching. That was 24 years ago. Now, only my 12th child is currently on the team.

SW: After a successful life in the corporate world, you became an entrepreneur involved in a myriad of activities. What drives that energy?

JK: All men need a mission. A strong mission focused on someone other than yourself is the source of unlimited energy. Teaching kids to become strong, self-reliant and faithful adults who can embrace discomfort is a mission that is ultimately rooted in my Catholic faith.

People always seem surprised that my 16 assistant coaches and I are all volunteers. My professional life as a corporate executive, entrepreneur and venture capital investor has given me the capability and the resources to focus on helping boys and girls grow into men and women capable of thinking of others.

SW: How has your Catholic faith influenced your coaching?



JK: The Catholic faith is the foundation of everything we do at Seton. To that end, we have created a set of values called GEMS: Gratitude, Excellence, Meekness, Sacrifice. GEMS are a part of our daily existence at Seton Swim & Dive. For a deeper dive, check out **“GEMS-Gratitude, Excellence, Meekness, and Sacrifice in Athletics, in School, and in Life – Seton Swimming”** under Banquet Speeches on www.setonswimming.org.

SW: *How have you managed to make the Seton swim team the most popular sport (by far) in a school of 350 kids?*

JK: This year, we have 123 kids on the team—that’s about 35% of the entire school. If you want to develop the whole child, I believe you must do it spiritually, emotionally and physically as well as mentally. High school athletics is a powerful tool to do that. We have developed Seton Swimming well past the “incumbrances” of other sports like basketball, which limit participation because of team size and game parameters.

Kids join a team to be with friends and stay on a team because they get better. All teenage kids need “wins” in their lives. Swimming can provide many opportunities to get those “wins.”

SW: *Every state championship team has its share of USA swimmers, and nearly every high school coach who is not also a USA coach struggles with how to integrate them into their high school team. How do you handle that challenge?*

JK: First, I start with the good of the athlete in mind. I’ve seen coaches put dedicated USA swimmers in the difficult position of having to choose between USA and high school practices. To me,

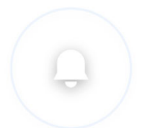


that's a false choice. High school kids have a well-developed sense of fairness, and they all understand that it is silly to make a kid come to a high school practice when they are already swimming seven or even nine times per week.

But that doesn't mean you can't get your USA swimmers to want to come to your practice—if you ensure that your program is complementary, not in competition, with the USA program. Any top USA swimmer already gets intense cardiovascular training in an environment that is individually-focused. Rather than duplicate that, we spend an inordinate amount of time on stroke technique and combine it with opportunities to compete in meets with friends and teammates.

I don't require our USA swimmers to attend our practices, but I do offer them things they are not getting from their USA program. One way we get our highest-achieving USA swimmers to our practices is by offering them leadership opportunities—i.e., as a captain or assistant coach. Some even come after their USA practices and coach a couple of lanes. They also make great demonstrators during stroke instruction periods.

***SW: How
have you
managed
to build a***



community of volunteer parents to produce such a positive culture and 10 state championship teams?

JK: Parents are the primary educators of their children. Schools and sports are simply tools to help parents accomplish that.

I often say, “Excellence is attractive.” People want to be a part of something excellent—and they especially want to be a part of something that helps their kids.

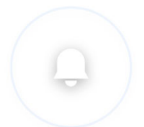
Last year, we recognized 57 significant volunteers. These include the 16 assistant coaches and all the people who allow us to host 12 meets per season, including three statewide invitationals.

Some of our coaches do not have kids on the team. Long-time coaches **Pat Mulhern** and **DD Ross** have kids who graduated from Seton more than a decade ago. They still bring their significant swimming experience to the team.

We have two coaches—highly accomplished collegiate athletes—with no other connection to Seton at all. Assistant **Ross Palazzo** swam for **Gregg Troy** and **Anthony Nesty** at Florida. Our diving coach, **Ashley Keapproth**, a four-year conference finalist at George Mason, is an attorney who has created one of the best high school diving programs in the VISAA.

SW: Your father was a U.S. Navy Admiral, and six of your sons are military officers. Why and how do you honor our country before swim meets?

JK: My mother was the orphaned youngest daughter of Italian



immigrants who grew up in a company coal-mining town. My father was also of humble origins, but they both believed in the “American Dream.” My mother became a Navy officer as a nurse. My father rose to the rank of admiral without going through the Naval Academy.

One way we show gratitude is by honoring our national colors during the national anthem before swim meets. We actually practice the national anthem at our annual Time Trials meet. I have U.S. Marine officers teach the entire team how to stand at attention, and then I tell them that for the rest of their lives, whenever they hear the anthem, they should immediately stand at attention and either pray for their country or sing along.

SW: You were not trained as a swimmer or coach but are producing winning teams. How have you educated yourself in the way of swimming?

JK: I’m a lifelong learner by nature. At an Ironman clinic, everything I learned about swimming in the 1970s was turned on its head. I was introduced to **Terry Laughlin’s *Total Immersion***. To this day, along with my own twists, it is the basis of what I teach.

Also, I pull in people who know more about swimming than I do. I have many relationships with top USA swimming coaches, particularly NCAP coach and Olympic gold medalist **Jeremy Linn**, who coached my son, **Kevin**, to high school All-America status. Many USA coaches have come to my practices as a guest coach. Most recently, Jeremy taught underwater dolphin kicks. There are countless resources available to any student of the sport. *SwimmingWorld Magazine* is one. Another is the GoSwim app.



To ensure kids swim properly, we spend a disproportionate amount of time building every stroke and every wall from scratch between our first practice on Election Day to the last practice before Christmas break.

SW: Dale Carnegie espouses, "If you want to make a friend for life, do something nice for their kid." How does that apply to you and swimming?

JK: If the quality of one's life is proportional to the quality of one's relationships, then I certainly live a very high quality of life. For me, it starts with my wife, my 12 children, my 16 grandchildren and my very large extended family.

Additionally are the relationships I've built through swimming. My Team Manager database contains 673 unique kids that I have coached at Seton—673 kids who have learned something about Gratitude, Excellence, Meekness and Sacrifice...and a bit about swimming.

Entrepreneurship and the work I do with several non-profits have been immeasurably enhanced by this vast network of relationships, too. It's not why I started coaching, but it has certainly been a far more powerful way to "network" than meeting people for coffee.

SW: You built a high school swimming website that is encyclopedic in scope.

JK: www.setonswimming.org got 74,000 page views last season. Using Google analytics, I note that the views come from all over the world. Any small business owner would be thrilled to get that



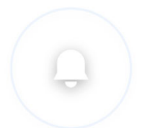
sort of traffic to their site.

Our website is my most important communication vehicle. It contains practical things like meet announcements, meet results from as far back as 2000 and the team calendar. There are administrative things like team rosters, attendance, team and personal records, coach biographies and links to our very elaborate live streams. It encompasses marketing things like a brief history of our team and video introduction to prospective new families. It also has historical information and 20 years of photo albums and videos of Seton's all-time greatest swims.

But the most important part of the website is the life lessons I try to build into the site. I'm fond of saying, "Swimming ain't about swimming." After every meet, I post a lengthy blog highlighting the successes and lessons from the meet. The site contains almost 250 blog posts and 24 banquet speeches.

SW: Following weekend meets, you spend as much as five-to-seven hours updating your blog. To what end and what is the essence of your message?

JK: Like everything at Seton Swim & Dive, it goes back to our GEMS. If you want to demonstrate **Gratitude**, you need to thank the people who are doing so much to make these big meets happen. If you want to reward **Excellence** as we define it, you need to recognize every single personal record. Our team had 1,130 of them last season—and I recognized all of them in my blog. We demonstrate **Meekness** by acknowledging competitor success and **Sacrifice** by highlighting kids who thought of someone other than themselves.



SW: You have extended considerable sweat and financial equity to Seton. From that generosity, what result makes you the most proud?

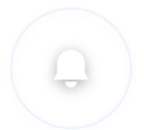
JK: It is important for a child to see their father in leadership positions. One of my proudest moments was during a post-meet walk with one of my boys. He said, "Dad, it is just amazing what you have created here."

Today, that boy is a Catholic priest and U.S. Navy chaplain, and all his adult siblings are strong, faithful leaders with strong marriages and relationships. That is the result of which I am most proud. I see my role as a coach more like that of a father. All the 673 kids I have coached are in some way my kids, and I hope that they all have learned a few more things from me than just how to swim faster.

SW: Fairly early in life, you wanted to be a submarine captain. Was your completion of the 4.4 Great Chesapeake Bay Race in under two hours as close as you came to fulfilling that dream?

JK: Oh, I wish! When I was in Navy ROTC at Notre Dame, I spent 13 weeks of one summer on a fast-attack nuclear submarine in the Western Pacific. This was in 1982, the height of the Cold War. It was so invigorating that I changed the focus of my mechanical engineering major to energy, including nuclear energy. I was selected early as one of only 18 candidates in the country for Navy Nuclear Power School. My life's dream was to be the commanding officer of a fast-attack submarine.

I guess the Lord had other plans for me when I broke my neck in a Notre Dame rugby game and was physically disqualified for the



Navy. I never would have imagined that at this point in my life, I'd be coaching swimming and teaching pre-calculus in high school.

My mother always said, "Everything happens for the best." It is amazing how sometimes the worst events in your life can lead to something far greater!

SW: Any plans soon to relive that 15:20-minute Lake Placid Ironman triathlon experience?

JK: I frequently speak to high-school-aged kids about the importance of getting comfortable with discomfort, but even I have my limits. I can't even drive 15:20 right now!

Michael J. Stott is an ASCA Level 5 coach, golf and swimming writer. His critically acclaimed coming-of-age golf novel, "Too Much Loft," is in its third printing, and is available from store.Bookbaby.com, Amazon, B&N and distributors worldwide.

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