



Personal Commitment

Coach Rob Klamut's days devoted to others' successes

By JUSTIN ZACKAL

There's a "Far Side" comic that shows a psychiatrist with his legs crossed and mind wandering as he doodles "Just plain nuts!" on a notepad while a frazzled patient lies on a couch in the background.

Someone wrote "SWIM COACH" on the patient's chest and now that comic is taped to the wall in Rob Klamut's office at Westminster College.

Since Klamut just completed his 25th year as head coach at Westminster, there could be plenty of former swimmers so taken aback by Klamut's incessant devotion to his profession that they would offer the comic as a tongue-in-cheek way to pay homage to their coach.

Hundreds of swimmers, all logging the twice-a-day workouts beginning at 6 a.m., were mentored by Klamut in the last quarter century. There are the 88 conference champions, the 36 All-Americans, and the three national champions. There are also swimmers who went on to achieve more, like Sean **Swarner**, the first-ever cancer survivor to reach the peak of Mount Everest.

While flipping through his mental rolodex to determine who gave him the comic, Klamut concluded that it was indeed Swarner. At that moment, a writer working on this article about Klamut wrote “Just plain nuts!” on his notepad.

After spending an entire day with Klamut, here’s what else appeared on that writer’s notepad:

It’s 6 a.m. on Tuesday, March 2. Klamut enters the weight room at Westminster appearing as if it’s his first day on a job. Six hours earlier was the deadline for coaches to submit their swimmers’ times for consideration in the NCAA Division III Championship meet. Swimmers with provisional qualifying times will be informed if they made the cut by 5 p.m. Friday. Westminster had five swimmers on the bubble and two with automatic qualifying times. Three would ultimately go to nationals held March 17-20 in Minneapolis, Minn.

On this morning, senior Maile **Kirkpatrick** needs to do her dry-land workout early enough so that she can student-teach at nearby Wilmington Elementary School later that morning. The six other swimmers vying for nationals come in an hour later.

“Our coaches are really here to help us,” Kirkpatrick said. “It puts them out of their way (to work around our class schedules) but their heart is really in the sport.”

“I love it,” Klamut said. “It keeps you going. Every day there are different workouts and different challenges. It’s great to see student-athletes meet their goals and it’s very rewarding to have such a positive influence in their lives.”

Later that morning, Klamut’s wife, Kelly, arrives with their 4-year-old daughter Stephannie before she heads off to Golden Hill Nursing Home in New Castle where she is a social worker.

Stephannie watches a few “Spongebob Squarepants” cartoons in her father’s office with assistant coach Pat **Smith** before she starts her 9 a.m. preschool lab across the street at the Hoyt Science Resources Center. Klamut reminds her that both daddy and Stephannie go to work at Westminster.

Klamut’s work is certainly not limited to holding a stopwatch and spotting his swimmers. The previous week he was promoted from associate professor to professor at the College. On this day, he teaches a 9:20 a.m. class, Level 1 Aquatics, and a 2 p.m. Lifeguarding class sandwiched around a sandwich, for lunch, and a 12:45 p.m. faculty meeting.

Klamut is also Westminster’s aquatics director and he serves on the NCAA’s swimming and diving committee, both of which required urgent phone calls on this day. A lifeguard took a false reading of 0.3

ppm for the pool’s chlorine level, too far below the desirable 1.0 ppm to allow swimming. Then there was a coach that missed the NCAA’s midnight deadline and another coach that was challenging a submitted time.

After Lifeguarding class, Klamut dissects video footage with senior Ben **Gutmann** to perfect his breaststroke form. Klamut sketches a stick figure on a piece of paper with its knee bent ever-so-slightly, thus causing too much resistance. He also demonstrated the proper “keyhole” shape that Gutmann needed to make between his extended arms above his head while pushing off the wall.

“He’s the fifth-fastest swimmer in the country,” Klamut said. “And we’re trying to make him the fourth.”

At 4:15 p.m. the seven swimmers returned for another workout—this time it’s in the pool and two hours long. Klamut plots their workout by listing their sets on a dry-erase board hanging from the pool deck wall. The workout is meticulously planned to lead up to the national meet so that the swimmers achieve the optimal taper.

A “taper” is as much of a buzzword for swim coaches as it is for barbers. Coaches have to enable specific tapering for swimmers so that they are fastest when it counts the most at the end of the season. For Klamut, that’s 44 different tapers for 44 different swimmers.

“That’s the most anxiety-producing part of this job,” Klamut said. “It’s what measures a successful coach,

making sure everyone is reaching their goals. A small female might only need a three-day taper, but a larger male might need to start tapering four weeks in advance.”

However, it’s not a simple equation that you apply for each swimmer. A coach must also consider a swimmer’s personality trait and also if a swimmer is recovering from an injury. This makes knowing how to fluctuate the intensity and volume of training a difficult task.

After practice Klamut spends some quality time with his daughter before her 8 p.m. bedtime. Then he’s back on the job calling recruits at home and wishing them good luck for the upcoming weekend’s high school meets. This week it’s the WPIAL Championships in Pittsburgh that Klamut will attend.

Just before 10 p.m. the swim coach lies on his couch to reflect on his day. The writer now has another word scribbled on his notepad, one that a psychiatrist reluctantly uses:

“Committed.”

(Justin Zackal is the sports information director at Westminster College.)



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