

Coaches' Connection - Coach Mike Lewellyn

We may think we know our Splash Club coaches, but through this series, we'll get a little more insight into where they came from, why they coach, and what they're trying to accomplish with our swimmers. The second interview in this series is all about Head Age Group Coach Mike Lewellyn....

The Young Coach Mike

Mike grew up in Appleton, Wisconsin (that's on the westside of Lake Winnebago for those of you a little hazy on your Wisconsin geography). He had a nontraditional family structure with a single mom, an older brother who was given up for adoption, and a younger brother. All three boys had different fathers - none of whom stayed around too long.

Coach Mike learned to swim when one of his mom's boyfriends threw him into the pool - sink or swim...Mike swam. They lived on a farm outside of Phlox, Wisconsin and Mike began swimming a few days a week at the YMCA and a few days in the farm pond with his younger brother, Rory.

When Mike was in middle school, he joined the Milwaukee Central YMCA and started participating in local meets with the AAU team. By the time he was 12, he had already reached his peak height of 6 feet and stopped growing. He was less than 100 pounds, but his coaches trained him like he was one of the high school swimmers. He lifted weights and swam a ton of yardage. This experience would play a big role in his coaching philosophy later in life.

During his freshman year of high school, the football coach (a former Greenbay Packer) noticed Mike and told him to join the football team. Next thing Mike knew, he was the Washington High School 3rd string quarterback. Shortly into his football career, he was tackled by two kids from another team, who both went on to play in the NFL. Coach Mike was left with a pair of mangled knees and back to the pool he went. Swimming was the only exercise he could do - although his knee limitations did transform him from a breaststroker into a distance freestyler.

Education and Career

Coach Mike started his college career at Evangel University in Springfield, Missouri with the idea that he would become a minister. Looking for a pool to swim in, he found Jack Steck, Head Swimming and Diving Coach at Drury University, who let Mike swim with his college swimmers for the next two years. Midway through his college career, he realized that being a minister wasn't his calling - he wanted to be an age group coach...and he had always wanted to be an age group coach. He transferred to University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee to finish his college degree and take classes relevant to swim coaching, like kinesiology and psychology.

While studying at UWM, he swam for about a year until his shoulders gave out. He has no doubt that his shoulders were damaged when he was a tall and skinny middle school kid who was forced by his coaches to train at a level beyond what his body was ready to handle. He vowed to be mindful of this with the young athletes he would work with in the future.

His first job as a swim coach came by chance. He was watching a summer swim meet - cheering on a friend's sister - and noticed a disqualification that should not have been called. The swimmer's team ended up offering Coach Mike the job as head coach. He stayed with the West Allis Swim Club for a year, coaching based on his experience as a swimmer, and teaching technique based on what he thought it should be. During the first year under Mike's leadership, the club qualified for states for the first time in its history.

For the next few years Coach Mike moved between several different clubs and roles. He held a few corporate management positions; a few head coach positions, several age group positions, and even an administrative position within USA Swimming, serving as the Sport Development Coordinator for the Central Zone - a job that took him all over the Midwest consulting with small clubs. A few things remained consistent during these years. First, Mike's favorite roles were those where he served as Head Age Group Coach. Second, he was always hired by those who knew him and recognized his skills. His job opportunities stemmed from his network within the swimming community. Mike developed a reputation as a transformative age group coach with a high level of technical skills.

One high and low during these transitions was in 1987 when he was hired as the Head Age Group Coach for the Kansas City Blazers. He was married to his high school sweetheart, Deb and they had two children - daughter, Tauna and son, Ben. He loved this position and worked hard to make sure all of his athletes reached their full potential. He developed athletes that went to the Olympic Trials and one who went on to win two Olympic gold medals. He was hitting his stride as an age group coach and developed athletes there for 12 years. But ironically, as Mike describes it, he was working so hard to get his family what he thought they needed (consistent income and benefits) that he failed to give them what they really needed (an engaged and present husband and father) With the change in his family dynamic, he needed some space from Kansas City and took a coaching job with a club in Mission Viejo, California.

Mike took a windy path from California, to Charleston, South Carolina, to Boise, Idaho; but along the way he stayed focused on helping his age group swimmers grow into successful athletes. When he saw the Splash Club posting for an age group coach, Mike had actually stepped away from coaching - temporarily convinced he was ready to retire. Quickly realizing he missed the pool deck, he applied for the position in Bartlesville and a similar job in Buffalo, New York. Being able to work with Chad Englehart was the deciding factor. Coach Mike joined the Splash Club coaching team in December 2018.

Coaching Philosophy

As the age group coach, Mike sees his role to improve his swimmers' technique and build up their endurance so that when he hands them over to the head coach at the top level, they are ready to focus on speed. Mike loves the age group swimmers. He says age group encompasses the key ages when swimmers are developing a true love of the sport and when they decide whether they have the passion and drive to take their commitment to the next level.

Because of his past as a swimmer, and specifically his experience being overtrained at a young age, Coach Mike focuses on the long term development of his athletes. He's cautious about moving swimmers up in the groups too quickly and he invests in making sure each swimmer reaches his or her full potential. He balances hard work with play. But his "play" has a purpose. Many parents and swimmers wonder why he makes kids swim backwards. He feels that it is important for swimmers, especially young swimmers, to change their perceptions and develop a feel for the water. Swimming the strokes backwards teaches them to look at their strokes from a different view. He encourages them to "play" with their strokes, distorting what they know so they learn how to bring it back with great technique.

He does not hold back when he sees technique that needs to be corrected or a swimmer not giving his or her all. He gives immediate feedback because he cares. All of his swimmers recognize that a compliment from Mike is a big deal. He acknowledges that he gets easily frustrated at those swimmers who cannot see their full potential and swimmers who squander it by not putting in the work. He refers to it as the gift and curse of being a swim coach - being able to see the long term potential of his swimmers before they can.

His goal is teaching kids to be successful - in and out of the pool. At the end of the day, he is most proud of those swimmers he had who went on to be honest people, diligent workers, and follow through on their word. He wants each of his swimmers to add value to their family and their community. Swimming is merely a tool to get to that end.

Off the Pool Deck

When Coach MIke is not at the pool, he is an author, editor, and singer. He has written articles published in Swimming World and the USA Swimming Magazine for Age Group Coaching and he has written articles that have been utilized by coaches and clubs across the country, including "7 Common Traits of Successful Swim Clubs" and was part of the group that developed the "American Development Model". He is also a regular and valued contributor on the Swim Coaches Idea Exchange Facebook Page. When he is not writing his own material, he edits other authors. He is currently editing a 170 chapter (so far) science fiction novel written by an author working in Australia.

But the hobby that holds his passion is singing. He is a baritone and makes appearances singing with several bands, including a recent performance in Kansas City with the "Troubadour Retrievers." If you're lucky, you might catch him at a local karaoke night here in town or at a jam session at the Red River Saloon in Tulsa. When he gets a rare vacation, he visits his son, Ben and his granddaughter, Winifred in St. Joseph, Missouri.

Hopefully, this Coaches Connection shed a little light on the real Coach Mike. For more insight, we encourage you to reach out to him - we promise, he won't bite.