



USOPC

SPORT PERFORMANCE

OLYMPIC & PARALYMPIC COACH

June 2021

VOLUME 32, ISSUE 2



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Olympic & Paralympic Coach is a publication of the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee Sport Performance Division/Coaching Education Department. Readers are encouraged to submit items of interest for possible inclusion. Submitted materials will be acknowledged, but cannot be returned and inclusion is not guaranteed. Materials should be sent to Christine Bolger at Christine.Bolger@USOC.org.

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Message from the
**Coordinator for Coaching
Education
Manager, Coach of the Year
Program**

Kenzie Coning



Welcome back *Olympic & Paralympic Coach* readers!

We are in the final stretch towards the lead up of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games and anticipation around the movement is only growing! With qualification events well underway and still more to come, Team USA is expected to be comprised of more than 600 Olympic athletes and upwards of 290 Paralympic athletes in Tokyo. As we know, Tokyo 2020 will be a Games unlike any other we recognize that this impressive delegation would not be possible without a community of support from quality coaches, dedicated parents and knowledgeable service providers!

Each year, through the USOPC Coach of the Year Program, we take immense pride in recognizing and awarding quality coaches and service providers that are 'changing the game' for their sport and creating significant impact in the experiences of athletes. In 2020 in particular, this recognition program was broadened to not only evaluate performance accomplishments, but also consider innovation in continued support of athletes through the COVID-19 pandemic. Amidst an unprecedented year with major halts to sport participation and competition, Team USA coaches and service providers have continued to support athletes on and off the field of play in monumental ways. In this issue of *Olympic & Paralympic Coach*, you will hear from our 2020 Coaches of the Year. These eight standout coaches and service providers shed light on their experiences and approaches to coaching amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. From creative adaptations to coaching, to digital transformation and social innovation, there is a wealth of knowledge and immense inspiration that can be applicable across all sports and coaching initiatives.

We are so grateful to have partnered with writer, Thomas Lawson, to elevate these coaches' stories and highlight their accomplishments in 2020. This issue serves as a celebration of the innovation, grit and resilience of Team USA and the continued pursuit of excellence fostered by our Team USA coaching community, regardless of the challenge.

Hope you enjoy!

The USOPC is happy to have a guest writer for this issue of Olympic & Paralympic Coach magazine. Thomas Lawson supported USOPC Coaching Education by interviewing the award recipients and contributing the articles that follow in this special issue. We're grateful for Thomas' time and expertise to help recognize the outstanding coaches and performance staff who are included in this issue.

Thomas Lawson is a writer, editor and doer who is married with three beautiful children, a dog and living in Clifton, VA. He earned a bachelor's from Radford University, a master's from George Washington University and has been in publishing for over 20 years. An avid sports fan, his career began in newspapers as a sports reporter and sports editor. Currently, he oversees a publishing and marketing operation for an educational nonprofit in Reston, VA.

Paralympic National Coach of the Year: Michel Assouline, U.S. Equestrian

Assouline has brought life experience, perspective to make Para-equestrian team one of world's best

Michel Assouline has been around the world and experienced success as both a rider and as a coach. He has done it for several countries and at several stops. It has been no different since his arrival with the U.S. team four-plus years ago.

Yet, it wasn't until this February when he truly realized the impact he has made here in the United States, when the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee named him 2020 Paralympic Coach of the Year – and his team and colleagues threw him a surprise party to congratulate and celebrate him.



"It made me realize how important it was to them," Assouline said. "It was so special to me. Other coaches from other disciplines came to the party and that meant a lot. It was incredibly impressive and touching for me."

Assouline has been with the U.S. Para-Equestrian Dressage Team since 2017 and has made an incredible mark in just four years. In his well-travelled career, this award ranks near the top of his trophies and he says he could not have gotten to this point without the support of his community – especially his athletes.

"It's a great, great honor and I'm extremely humbled. I have been working in the sport all of my life. I know this award is not to be taken lightly. It is incredibly hard to get there and only through hard work and belief did it happen. I am very proud and grateful for my athletes and their support and vision. I am also happy for them and could not have gotten here without them. This is as much for them as it is for me."

Assouline, who spent time in France, Germany and Great Britain as a rider and a coach, began working with the U.S. Para-equestrian dressage program in May of 2017. His innovation and persistent drive to grow the sport and expand the program has positively impacted the Para dressage community in the United States.

“He brings a huge amount of technical expertise, but also the ability to look at the wider picture,” U.S. Equestrian Director of Sport Will Connell, who worked with Assouline in Great Britain in the early 2000s, said. “A trainer gives a lesson. A coach is looking at the entire holistic program. It’s that ability to look at the whole program that makes him so special. Michel came in and aspired to be world class and built a program that people can believe in.”

At the very heart of Assouline’s success is his ability to work with each athlete and build a specialized program around them to improve their development and performance. He says it is all about a level of trust that goes both ways between coach and athlete.

“You have to gain the trust and confidence of the athlete, and it’s a really reciprocal thing,” Assouline said. “I took my experience with me to this position, but you have to gain their trust – it does not work without their trust.”

“No program is about one person,” Connell said. “But what Michel has done is to make every aspect of the program a world-class level. He has impact everywhere. People believe in him.”

Based on the successes that the U.S. team is having, there is obviously a mutual trust between the coach and the team. The progress first showed in 2018 when the U.S. won four medals in the FEI World Equestrian Games™ in North Carolina.



Then, last year when COVID-19 hit, the U.S. Para-Equestrian Dressage Team ranked No. 1 in the world having achieved scores that would have tracked Team USA to be on the podium at Tokyo 2020.

They appeared to be peaking at the perfect time. But, since the Olympic and Paralympic Games were delayed a year, it forced Assouline to adjust his coaching schedules to try and keep the athletes from burning out.

“We have to try not to peak too early and be concerned with burnout,” Assouline said. “The key with our sport is you are dealing with two athletes (human and horse). It’s a double challenge. The way I’ve kept them on track is to continue to participate in international competitions. It gives me a chance to reassess their performance and it gives them an idea of where they are.”

COVID forced logistical changes: He instituted virtual coaching and one-on-one meetings, and then implemented intensified routines for the riders to keep them busier than they were used to. It made them more competitive. At the 2020 U.S. Para Dressage National Championships in October, the first competition since the COVID lockdown in March, his approach paid off as the team saw significant performance improvements across a range of grades.

Part of his ability to deal with challenges such as a worldwide pandemic is his understanding of psychology and the time spent in the classroom studying the subject in his younger days. He says that an equal part of getting the athlete to perform at their best is to be in their head and understand their individual struggles and what makes them unique.

“As a coach, you need to be able to connect with your riders to help them be as successful as possible. Learn to understand their psyche and what is the best way to help them learn. In our sport in particular, you deal with some traumatized athletes, so psychology is so important.”

His psychological approach also helped tremendously last year, by helping his athletes work through the emotional pressures of the pandemic and the disappointment of the postponement of the Olympic and Paralympic Games.



“The biggest observation I saw was that some athletes were losing their drive and becoming frustrated once the Tokyo games were postponed. I tried to be available for them at all times via online calls or Zoom.”

Psychology, experience, perspective: all incredibly important to Assouline and part of the reason he is such a great coach and leader. And that knowledge started during his own youth, when his father pushed him to go to school and go into business. He thought that was the better path for Michel. After college, Assouline joined the business world as a fashion designer in California. However, Assouline was always fascinated with sport and wanted to ride. He returned to France and eventually became the French national champion and top-ranked dressage rider in the country. Despite his success as an athlete, his desire remained

to coach and to help others. Eventually his father changed his perspective after realizing how much Assouline loved the sport and was completely supportive. This support, coupled with his experience in business, has made him a much better coach as well.

“I have always believed that family environment and support is so important. Life experience and perspective is important in both business and coaching. You must deal with people and different personalities and conflicts. It was a life-gaining experience working in business. It made me stronger in sport too having that perspective.”

Now, heading into the Tokyo Games this summer in 2021, Assouline has high expectations for the American team. He believes that the team, led by Roxanne Trunnell who is currently ranked No. 1 in the world in her grade and across all Para-equestrian grades, is ready to challenge for both individual and team medals.

“My dream and vision for the athletes this summer is to medal and be on the podium. I would be thrilled if we could get a team medal. I know we are leading the world rankings coming in, and I know the team has the drive and ability to reach that goal.”

Service Provider of the Year: Gillian Bower, U.S. Ski & Snowboard

Bower successfully steers U.S. Ski & Snowboard through COVID

For someone who grew up in Canada and was not a serious skier or snowboarder, it has been quite a circuitous route to the top of the U.S. Ski & Snowboard world for Gillian Bower.

Bower was a wind surfer living in Oregon and started working with the U.S. Ski & Snowboard team almost by accident back in 2005. Now, more than 15 years later as the team's sports medicine director and lead physical therapist, Bower deserves a tremendous amount of credit for leading the team through a worldwide pandemic.

Fresh off one of the roughest years in the history of sport medicine and physical therapy, Bower has been named the 2020 Service Provider of the Year by the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee. It is an award she is humbled by and one that she is honored to receive.



"I was quite surprised, but it is such a huge honor to win this award and be honored by the USOPC, particularly during this very difficult year on the sports medicine side."

Bower has been instrumental in building the U.S. Ski & Snowboard COVID-19 plan to allow athletes to stay safe while training and competing. Among other steps she has instituted, she holds weekly meetings with a COVID Medical Panel to develop and review protocols and guidelines for all members to follow.

"We set out to provide consistent regulations across all our teams," the mother of two said. "We evaluate how to operate and manage this in the given environment and work within the restrictions."

The measures that she and her team have put in place have been working. Over the last year Bower has conducted roughly 15,000 tests and has had a positivity rate of less than 0.5%. "We have been extremely successful with low case counts. When we did have positives, they were isolated. All the protocols with masks, distancing and quarantining seem to be working." "Her job is hard enough on a good year," U.S. Ski & Snowboard Director of High Performance Troy Taylor said. "We have teams literally all over the world simultaneously. Then you add in a global pandemic where all the athletes and staff still need to travel to events all over the world. It's incredible what she has done with creating protocols to mitigate risk, coordinating, translating, and educating all the athletes and staff, and then executing when we are travelling."

"Words cannot express my gratitude with what she has achieved," Taylor said. "While many people have done incredible work, what Gillian and her team have accomplished is

unquestionably justified that she receives this award.”

None of this has been easy though. She fully admits that it has been difficult because, rightfully so, it has changed the focus of her team from focusing on an athlete’s performance, to keeping them safe.

“COVID has completely dominated everything we’ve done in the last year,” said Bower, who holds a doctorate in physical therapy from the University of Montana.

Still, the COVID pandemic has provided a unique opportunity for her and she has learned a great deal in a short amount of time.

“I’ve learned a lot about the viral and technological part of the disease,” Bower said. “I have learned a lot about logistics and creative solutions to keep the athletes and staff safe.”

Although she and her team have been able to keep the athletes, coaches and staff safe from the pandemic, Bower worries about the effect it has had on their mental health.

“The impact on mental health has been significant.”

Her concern has led to the U.S. Ski & Snowboard’s expanded mental health committee, of which she is the co-chair. The committee has created resources for athletes and staff which address suicide prevention.

“This committee is for our athletes and staff to be aware of resources that are available to them. My role is as a facilitator and to make sure that we provide enough support for them. We talk to the athletes to check up on them. We check in monthly via email. We make sure they know what is available to them. Having a good relationship with them is so important.”

In her role, Bower is focused on making a difference for athletes across all the sports she oversees, including alpine, cross-country, freeski, freestyle, and snowboarding.

“My role is to focus on an athlete’s health and wellness while also focusing on athletes being prepared for high performance,” said Bower, who has also been a head physical therapist, senior clinical specialist and lead physical therapist for the U.S. Ski & Snowboard team. “My passion comes in integrating high performance teams and working closely with athletic development coaches, sport coaches, psychologists and nutritionists to provide the best services for the athletes in order to get the best outcomes.”

Bower believes that she gets the best out of the athletes by focusing directly on their individual needs. She believes that the better she knows the athlete, the better she can help them, which ultimately leads to better results.

“I do believe in athlete-centered care. We’re making decisions daily that put what is best for the athlete at heart. I am conscience of letting the athlete know they are cared for both as an athlete

and as a person. It's always been my experience that if you have a relationship with the individual, then that is where the best medicine happens. Letting people know that you care, and allowing yourself to understand the person, gives you the best opportunity to help them."

Help them she has. And the program is that much better with her aboard.

"Quite simply, I'm not sure we'd have a program without her," Taylor said. "It's immeasurable. She's been involved with our organization for so long. We have a long and storied history in our medical department, but she has been incredible. The biggest difference she brings is the integration between our performance and our medical staff. The two areas working together seamlessly is one of the areas where Gillian's guidance has been critical."



Breezy Johnson of USA celebrates during the Audi FIS Alpine Ski World Cup Women's Downhill on January 9, 2021 in ST ANTON Austria. (Photo by Christophe Pallot/Agence Zoom/Getty Images)

Doc Counsilman Science Award Recipient: Jeff Lackie, U.S. Ski & Snowboard

Lackie elevates U.S. Alpine Women's Ski Team with scientific approach

Oftentimes you will hear coaches say that they do not want any accolades or attention for a job well done. Instead, the athletes deserve all the credit.

Except Jeff Lackie actually means it.

The 2020 Doc Counsilman Science Award recipient from the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee was humbled and even a bit bashful after hearing that he had won the award.

"Truthfully, as all coaches, we don't want the spotlight on us but rather on the athletes," he said. "I am incredibly honored and humbled to win this award."

Established in 2004, the Doc Counsilman Science Award recognizes a coach who utilizes scientific techniques and equipment as an integral part of their coaching methods or has created innovative ways to use sport science.

And Lackie is the embodiment of the award.

As the conditioning coach for the U.S. Ski Team's women's alpine tech (slalom/giant slalom), Lackie uses science in almost every part of both his training regiments and daily life. He says that using data helps eliminate any assumptions or biases that may exist.

"Data for me it helps hedge my bets," the lifelong learner and reader said. "We don't know what we don't know. We are bias sometimes inherently and there are many variables. It's easy to make a leap of logic and not do it rationally. I track as many variables as I can to eliminate the uncertainty. It doesn't always work, but it certainly helps make our analysis better and less biased."

"By definition of this award, Jeff's efforts and work with our team exemplifies his use of world-leading sport science and technologies to guide his work and programming," U.S. Ski Team women's head coach Paul Kristofic said. "Jeff is always studying new ways to explore athletic performance and program efficiencies. He challenges the 'norm' which raises the level of the quality of our program." A student of the sport, Lackie applies scientific principles, including in many areas where data was not typically used such as the dissection of video to motion analysis and running mathematical probabilities to help inform competition schedule planning. Mathematics and breaking down a race into intervals and per second are invaluable to his approach.

He finds film breakdown equally important in both downhill and slalom.



“The timer starts as soon as you leave the gates. There are many turns that can make the race go wrong or right. We use video to determine where things changed with velocity and how the skier approach the gate and turns. Figuring out where to hit the brakes and where to accelerate is so important.”

Since he arrived with U.S. Ski & Snowboard six years ago, he has put his knowledge and methodologies to use – and the team has been better off because of it. Continually one of the top teams in the world, the team was in fourth place at the 2020 world cup when the season was cancelled due to the COVID pandemic.

For Lackie, the disappointment of having the season cancelled was tough, but it was equally difficult on a personal level.

“COVID has been hard,” he said. “We’re based in Europe. I have a family back in Canada and haven’t seen them in a long time. It’s not a great situation, but this is the reality.”

But as a professional, Lackie understands he needed to keep moving forward and deal with the challenging reality of navigating a worldwide pandemic. He knew he had to adjust to put his athletes in the best position possible – and this started with learning as much as he could through whatever means he could find.



Mikaela Shiffrin of USA in action during the FIS Alpine Ski World Championships Women’s Slalom on February 20, 2021 in Cortina d’Ampezzo Italy. (Photo by Alexis Boichard/Agence Zoom/Getty Images)

“I want to be as educated as possible on the subject, so I read as much as I possibly can,” Lackie, who loves music and biking, said. “I then relay as much of that information as possible to our staff and athletes.”

“Jeff is an innovative coach who studies new and scientifically proven methodologies in athletic performance,” Kristofic said. “He is always looking to better himself, learn and adapt to our every changing world of athletic prowess. He studies sport science journals and other sports with similar challenges to ours, to look for innovative ways to push the boundaries of what is possible.”

Considering the health and safety of the athletes while travelling or at competitions is Lackie’s main focus at this point. He developed a travel plan where he examined where they stay, how they travel and times of travel – all in an effort to eliminate as many unnecessary risks as possible.

He understands the repercussions if an athlete gets sick and cannot compete.

“If an athlete misses a single race it can affect their place for the entire season. We’ve been very fortunate not to have been too affected.”

Through the COVID-19 pandemic, Lackie has shown tremendous leadership for U.S. Ski & Snowboard. And the results of the team are proof of that. Through 32 races this season, the team again sat in fourth place in the 2021 world cup standings, with three different individuals sitting in the top five of the respective disciplines.

In addition to success on the slopes, his leadership and professionalism transcends the U.S. women’s alpine tech team. He has also worked with other U.S. Olympic organizations to exchange best practices through his involvement with the USOPC’s National Team Coaches Leadership Education Program. This program focuses and contributes to the long-term success of all parts of Team USA.

“It is a two-year program for helping coaches for all Olympic and Paralympic teams and it has been interesting talking with coaches of other sports. Regardless of the sport, 80-90% of the challenges we all face are so similar.”

Whether it’s a worldwide pandemic, logistics, or any other challenges that arise, Lackie has done an exemplary job of handling them – and this hardware from the USOPC is further proof of that.

But if you listen to Lackie, he does not deserve the credit. Rather, the athletes do.

Olympic National Coach of the Year: Greg Massialas, U.S. Fencing

Massialas has built men's foil program into one of the best in the world

They say proof is in the progress. If that's true, then U.S. Men's Foil Team head coach Greg Massialas has all the proof he needs.

Beyond the progress of simply taking the foil team from the international shadows to one of the best teams in the world, there is now more proof of his impact on the sport as the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee has chosen him the 2020 Olympic Coach of the Year, the first for a fencing coach in the award's history.



"It's a tremendous award for me personally," the former Olympic fencer said. "First time for a fencing coach, so it's obviously rewarding. Beyond that within the Olympic family, I feel like it is a tremendous accomplishment. It's very tangible in many ways."

But it almost didn't happen at all for Massialas, or for the U.S. Foil Team.

It all started on a small piece of paper in 2002. A detailed 10-year plan to grow the U.S. fencing into an international powerhouse. A plan scribbled on a piece of paper and taped to the side of his desk at his San Francisco-based fencing academy served as his daily reminder – his beacon guiding his way. Highlighting this plan was a 10-year goal to produce a gold medalist in the sport by 2012.

He had to figure out a way to achieve his goal, so he built a pedagogy that centered on starting athletes in the sport at a young age and building champions. By 2008 he had produced his first Olympian, Gerek Meinhardt, and was reassured of his progress and direction despite coming out of those Olympic Games without a medal.

Massialas kept pushing and building a private program that was commanding attention. By 2010 he had built such a well-respected and successful academy that everyone was taking notice, including the Olympic team. In 2011 he was offered and accepted the head coaching position of the U.S. Men's Foil Team.

In the 10 years since, Massialas has had tremendous success and built the program into an international powerhouse with world championships and Olympic medals in both individual and team competitions. Currently he has four Americans ranked in the top eight in the world – the most of any country in the top eight of any weapon.

He credits his immense success with the national team on using the same team-based fundamentals he used to make his private academy so successful.

"I used many of the things I established in my private gym for the national team," Massialas, who also established a development pipeline from cadet (U17) to junior (U20) to senior that stretches across all levels, said. "I emphasize the team aspect to the sport, which is hard in an individual sport. I try to

empathize with the athlete and help them feel an ownership for the team. This is how we built a team chemistry. Team unity is so important, and everyone buys into the team success.”

His team-first approach has yielded tremendous results, as the team has experienced a meteoric rise in the international rankings. But the gold medal that highlighted his plan all those years ago still alludes him.

He feels it is close though.

In July 2019, the U.S. Men’s Foil Team was on top of the world when Massialas led his team to its first-ever senior world championship title. Through the first four world cups in the 2019-20 season the U.S. team had three golds, one silver, and was ranked No. 1 in the world. It was peaking at the right time heading into the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020. Then COVID-19 hit and shut down the season and the Olympic Games.

“It was a disappointment (when COVID cancelled the season and the Olympics), because you have a plan and look to peak at the right moment. We were right on schedule. We had to refocus, stay in shape and stay on top of it, but take a break and take a rest so we didn’t burn out.”

Adjusting a plan due to a worldwide pandemic takes a great deal of patience and perspective. For Massialas, he has developed both through parts of six decades in the sport.

His journey in foil fencing started at Cornell in 1975, and his Olympic dream began with a trip to watch the Olympic Games Montreal 1976. Following those Games (and Cornell dismantling their fencing program), he then traveled to San Jose State University to train with Olympic coach Mike D’Asaro Sr., and ultimately became a three-time Olympian in 1980 (which was boycotted), 1984, and 1988. He also won four medals in three different Pan American Games. After the 1988 Olympic Games (in Seoul) he retired from the sport and became an international referee working the world competition circuit.

But, he gives all the credit to his wife for him becoming a coach.

“My wife pushed me to start a fencing program. She told me, ‘you can make history.’ So, I started to look at this as a business and thought how I could make this work.”

He certainly made it work. And now his children – son Alexander and daughter Sabrina – have followed in his footsteps and have grown to be very well-known fencers in their own right. Alexander, who is one of the top-ranked individual fencers in the world, has already qualified for this summer’s Olympic Games in Tokyo. He won an individual silver and team bronze medal at the Olympic Games Rio 2016, narrowly missing the gold in the final match.

Meanwhile, Sabrina, who is an All-American at Notre Dame and won both a gold medal at the Summer Youth Olympic Games in 2014 and a world title at the 2016 FIE Junior World Championship, also qualified for this summer’s Olympics.

For the elder Massialas, it has been difficult at times trying to balance being a parent and being a world class coach. But he has learned not to bring fencing home and talk about it around the dinner table. He obviously supports them outright but believes strongly that they will need to grow on their own as well.

“It’s tough sometimes. I am there to support them, but no favoritism. They have to stand on their own two feet.”

At the same time, it has been incredibly rewarding and filled him with pride watching his children grow into world class fencers.

“It’s not something I fawn on, but I certainly take a moment to think and I say wow, it’s pretty amazing. As a coach I’m always looking forward and trying to get better and improve. But, it’s important to stop and smell the roses too.”

Heading into this summer’s Olympic Games in Tokyo, Massialas has very high expectations and looks to become the first U.S. fencing team to win gold in the team event at an Olympic Games. He also hopes one of his athletes capture that elusive first individual gold medal that was written on his desk note nearly 20 years ago.

He stops short of making a prediction, instead reasoning why it is entirely possible for his team to make history this summer.

“I go into it looking for double gold – both team and individual. I think that we’re stronger, better, and smarter than last time.”

Coach Educator of the Year: Chris Packert, U.S. Ski & Snowboard

Packert combines expertise with passion to develop the U.S. Ski & Snowboard coaching program

Chris Packert has finally found his own personal utopia. And U.S. Ski & Snowboard is glad he did.

The former high school science teacher and instructional designer for the Marines and NASA who embraces challenges in life found his way back to where he feels he belongs – on the slopes.

And he's done so by combining his advanced education in curriculum design with his lifelong passion of skiing to form the perfect coach educator – so much of a rarity that some have even referred to him as a “unicorn.”



After more than five years as the Coach Development Manager with U.S. Ski & Snowboard, Packert is just as passionate as the day he began.

“I feel so fortunate to do what I do,” he said. “I am always busy and I love it.”

And now he has the hardware to show how much all his hard work has paid off as the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee has named him the 2020 Coach Educator of the Year.

“I see this as the highest honor for someone in my position to receive. It was totally unexpected, and I am so honored to receive this award.”

Before a distinguished career which has seen stops in academia, as a high school teacher and with the U.S. military, Packert had a passion for skiing. It all began in middle school on a small hill in Pennsylvania called Spring Mountain. From there his love affair with skiing began and he worked as a ski instructor at Seven Springs in Pennsylvania and in Colorado during college. Although skiing remained his passion, Packert was thirsty for knowledge and focused on academics as well. He received his undergraduate degree from West Virginia University, then received a master's degree from the same school in curriculum and instruction and a second master's in instructional design and technology from George Mason University.

Packert began as the coach development manager with U.S. Ski & Snowboard in 2016 where he found the perfect match to combine his background in curriculum design with his athletic passion. He immediately performed a needs analysis of the program. He found that there was a good foundation, but he knew he could improve on the approach and the delivery and sequence of learning.

“They were doing both the teaching and evaluation at the same time,” Packert, who is still an

instructor at Vail and Beaver Creek, said. “I thought I needed to change the course structure into a blended learning model, which consists of a series of eLearning modules, where people can digest things and process what they learn at their own pace, and then participate in an in-person practicum where they apply what they learned and show their retention.”



Packert has brought an elevated level of professionalism and careful thought to his position with U.S. Ski & Snowboard. Packert made minor tweaks to his programs, such as calling participants “coach developers” instead of “clinic leaders” to place more of the emphasis on the importance of developing the next generation of coaches.

He believes strongly in collaborating with other expert coaches in the community to adapt the existing programs and create new impactful programs for coaches who work with athletes within all stages of development and within the seven snow

sport disciplines.

With collaboration in mind, Packert created a coach’s forum in which all coaches are able to communicate with one another, and share ideas and tips with each other. He also makes himself directly available through office hours where he and coaches can have individual discussions. Packert believes strongly in developing coaches at a young age and wanted to do something for those who needed more instruction. He led a redesign of the booklet “Alpine Guide to Ski Fundamentals,” which is an excellent resource for any ski coach. It’s designed to serve as an in-field guide and contains resources such as drill progressions, training plans and skill-building sessions for all coaches.

At the end of the day, Packert is able to gauge whether his efforts are successful just by watching coaches and athletes interact.

“The way in which coaches interact with athletes is so important. Through positive relationship-building, encouragement, and proper skill development tactics, coaches can create a life-long passion for the sport. On the flip side, they can quickly turn people away from going any farther if they don’t have a plan, don’t develop positive relationships, and provide skill development opportunities that are either too rigorous or too easy.” Packert said.

In addition to developing the Coach Certification Program, which certifies over 1,000 coaches per year and provides continuing education for an additional 5,000 coaches, he also developed a program for training coach developers which is now in its second year. His goal for the program is to establish a high standard of coaching consistency across the country, so regardless of a club’s

location, athletes receive the same level of care and training.

Packert, who is also a U-12 coach for Buddy Werner racing, also runs an LLC called Emerge, where he works with several other National Governing Bodies and sporting organizations such as U.S. Lacrosse, USA Hockey, USTA and Steel Sports to help utilize best educational principles in the way content is delivered to coaches. He has also contributed to numerous national publications, including co-authoring the series by the United States Center for Coaching Excellence Professional Development in Sport Coaching: How to Develop and Support Coaches in Creating a Positive Sport Culture (currently in development).

For someone who has always needed to stay busy and challenge himself, Packert is obviously succeeding. His passion for what he does now is fulfilling and rewarding.



Red Gerard of the United States takes a practice run before competing in the men's snowboard slopestyle final during Day 3 of the Aspen 2021 FIS Snowboard and Freeski World Championship on March 12, 2021 at Buttermilk Ski Resort in Aspen, Colorado. (Photo by Ezra Shaw/Getty Images)

Developmental Coach of the Year: Dana Skelton, USA Swimming

Skelton trying to be the 'best human she can be' while developing the next generation of swimmers



Dana Skelton loved the sport of swimming too much. She knew she had to make a change and bring some balance into her life.

She realized that sometimes perspective makes all the difference. Sometimes time away from what you love can be positive. Sometimes taking a step back can open the path forward.

For U.S. Swimming and First Colony Swim Team coach Dana Skelton, her moment of clarity came after she realized she was too consumed with the results of a meet and needed some perspective.

"I actually left coaching for a bit because I did not have an identity outside of coaching," she said. "I used to get so nervous before swim meets. I realized I was too results-driven. I had to reevaluate. It was driving me out of coaching. Once I realized that, that is when changes

started to happen. I became more authentic, and I wanted to be someone to make others be better. Become a better person."

Thankfully for the swimmers at FCST and all the others she has influenced, she did not stay away from the sport too long.

"I was out of coaching for about a year, and I realized I missed the sport and the creativity that goes into coaching," she said. "When I came back, I made sure I kept my balance and did things I love like arts and crafts and spend time with my family. Coaching has such an emotional tie and I had to learn to leave that at the pool."

Her time off and recalibration obviously worked. After an outstanding year in 2020, she has been named the 2020 Developmental Coach of the Year by the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee.

"I was so surprised," she said. "It is really awesome that people around me nominated me. I feel motivated that people believe in me. I think it is so important that people are starting to understand the importance of beginning young, building a foundation, and being active early on."

Starting early was something she experienced herself as her family was in to swimming and she took to the water at a young age. It led to a standout swimming career in both high school and college. It is also at the core of who she is as a coach.

"The big thing is that I want to help kids start out loving sports, and it doesn't need to be swim," she said. "It can be soccer, or any other sport or activity. But I focus on helping them become better

people in general. As a developmental coach that should be our main goal.”

During her 20-year tenure as a USA Swimming coach, Skelton has dedicated herself to developing individuals and working with the athlete and parent as the head development coach of First Colony Swim Team, Inc. in Texas. As part of her role and mentorship position with the team, she started a program called the FCST Strong Girls Program to show girls ages nine and older how to be strong and fearless leaders.



“I was noticing some things about our girls. Some of them seemed to have a lack of confidence. I think there are certain things that female athletes need to learn. I try to talk to them about things like confidence, gratitude and performance anxiety. It’s about relationship building.”

Beyond that, Skelton wants to develop the athlete as a person, not just based on swimming or the results of a competition.

“Self-sufficiency is important. It isn’t just swim. It trickles over to school and other things. Be a leader and a good teammate. Learn to be sincere, encouraging, loyal and reliable. I think confidence is huge. They are trying things they’ve never done in their life, and I can guide them through that and build character.”

“The process of what sports do far exceed the outcome of winning,” USA Swimming Senior Director of Team Services & Athlete Development Mariejo P. Truex said. “It really is about developing connections with athletes and building their self-efficacy so they can see the outcomes they are hoping for. Dana not only gets that, but she intentionally builds her interactions, long-term athlete planning and her day-to-day around it.”

She remains committed to both mental and emotional growth in her athletes, as well as physical. In addition to practices and one-on-ones, she encourages the swimmers to keep a journal and use it as a place for openness, healthy communication, and growth.

“She sees the big picture and connects the steps to get there,” Truex said. “Having Dana work with our youth on deck every day with these things in mind is what we need more of. We are proud to call her a coach member of our organization and are fortunate to have her help building our coach education program set to launch in the Fall of 2022.”

Like with most of the world’s population, COVID-19 has presented challenges with Skelton and her program, most of which were logistical like ensuring the kids remained in one lane or separated at opposite ends of the pool. Still, from a coaching standpoint, Skelton learned to be aware of each athlete’s mental state as well as their athletic one.

“The biggest thing I learned is to be there mentally, really paying attention to the athletes. Sometimes

it has nothing to do with swimming but being there for them is so important.”

She gives credit to a trio of strong women who helped mold her into the coach and role model she has become. Her mother is her hero and the one who started her in the sport and the pool early on. Markell Lyng is her daily inspiration and the one who is always pushing her to learn and get better. And finally, Allison Beebe is her mentor who saw greatness in her before she saw it in herself. “Dana is very open-minded. She listens to people’s opinions, processes those opinions, and then decides the best course of action,” Beebe, who is the former head coach at FCST, said. “She is fantastic at putting herself in her athletes’ shoes. She learns which learning style works for each swimmer rather than just using one approach.”

“I have known Dana professionally and personally for about 15 years,” Lyng, who is a fellow coach at FCST, said. “I have seen her grow and evolve over the years. I could not think of a person more deserving of this award. She puts her heart and soul into everything she does and is always looking out for the good of others. I could not be prouder of Dana and hearing she received this award showcased for the world what I had seen in her for years.”

Skelton is thankful for all three of these women and how they have helped shape her perspective. Because for Skelton, perspective and seeing the big picture remains so important. And now being a mom of her own three girls has helped reinforce that perspective and has made her more determined to set a positive example to teach her swimmers how to be better people for their entire lives.

“I am trying to be the best human I can be. Constantly trying to improve myself and help those around me. I think that has helped me become a better coach. Results are fun, but I really want to make the athletes better people. I try to put them as a person first, and the results will come.” Many coaches stress the importance of putting the person first over the results. Skelton truly means it.



“She cares much more about developing people than she does building a resume,” Beebe said. “I think that’s the greatest quality a coach can have.”

Photo credit for Dana Skelton article: First Colony Swim Team.

College Coach of the Year: John Tanner, USA Water Polo

Tanner building leaders while stacking hardware at Stanford

Standing in the Yading Nature Reserve in the Tibetan mountains, over 15,000 feet above sea level in the 2019 summer, Stanford women's water polo coach John Tanner felt at that moment that his team had come together.

He was right. And hindsight remains 20-20.

"Last year's success was built in the Tibet mountains. Thousands of miles away from any pool."

His Cardinal were off to an incredible 15-1 start to the 2019-20 season (with wins over 14 ranked opponents). Fresh off the national title the year prior, the fast start came as a bit of a surprise because a few top players were off with the U.S. National Team. However, just when things were rolling, the season was called off when COVID-19 hit.

"When COVID hit, it was really disappointing because we hadn't been in a position to grow late in the season or postseason to see how good we really were," the USA Water Polo hall of famer said. "We hadn't really faced adversity or been challenged. We feel what we do as a program is to teach courage, and it has taken a lot of courage to deal with this."

Despite the worldwide pandemic, and after another outstanding year unique year, Tanner has been named the 2020 College Coach of the Year by the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee for his continued excellence leading the Stanford women's water polo team.

He is incredibly honored and sees it as somewhat of a lifetime achievement award for his career that has produced All-Americans, Olympic athletes, NCAA championships, FINA world titles, and Olympic gold medals.

"I am tremendously honored," the 23-year Stanford head coach said. "I feel that being recognized by the USOPC is so reassuring and gratifying."

Just like other sport programs, COVID forced Tanner to find creative new ways to engage his athletes. Tanner adjusted the team's athlete-led TED talks to include professors who inspired and sparked interest in their presentation topic. Additionally, he hosted resume workshops to prepare athletes for their future and set them up for success after their time at Stanford. As always, his goal through all of this was to create better people and leaders in his athletes.

"What we want to do in our program is create leaders outside of the sport," Tanner, who was also a three-time NCAA champion and an All-American at the school as a member of the men's team, said. "Even though our season was cut short, we felt that our women were ready to go out and lead. I feel



that being around a college environment, your brain is constantly challenged. You are constantly inspired by the environment. The faculty and especially the athletes. Everything is a learning opportunity.”

Current Stanford standout Makenzie Fischer, who was a 2016 Olympic gold medalist, three-time FINA World Champion, and two-time NCAA Champion under Tanner with the Cardinal, appreciates the impact Tanner has had on her both in and out of the pool.

“The thing I most appreciate about JT (Tanner) is that he genuinely cares about his athletes and wants us to succeed in all aspects of our lives,” she said. “He sees us as people first and then as athletes. Obviously, he wants to win championships like any coach out there, but he also wants us to be the next change-makers in the world. He gets just as fired up about when I share a class or a topic I’m passionate about as he would if I were to score an important goal in a big game. In this way, JT goes above and beyond the job description of a water polo coach. He sets aside time that could be spent playing water polo to develop skills to set us up later in life.”



Learning opportunities, adversity, challenges and courage: All things that Tanner has seen in pools all around the world. And all things that his team faced in the mountains of China.

In that team-building summer of 2019, he led his team on a trip to China and the Tibetan Plateau to gain experience in the pool playing against the Chinese Olympic Team, but more importantly to gain worldly experience as leaders.

For two weeks the team traveled in China, played exhibitions with the Chinese Olympic

Team, visited college groups, and hosted a clinic with youth water polo players. The team also spent five days in the extreme altitude of the Yading Nature Reserve which is on the Tibet Autonomous Region border of the Sichuan Province. The team’s visit included extreme hikes that reached elevations of 15,500 feet, as well as visits to four different temples in the Daocheng Yading area and one where they met a Lobsang monk, toured the temple, shared tea and listened to his philosophy on life.

“We really embrace the idea that athletics are done at the highest level with world-class aspirations,” Tanner said. “We want to compete against the best. To have the opportunity to go to China and compete against the Chinese team, to be invited, it was absolutely amazing.”

His philosophy of building world citizens and world leaders was not formed overnight. He spent years as a high school coach, an assistant at Stanford, head coach at Pacific University in both men’s water polo and men’s swimming, and ultimately as a scout and assistant coach with the U.S. Men’s Water Polo National Team. He was a part of winning gold medals at the 1991 and 1997 FINA Cup

plus appearances at the 1992 and 2000 Olympic Games. In addition to his time as Olympic water polo coach, Tanner also coached swimming and helped Brad Schumacher win two gold medals at the 1996 Olympic Games.

And it was during his time as an Olympic coach where he thinks he grew the most.

“I learned so much from my time as an Olympic coach. I have always been grateful for my learning opportunities. That is what the Olympics are about. Everywhere we go we see it as a classroom and an opportunity for the Olympic Movement.”

Tanner, who took over the Stanford program in 1998 and turned it into a national powerhouse nearly overnight, has led the program to seven NCAA championships and five Mountain Pacific Sports Federation championships. He has also produced 12 Olympians and dozens of U.S. National Team members during his tenure in Palo Alto.



It's credentials such as these why Fischer credits him with building Stanford water polo into the elite program it currently is.

“JT has had an immense impact on the Stanford water polo team and the sport of water polo in general,” she said. “It goes without saying that's he's an incredible water polo coach and his national titles can attest to that. He has led Stanford women's water polo from its inception and has built it into one of the most elite athletic programs in the country.”

Still, Tanner deflects his own greatness as the cause of the program's success. He says he owes much of the success to the winning environment and greatness at school.

“I owe a lot of success to being in the great environment I get to work in at Stanford,” said Tanner, who credits former Stanford and San Francisco 49ers head football coach Bill Walsh with teaching him a great deal about leadership. “So many great people and so many great minds and winners, and I think part of my success is reflective of that.”

Photos in John Tanner article compliments of USA Water Polo and Stanford University

Volunteer Coach of the Year: Cherise Wilkins, U.S. Speedskating

For Wilkins, Syracuse is the home where her heart is

For Cherise Wilkins, her roots run deep. And no matter how far her international skating career took her away from Syracuse, NY, she knew she would return.

Now back home, it is only fitting that she has returned to the very same rink and the very same club team where it all started for her.

After a decorated international career that included competing in the world cup and Olympic trials, Wilkins is now the head coach for the Syracuse Speedskating Club. And the impact she has made is now obvious, as the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee has named her the 2020 Volunteer Coach of the Year.

“I honestly love speedskating so much and sharing the joy with people,” the 10-year coach said. “I am thankful that I get to share with these athletes and be a part of it. For them to put in the nomination is special. To know that they think of me like that means so much. It feels very nice. When you are a volunteer, it’s nice to know that what you are doing is working.”

US Speedskating Events & Membership Director Marion Wohlrab says that Wilkins’ experience and dedication has been instrumental in building a program to develop future skaters for the U.S. program.

“It’s great to see that former athletes recognize the impact a coach can have on young athletes and are willing to give back to the sport,” Wohlrab said.

Wilkins’ passion for coaching extends beyond just focusing on developing future competitive skaters. She is passionate about creating an inclusive and supportive program, while also promoting opportunities to grow the sport.

“My philosophy is that I want it to be fun and be an outlet for anyone,” Wilkins, who is a Level 2 US Speedskating certified coach, said. “I want to create the foundation for a lifetime. I want to create a family environment and somewhere kids can go for trust.”

Wilkins also wants to stress a balance between competitive excellence and an individual’s development beyond their physical goals.

“It is so important to communicate with the athlete and understand what their goals and wants are. I ask each athlete what their goals are for the competition, not win or lose, but personally what they want to do in the competition such as a certain technique or something they have worked on. It’s not



all about the results of a race.”

As a coach, she prides herself on her empathy. As a skater, Wilkins simply wanted to go fast. She grew up playing hockey in Syracuse and was known for her speed. Someone mentioned that she should try out for speedskating, so she gave the Syracuse Speedskating Club a shot. The rest is history.

Since that point, she blossomed into one of the best short track skaters in the country. In addition to appearances in the world cup and Olympic trials, she won many awards over her career, including multiple national and North American championships, and the Masters National Champion in both 2018 and 2019.

Her experience growing up with the club and her personal achievements on the national scale has made her a cornerstone of the team, inspiring athletes to strive for success. She says she uses much from her time as a competitor as a coach, especially how to approach training and racing from a mental aspect.

“To get to the international level you have to truly live it and mental prep is so important,” Wilkins said. “I learned a lot about different coaching styles and techniques on how to approach people and athletes. I took all the positives from my time skating and try to implement with my kids.”

“Obviously the technical expertise Cherise brings to the sport is of great advantage,” Wohlrab said. “She has already walked in her skaters’ shoes, can relate and emphasize, and I believe that creates great bonds with a coach and helps forming a great program.”



Wilkins owes a great deal of her success and love for the sport to her youth coach, who turned into her coaching mentor and head coach at Syracuse Speedskating Club. That coach was Gretchen Burns, who continued to lead the youth program until retiring last year.

“She loved the sport and was all about having fun and working hard,” Wilkins said. “I have had plenty of coaches in my day, and I hope I can live up to her. As a coach I look up to her and strive to instill the love of the sport into the athletes who I coach.”

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit last year, Wilkins aimed to be that coach for her athletes to look up to and count on for guidance and directions during the tough time. She responded by providing personalized training workouts, two virtual workouts per week, one-on-one virtual meetings to discuss personal matters such as mental health, and videos showing certain techniques that were being coached.

In her opinion, other than coming up with new ways to communicate with the athletes, COVID has presented challenges from a logistical and safety standpoint.

Wilkins runs two sessions – one for athletes ages 5-11 and one for 12-up – with a total of more than 20 athletes. When dealing with that many moving parts, logistics and safety matter greatly.

“It has brought about a whole new level of safety. It’s been a challenge to make sure the right protocols are in place and what we could do safely to continue to have the sport and keep from everyone getting sick. It’s been challenging balancing training partners and keeping up practices when we couldn’t have the full club together.”

True to her philosophy, Wilkins has stressed that the sport is a positive foundation for a lifetime. Currently, Wilkins is a Level 2 coach and focuses on the development for teens and young adults who strive to compete at a high level. She is in the process to obtain her Level 3 certification, which would allow her to coach at the highest level and internationally.

However, she loves teaching the young children, the gratification that comes with it, and doesn’t see herself anywhere but the rink she grew up in.

“I always want to learn as much as I can. I don’t think I want to coach at world cup or Olympics. I truly enjoy the young children and teaching. I am very happy with where I am and what I do.”

Cover image by: Kenzie Coning

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