

Off-campus coaches: Most prep mentors aren't teachers

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By Geoff Lepper, Marin *Independent Journal*

When George Lewis arrived at the campus of Drake High as a young math teacher in 1967, he found his dream of running a varsity athletic program placed on hold.

"I wanted to coach in the worst way," Lewis said. "But every coaching position was taken by a teacher, and there wasn't an opening."

Thirty-six years later, things have changed radically when it comes to high school teams and the men and women who lead them. The scene was once dominated by on-campus coaches - that is, full-time school employees, almost always teachers. But if Lewis, Drake's athletic director, had been starting his career over this fall, he would have little trouble finding a team to guide.

An IJ survey of athletic directors from all 12 Marin high schools with varsity teams - Branson, Drake, Marin Academy, Marin Catholic, Novato, Redwood, San Domenico, San Marin, San Rafael, Tamalpais, Terra Linda, Tomales - showed that only 32.7 percent of all varsity head coaching positions were filled by on-campus coaches during the 2002-03 school year.

In other words, more than two-thirds of the county's coaches guide their teams while holding off-campus jobs.

There's no sure-fire way to compare historical figures, but the balance of power has shifted dramatically from on-campus to off-campus mentors. Some believe it's a crisis; some believe it's an acceptable sign of the times.

"Time flies," said Marin County Athletic League commissioner Phil Roark, who spent 35 years as an on-campus coach at Redwood before retiring in 1999. "Fifteen to 20 years ago, we were all coaches on campus. ... Now, a lot of our coaches work somewhere else, get to practice and get out of their car, start practice and when practice is done they get in their car and drive home."

"I'd say it's been in the last 15 years I've seen this trend developing," Tamalpais principal Chris Holleran said. "Whenever we have coaching openings, we have this conversation. ... It's kind of been a sea change, a transformation to really relying on people who aren't teachers at the school to come in and coach."

Every school used to have at least one on-campus coaching icon, someone who had served as a teacher and coach for more than two decades. Among them were Roark, Tamalpais' Beth Juri and San Rafael's Bret Tovani. Those days are long gone.

Jim Brownfield is a past president of the California Coaches Association and current West Coast commissioner for the National High School Athletic Coaches Association. He molded future Olympic gold medalists and NFL players as a longtime track and football coach at John Muir High in Pasadena. Recently retired, he now devotes his time, in part, to combat the off-campus coaching phenomenon.

"It's beyond epidemic," Brownfield said. "... It's beyond a crisis. It's gone way beyond that."

The situation is not unique to California. According to an April report in the Arizona Republic, the amount of off-campus coaches employed by that state's largest school district leapt from 2 percent of the district's total coaching pool in 1998 to 18 percent this year.

But whereas some states and metropolitan areas across the country still cling determinedly to the idea of using teachers as coaches, the off-campus trend has become the new norm in Marin.

Of the dozen local high schools surveyed, only three had a majority of on-campus coaches - San Domenico, Branson and San Rafael. Two schools - Novato and Tamalpais - had four on-campus coaches and 20 of the off-campus variety.

There was one school with an even more lopsided record. At Drake, there was only one on-campus coach in 2002-03: Doug Donnellan, who heads up the boys basketball program and is a physical education teacher.

"When I played (basketball) at Marin Catholic, my coach all four years was on-campus," said Donnellan, a 1981 MC grad. "My cross country coach was on campus. It just seemed more normal for coaches to be on campus. Back then, it seemed like more teachers just wanted to be coaches. Now, it seems like the teaching job is so time-consuming, it's tough to coach."

REASONS FOR THE TREND

Lewis said he's devoted a fair amount of time trying to figure out why things have changed so dramatically, and he has identified several potential explanations.

"Teachers feel a fair amount of pressure to be outstanding inside the classroom," Lewis said. "They don't feel they have three hours to devote to something else. Pay is certainly an issue, although it's always been. ... There don't seem to be as many people getting involved in teaching that had athletic backgrounds. When I came to Drake, half the staff had an athletic background and hoped to tie coaching and teaching together."

Brownfield traces the problem's origins to the 1960s, when mandatory physical education in high schools was cut from four years to two. "You say, 'Where was the beginning?'" he said. "That's either the chicken or the egg ... take your pick."

Previously, Brownfield said, coaching positions had been oversubscribed with World War II veterans who had become college-educated physical education teachers, courtesy of a newly installed innovation called the GI Bill. But without the mandatory four years of physical education classes, there was no need to have so many PE teachers, Brownfield said, and so colleges dropped their majors on the topic.

The speed of the transformation picked up dramatically with a numerical double-whammy in 1978: Proposition 13 and Title IX. Prop. 13, passed by California voters on June 8, lessened property tax burdens but increased the strain on school budgets and teacher staffing levels. Title IX, a national ruling, mandated that all schools receiving public funds must offer equal athletic opportunities for both genders, effectively doubling the number of teams - and coaches - each institution needed.

"When I started teaching, jobs were hard to come by, so you were certainly going to be willing to do whatever you could to make yourself important to the school," said Holleran, who coached football, cross country, basketball and track at various Southern California schools earlier in his career. "There was just an expectation that you'd take on these extra things. That expectation isn't there anymore, and part of it is the teacher shortage."

Redwood assistant principal Sue Chelini agreed.

"We used to have all coaches as teachers, but back when Prop. 13 happened, we were not able to hire new young teachers for some time," she said. "The people who had been coaches got tired of it and we couldn't find people to coach, so we had to go outside."

Said Lewis: "Many years ago, there weren't girls (varsity) sports, so you only needed to find half as many coaches. Maybe the pool of coaches wasn't so different; we just have so many more sports now, there just aren't enough people to go around for the jobs."

TIED TO ENROLLMENT

A Marin-specific factor in this coaching evolution is the relatively small size of the county's schools.

For state-wide playoffs, such as in basketball and volleyball, the California Interscholastic Federation divides member schools into five classifications, based on enrollment. The largest schools are in Division I, the smallest in Division V.

Marin has three Division III schools (Novato, Redwood and San Marin), five Division IV schools (Drake, Marin Catholic, San Rafael, Tamalpais and Terra Linda) and four Division V schools (Branson, Marin Academy, San Domenico and Tomales). And while many of these schools offer the same number of sports as their Division I brethren, their smaller size means they have fewer faculty and staff members - and therefore, a decreased pool of on-campus coaching possibilities.

It doesn't help matters that salaries for many coaching positions total less than \$3,000, pre-tax, for a full season. One coach laughed ruefully when he reported that, over the course of a year, he made less than a \$1 per hour for his coaching work.

At least he still made money. Not Robin Goddard, an off-campus coach who is a full-time mom and part-time graduate student. Before her two daughters, Michelle and Jamie, grew older and joined after-school teams of their own, Goddard was paying out cash to head up Redwood's girls basketball team.

"When I first started, I would hire somebody to watch the kids," said Goddard. "... It would cost me a lot more to have the baby-sitting help than I would get paid. You don't do it for the money. You do it for the passion of the sport, wanting to help mentor young people and athletes."

HIGH TURNOVER RATE

Passion only lasts so long, however. And when it leaves, it contributes to an abnormally high "churn rate" - that is, the number of high school coaches leaving their jobs each year.

There are approximately 75,000 coaches at California high schools, according to Brownfield of the national coaches group. "According to a CIF study, we have a turnover of about 25,000 a year. Now that is massive. I don't know if you can find another profession that has that major a problem."

Terra Linda athletic director Steve Farbstein sees that situation compounded by incoming teachers who either aren't as willing as their predecessors - or simply aren't allowed by their school administrators - to don a whistle.

"The thing I see now is teachers coming in now who would coach, but a lot of schools won't let a first-year teacher coach," Farbstein said. "The people we've hired kind of want to get the lay of the land. They want to get acclimated."

Holleran seconds that observation: "Our district really wants young teachers to focus on their teaching, so we don't necessarily get a lot of the young teachers getting into coaching right away."

The rise of more esoteric sports has also played a part in the need for off-campus coaches. For example, few schools in Marin can boast full-time employees who have played serious, competitive lacrosse. So when the MCAL added that sport as a varsity offering last spring, most schools had to scramble to find coaches who knew their "cutters" from their "feeders."

"Whenever I interview people from back East," Branson athletic director Tom Ryan said, "that's the first thing I ask them: 'What kind of lacrosse background do you have?'"

OFF-CAMPUS NEGATIVES

Some people might say, what's the big deal? Does it really make a difference if a coach puts in 40 hours as accountant, restaurant manager or printer instead of as a teacher?

Novato football coach Travis Brackett, who also teaches economics and government at the school, believes it absolutely does.

"Oh, definitely," said Brackett, who has led the Hornets to back-to-back appearances in the North Coast Section 2A Redwood Empire championship game. "I've been able to work with a lot of the guys over the past three years, meet with their teachers, see what the problems are. Maybe they're slipping, or not understanding things, or not getting homework done. Freshman, junior varsity or varsity, you can be a positive influence."

Dick Galiette is executive director of the NHSACA, the national governing body for prep coaches. He said the increasing prevalence of off-campus coaches is part of the reason that states have instituted more stringent coaching certification processes over the past two years.

"When the off-campus things started to increase, they didn't know the first thing about giving first aid when an injury occurs on the field, and how you deal with young people," Galiette said. "If you're somebody with no background in that, that'll be a problem."

Matt Winton, a teacher and boys basketball coach at San Rafael, said his on-court responsibilities are made easier by his on-campus status.

"Ultimately, it probably has some effect in game-type situations," Winton said. "You just build a closer relationship with your players. That makes a difference because we, as basketball coaches, ask a whole lot of our players. We ask them to give a lot of time, energy and emotion. I don't think it's easy for kids to do that, and they need to have someone coaching them that they respect and trust. Getting to know players more makes it easier to trust and respect a coach."

Being on-campus doesn't just improve relations between a coach and an athlete. It also allows a coach to find discover new, untapped talent. Take the case of Drake's Andreas Brylka, a 6-foot-5 senior who has been part of the Pirates' past two North Coast Section champion boys volleyball squads.

"He was originally encouraged to come out by (basketball coach) Doug Donnellan and (athletic director) George Lewis, whereas I had no idea who Andreas Brylka was," Pirates coach Dan Dibley said. "As an on-campus coach, I might have been able to recruit him. As an off-campus coach, I had no idea."

As a three-sport star at Redwood, 2003 graduate Bobby Holt played for multiple on- and off-campus coaches. Of that group, Holt grew closest to baseball coach Gino Pomilia, in part because Pomilia also taught physical education at the school.

"I think it does help to have him on campus, because he's always there. If you want to talk baseball in the middle of the day, you can see him," Holt said. "The players have a closer relationship with him. I had class with him, so we'd always be talking baseball. If anything comes up, you can always talk to him."

Would it be a significant loss if Pomilia were ever replaced by an off-campus coach?

"I think it would," Holt said, "because when he's there all day, he's making sure you're on the right track all the time."

OFF-CAMPUS POSITIVES

That said, a coach is not rendered infallible simply because he or she works full-time at the school.

"Ideally, it's great to be a teacher-coach, because you get to know the kids in two different venues," Marin Academy athletic director Heather Rogers said. However, "teaching takes a tremendous amount of energy. Now, with the level of competition out there, the expertise that you need, not everyone is competent. Not everyone has those skills to just step out of the classroom and onto the athletic field. It's like another full-time job."

And just because a science teacher is skilled at explaining the physics of a 100-mph tennis serve, it doesn't mean he or she is talented enough to demonstrate.

"I think the kids are lucky to have somebody with a lot of experience," said Geoff Martinez, a tennis pro at Rafael Racquet & Swim Club who works part-time as Marin Academy's tennis coach. "My high school (tennis) coach was almost more of a baby-sitter: 'Here are the balls.' He didn't have much to offer. ...

"It definitely helps, I think, if you have somebody who's really knowledgeable," Martinez said. "You get (the players) to become more students of the game, to learn tactics instead of ball-bashing."

Although some critics see them as carpetbaggers who come in at day's end, whistle-armed dilettantes who conduct their coaching and then bolt from school grounds, there are plenty of off-campus coaches who go above and beyond the basic job requirements.

"A lot of people that are off-campus bring pretty good quality to the job," Novato athletic director Bill Schoen said. "The guys that coach baseball, they're out there on Saturday and Sunday redoing the field, making a warning track. ... They do provide a lot of support and emotion."

While Branson's Ryan prefers his coaches have some interaction with the players in the academic arena, he doesn't consider off-campus coaches automatically inferior to on-campus ones.

"I think quality is quality," Ryan said. "That's what all the administrators are looking for, what the athletes and parents are looking for. Whether it comes from in-house or off-campus, it doesn't make that big of a difference, as long as you have a quality coach who knows their sport and works well with the kids."

Besides, some off-campus coaches are on campus so much that the label hardly seems accurate. Farbstein, for example, considers himself more on-campus than off even though he earns the bulk of his salary as the administrator of Marin County's Catholic Youth Organization recreational sports programs.

For others, the entire "off-campus" label comes off as a bit disparaging.

"I put a lot of time into the program and the kids," said Marin Catholic girls basketball coach Rick DeMartini, who won a Division IV state title with the Wildcats in 2001-02 while working full-time as a plumber in San Francisco. "I put in as much time as any on-campus coach. ... To label me an 'off-campus coach,' I think that's not fair."

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

As an official for the coaches' governing body, Brownfield has a plan for reversing the trend. It depends on his generation of teacher-coaches, the men and women who have devoted decades to their craft.

"It's solvable, but the coaches have to do it themselves," Brownfield said. "I've got to be able to sell the professionals that are left ... sell them on the idea: 'Find people to replace you and two other coaches.' I'm saying we can solve this in one decade if all the coaches will step up and do this."

"The problem I have is, each year we're losing more and more of that group that was into this - the World War II and Korean War veterans. ... We're getting responses. We're just not getting to the masses."

In Marin, where so many of the longtime on-campus legends already have retired or simply stopped coaching, it may be too late to try that tack.

"I don't see it turning around in the near term, certainly," Tam's Holleran said. "And there are some potential consequences from the continued detachment of athletic programs from the school. ... It concerns me in that as long as we are offering this program, to the extent that it's possible, I want teachers, educators involved in the program."

Offering more money for the posts might make teachers more apt to apply, particularly in Marin, with its high cost of living. With the state's budget woes reaching a critical point, that money would certainly have to come from local fund-raising.

"A lot of the newer teachers can't afford that time commitment because they're working another job," Brackett said. "That makes it a struggle in itself. ... It's pretty tough, just from the financial aspects. Living around here, you have to be really aware of that."

Schoen cuts to the chase: "It's not going to happen because most teachers don't want to do that much work for that little money. ... When I was in high school, everybody was on campus then, because it was 40 years ago. But the pay (now) is the same that you got 40 years ago. A football coach (then) got \$600 or \$700 for a season. A tennis coach (now) gets \$1,400. And, obviously, \$600 in 1962 is worth a lot more than \$1,400 today."

Even Brownfield recognizes that his vision may never come to pass.

"I'd like to find out if there is a high school left (in California) where all the head coaches are teachers," he said, pausing a moment before continuing.

"That's long gone. That's from a different world."