

COACHING: High turnover in positions over past two years

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high school, and I was going to be a teacher and a coach — and it never changed.”

Volleyball Coach Rory Rush recalled that when she was a player, “there weren’t a lot of female coaches at the time.” She wanted to step into that role and build relationships with players.

For all the coaches interviewed by *The Nugget*, relationships with student athletes are the core of coaching.

“For me,” said Cross-Country Coach Josh Nordell, “it’s the relationship with the kids. I think sports is the greatest teaching tool available to us.”

Track Coach Jeff Larson concurs.

“I think coaching is an extension of the classroom,” he told *The Nugget*. “You have to be able to connect with the kids (to) bring out their best.”

Many of the coaches that lead programs at Sisters High School have been in the field for more than two decades. Though they are clearly dedicated, Sisters coaches — like coaches across the nation — are feeling more pressures than ever before; pressures that diminish both their ability to coach effectively and erode their enjoyment of the work. And those pressures are making it harder and harder to recruit and retain new coaches.

SHS programs have seen considerable turnover in recent years, in baseball, volleyball, soccer, lacrosse and other programs. Sometimes a coach relocates or other professional and personal obligations make

coaching impossible. And sometimes they just don’t want to do it anymore.

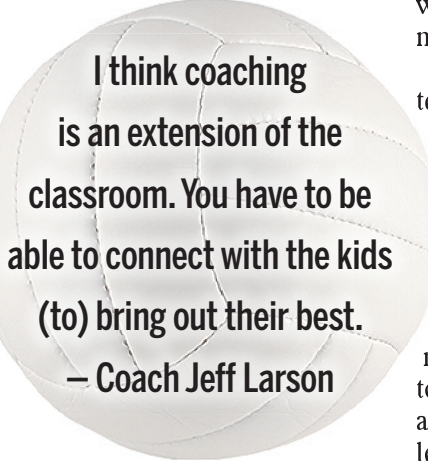
SHS Athletic Director Gary Thorson told *The Nugget*: “In my two years as an AD, we have had 16 head coaching changes. Of these, only two were non-renewals of contracts by the district... The turnover is alarming and hurts the growth and continuity of programs, and we are looking at ways to help with this issue. Recruiting coaches in to the area is difficult as we are limited to what we can pay a coach, and several of the positions are now ‘red flagged’ in the coaching community due to the high turnover in that particular sport. It is not unusual for there to be only one candidate for a posted position, and we rarely have more than two to three potential candidates for a position.”

Coaching is a tremendous time commitment.

One of the factors that makes recruiting coaches difficult and keeping them a problem is that the gig puts tremendous demands on coaches’ time.

Thorson notes: “The average practice length is two hours, but you also add in games, planning for practices and games, film breakdown, fundraising, travel, meetings, and answering emails

and phone calls on a regular basis,” he said. “Travel is an issue, as Sisters will always be an outlier school due to our size and location. In our



current league situation, the average one-way trip is about 2:45 (hours), with the longest trip for league being Newport. We try to help by scheduling as many non-league games as possible, but with the growing size of the Bend schools we often run into a competitive mismatch when we schedule them.”

And the time commitment isn’t just an issue during the sports season.

“It starts months before your program (starts),” Larson noted. “It’s not confined to three months and I don’t think a lot of people understand that.”

Fendall says that program administration — which takes up most of a head coach’s time — is far more complicated than it used to be, especially since technology leads people to expect constant and instant communication on every aspect of the program. Ironically, the coaches say, technological ease of communication has in some ways made things worse instead of better. People expect more direct, individualized communication — and

wrong information can get out just as easily as good information, and travel just as far and as fast.

“We have way more channels of communication — and way more problems with communication,” Fendall said.

Several coaches noted that texts from parents of athletes and other communication demands can often come in the evenings, intruding on family time.

Then there’s fundraising and equipment management and compliance with myriad rules and regulations to attend to. Time spent actually working with student athletes becomes limited.

“I think there’s a big difference between coaching and head coaching,” Fendall said. Head coaching “is not as fun.”

Finding assistants to help with myriad coaching tasks isn’t easy; it’s especially hard for somebody who works a job outside the school district

to commit the time necessary to get the work done and to travel with the team.

While they recognize that Sisters is at the bottom end of the pay scale for coaches in Central Oregon, none of the coaches think that pay is a primary factor in putting strain on coaches.

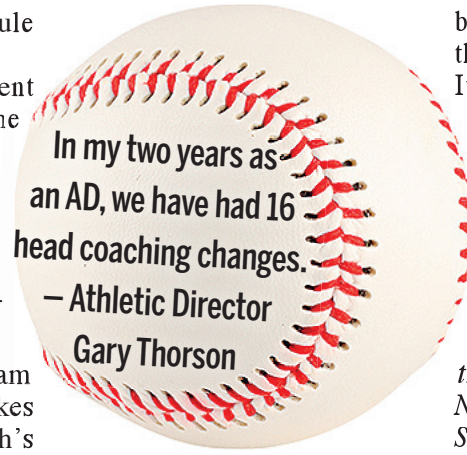
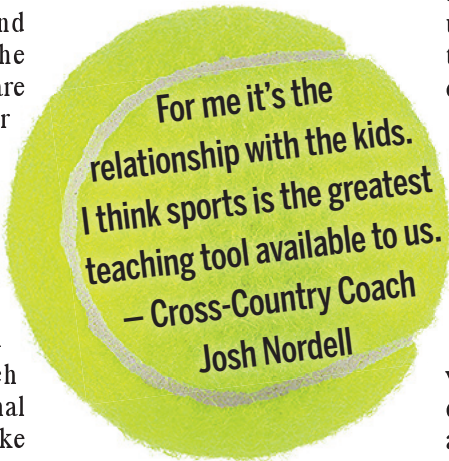
Sisters pays a new coach in one of the mainline sports a stipend of \$4,187, going up to \$4,884 for a coach with four or more years of experience.

“You could pay us a lot more and it would never pencil out,” Nordell told *The Nugget*.

However, Larson believes that a teacher weighing whether or not to step up to coach might weigh the commitment against the pay and decide not to.

“I do think there are teachers in the buildings who might be more motivated if the stipends were higher,” he said.

Working long hours for short pay can get a little old, but coaches understand that this is what they sign up for. It’s when they face undue pressures and unreasonable expectations from parents — and what some of them see as an increasing “professionalization” of youth sports — that they have to start to wonder whether it’s all worth it. *Those topics are the subject of Part 2 of The Nugget’s look at coaching in Sisters.*



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