

When did you get involved in the sport of swimming?

Bob and I have been with the sport of competitive swimming for 30 years, since our eldest son Rob started with the Goldfins in January 1990. Like every newbie parent, we started out as Level I officials during that first season. I became a Referee (Level IV, Green badge) in 2002 and earned my Level V (Blue badge) in 2004. Bob was busy being MM for the club for several years, so he didn't finish his Referee certification until a bit after me—maybe 2005 or 2006? I can't quite remember! We have six kids, all of whom swam with the Goldfins for varying amounts of time—and yes, we did have all six in the water in one year. Our daughter Alison went on to coach with the Goldfins for several years—Belinda Bilous credits Alison (who did teaching experience in Belinda's classroom) for recruiting Jayden into the sport! Our second youngest son Patrick was the last man standing (swimming) in our family—he was a National qualifier for several years and swam varsity with UBC—he stopped swimming after Winter Nationals and varsity championships in 2013, so essentially in the early spring of 2013. We have continued on as Master Officials since then.

Who are you when you are not on deck?

When not on deck, I was a Family Physician in Saskatoon. I retired at the end of June, 2018 after 40 years. Bob is a Professional Mechanical Engineer, doing consulting (design) work in HVAC. He has been in that business since graduating in 1973. He also ran his family farm out at Rosetown from 1994 until 2007. And, by the way, when our kids swam, billeting was still a thing in swimming! So every Goldfin meet when our kids were little, we were supposed to officiate, AND provide billeting for up to four out of town swimmers, AND provide donated food for feeding the officials and coaches. I was pregnant with Patrick in 1990 when Rob started swimming, and then had Sandy in 1992, so our two youngest literally grew up on the pool deck, in the stands, and surrounded by older swimmers. Our kids are still friends with some of the swimmers who used to billet with us back in the day.

When did you become a referee?

As Master Officials (Level V) we are expected to provide referee services within our province to all of the various swim programs. In Saskatchewan, that means volunteering our time to Winter, Summer and Masters competitions and to officials' education. As you know, most of the swim clinics must be taught by Referees, or by up-and-coming Referee candidates under the supervision of a Referee. We also provide refereeing to other swim competitions not governed within Swim Sask or Swimming Canada purview, such as Western Canada Summer Games, NAIG Games, Varsity swimming, and Special O swimming. At the national level, we can volunteer for any of the national level competitions that are offered by Swimming Canada, as well as Varsity and Summer Games meets. Nationally, I am classified as a Referee and Bob is classified as a Starter. Neither of us was selected for FINA designation, so we would not be chosen to represent Canada at international competitions. However, if we chose to get more involved with Para officiating, we could possibly advance to international in that stream—there are three or four Saskatchewan Master Officials who have done that.

How much money do you make, what do you get reimbursed for, what do you pay for out of pocket?

It is 100% true and no joke that officiating is an entirely voluntary vocation. We do NOT get paid. Not one thin dime. I guess we do it for love of the sport. Within Saskatchewan, Swim Sask policy states that Referees who travel to meets are provided with a mileage allowance, accommodation expenses and meal expenses as required/appropriate. There is no honorarium. Many of us donate our expense cheques back to the clubs, and if we do that, Swim Sask can issue a charitable donation receipt. We don't get paid for teaching clinics, either, although the travel expense policy does apply to that as well as to being on deck. Our time is entirely donated, whether for meets and clinics inside Saskatchewan or for out of province meets. There is a travel policy for national meets, but the only people who actually get their expenses reimbursed are the ones who are selected as Referees or Starters for the national meets—all the other “major” officials are travelling on their own dime as well as donating their time—and that means using holiday time if they are still working at their “real” jobs. I haven't reviewed the Swimming Canada reimbursement policy for some time, so it may have changed from what I just wrote, but I don't think so. When Bob and I went to Swift Current last summer for Western Canada Summer Games, our travel, accommodation and meals were provided or paid by the Summer Games organization—but we were encouraged to donate some or all of that back (with a donation receipt offered) to help the Games. And needless to say, Bob took several days off work for the Games, including the open water swimming (which, by the way, has its own clinics, as does Para.) So that's a long winded way of saying that Referees (and all Major officials at Swimming Canada meets) are strictly volunteers, just like the officials at small local meets.

What's the path way to become a referee, what are the levels?

The pathway to becoming a referee is the officiating “ladder” that everyone gets when they take the Intro to Swimming clinic (Level I clinic)—so, progressing through Levels I to V. I have said for years that if people take the maximum number of clinics that they can take in a year (especially now that we offer three mass clinics per year, north and south, so six options!) and work at every meet they can get to, it is absolutely possible to finish all the Level I and Level II tasks in less than two years. There is a mandatory “pause” at Level III—a person has to have worked one full calendar year at Level III before being allowed to progress to “senior” official (Green badge, or Level IV) which is the first Referee level. The provincial Officials' chair (currently Gary Thronberg) has an important role in determining when people are ready to progress to be given their Level IV or Level V designations, with lots of input from the currently certified Level V Referees who are working the meets. So, we have most recently worked hard to mentor Belinda Bilous and Jen Abrahamson (who came out of Summer Swimming in Watrous) up to their Level IV designations, and are now pushing to get Belinda advanced to Level V. Jen proved my point about getting to her Level IV within three years—and she did it while still living in Watrous, with her kids in Summer Swimming, and (just by the way!) while working in a Seniors' home and taking classes towards her nursing degree. I know everyone's life story is different, but it is possible!! I counted up, and I think there have been 13 Referees that have mentored under Bob and me over the past 15 or so years—of those, only Simon Merkosky (now in Regina) and Belinda and Jen are still active. Meanwhile, Bob and I have stayed on.

Where can you go (travel) being a referee?

We have thoroughly enjoyed our time as Referees. That being said, I at least am close to being done. I've said this will be my last season, at the end of the Summer competition schedule. We've travelled to Nationals (some of which have also been Trials meets for various international competitions including the 2008 and 2012 Olympics) Western Champs (formerly Junior Nationals and/or Age Group Nationals) and Varsity meets pretty much all across Canada, including 2009 Canada Games in Charlottetown, PEI. We've been to national and/or varsity meets in Victoria, Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Toronto, and Montreal, and we've been to all of those cities except Toronto more than once. We've officiated in pretty much every pool in Saskatchewan, with the exception of a couple of the Summer clubs in the south. We have made friends among the other nationally qualified referees, some of whom we hope to see at Westerns here in April. Your major officials coordinator, Joan Butler, is one; Jim Fleury from Manitoba who will be doing evaluations is another. And we've got to know lots of dedicated parent volunteers across Saskatchewan throughout the years.

What makes a good referee?

A good referee is one who (a) knows the rules; (b) is observant; (c) is calm and fair; and most importantly (d) is there to ensure that every swimmer gets a fair chance to compete. A good referee is also one who is eager to share his or her knowledge of the sport and able to mentor less senior officials to achieve their potential.

Why do you do it?

There you go—not a short answer, but I hope it's useful even if just for your own understanding and for you to share at the Board level within the organization. I know I've made it sound like a big commitment, and it is, but the real message I want to get across is that swimming only works on the backs of its volunteers. And people like Bob and me, and all the referees in Saskatchewan who no longer have kids in the sport, need new blood to step up behind us. When our kids started swimming, one of the favourite swim T-shirts that used to get printed up at meets was one with the slogan "Competitive swimming is a form of child abuse"—and there was one for the adults that said "Competitive swimming is a form of parental abuse." I think I still have mine! It got relegated to being a painting shirt years ago, but tongue in cheek, I've held onto that sentiment for 30 years!!