# Interviewing a Coach

Thoughts for the Employer

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1. Before the interview process the Board of Directors should meet to discuss what you want in a coach and to also know the direction the club wants to go in with a new coach. Put this information in writing. List the qualities you are looking for in a coach. Think about good coaches and bad coaches you have had in the past. Also, what is the philosophy of the club? Are you a Feeder program? Participation oriented? Olympic preparation? Senior oriented or Age Group oriented? Are you looking for someone to “just coach” or are you looking for someone to also manage many of the day to day operations of the program? Are you looking for a director of the staff with authority and responsibility for development of the staff, or are you looking for someone to just be part of the staff that is fully directed by the board? ASCA has a list of coach’s responsibilities and authorities that can be used as a guide.

Then seek the coach who matches what you want. This sounds simple, but too many clubs beg for a coach, see only the good, and later find that there has been a mismatch. Be careful on compromising principles or philosophies.

2. The interview committee should be three to five people in size and must include the Board President. The Board President is the person the coach directly reports to so there must be a match between these personalities. If possible, the person most likely to become the next Board President should also be on the committee. An age group parent and a senior parent should also be on the committee. Search the team roster for a member with corporate experience in the hiring process to also place on the committee. If possible, all people on the committee should have a business background and be familiar with the hiring process.

3. Meet before the interview to construct common questions that will be asked of all candidates. Agree on the answers you are looking for.

4. Ask questions that don’t give away the answers. For example, don’t ask, “How often do you evaluate your assistant coaches?” Or, don’t ask, “How do you evaluate your assistant coaches?” These questions indicate that you think the coach should evaluate his staff. Most coaches don’t evaluate their staff but when they hear this question, they will figure out that you think it is important and they will answer accordingly. It would be better to ask a more open question such as, “How do you develop your staff?” This is called a primary question that will open the door to secondary and tertiary questions. ALWAYS ask the secondary and tertiary questions. As a Board member I would want to know that the coach is interested in supervising (observing) the staff, conducting staff meetings for communication and training, and formally evaluating coaches based on written job descriptions. If a candidate says, “I like to observe the coaches working with their groups.” My secondary question is, “What kinds of things are you looking for?” My tertiary question is, “When you see something you don’t like, how and when do you address that with the coach?”

5. Ask situational questions. “During the final relays at an important meet, one of the parents grabs your shoulder and shouts, ‘You didn’t put my daughter on the relay. Why not?’ What do you do?” Why would you do it that way? What would you do to prevent that scene in the future?”

6. Don’t overemphasize the technical skills. Most coaches who are fired or forced to resign get themselves in that position for reasons that have nothing to do with their technical skills and most often have everything to do with their people skills. The interview process should be more directed to discovering the coaches ability to work with the staff, the Board of Directors, and the parents.

7. When you ask questions about technique, look for the coach’s passion, forethought, lack of defensiveness, knowledge, humbleness, and commitment in his answer, more so than the specific answer. There are so many ways to coach successfully that it is not known what are the absolute correct ways. Avoid placing people on the interview committee who think they know the absolute correct way to teach a stroke or design a workout for a senior national level swimmer. It is fair to ask technical questions, and it is right to judge how they answer the question, but it is a mistake the dismiss the answer because it doesn’t fit your understanding of the sport.

8. Expect to be interviewed. A mature coach who is not begging for a job will want to know everything they can about you. Welcome their questions and directly answer their questions. It is fair, and very revealing to follow-up your answers with, “May I ask you why you asked that question?” or “It sounds like you have had an experience with that issue, could you tell us about that?”

9. Get additional help. Check out the bookstore or the internet for references on the interview process. My favorite resource is a CareerTrack Publication entitled “How to Interview and Hire the Right People.” This workbook is short, simple, and invaluable. It gives example questions to discover the candidate’s adaptability, competence, experience, manageability, interpersonal skills, attitude, initiative, maturity, stability, emotional control, integrity, and values. CareerTrack: 1-800-334-1018, item number 30073, $9.95.

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# Putting The Candidate To WorkAn Interviewing Tip for the Employer

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Here is a suggestion for a final question when you get to your finalists.

"Given what you have learned about our program, what goals would you set and how would you move the team in that direction? Imagine that you have full authority for any and all changes."

This is called "putting the candidate to work" and is based on an article that came across my desk last week.

Keys:

1. Is the candidate ready with ideas or hasn't he thought about it?

2. How specific are their goals?  Are they quantifiable and timelined?

3. What areas do the goals cover?  Are the goals competitive oriented only? Or growth oriented? Or program oriented?  Is there balance between all aspects of the club?  Do they have a grasp of the larger picture?  Do their goals match the Board's stated goals?

4. Does the candidate show a command of the staff?

5. Does the candidate show wise and responsible use of their imagined full authority?

6. Does the candidate show the ability to have a vision while keeping one foot in the current reality.

7. All goals boil down eventually to financial issues.  Does the candidate address financial considerations?

8. Does the candidate indicate a process for organizing tasks?

9. Does the candidate indicate a process for delegation?

10. Does the candidate indicate a process and timeline for evaluation and reporting?

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**The Coaching Interview**

**Best Practices**

By ASCA Director John Leonard

Good beginnings and good process usually mean good results. When a club is looking to hire a new coach, be it for the Head Coach Position, or an assistant position, quality preparation for the interview process will give all candidates a good opportunity to show their strengths and discuss what they can bring to the program.

Asking quality questions of the coach is an important part of this process. A good interview process does several things:

**1.** Allows the interviewed coach to present a coherent picture of what they are looking for in a position.

**2.** Allows the club to provide a clear picture of what its goals and objectives are, and what it is looking for in a head coach.

**3.** Allows for a “discussion period” when both parties can freely explore questions and unexpected opportunities.

Generally, a format for the interview would first have the club discussing its history, current situation and expected needs. Following this, the coach might make a presentation of his history, current situation and what they are looking for in a new position. Finally, both parties should fully explore important questions that have arisen during the process.

Open ended questions typically are most comfortable and most educational for both parties. Here are ten sample questions that, if not covered during the early presentations, should be asked directly of the coach during the question period.

**1.** What are your Coaching goals? What do you see yourself doing in 5-10 years?

**2.** What are your personal strengths and weaknesses, and how do they enter into your response to the first question?

**3.** In our team we have “x” number of training groups. How would you develop and maintain a sense of “team” among our “Y” number of swimmers?

**4.** What do you see as the key elements in maintaining an effective Coach/Board relationship?

**5.** Staff continuity and improvement are key to any program. How do you develop your assistant coaches and what do you expect from them? What qualities do you look for when hiring assistant coaches?

**6.** Describe the transition from age group to senior swimming and how you accomplish this critical task?

**7.** We believe that all swimmers should value their personal achievements regardless of whether they are top swimmers or less talented. How would you go about reinforcing and focusing on this goal?

**8.** Describe your philosophy with regards to the competing items of family, school, and swimming. What priorities do you espouse, and why?

**9.** If you were not a swimming coach, what would you do for a living?

**10.** High school swimming is important here. How do you see the best relationship between High School swimming and club swimming being implemented?