

# Rumor not correct, but points to issues in prep sports

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## Despite lack of coach, swimming still part of program; Other sports face similar hurdles

By John Herndon


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The news came as a bit of a surprise but wasn't totally unexpected. Thankfully the "news" going around Anderson County was, in reality, only a rumor.

Such were the wheels turning around the Anderson County High School swimming program last week. The word was circulating -- I heard from several people -- that the school was dropping its swimming program due to lack of a coach. A few hours later, the status of the information dropped out of the news category when Anderson assistant athletic director Jeremy Cook told me he didn't know "how that rumor got started."

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Surprised by the "news?" Certainly.

While high school swimming is one of those sports that flies under the average sports fan's radar, those seriously involved are as passionate as any football or basketball fan. That's just as true in Anderson County, which has never had a competitor as much as qualify for the state swimming meet, as it is in a major metro area where high school swimming is often seen as a supplement to the club teams.

There's passion and, while Anderson has always had problems in filling all the available spots in a meet, the number of kids going out for the team has always been higher than the threshold where sponsoring a team could not be justified. Anderson usually has between 20 and 30 kids out every year with the majority being girls.

In addition, I have talked with Anderson athletic director Rick Sallee and with Cook many times and knew there was some effort being made in filling the position that came open when Karla Phillips stepped down in the spring. One's view of how strenuous that effort has been probably corresponds with the emotional attachment he has to the sport.

Sallee said Monday that while the school has still not hired a coach, Georgia Kennerly, who has helped with the team for many years, will be running practice until a coach is in place.

Something Phillips alluded to many times was that swimming is a sport that someone takes from the pool long past graduation is pertinent. While that last touchdown in the last high school game is usually the final one in a career, people can jump in a pool and do butterfly or backstroke laps throughout life.

So, yes, it was a bit surprising to hear the news and it was a relief that the news was not true.

But it would not have been totally unexpected if it had been true.

With no local indoor pool, the Anderson team travels to Kentucky State University several times a week for practice. Meets are usually in other locales and Phillips worked to get Anderson in as many meets as possible at Shelbyville or Versailles in recent years.

It's very expensive to rent a facility and pay for a bus to transport students to practice.

And finding a coach willing to put the time and effort into building a program in a sport where Anderson County is wayyyyyyyyyy behind in regard to facilities is about as easy as coming up with a clever one-liner to make the point.

I couldn't.

The fact is that providing scholastic teams means coming up with money. Money that's competing with other wants and needs of the public school system.

That's tax money, you know, and the average citizen does not want to part with more, even though some of those programs might be good.

Finding qualified people to coach is getting tougher and tougher. While the ideal is to have teachers leading programs, many simply don't want to juggle the demands of coaching with the ever-increasing workloads being placed on educators.

Turning to paraprofessionals is an option but that's also iffy as it requires juggling work and the sport. It's a never-ending cycle of low pay and long hours, especially in the non-revenue sports. Often they don't have assistant coaches and those who do coach truly do so for love of the game.

And that cycle means that every year I pose the same question about some sport to Sallee or Cook: "Who is coaching (insert sport or activity here) this year?"

The answer is often the same, "We are still trying to hire someone."

I've asked several head coaches the same question about assistants and the answer is often the same.

"We are still trying to hire someone."

This column is not intended to be a criticism of anyone in administration. It is a reflection on just how difficult it is to find someone willing to take on a thankless task, a task that is often magnified in

Over the years, the number of scholastic sports have grown exponentially. At the same time, the time and energy investment required with those sports have made coaching much less attractive.

Here's one who hopes that all kids who want to play a sport will be blessed with someone competent to help those kids grow and be challenged to be their best. It's all anyone can ask.

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