Our Greatest Asset: Holding on to Great Coaches
A Coach Sustainability Study

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Executive Summary

Retaining experienced coaches has become a growing challenge for competitive swimming. Despite the critical role coaches play in athlete development, coaching swim has been viewed as more of a professional career while the systems supporting coaches have not. In response to prior work on this subject, specifically the 2022 ASCA Fellows observational study on coach attrition and the 2025 *Swimpler Coach Compensation Survey* spearheaded by Doug Cornish, the 2025 ASCA Fellows Class used a mixed-methods approach, combining an ASCA coach sustainability survey with follow-up interviews with five high-retention USA Swimming teams identified through USA Swimming tenure data. The survey covered stressors, workload, benefits, paid time off (PTO), opportunities for advancement, workplace conditions, and organizational climate. These interviews provided further context on organizational structure, workload distribution, and coach support in high-retention programs.

The findings reveal three key themes: administrative burden is a major source of coach stress; many coaches lack access to health insurance, retirement benefits, and enough time off; and advancement pathways are often unclear or informal. Coaches were more likely to remain in the profession when organizations intentionally separated on-deck coaching duties from administrative tasks, offered stronger compensation and benefits, and created clear opportunities for advancement. These findings build on the growing body of work examining coach attrition and compensation, moving the conversation from documenting the problem toward identifying the organizational conditions that can address it.

Together, the 2022 ASCA Fellows observational study, the 2025 *Swim Coach Compensation Survey,* and the present study make clear that passion and motivation alone are simply not enough to sustain high-quality coaching over time. National organizations, including ASCA, should now take the lead in turning the established body of evidence into action. This study provides not only recommendations for addressing the organizational conditions identified in the findings, but also implementation roadmaps outlining potential pilot programs and practical initial rollouts (Appendix H). The ASCA Board and USA Swimming are well positioned to move from identifying solutions to taking action. The coaching community has demonstrated both the expertise and the willingness to contribute to this work. The burden of sustaining this profession, however, cannot continue to rest on the shoulders of individual coaches. Responsibility must now shift toward the organizations with the authority and resources to change the systems that support our greatest asset.

Introduction

Swimming is a sport that demands long-term technical development, consistent training, and intensive support. Professional swimming coaches are central to the development and retention of athletes, and their expertise and commitment are pivotal in athlete performance and personal growth. Despite the importance of professional coaching to the sport, the sustainability of swimming coaching as a profession is under increasing strain. Coaches are leaving the field at concerning rates, and those who leave often cite compensation, burnout, excessive workloads, and insufficient support structures (Bentzen et al., 2016; Collier et al., 2025; Gustafsson et al., 2008) as contributing factors. This attrition diminishes the pool of experienced professional coaches and threatens athlete development as well as the sport's long-term health.

Building upon existing research on the factors that contribute to coach attrition, this study integrated literature with coach survey data and follow-up interviews with swimming coaches and teams across the United States to better understand the conditions that support long-term coach retention.

The study sought to answer the following guiding question: *Which organizational and individual supports, policies, or cultural norms within swimming programs are most strongly associated with sustained coaching engagement and long-term retention?* This question is grounded in the premise that supporting coaches is a core organizational responsibility rather than merely an afterthought.

Definition of Terms

- **ASCA:** American Swimming Coaches Association
- **Burnout:** A response to recurring occupational stress characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment, has consistently been identified as a primary factor in coaches' decisions to leave the profession (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).
- **Coach Attrition:** The gradual loss of coaches from organizations.
- **Coach Retention:** This term is used in three ways throughout this report:
    - Individual retention: whether a coach remains in the coaching profession over time

    - Organizational retention: a coach who stays with the same swimming organization over a specified period of time
    - Workforce retention: the long-term stability of the swimming coaching workforce as a whole
- **Coach Sustainability:** The long-term capacity of an organization to maintain an effective, healthy coaching community while supporting ongoing development and avoiding burnout and voluntary turnover.
- **LSC**: Local Swimming Committee, a separate and independent corporation to whom USA Swimming has delegated certain governing and supervisory responsibilities within the geographic boundaries designated by USA Swimming (usaswimming.org)
- **NCAA:** National Collegiate Athletic Association
- **Time-role conflict:** The phenomenon that occurs when the time required for one role interferes with the person's ability to fulfill the demands of another role.
- **Role-Strain**: Stress and time demands caused by pressures associated with completing a role when expectations are hard to meet.
- **USA Swimming:** The National governing body for competitive swimming in the United States, responsible for organizing the sport, supporting athletes and coaches, ensuring the safety of coaches and athletes, and overseeing major swimming competitions.
- **Voluntary turnover:** The movement of coaches out of a position when the role is refilled with another person.

Literature Review

The sustainability of the coaching profession has been an ongoing area of interest within the swimming community, considerably so within the past four years. Within ASCA specifically, the 2022 ASCA Fellows Study examined coach burnout and retention in competitive swimming. This study identified factors such as work-life balance, financial stability, workload, lack of support, weak career pathways, and organizational culture as important influences on a coach's decision to remain in the profession. That work provided an important foundation for our understanding of the challenges facing the swimming coaching workforce.

Drawing upon the findings of the 2022 Fellows Study and the Swimpler Coach Compensation Study, this literature review expands the discussion beyond the causes of burnout to explore the broader organizational and individual factors associated with long-term coaching engagement and retention. While limited research exists specifically on swim coach retention, studies from sport coaching, education, healthcare, and workforce development offer valuable insight into the conditions that support workforce stability and professional sustainability.

To better align the literature with this study's guiding question, the research has been organized into four thematic areas: (1) Coach Retention and Workforce Stability, (2) Stress, Burnout, and Psychological Well-Being, (3) Support and Quality of Work Life, and (4) Organizational Supports for Burnout Prevention. Together, these themes not only inform interpretation of this study's survey and interview findings, but also provide context for identifying organizational needs and developing practical recommendations that are designed to strengthen coach support and workforce sustainability.

Coach Retention and Workforce Stability

Employee retention has become an increasingly important organizational priority across a variety of professions, including swim coaching, nursing, and teaching. Research in nursing consistently demonstrates that high turnover reduces workforce stability, increases recruitment and training costs, disrupts organizational continuity, and limits long-term organizational effectiveness (Kerzman et al., 2020). Within competitive swimming, coach turnover has similarly been associated with disruptions in coach-athlete relationships, program continuity, and overall organizational stability (Afkhami et al., 2020). Collectively, these findings suggest that retaining

experienced professionals benefits not only individual employees but also the long-term health, continuity, and performance of the organizations.

Stress, Burnout, and Psychological Well-Being

Burnout can be caused by a wide variety of factors, but research indicates a few main reasons coaches can develop burnout, including becoming overloaded with responsibility, high emotional labor, poor administrative support, feelings of entrapment, compensation, and work-family conflict (Bringman et al., 2023; O'Connor & Bennie, 2006; Sas-Nowosielski et al., 2018; Xie et al., 2022). More recent industry data provide additional context for the role of compensation in coaching sustainability. The 2025 Swimpler Coach Compensation Survey documented compensation patterns among 804 swim coaches, providing a contemporary snapshot of the financial conditions within the profession (Collier et al., 2025). These varying factors lead to different levels of commitment to coaching and attraction to coaching. Coaches with a high level of commitment but a low attraction to coaching suffer from the most burnout, which is called “entrapment", while coaches with high commitment/high attraction and low commitment/low attraction report less burnout (Raedeke, 2004).

Coaches can suffer from different types of burnout, which come in three categories (Xie et al., 2022): emotional exhaustion, where coaches are overextended and emotionally drained; depersonalization, where coaches become negative and disengaged from others; reduced personal accomplishment, where coaches feel incompetent and performance is affected. A majority of coaches in one study reported some level of emotional exhaustion or depersonalization as well as a low level of feeling personal accomplishment (Sas-Nowosielski et al., 2018). The same study also reported that male coaches and older coaches were more likely to deal with levels of depersonalization. Another study indicated that head coaches were more likely to suffer from burnout than assistants (Bringman et al., 2023). Emotional exhaustion was shown to be more prevalent in a sport like swimming, where athletes compete side-by-side, rather than against other teams (Sas-Nowosielski et al., 2018).

Burnout levels may change over time, but studies have found that coaches and teachers tend to experience similar patterns of burnout from year to year regardless of their perceived commitment or attraction to the profession (Raedeke, 2004; Xie et al., 2022). Once burnout develops, it may persist for several months or even years (Raedeke, 2004), negatively affecting

not only the well-being of coaches but also the athletes they coach. (O'Connor & Bennie, 2006; Raedeke, 2004; Sas-Nowosielski et al., 2018; Xie et al., 2022).

Support and Quality of Working Life

Quality of Working Life (“QWL”) refers to “employees’ perceptions of how working conditions in an organization can meet their personal and work needs” (Afkhami et al., 2020). In the context of swimming, QWL encompasses factors such as “job content, physical work environment, salaries, benefits, promotions, autonomy, teamwork, decision making, occupational health and safety, job security, communication, peer and manager support, and work-life balance” (Afkhami et al., 2020). Collectively, these organizational characteristics have been shown to improve employee well-being while enhancing organizational performance.

Research has identified QWL as a significant predictor of coach retention, both directly and through its influence on broader talent management practices (Afkhami et al., 2020). Organizations that invest in improving coaches’ QWL report benefits such as “reduction in staff complaints, absenteeism, stress, and conflict between management and practice, reduction in discipline, enhances employees' positive attitudes, and increased participation in job offerings programs, job security, and their functioning" (Afkhami et al., 2020).

Practical strategies for improving QWL include "closing appropriate contracts, involving coaches in decision making and communication, giving feedback on coach performance and respectful behavior" (Afkhami et al., 2020).

Organizational Supports for Burnout Prevention

Given the chronic nature of burnout, organizations should prioritize proactive prevention rather than relying on reactive efforts after it has developed (Raedeke, 2004; Xie et al., 2022). Research identifies several organizational supports associated with reducing burnout risk: Strong mentorship programs help coaches feel supported and less isolated (O'Connor & Bennie, 2006; Shuls & Flores, n.d.), while organizational practices that promote work-life balance reduce the likelihood of developing burnout (Bringman et al., 2023; O'Connor & Bennie, 2006; Shuls & Flores, n.d.). Adequate compensation is also an important protective factor, as lower salaries have been associated with higher levels of depersonalization (Sas-Nowosielski et al., 2018). Together, these findings suggest that burnout prevention depends less on individual

resilience than an organization's intentionality in creating an environment where coaches feel supported, connected, and valued.

Methods

ASCA Nationwide Coach Sustainability Survey

To better understand the factors influencing coach retention within competitive swimming in the United States, the Fellows developed an online survey, the ASCA Nationwide Coach Sustainability Survey ("Survey"), designed to examine how organizational practices, employment structures, workplace expectations, and individual experience contribute to coaches' decisions to remain in or leave the profession. The Survey was designed to address the following guiding question: *Which organizational and individual supports, policies, or cultural norms within swimming programs are most strongly associated with sustained coaching engagement and long-term retention?*

Participation in the Survey was open to anyone who chose to respond, although the primary target demographic was USA Swimming-certified coaches active during the 2025-2026 competitive season. The Survey was administered through Google Forms (Appendix B) and distributed through multiple channels including: the ASCA website, newsletter, and social media platforms; emails to LSC leadership requesting distribution of the Survey to their respective coaching members (Appendix A); and QR codes distributed at the 2026 Northwest Age Group Regional Championships, New Jersey Swimming's 13&O Silver Championships, and New Jersey Swimming's 10&U Gold Championships (Appendix C).

Data collected from the Survey were "visualized," and a small pod of Fellows ("Survey Pod") used explanatory analysis to identify trends. Survey findings were organized into thematic sections. Members of the Survey Pod independently reviewed the quantitative results (percentages, ranking, and frequency) and the qualitative responses to produce observations and interpretations. Additionally, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between selected survey variables. Specifically, the relationship between years of coaching experience and overall ratings of the coaching environment, and perceived work-life balance and these same measures. Correlation coefficients were interpreted to identify the

direction and strength of relationships among these selected variables. The full cohort then discussed recurring themes, contradictions, and thematic section connections.

USA Swimming Club Selection Process

To identify swimming programs with evidence of high coaching retention, a small pod of Fellows ("USA Swimming Pod") analyzed coach tenure data provided by USA Swimming (Appendix E). The coaches received a breakdown of all teams affiliated with USA Swimming and categorized them according to the following:

- Zone
- LSC
- Offering (Year-Round vs Seasonal)
- Setting
- Owner Type
- Club Size
- Tenure (0-5 years, 5+ years, 10+ years)
- Number of coaches (USA Swimming Tenure and Club Tenure)

Rather than focusing exclusively on individual coaches with long USA Swimming membership histories, the Fellows determined that club-level retention was more relevant to the study's goals. While individual longevity is important, coach retention is strongly influenced by the day-to-day organizational environment in which coaches work. Therefore, clubs were selected based on patterns of long-term coach retention within an organization rather than solely on the tenure of individual coaches.

Table 1. *Analysis of USA Swimming registration data by coaching tenure and club tenure*

Registration Data	**Count**
Total registered USA Swimming coaches	16,696
Coaches with 10+ years USA Swimming tenure	5,144
Total registered USA Swimming teams	2683
Teams with at least one coach with 10+ years of USA Swimming tenure	1,916

Table 2. *Selection criteria for clubs with sustained coach retention*

Selection Criteria	Teams Identified
At least 50% of coaching staff with 10+ years club tenure	280
At least 5 coaches with 10+ years of club tenure	80
Met both criteria	21

These categories were selected to identify organizations that demonstrate sustained retention across multiple staff members rather than isolated cases of long-tenured coaches. The teams that met both criteria were contacted for follow-up interviews and further exploration of their organizational practices associated with long-term coach retention.

Qualitative Follow-Up Interviews

Following the initial quantitative analysis of the data from USA Swimming and the Survey, a series of semi-structured interviews ("Interviews") were conducted to provide qualitative context to the broader identified trends. This phase was informed by the principles of positive deviance by investigating organizational environments that defy industry norms. By examining the organizations that met the retention criteria, we aimed to identify organizational practices such as operational habits, cultural norms and leadership philosophies that may function as protective factors against voluntary turnover and may be transferable to other swimming programs.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

- **Selection Criteria:** Initial dataset metrics were reviewed across all 59 LSCs, leading to the identification of 21 teams meeting retention criteria (defined as a team with at least five coaches who have at least ten years of club tenure in addition to at least 50% of their coaching staff with at least ten years of club tenure)
- **Strategic Outreach:** To maximize participation, an "Interview Pod" of Fellows was divided geographically to serve as regional liaisons. This peer-to-peer recruitment model aimed to leverage existing professional networks to foster trust and facilitate candid engagement.

- **Final Sample:** Despite multiple follow-up attempts made to all 21 identified teams, the final sample consisted of five participating organizations, representing a response rate of approximately 24%.

Interview Procedure

Interviews were conducted via Zoom using a semi-structured format to provide consistency across participants while allowing flexibility to explore topics in greater depth as they emerged (Appendix F and G).

- **Instrument Development:** The interview protocol consisted of a set of standardized questions developed in alignment with the Survey, allowing the interviews to expand and contextualize the survey findings.
- **Interview Approach:** Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences leading their organizations, including organizational structures, leadership practices, workload management, and coach support. Interviewers used follow-up questions and probes to clarify responses and explore emerging topics while maintaining consistency with the core interview protocol.

Alignment with Survey Findings

The interview protocol was intentionally aligned with the constructs measured in the Survey, allowing the qualitative Interviews to serve as a direct extension of the Survey dataset. This approach allowed the full Fellows cohort to explore the “why” behind the quantitative findings by connecting the survey-reported trends with the day-to-day organizational practices of the teams that met the study’s retention criteria.

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using an approach informed by Creswell’s Spiral Method. Interview Pod members independently reviewed the transcripts to produce observations and interpretations before meeting as a full cohort to discuss recurring themes, contradictions, and refine overarching themes. The resulting themes were then compared across the five participating teams to identify recurring patterns and shared experiences. These findings were then contrasted with Survey results to explore potential organizational factors associated with coach sustainability.

To protect participant confidentiality and help facilitate open discussion of both organizational strengths and ongoing challenges, the identities of participating swim clubs are not disclosed. Throughout this report, interview findings and excerpts are attributed only as Team 1, Team 2, Team 3, Team 4, and Team 5. Additional identifying information has been omitted where appropriate.

Limitations and Delimitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study:

Limitations

1. This study was limited to the 2025/26 season.
2. Only five of 21 teams invited to participate completed the follow-up interviews, creating the potential for nonresponse bias. Those who did take part may differ from the majority of teams across the nation and may not fully capture the full diversity of the coaching experience.
3. Both the survey and interview samples are based on voluntary participation. Voluntary selection may skew the results toward coaches with stronger opinions on the topic.
4. USA Swimming data may not include all variables, including climate and perceived support.

Additionally, the 2025 Fellows deliberately chose the following boundaries:

Delimitations

1. This study was limited to coaches in the United States only. Coaches outside of the United States were not included.
2. NCAA coaches were deliberately omitted, narrowing the scope but increasing the relevance to ASCA's primary coaching population.
3. This study focused on competitive swimming rather than all aquatic sports.

Findings

The analysis of the following six domains suggests that coach sustainability is not an accidental byproduct of a team's culture, but an intentional result of organizational design. The following findings highlight the gap between current coaching conditions and the organizational practices needed to support long-term coach sustainability.

Workload and Administrative Burden

Coaches reported a clear disconnect between the work they value most and the demands placed upon them. On-deck instruction was ranked as the least stressful aspect of coaching, with 60 respondents ranking it as such, while balancing personal relationships and coaching responsibilities was the most common primary stressor (39 respondents). Communication with families also emerged as a major source of stress, with 43 respondents ranking it among their top three stressors.

Figure 1. *Survey stressor rankings for coaching workload and personal relationships*

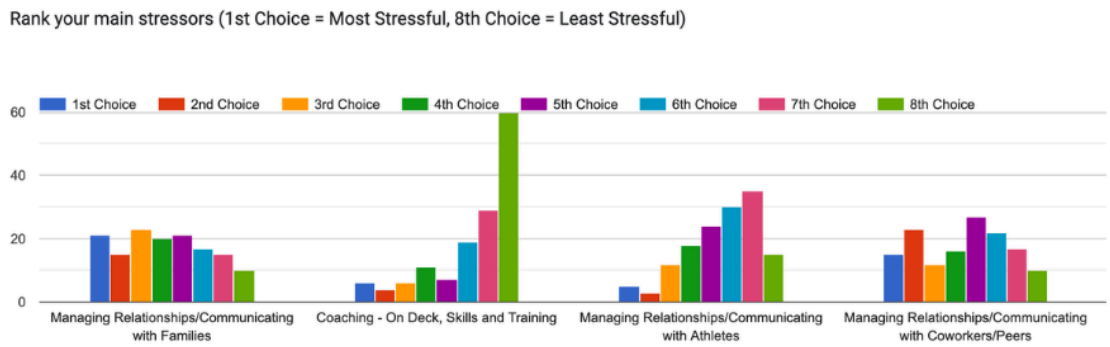
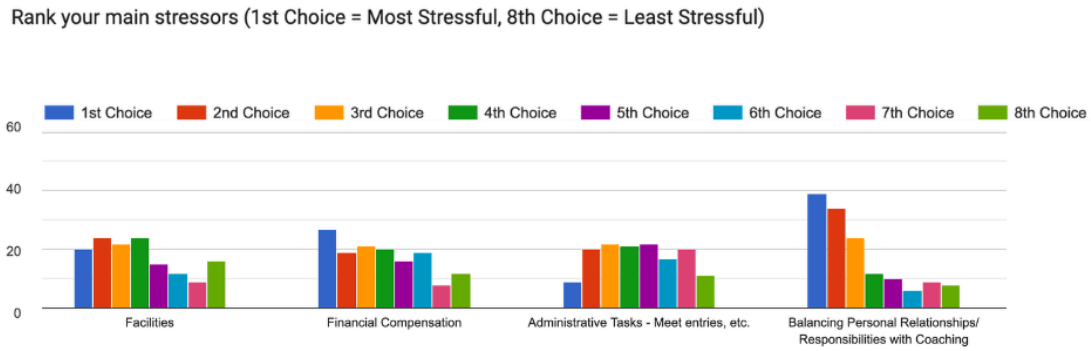


Figure 2. *Survey stressor rankings for coaching workload and personal relationships*



Interviews confirm that administrative burden is a major challenge for three out of five teams. However, four out of five teams have successfully adopted systematic offloading, delegating “dry side” tasks based on individual staff strengths to protect coaching time.

Key Finding: Sustainability is undermined not by the act of coaching, but by "task saturation." Our sample of high-retention teams mitigated this by treating administrative duties as a team-wide delegation project rather than an individual burden, effectively preserving the coach’s capacity for high-value athlete interaction.

PTO, Benefits, and Compensation

Survey data highlights a profound lack of standardization regarding core professional benefits. Access to health, dental, and vision insurance remains inconsistent, with 28% of coaches reporting no access to health insurance, and over half of respondents (51% to 52.5%) lacking dental and vision coverage. Retirement security is similarly fragile: 46% of coaches report no retirement benefits, and where they do exist, 69.3% indicate they are restricted to leadership personnel. While 79.2% of coaches are theoretically offered PTO, this figure is deceptive: only 59.4% of coaches are satisfied with their leave, a dissatisfaction driven by the fact that 46.1% of coaches bear the personal burden of arranging their own deck coverage to take time off.

Figure 3. *Access to health, dental, and vision insurance among coaches*

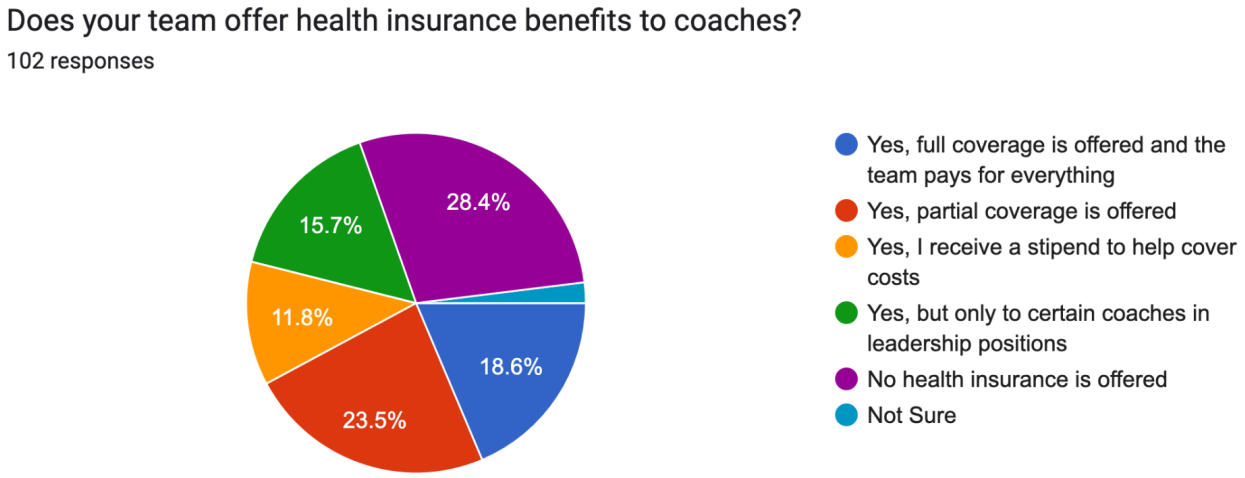


Figure 4. *Access to dental insurance among coaches*

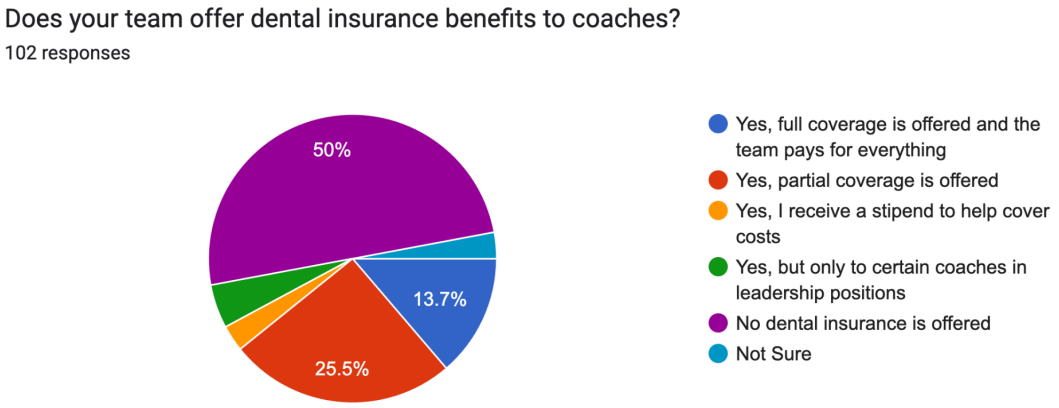


Figure 5. *Access to vision insurance among coaches*

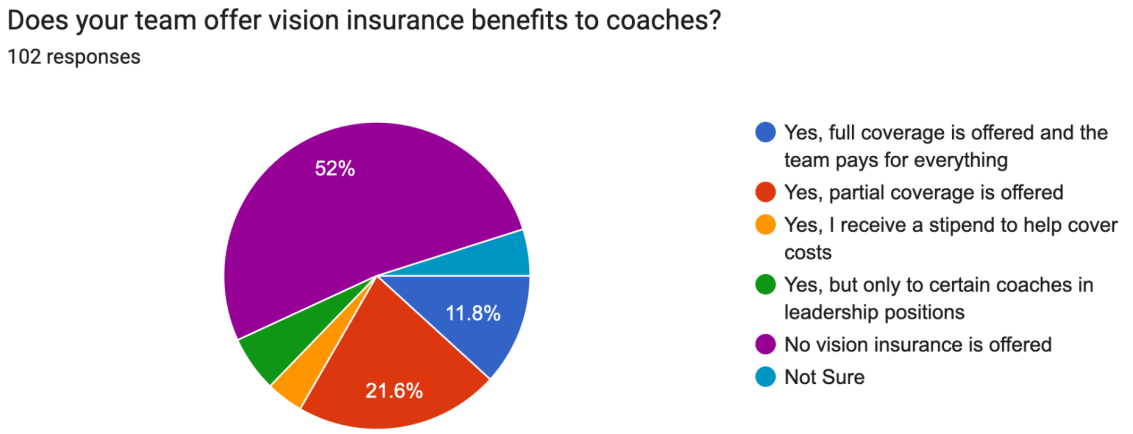
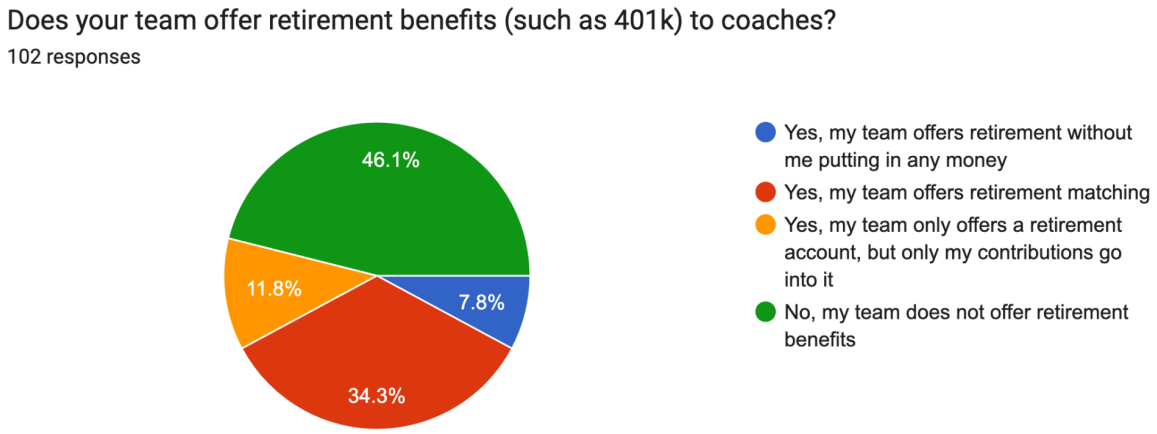


Figure 6. *Access to retirement benefits and paid time off*



Interviews corroborate these findings. Even when benefits are provided, they are often exclusionary. Organizations frequently limit health insurance and retirement plans to full-time staff or Head Coaches only, leaving the broader coaching workforce—often including part-time or regional staff—without institutional support. Several teams utilize workarounds, such as providing monthly stipends rather than direct plans, or relying on the assumption that coaches carry their own insurance through primary employment. Regarding leave, organizations largely refrain from formal administrative policies in favor of informal, peer-to-peer coordination. While this fosters a collaborative "shared-burden" culture, such as Team 2's shared communication threads, it places the responsibility for work continuity entirely on the individual coach rather than the organization.

Key Finding: Findings suggest that professional benefits within competitive swimming in the United States lack consistent organizational standardization. Access to health insurance, retirement benefits, and paid leave is inaccessible to many coaches due to eligibility restrictions based on employment status or organizational role, with availability varying by team. When benefits are available, organizations rely on informal administrative practices that place responsibility for accessing or coordinating them on individual coaches.

Staffing, Role Clarity, and Workload Delegation

Survey data identifies a critical correlation between organizational structure and coach burnout. Survey results confirm that administrative tasks, the "dry side" of the operation, are a primary driver of fatigue. While core responsibilities like communicating with families and managing meet entries often fall heavily on Head Coaches, there is a clear distinction in operational philosophy between high-retention teams and those experiencing higher levels of stress.

Interviews with the five teams revealed that four out of five prioritize purposeful role differentiation. These organizations have moved away from the "all-purpose" coaching model, where the Head Coach acts as a general manager, in favor of utilizing two primary strategies:

1. **Professionalizing the Back Office:** Team 2 and Team 5 utilize non-coaching personnel (e.g., accountants, dedicated admin assistants) to manage finances, billing, and logistics. This intentional structural design explicitly frees coaches to focus on athlete mentorship and on-deck instruction.

2. **Strengths-Based Delegation:** Team 1 and Team 3 distribute tasks based on coach capabilities or group leadership rather than hierarchy. By assigning "lead coach planning hours" or specific administrative duties (like group updates) to designated assistants, these teams prevent the concentration of administrative burden on a single individual.

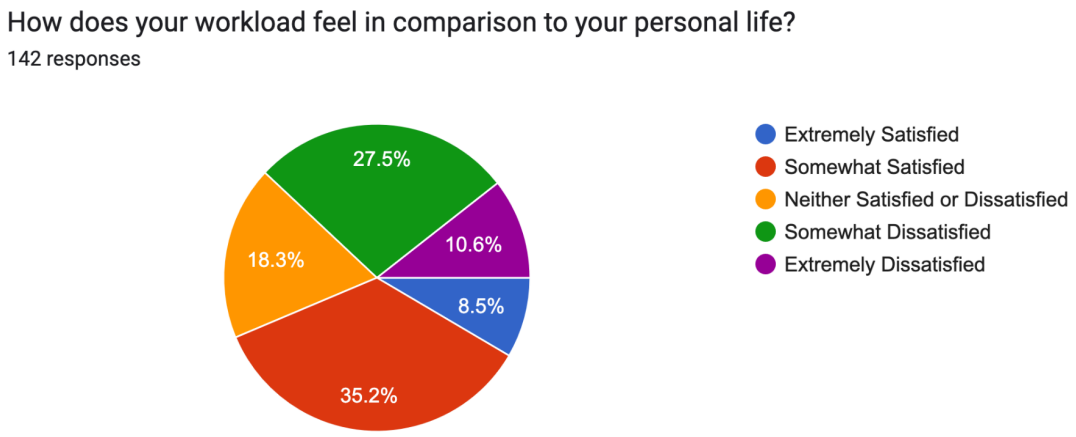
Conversely, Team 4's model centralizes all administrative duties under the Head Coach. This suggests a generational shift: modern coaches increasingly value the ability to focus exclusively on their craft rather than balancing the dual, conflicting roles of athletic mentor and administrative operator.

Key Finding: High-retention teams demonstrated a deliberate separation of athletic expertise from administrative labor. Through role-specialization, non-coaching administrative support, and strengths-based delegation, these organizations distributed administrative responsibilities across multiple individuals rather than concentrating them under a single coach.

Stress, Recovery, and Quality of Work/Life

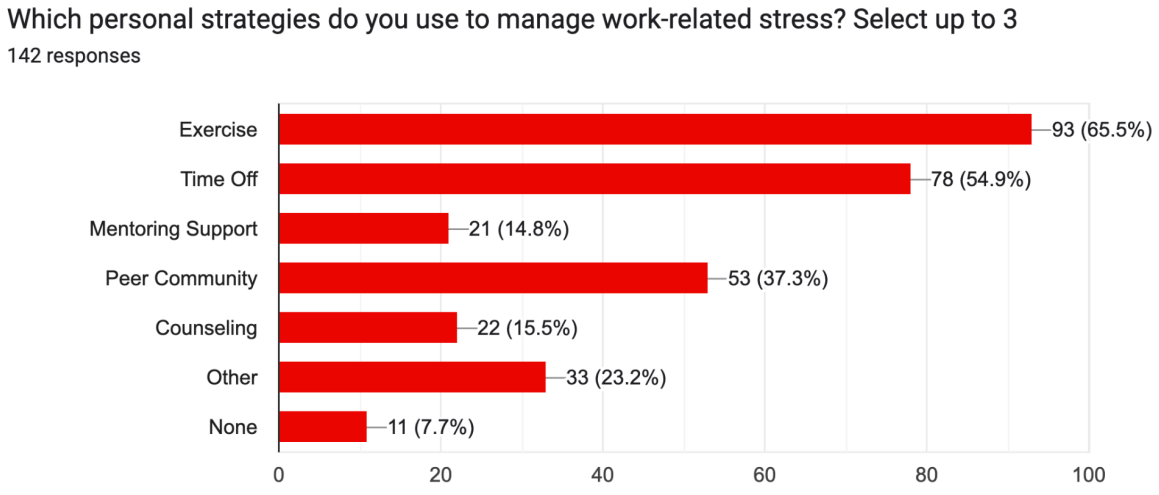
The Survey data highlights a significant "well-being gap" within the coaching profession, with 38.3% of Survey respondents expressing dissatisfaction with the balance between their professional and personal lives. Survey respondents had a moderate correlation between perceived QWL and the following rating questions: Administrative Support, Pay Equity, Scheduling Flexibility, and Career Advancement. Respondents who rated those four aspects of their job higher were more likely to be satisfied with their QWL. A recurring theme in feedback regarding retention improvements is the need for systemic change, specifically calling for better work-life balance, improved compensation, and higher-quality leadership. The Survey reveals a clear hierarchy of pressure: while coaches identify their core responsibility of on-deck coaching as the least stressful aspect of their job, they report acute stress from interpersonal demands, specifically relationship and family communication.

Figure 7. *Perceived work-life balance and quality of working life*



In the absence of formal organizational recovery programs, coaches currently rely on individual self-regulation, with 66.6% utilizing exercise and 44% leaning on peer community to manage stress. Interviews revealed that individual coping mechanisms have been replaced with "empathetic internal leadership." Directors at these high-retention organizations actively monitor staff for signs of fatigue and provide "top-down" permission to recover, such as mandating time off for exhausted coaches. Furthermore, these teams foster a culture of professional autonomy, where coaches are trusted to design their own schedules and pedagogical methods. This environment, which prioritizes community and family-oriented norms, serves as a vital buffer against the burnout typically associated with performance-driven environments.

Figure 8. *Coping strategies used to manage stress and recovery*



Key Finding: Sustainability is not achieved by helping coaches "manage" stress, but by designing an environment that minimizes the conditions that create it. The current reliance on individual coping strategies is inadequate; instead, retention is most effectively driven by an empathetic leadership culture that treats recovery as a core operational requirement rather than an individual luxury. By institutionalizing autonomy and proactively intervening in burnout cycles, teams can shift from a high-pressure model that depletes its staff to a regenerative culture that sustains them.

Equity and Advancement

Survey data reveals a paradox in professional advancement: many organizations seem willing to fund short-term pedagogical development, but they struggle to provide equitable, transparent pathways for long-term career growth. Survey results indicate that 74.5% of teams fully cover clinic registration, and nearly 70% provide travel expenses with "no strings attached."

Figure 9. *Who funds professional development*

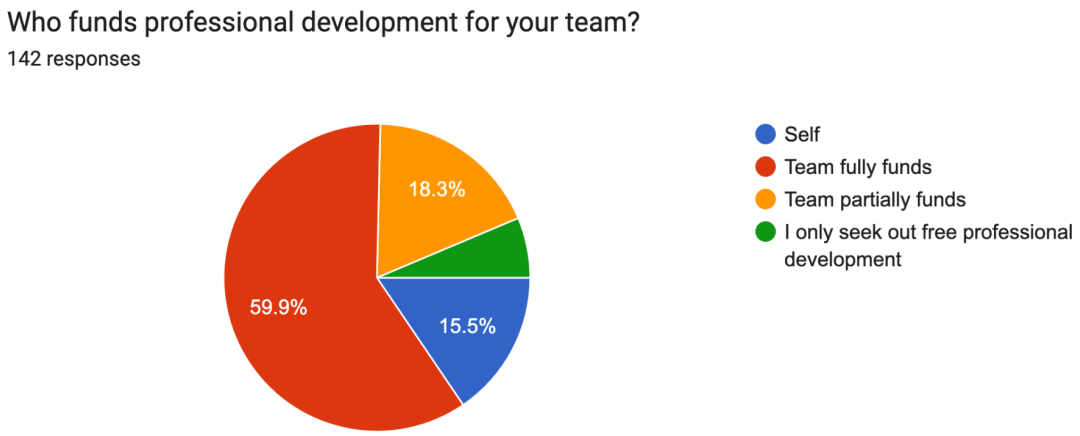
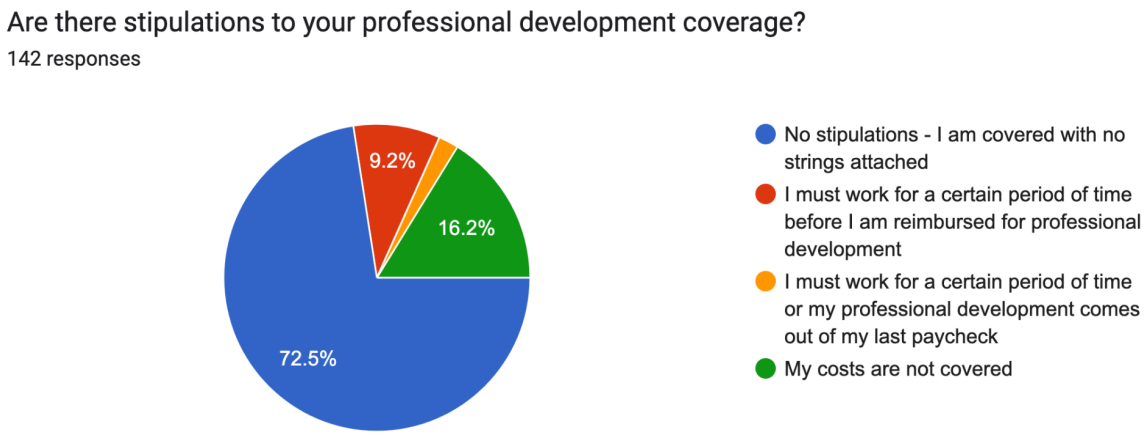


Figure 10. *Stipulations to professional development coverage*



However, when asked about career advancement, 61% of coaches express indifference or dissatisfaction with their current prospects. This is exacerbated by a lack of standardized compensation growth; 32.7% of coaches report receiving no annual raise or are unsure if they are eligible for one, and 55.4% note that pay increases are frequently decoupled from changes in role or title.

Representation and administrative power remain concentrated. While women are present in most leadership structures, nearly a quarter of respondents (24.8%) report having zero women in administrative or decision-making roles, suggesting a gendered gap in top-tier organizational influence. Furthermore, development is currently managed through informal, subjective channels. Interviews demonstrate that formal evaluation metrics are rare, as they forgo structured performance reviews in favor of informal mentorship or a “Director’s eye test." While this promotes a familial atmosphere, it creates an opaque advancement landscape where career progression is tied more to subjective assessment than to clearly defined, equitable competencies.

Key Finding: Professional development in swimming is currently treated as an act of generosity—funding attendance at clinics—rather than a strategic investment in career architecture. The reliance on informal mentorship and the absence of objective, role-based advancement criteria create a sense of professional stagnation for many coaches.

Culture, Peer Support, and Retention

Survey responses consistently identified strong interpersonal relationships among coaching staff as the top cultural norm that contributes to sustained engagement. Respondents emphasized behaviors such as trust, collaboration, open communication, mutual respect, shared purpose, and intentional connection far more than “I like my coworkers” or general friendliness. Coaches described regularly scheduled staff meetings, shared meals, team-building activities and peer professional development as contributors to strengthening these relationships. Many also highlighted supportive leadership practices including giving feedback, proactively responding to burnout, encouraging time away when needed, and providing autonomy.

Interviews reinforce these findings by illustrating how high-retention organizations intentionally create cultures characterized by strong interpersonal relationships, mutual support, and a community-oriented approach through regular communication, shared responsibility, and proactive responses to stress.

Beyond interpersonal relationships, interviews suggested that organizations reinforced supportive culture through two intentional practices: autonomy and flexibility. Team 2 and Team 3 demonstrated that they anchor their stability in a deep respect for coaching autonomy, allowing staff to design their own methods and schedules. Furthermore, these teams manage the inevitable turnover of staff not through rigid policies, but through structural redundancy, such as maintaining an "oversized" staff to cover transitions and historical continuity, where coaches find comfort in familiar, internal structures. While women are present in most leadership roles, the concentration of administrative power among a small number of male individuals persists, and the findings suggest that the current reliance on informal, relational support, while effective, lacks the formal, equitable structures needed to scale this retention success across the broader industry.

Key Finding: Collectively, these findings suggest that organizations with higher retention and job satisfaction intentionally cultivate a culture that enables collaboration, psychological safety, and shared responsibility rather than relying on individual resilience.

Discussion

While the Findings are presented across five themes, several broader patterns emerge when considered collectively. Together, these findings suggest that coach retention is associated with intentional organizational practices spanning workload, workplace culture, professional support, and organizational structure.

Beyond Individual Resilience

The findings of this study suggest that coach sustainability is influenced not only by an individual coach's ability to manage stress but also by how organizations intentionally design coaching roles. Four of the five organizations included in the interview phase consistently described decoupling athletic expertise from administrative labor through a strengths-based delegation, role specialization, and non-coaching administrative support. As one coach noted, they "acknowledge that running the senior program and handling the administration takes an enormous amount of time," and they realized that "the breakthrough was learning to willingly give up control" to protect the staff (Team 3). These organizational structures appeared to preserve coaches' time to focus on actual coaching and athlete development while reducing administrative demands. These findings are consistent with previous research identifying that workload, inadequate administrative support, and work-family conflict contribute to coach burnout (Bringman et al., 2023; O'Connor & Bennie, 2006; Sas-Nowosielski et al., 2018; Xie et al., 2022). The present study extends this by suggesting that one mechanism for reducing these stressors is the intentional redesign of coaching roles so that administrative responsibilities are distributed across the organization rather than concentrated within individual coaches.

Relational Capital

Higher coach satisfaction in the profession seems to be one outcome of "relational capital"—the emotional support and sense of belonging fostered by supportive leadership—rather than formal, systemic programs. Organizations do not leave supportive relationships to chance, but rather create intentional cultures and organizational practices that foster those relationships. One respondent wrote, "*When we work together and hang out together, we usually get along well. When we end up on islands and don't have a relationship beyond the pool deck, coaches get prickly,"* suggesting that isolation erodes collaboration while intentional connection strengthens it. These findings further suggest that when an organization makes time for their

coaches, whether through intentional rituals such as meals together or staff meetings, or allowing for time off when needed and flexibility in schedules, the organization is communicating "we value your time as much as you value ours." Such reciprocity may reinforce coaches' commitment to the organization.

Professional Expectations Without Professional Infrastructure

Swimming coaching has evolved into a profession with increasingly complex responsibilities, but many of the organizational structures have remained largely unchanged. Today's coaches are expected to wear many hats: develop athletes, manage administrative tasks, communicate with families, lead staff, resolve conflict, pursue professional development, and meet high performance expectations. At the same time, coaches are expected to wear those hats in environments that often rely on personal sacrifice. The findings of this study suggest that expectations placed on coaches have become increasingly professional while the system supporting those expectations has not.

This disconnect is also reflected in broader industry data. Collier et al. (2025) surveyed 804 coaches and documented substantial variation in compensation across the profession. While compensation alone does not determine whether coaching is sustainable, the data does provide important context for understanding the financial infrastructure surrounding the profession.

As a result, much of the responsibility of sustaining a coaching career appears to fall on individual coaches. The findings presented here reflect a culture in which passion for athlete development and commitment to the sport often justify long hours, heavy workloads, and personal sacrifice. Within this context, survey respondents described individual strategies for managing stress and preventing burnout. While these strategies may help coaches cope with existing demands, burnout remains a persistent challenge.

The organizations with the highest coach retention approached this challenge differently. Rather than relying on coaches to simply work harder or become more resilient to overcome systemic challenges, they intentionally designed systems that reduced unnecessary burden. Responsibilities were delegated across staff, coaches' time was protected, and leadership fostered cultures that intentionally supported coaches' well-being and strengthened

relationships among staff. These findings suggest that coach sustainability depends as much on organizational design as it does on individual resilience.

The findings also reveal a cycle that may help explain why burnout remains common across the profession: swimming attracts passionate individuals who are willing to invest extraordinary time and effort into developing athletes, especially at the beginning of their coaching career. While that commitment benefits athletes and organizations, it can also mask structural problems. When experienced coaches eventually leave because the workload becomes unsustainable, they are often replaced by a new passionate coach who may be more willing to shoulder those same demands. Over time, this creates a cycle where turnover becomes easier than redesigning the work.

The organizations identified in this study demonstrate that an alternative is possible, but not without intentional organizational change. Rather than relying on a traditional model of heroic leadership in which responsibility is concentrated within a single head coach, leaders were willing to redistribute responsibilities across staff and rethink how coaching work was organized. Although these changes required trust, communication, and a willingness to challenge long-standing practices, they created environments where coaches were better supported and more likely to remain within the organization.

Limitations and Future Research

Selection criteria and the definition of "high retention": A second limitation concerns the definition used to identify high-retention organizations. Because there is no industry-wide definition or standardized metric for coach retention, this study established its own criteria: organizations were required to have at least five coaches with 10 or more years of club tenure, and those coaches had to represent at least 50% of the coaching staff. The two-part criterion substantially narrows the potential sample from 280 organizations meeting the 50% threshold and 80 meeting the minimum number of long-tenured coaches to only 21 organizations meeting both criteria. While this approach was intended to identify organizations demonstrating substantial coach retention, it may have excluded organizations with strong retention but different staffing structures. In addition, no differentiation was made between full-time and part-time staff, coaching responsibilities, employment structure, or the proportion of a coach's career spent with that particular organization. The findings should be understood as describing

a specific subset of high-retention organizations rather than universally representing coach retention. Future research should establish standardized metrics and examine retention across different employment classifications to better understand coaching as a sustainable career choice.

Qualitative scope: This study is limited by its qualitative scope and focus on specific regional teams, specifically teams in suburban settings. As a result, the findings identify organizational practices associated with coach retention but cannot determine whether these practices directly caused improved retention. Future research should investigate whether these "family-style" organizational cultures are scalable to larger, national-level clubs or are unique to small or mid-sized, community-based programs. Additionally, future studies could quantify the correlation between administrative offloading and long-term coach retention rates, building on existing transtheoretical models of occupational turnover in swimming.

Interview format and participation burden: The qualitative component of the study was originally envisioned as a written questionnaire that would allow participating organizations to respond to a standardized set of questions, potentially allowing for more consistency in how questions were posed to participants and how data was extracted. However, the final study design required interviews to be conducted via Zoom. While interviews allowed researchers to ask follow-up questions and explore organizational practice in greater depth, the additional time and scheduling burden may have reduced participation among the 21 eligible organizations. The Zoom format may have also introduced effects that would have been minimized through written responses. Nonverbal cues, tone, facial expressions, and other aspects of real-time interaction may have influenced participant responses or the direction of follow-up questions. In addition, some researchers had existing professional or personal relationships with interview participants, which may have influenced how participants characterized their organizations, either by increasing candor and/or introducing response bias. Differences in interview style and follow-up questions may have also reduced consistency across interviews. Future research may consider a standardized written questionnaire, potentially supplemented by optional follow-up interviews to reduce these effects while preserving opportunities for deeper exploration.

Recommendations

It is important to note that no single recommendation will be enough to stem the tide of burnout and attrition. Only when these suggested recommendations work in concert will they begin to make an impact on the systemic issues driving coaches to leave the profession.

National Recommendations

At the national level, organizations such as ASCA and USA Swimming are uniquely positioned to support clubs and coaches who look to influence the culture of the coaching profession. One important area national organizations can support is in leadership development. Research shows that democratic, athlete-centered leadership styles support lower levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization that can lead to higher rates of burnout and hinder retention (Sas-Nowosielski et al., 2018). To support change, national organizations should prioritize leadership training that supports collaboration, communication, joint decision-making, and clear delegation of tasks within the organization.

1. Create an evidence-based Coach Sustainability Framework that clubs can use to evaluate organizational health. The framework should include:
    - Burnout risk assessments
    - Staff climate surveys
    - Workload audits
    - Retention benchmarks
    - Onboarding resources
    - National salary and benefits benchmarks
    - Implementation guides and best practices resources
2. Develop required or strongly encouraged education on:
    - Recognizing burnout
    - Empathetic leadership
    - Workload management
    - Delegation
    - Psychological safety
    - Sustainable staffing models
    - Coach retention planning

Our national organizations are also central to establishing and supporting cultural shifts that help coaches avoid burnout. Shifting toward a more holistic coaching culture that prioritizes not only outcome but the coach's well-being, personal development, and long-term engagement can reduce pressure and better reflect the full scope of the coaching role. To be effective, this cultural shift must support the normalization of rest and recovery as part of professional responsibility rather than as a weakness a coach needs to overcome (Pearson et al., 2020). This shift in cultural expectations and the integration of emotional wellness, mindfulness, and cognitive-behavioral approaches into certification and educational programming can help reduce burnout.

For national organizations, the focus on equity must remain a fundamental principle when developing and implementing these projects. Gender disparities related to stress and burnout point to the need for continued intentional interventions that include areas of leadership and pathways for underrepresented coaches to expand advancement opportunities. By expanding on established mentoring programs and peer support networks, these initiatives can further reduce real and perceived isolation and improve retention (Pearson et al., 2020).

Additional Coach Support:

1. Mental Health Partnerships: Partner with platforms such as Calm or Headspace coaches would receive free or reduced rates to put an emphasis on their mental health.
2. Health and Wellness Access: Provide coaches with a free or reduced gym membership through organizations like ASCA or USA Swimming, prioritizing physical health as a foundational element of coach longevity.
3. Scalable Health Insurance: Identify and leverage USA Swimming's national scale to negotiate, identify, and facilitate access to affordable health insurance solutions for individual clubs that may not be able to offer health insurance.

LSC Recommendations

LSCs also play a pivotal role in the collaborative effort required to address the systemic issues which drive good coaches to leave the profession. While the national governing body (NGB), USA Swimming, establishes overarching policies and strategic priorities, LSCs are uniquely positioned to develop and implement region-specific programs that reflect the needs of their local coaching communities. This autonomy creates an opportunity and responsibility for LSCs to intentionally apply meaningful practices that strengthen coach support and long-term retention.

1. **Localized Education:** Host more regional and local clinics that focus on coach-specific development rather than just athlete-focused events.
2. **Formalized Mentorship:** Implement a structured mentorship program that pairs veteran coaches with newer coaches to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and experience.
3. **Onboarding Structures:** Create standardized regional onboarding toolkits to support coaches relocating between LSCs, ensuring they understand local certification requirements and regional norms.
4. **Reimbursement frameworks:** Create regional funding models or best-practice guidelines for teams to reimburse coaches for ongoing professional certifications and training. LSCs can also standardize a model for LSCs to subsidize clinic travel and certifications, ensuring that teams- regardless of size- can support their staff's growth.
5. **Social Cohesion**: Organize coach-specific social outings during championship meets to build community and peer support networks.
6. **Standardization and Recognition**: Increase coach awareness and incentivize clubs to achieve 100% ASCA Team status. Host ASCA training at LSC House of Delegates meetings.

Team Recommendations

While national organizations and LSCs help set the direction, teams ultimately determine how coaches experience the role day to day. Swim programs across the United States vary in size, resources, and structure. To be successful, interventions need to be flexible and take the club's circumstances into consideration. For example, in larger clubs with more resources, reducing burnout-related turnover may involve increasing administrative support, role specialization, and using management systems to coordinate communication and scheduling (Pearson et al., 2020). In smaller clubs with fewer resources, similar outcomes can be achieved by sharing responsibilities, engaging volunteers, and establishing predictable schedules that help coaches balance multiple roles without becoming overwhelmed.

1. **Intentional Role Design:** Design coaching roles that intentionally separate administrative and coaching responsibilities through administrative support, role specialization, and strengths-based delegation.
2. **Transparent Compensation:** Create structured, predictable raise schedules tied to annual performance reviews, removing subjectivity from the compensation process.
3. **Predictable PTO Structures:** Formalize a "rest and recovery" policy, such as mandating a specific day off for coaching staff the week following a major weekend meet.

4. **Assess Workload Regularly:** Conduct periodic workload and role audits to evaluate coaching, administrative, and communication responsibilities to ensure expectations remain sustainable as team size and program demands evolve.
5. **Culture of Connection:** Conduct regular staff retreats and team-building outings to foster a "family" environment and provide non-work opportunities for team bonding.
6. **Staff Recognition:** Establish recurring recognition programs—beyond performance-based bonuses—to celebrate coaches who excel in team culture, mentorship, or administrative support, reinforcing their value to the "family" unit.
    - Celebrate coaches who have been with the team and/or coaching for 5/10/15+ years.

Team culture plays a massive role in influencing coaches' well-being. All too often, coaches are expected to stand on deck for multiple days supporting athletes across multiple sessions. Coaches are often expected to be on deck for more than 12 hours a day, multiple days in a row, for several weeks without a day to recover. This can cause severe stress, anxiety, and burnout for even the most robust coach. To support coaches, teams can support practices such as rotating meet-and-travel responsibilities, setting clear time-off parameters, and providing access to wellness resources. To be most effective, teams need to foster positive environments through equitable policies, follow-through, accessible communication, and family-friendly practices, which can improve retention, particularly for coaches juggling multiple personal and professional responsibilities.

Table 3. ***Club-Level Interventions for Coach Burnout***

Category	Large Elite Clubs	Small Community Clubs
Workload Management	Hire administrative staff; delegate travel, fundraising, and communication tasks; use digital management systems; assign age/event specialization to coaches (Pearson et al., 2020).	Recruit parent volunteers for admin/event support; share coaching duties across part-time staff; set predictable schedules to help coaches balance work/life roles.
Recognition & Valuation	Create formal recognition systems (banquets, coach awards, structured evaluations that highlight holistic contributions).	Use informal recognition (thank-you notes, coach spotlights, meet shoutouts); celebrate milestones such as a coach's first season or years of service.
Professional Development & Mentorship	Allocate budgets for conferences (e.g., ASCA World Clinic); fund certifications; establish formal mentorship pathways for junior coaches (Sas-Nowosielski et al., 2018).	Encourage low-cost PD via regional networking, webinars, and peer-to-peer support; partner with nearby clubs for knowledge sharing.
Work-Life Balance & Wellness	Rotate staff meet/travel assignments; provide wellness stipends (mental health services, gym memberships); formal vacation/recovery policies.	Offer flexible scheduling for part-time coaches; integrate rest weeks into the season; partner with local gyms/wellness centers for discounted access.
Inclusive & Supportive Culture	Implement HR-style policies for equity, harassment, and inclusive hiring; provide childcare during travel; track gender equity in coaching staff (Hindman & Walker, 2020).	Hold open forums for coach feedback with boards/parents; adopt informal family-friendly practices (flexible practice times); promote a culture of community support for coaches.
Early Retention & Belonging (Coleman, 2023)	Structured onboarding (90-day mentoring and shadowing); celebrate milestones (first meet, first anniversary); leadership tracks for growth.	Clear orientation on club culture and expectations; community welcome events; early check-ins with the board to address challenges.

Ultimately, the future of the coaching profession depends on our ability to transition from a culture of endurance to one of sustainable excellence. By aligning efforts across the national, local, and team levels, the swimming community can foster an environment where coaches are not merely preserved, but empowered to thrive. Implementing these recommendations—from structured mentorship and equitable compensation to the normalization of rest and recovery—will move the profession toward a more holistic, professionalized, and resilient model. Appendix H provides a *Coach Sustainability Playbook for Organizations* that expands upon these recommendations with examples of organizational initiatives that national organizations, LSCs, and clubs may adapt to fit their own structure, resources, and needs. By investing in the well-being and professional growth of our coaches, we do more than just reduce turnover; we ensure that the individuals guiding our athletes are supported, energized, and equipped to lead with the excellence and longevity that our sport demands.

Coach Recommendations

While supportive national organizations and teams play a large part in sustainable coaching, individual coaches also play an active role in maintaining their well-being and professional growth. Previous research suggests that coaches encounter different challenges throughout their careers, with early career coaches often benefiting from mentorship and role clarity, while more experienced coaches may need strategies to sustain motivation and prevent professional stagnation (Kelley & Baghurst, 2009; Sas-Nowosielski et al., 2018; Appleton & Hill, 2012). The following recommendations, informed by both literature and the findings of this study, can help coaches build more sustainable careers.

Table 4. ***Individual Strategies for Preventing Burnout***

Focus Area	New Coaches	Veteran Coaches	Shared Strategies
Professional Identity & Confidence	Seek mentorship from experienced coaches to build confidence and coping models (Sas-Nowosielski et al., 2018).	Reinvest in purpose and values to sustain motivation over long careers (Lundkvist et al., 2012).	Clarify personal coaching philosophy to align daily work with core values.

Workload & Boundaries	Set early boundaries around work-life balance to prevent overload (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).	Delegate duties, mentor assistant coaches, and adjust roles to reduce daily strain (Pearson et al., 2020).	Protect rest and recovery time across all career stages.
Skill Development	Focus on building coaching efficacy in technical, motivational, and interpersonal domains (Sas-Nowosielski et al., 2018).	Pursue advanced clinics, cross-disciplinary learning, and certifications to stay engaged (Kenttä & Lundkvist, 2019).	Commit to lifelong learning to maintain growth and relevance.
Recognition & Value	Actively seek constructive feedback from peers and supervisors to build validation (Kelley & Baghurst, 2009).	Cultivate peer networks for support and recognition outside formal structures (Kellmann et al., 2018).	Practice gratitude and reflection to reinforce a sense of accomplishment.
Perfectionism & Motivation	Adopt a process-focused mindset to reduce maladaptive perfectionism (Appleton & Hill, 2012).	Shift from outcome obsession to mentoring and developmental goals with athletes.	Develop adaptive perfectionism: striving for excellence without tying self-worth to results.
Wellness & Resilience	Prioritize sleep, nutrition, and physical activity early in career (Goodger et al., 2007).	Use workload cycling, sabbaticals, or off-season renewal to maintain long-term health (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).	Incorporate mindfulness and stress-reduction practices (Baltzell & Akhtar, 2014).

Across all stages of a coaching career, sustaining professional growth requires intentional learning, meaningful support, and regular opportunities for recovery and reflection. Ultimately, reducing coach burnout and improving retention requires alignment across systems. National and local organizations take the lead in cultural and structural change, teams must create sustainable and supportive work environments, and individual coaches must actively engage in their own professional growth and well-being. To help translate these recommendations into

practice, Appendix I provides a Coach's Resource Guide with practical tools and examples that coaches, teams, and organizations can use to begin strengthening coach sustainability. When these efforts are aligned, they create conditions that not only retain coaches but also help coaches thrive over the course of their careers.

Conclusion

The matter of coaching retention remains a priority to ensure the future of the sport. Recent findings suggest that retention is influenced less by individual resilience and more by organizational conditions.

Organizations that participated in this study consistently demonstrated decoupling athletic expertise from administrative labor. By intentionally offloading "dry side" tasks to non-coaching personnel or delegating responsibilities through a compensated, strengths-based structure, we can eliminate the "hero-based" management model. Role clarity is a critical retention strategy that allows coaches to remain engaged and present for their athletes.

True sustainability is not achieved by teaching coaches to manage stress, but by designing environments that minimize the conditions creating it. Retention is driven by an empathetic leadership culture that treats recovery as a core operational requirement. By institutionalizing autonomy and proactively intervening in burnout cycles, we can shift from a high-pressure model to a regenerative culture.

Furthermore, we must view professional development as a strategic investment in career architecture rather than an act of generosity. To improve equity and retention, organizations should move beyond funding external clinics and instead formalize internal paths to leadership. Pay raises, title changes, and administrative opportunities should be linked to transparent, objective metrics.

While high-retention teams often thrive on "relational capital" and community, these benefits should not depend solely on the personal style of a single leader. We must balance our informal culture with robust, equitable administrative structures to ensure that support is a scalable and inherent feature of our organization.

Coach retention cannot be solved through any single initiative by any single organization. It requires coordinated action across national, regional, and local levels and should be understood

as a shared responsibility rather than an individual performance issue. While national organizations can strengthen access to benefits and professional development, LSCs can cultivate regional learning opportunities and mentorship, and individual clubs can implement better employee practices, sustainable coaching will not emerge from isolated programs or one or two exceptional leaders. Intentional action at every level is needed to transform coaching from a profession characterized by burnout and high turnover into one that is sustainable, fulfilling, and capable of supporting the long-term success of coaches, athletes, and the sport itself.

Appendix A: Letter to LSC Leadership

Action Requested: Advancing Coach Sustainability – A Nationwide Study by the ASCA Fellows

Dear LSC Leadership,

On behalf of the 2025 American Swim Coaches Association (ASCA) Fellows Class, we are reaching out to ask for your partnership in this nationwide initiative: **Our Greatest Asset: A Coach Sustainability Study.**

Each year, the ASCA Fellows Program selects a cohort of coaches to undertake research aimed at advancing the sport. This year, we are investigating how role expectations, employment structures, and organizational practices interact to influence coach burnout, turnover, and club stability. This work is grounded in the belief that coach support is not an afterthought, but a fundamental responsibility that directly shapes long-term stability.

What we're asking: We've developed a Nationwide Swimming Coach Sustainability Survey designed to better understand the systemic drivers of coach burnout and the organizational conditions that support long-term coaching careers.

Why This Matters for Your LSC: By participating, your coaches will contribute to a first-of-its-kind **Sustainability Framework**. This study will provide LSCs and club leadership with actionable data on:

- **Retention Factors:** Understanding what influences coaches stay or leave specific roles (Head Coach vs. Assistant).
- **Organizational Health:** How team-level factors such as compensation, board relations, and professional development correlate with longevity.

Data Privacy & Transparency: All survey responses are confidential. We are using insights from the Swims 3.0 database to identify broad, aggregated patterns, and are not collecting nor using individual club-level data for evaluation or critique.

Next Steps We will follow up shortly with a formal "Media Kit" (including a brief blurb and the survey link) that you can easily copy and paste into your next LSC newsletter or email blast.

We are excited to partner with you to ensure that coaching remains a viable, sustainable, and rewarding career. Thank you for your leadership and for supporting the "backbone" of our sport.

Sincerely,

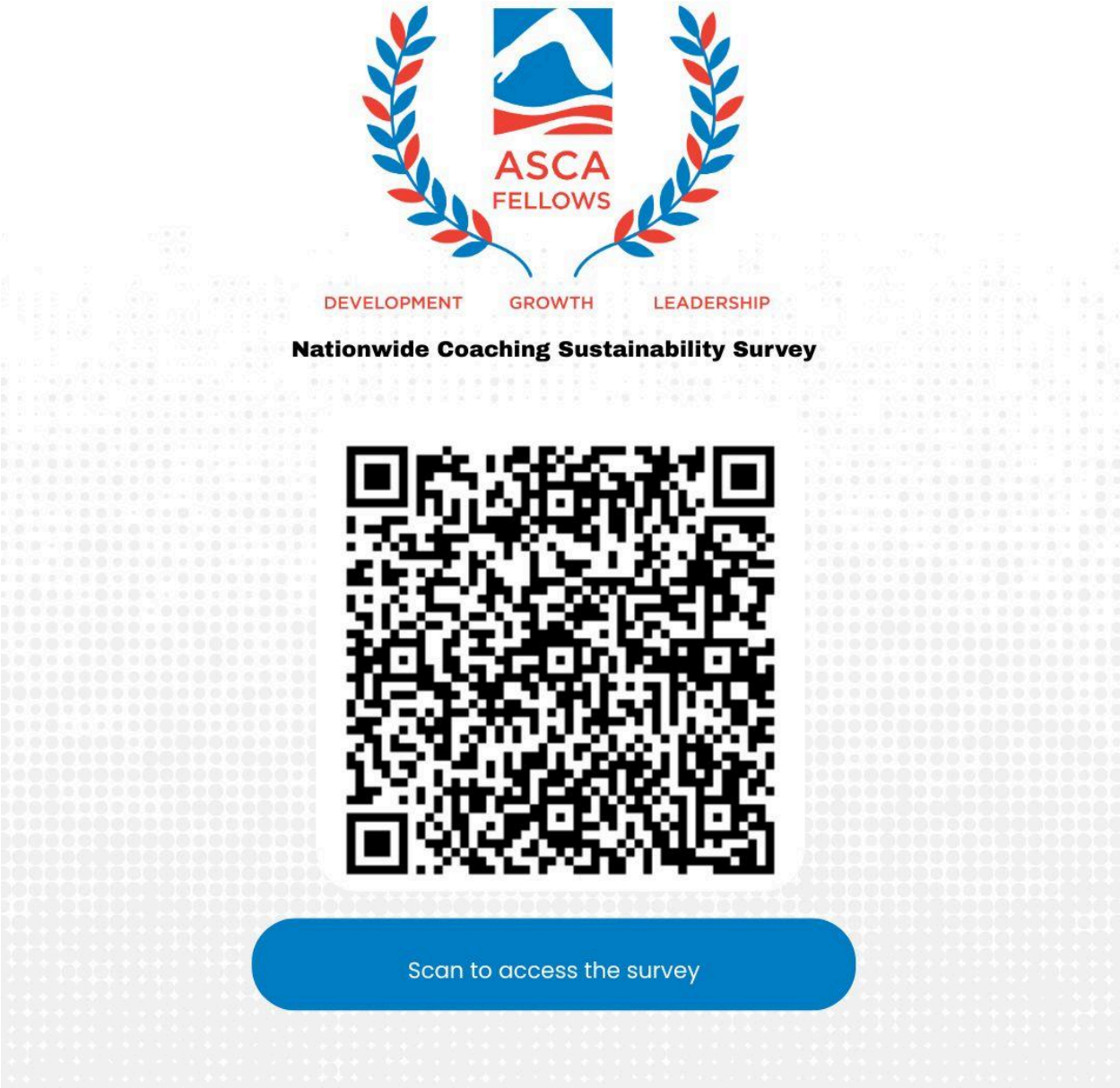
The 2025 ASCA Fellows Class Stephanie Bates | Adam Coffman | Melissa Healy | Emily Laurent | Jesse Lewis | Darla Long | Katie McNerney | Trevor Rill | David White

Cc: Kathleen Prindle, Fellows Chair

Appendix B: Nationwide Coach Sustainability Study

Full PDF of the Survey can be made available upon request.

Appendix C: ASCA Social Media POST-QR Code



Appendix D: Social Media Blurb

The Nationwide Swimming Coach Sustainability Survey is a coach-led research initiative developed by the 2025 American Swim Coaches Association (ASCA) Fellows Class. This anonymous survey is designed to better understand the experiences and challenges of today's swim coaches. Coaches of all levels are invited to share their perspectives to help shape future education, resources, and organizational decisions that authentically reflect the realities of coaching swimming.

Appendix E: USA Swimming Data Request

October 20th, 2025
Joel Shinofield
Managing Director of Sport Development, USA Swimming
1 Olympic Plaza
Colorado Springs, CO 80909

Dear Mr. Shinofield,

We are the 23rd cohort of the American Swim Coaches Association (ASCA) Fellows Program. Each year, this select group of coaches undertakes a year-long research project attempts to advance and enhance the sport of swimming.

This year, our mission is to establish the expectation that supporting coaches is an integral part of the experience, not an afterthought. Our goal is to better understand coach sustainability and develop a plan that supports the structure needed to retain great coaches.

We are **seeking USA Swimming's support to help us gather coaching retention data that is essential to our project**. With this participation from USA Swimming, we can leverage SWIMS's large and valuable database to identify teams better at retaining their coaching staff. This information will help us find best practices for keeping coaches on teams and may help retain athletes.

Some information we are looking for includes:

- Coaching membership data year over year to see teams' ability to retain coaches, and if there are teams of varying sizes and locations with better (or worse) retention.
- Coaching membership data to see if specific coaches have been in the sport for several years, but with different teams.
- Retention rate differentiation between Head Coaches and Assistant Coaches.
- Retention rate differentiation between Full-Time and Part-Time Coaches.
- Data showing if there's a correlation between coach retention and athlete retention.

We understand that all the above may not be practical or available. Regardless, we would appreciate the opportunity to discuss the specifics of our project. We recognize that membership data may be sensitive and assure you that we are committed to the highest data privacy and confidentiality standards. We are not interested in identifiable information but in aggregating data that helps us understand broader trends and patterns.

We are excited about the prospect of USA Swimming supporting our research and hope our study will be valuable to your organization. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
The 2025 Invited Fellows Class of the American Swim Coaches Association

Stephanie Bates
Adam Coffman
Melissa Healy
Emily Laurent
Jesse Lewis
Darla Long
Katie McNerney
Trevor Rill
David White

Cc: Kathleen Prindle, Fellows Chair

Appendix F: Qualitative Follow-Up Interview Questions

Opening:

We are looking at how different teams structure things to support coaches in the long term. There are many variations across teams, and we've identified you as having a high coach retention rate. We are trying to understand how you guys do it, and we'd love to get a feel for how things work on your team.

Benefits & PTO

1. Does your organization provide health insurance? If so, who on your team is provided health insurance?
    a. If not, why is health insurance not provided?
    b. Do you feel these benefits factor towards coaches staying on your team?

2. If a coach needed to take a week off mid-season, what would that actually look like? Ex.: Does a time-off request need to be submitted? How far in advance? How is coverage determined? Are employees offered paid time off? What about an emergency?

Stress and Workload

3. Our research suggests that 'dry side' administrative responsibilities are a primary stressor for coaches today. For example, weekly communications to training groups, organizing team travel, meet entries, etc. What is your experience with 'dry side' admin responsibilities?

4. How are dry side administrative tasks usually divided up across your staff? What determines who takes on what? Does that stay consistent, or does it shift depending on the situation? Are there certain roles that tend to fall to the same people?

Compensation and Advancement:

5. What does coach advancement look like on your team? Can you give me an example of someone on staff who has moved up over time?

6. When it comes to incentives like raises, perks, and bonuses, how are they determined?

Work Environment:

7. How does communication between coaches and families work on your team?

8. Would you say there are clear boundaries between communications around parents/other adults on the team? How are those expectations set, and how are they enforced? Does leadership provide support?

9. When the phrase “work/life balance” comes up in coaching, it can mean a lot of different things. What does that actually look like on your team?

10. When coaching gets stressful, what types of support do coaches seek? Do you offer ways for coaches to get the support they need (counseling services, life coach support, gym membership, etc)

Professional Development & Growth:

11. Beyond the technical side, how do coaches on your staff get better at the people side of coaching?

12. How do you measure coach growth and development on your team? Can you give me an example of someone whom you have seen grow over time?

13. What do you believe are the best resources for coach growth and development? Does your club provide resources for accessibility to those growth and development opportunities (i.e., clinic/course reimbursement, required book readings/videos, etc)

Retention:

14. We have identified your team as having a high coach retention rate. Why do you think coaches stay on your team longer than on other teams? How has the team developed or changed to support coach retention?

15. Have you had coaches leave, and why? What steps did you take to help offload anything?

Closing:

Is there anything about how your team operates that you think works really well that other teams might overlook? Or anything you’ve had to figure out the hard way?

Thank you again for allowing us to interview you. Do you prefer to remain anonymous as we publish our work? Would you like us to cite you and your team in our work?

Appendix G: Collaboration Opportunity: Insights from Your Teams Success in Coach Retention

Collaboration Opportunity: Insights from Your Teams Success in Coach Retention

Dear **[Head Coach Name]**,

On behalf of the 2025 American Swim Coaches Association (ASCA) Fellows Class, I am reaching out to you specifically because your program has stood out as a model for coach retention and organizational stability.

As part of this year's Fellows project, we conducted a nationwide study titled *Our Greatest Asset: A Coach Sustainability Study*. While much of our research focuses on identifying the systemic drivers of burnout and turnover, we believe it is equally vital to study the "bright spots"—teams like yours that have successfully fostered a sustainable environment for coaching staff.

The Request: We would love to schedule a 30-60 minute Zoom call with you to discuss your perspective on retention. We are interested in learning about the specific organizational practices, role expectations, or cultural elements you believe have contributed to your staff's longevity.

Why Your Input is Critical: Your insights will help us build a Sustainability Framework that provides actionable data for the coaching community. By sharing what is actually working on the deck, we can help move the needle toward making coaching a more viable, long-term career nationwide.

Privacy & Transparency: Our conversation is for research purposes to identify broad success patterns. We are not evaluating individual clubs, and any insights shared will be aggregated to protect the privacy of your specific program.

Are you available for a brief call during any of the following windows?

- **[Insert Date/Time Option 1]**
- **[Insert Date/Time Option 2]**
- **[Insert Date/Time Option 3]**

We are excited to learn from your leadership and appreciate everything you do to support the "backbone" of our sport.

Sincerely,

The 2025 ASCA Fellows Class Stephanie Bates | Adam Coffman | Melissa Healy | Emily Laurent | Jesse Lewis | Darla Long | Katie McNerney | Trevor Rill | David White

Cc: Kathleen Prindle, Fellows Chair

Appendix H: Coach Sustainability Playbook for Organizations

National Level: USA Swimming, ASCA

Mental Health Partnerships: USA Swimming and/or ASCA identifies and partners with 1-2 national mental wellness providers (e.g., Meditation or counseling platforms such as Calm, Headspace, TalkSpace, and BetterHelp). This initiative ensures that the high stress nature of the professional is met with accessible, professional support, destigmatizing pursuit of mental health care.

Program Structure

- **Funded Access Codes:** Every USA Swimming and/or ASCA registered coach receives an annual access code for the chosen platform, either fully funded at the national level or partially subsidized through annual registration fees.

Implementation Roadmap

- **Pilot Phase:** Launch a 12-month pilot program in 2–3 representative LSCs. Usage is tracked via opt-in anonymous reporting to measure platform engagement and ensure the service meets the actual needs of the coaching population.
- **Minimum Viable Rollout:** Year-one implementation focuses on a "Wellness Access Portal" hosted on the USA Swimming/ASCA website, where coaches can retrieve their subscription codes and access vetted mental health resources.

Health and Wellness Access: USA Swimming and/or ASCA identifies and partners with national gym chains like Planet Fitness to provide coaches with reduced-cost or free memberships prioritizing physical health as a foundational element of coach longevity.

Program Structure

- **National Gym Partnership:** The national organization leverages its scale to negotiate universal membership rates or sponsored memberships with a major national gym chain (e.g., Planet Fitness).
- **Subsidized Membership:** Coaches receive an annual access code funded by the national body (or partially subsidized via registration fees), effectively treating gym access as a standard professional benefit.

Implementation Roadmap

- **Pilot Phase:** Roll out the program in 2–3 LSCs for 12 months. Success is monitored through opt-in anonymous reporting of gym attendance and participant satisfaction.
- **Minimum Viable Rollout:** Implementation consists of a dedicated "Health Perks" section within the USA Swimming/ASCA member portal, allowing coaches to easily redeem their gym membership credentials.

Evidence-based Coach Sustainability Framework: USA Swimming and the ASCA establish a comprehensive "Coach Sustainability Framework" to provide clubs with the tools necessary to assess and improve their internal health. By moving from intuition-based management to evidence-based metrics, the organization empowers clubs to build environments that prioritize longevity, professional growth, and staff retention.

Framework Components

- **Organizational Health Toolkit:** A centralized suite of assessment instruments, including:
    - **Burnout Risk & Workload Audits:** Quantitative tools to measure daily labor intensity and identify high-risk fatigue patterns.
    - **Staff Climate Surveys:** Periodic, anonymous instruments to gauge psychological safety, cultural health, and leadership efficacy.
    - **Benchmarking Data:** Access to national standards for salary, benefits, and retention rates to provide clubs with an objective basis for competitive compensation packages.
- **Best-Practice Implementation Guides:** Ready-to-use resources for club boards and Head Coaches, ranging from standardized onboarding checklists to institutionalized delegation models and retention strategies.

Educational Integration

- **Mandated Professional Development:** The framework serves as the foundation for a national educational curriculum. ASCA integrates modules into existing certification pathways that focus on critical soft skills: recognizing and mitigating burnout, empathetic leadership, psychological safety, and sustainable team staffing models.
- **Proactive Retention Planning:** By leveraging these educational resources, clubs are equipped to shift their management culture from reactive turnover management to proactive, long-term coach retention planning.

Implementation Roadmap

- **Development Phase:** Synthesize research and industry data to build the digital toolkit. Establish "Success Metrics" that participating clubs can use to track their progress over time.
- **Deployment:** Roll out the framework as a "Gold Standard" certification for clubs. Offer tiered incentives (e.g., enhanced promotional opportunities, preferential clinic access) to clubs that implement the full audit suite.
- **Evaluation:** Utilize the aggregated, anonymous data from participating clubs to identify national trends in coach wellness, allowing the national organization to update the framework annually based on evolving challenges and successful outcomes.

Scalable Health Insurance: USA Swimming leverages its national scale to negotiate, identify, and facilitate access to affordable health insurance solutions for clubs that lack the leverage to secure competitive coverage independently. This initiative focuses on small-to-medium-sized clubs—specifically those currently unable to provide benefits to their full-time or part-time staff—by utilizing the national membership as a mechanism to achieve institutional-level group rates.

Program Structure

- **National Negotiated Access:** USA Swimming acts as the master policyholder or broker-partner to pool regional club staff into a national aggregate, unlocking group-rate premiums and broader plan options.
- **Subsidy & Integration:** Clubs have the option to contribute a portion of premiums as part of an employee compensation package, while the national organization provides the administrative infrastructure to facilitate enrollment.

Implementation Roadmap

- **Pilot Phase:** Launch a 12-month pilot program in 3–5 representative Local Swimming Committees (LSCs) to measure participation rates, demographic needs, and carrier responsiveness.
- **Minimum Viable Rollout:** Year-one implementation focuses on a dedicated insurance enrollment portal accessible via the USA Swimming website. This portal provides coaches and club owners with a vetted list of insurance partners and pre-negotiated plans, streamlining the quote-to-coverage process for small clubs.
- **Evaluation:** Success is tracked via opt-in anonymous reporting, measuring the number of clubs that successfully onboarded staff and the resulting reduction in monthly premium costs compared to individual market rates.

LSC Level

Standardization and Professional Recognition: LSCs increase coach awareness and incentivize clubs to achieve "100% ASCA Team" status, By embedding membership into existing registration process clubs can foster a culture of professional development, professional accountability, and coaching excellence.

Program Structure

- **Integrated Membership:** ASCA membership dues are integrated directly into the annual LSC club registration process. This seamless enrollment ensures every coach on staff is automatically rostered as an ASCA member, granting them immediate access to resources, certifications, and networking.

Implementation Roadmap

- **Pilot Phase:** The LSC Executive Director initiates a 12-month pilot with 3–5 representative clubs. During this period, ASCA handles the seamless onboarding of coaches, providing personalized login credentials and welcome packets directly to the staff.

- **Localized Site Education:** LSCs host tiered (Level 1, 2, and 3) training sessions in conjunction with the House of Delegates (HOD) meetings.These sessions feature national-level experts brought in by ASCA to provide localized, high-impact professional development.
- **Minimum Viable Rollout:** Year-one implementation focuses on the integration of the membership fee within the LSC registration portal and the delivery of at least one onsite, LSC-wide coaching clinic led by an ASCA representative.

Formalized Mentorship: The LSC Coaches Committee establishes a formal mentorship framework designed to accelerate the professional growth of early-career staff by pairing them with veteran coaches. This initiative institutionalizes the transfer of technical knowledge, administrative best practices, and long-term career development strategies, fostering a stronger, more connected coaching community.

Program Structure

- **Targeted Matching:** Mentorship pairs are curated based on professional alignment, pairing coaches who have specific developmental goals with veteran mentors who possess the relevant expertise. Criteria include years of experience, specific coaching environments (e.g., age group vs. senior), and identified areas for improvement.
- **Structured Engagement:** The program operates on a 4–6 month cycle, requiring pairs to meet at least twice monthly. Meetings may be conducted virtually or in person, following a standardized curriculum of discussion topics provided by the committee to ensure consistent learning outcomes.
- **Applied Observation:** The program encourages high-level professional development through "site visits," where mentees travel to observe the mentor's club operations, practice design, and athlete management firsthand.

Implementation Roadmap

- **Pilot Phase:** Launch the mentorship program across the LSC for one cycle to evaluate match efficacy and the relevance of the provided discussion topics. Usage and satisfaction are tracked via end-of-program surveys.
- **Support & Logistics:** To eliminate barriers to in-person observation, the LSC provides mileage reimbursement for coaches traveling to meet their mentors or visiting their clubs.
- **Minimum Viable Rollout:** A standardized digital "Mentorship Toolkit" for all participants—containing the curriculum, meeting logs, and reimbursement forms—accessible through the LSC website, constitutes the year-one implementation.

Social Cohesion: Building Community through Peer Support: The LSC Coaches Committee prioritizes social cohesion to combat the isolation often inherent in the profession. By organizing dedicated social outings during championship meets, the LSC creates informal spaces for coaches to connect, share challenges, and build lasting peer support networks that extend beyond the pool deck.

Program Structure

- **Championship Integration:** Social events are strategically scheduled around major championship meets, utilizing the time when the largest concentration of coaches is already gathered in one location.

- **Facilitated Networking:** The Coaches Chair oversees the selection of venues and timing to ensure these gatherings are accessible and inclusive, moving away from formal "business" settings toward relaxed, social environments that encourage authentic peer-to-peer interaction.
- **Institutional Support:** By formalizing these events, the LSC signals that coach wellness and community-building are legitimate professional priorities, helping to reduce turnover by fostering a stronger sense of belonging.

Implementation Roadmap

- **Pilot Phase:** The Coaches Chair will host a trial "Coaches Social" at a high-attendance regional championship meet to gauge interest and gather feedback on event formats (e.g., casual dinner, off-site networking).
- **Minimum Viable Rollout:** Year-one implementation consists of at least two sanctioned social events per year, one Senior and one Age Group, clearly listed in the championship meet information packet, and a standardized process for the Coaches Chair to secure low-cost, high-impact venues.
- **Evaluation:** Success is measured through attendance numbers and post-meet surveys regarding the impact of these social opportunities on coaches' feelings of connectedness to the wider LSC coaching community.

Team Level

Transparent Compensation: The Head Coach and/or Board of Directors will implement structured, predictable compensation frameworks tied to objective annual performance reviews. This initiative removes subjectivity from salary adjustments, ensuring coaches are rewarded fairly based on clear, pre-defined metrics and professional milestones.

Program Structure

- **Performance-Linked Progression:** Compensation adjustments are transitioned from informal, merit-based requests to a formalized "Step and Column" schedule. Raises are calculated based on performance targets, certifications attained, and years of service.
- **Objective Reviews:** The annual review process focuses on quantifiable KPIs—such as team growth, swimmer retention, and administrative reliability—providing coaches with a clear roadmap for financial advancement.

Implementation Roadmap

- **Pilot Phase:** The Board of Directors conducts a compensation audit to establish industry-standard benchmarks, followed by the introduction of the new pay scale to the coaching staff.
- **Minimum Viable Rollout:** Year-one implementation focuses on the publication of a "Compensation Handbook" for staff, detailing the criteria for advancement and the timeline for reviews, ensuring all coaches understand their potential for growth within the organization.

Operational Delegation: Empowering Distributed Leadership: To prevent burnout and optimize organizational efficiency, the Head Coach and/or other leadership systematically distributes "dry-side" administrative tasks across the staff. By aligning responsibilities with individual strengths and professional interests, the team moves from a centralized model to a collaborative, shared-leadership structure.

Program Structure

- **Strengths-Based Assignment:** Administrative duties (e.g., meet logistics, travel coordination, marketing, or data analytics) are inventoried and delegated based on each coach's unique skill set rather than seniority.
- **Institutional Accountability:** Each staff member takes ownership of a specific operational pillar, reducing the administrative burden on the Head Coach and/or Team Manager and fostering a sense of agency and professional growth among assistant staff.

Implementation Roadmap

- **Pilot Phase:** Conduct a departmental audit to identify redundant or centralized tasks. Transition 3–5 core administrative responsibilities to staff members based on their specific areas of expertise.
- **Minimum Viable Rollout:** Creation of a "Staff Responsibility Matrix" that clearly defines ownership of administrative tasks, ensuring transparency and accountability across the organization.

Predictable PTO Structures: Prioritizing Coach Recovery: The team formalizes a "rest and recovery" policy that acknowledges the physical and mental demands of the competitive season. By normalizing coaches having scheduled time off, the team prioritizes long-term coach sustainability and prevents the burnout associated with continuous weekend commitments.

Program Structure

- **Post-Meet Recovery:** Implementation of a "Recovery Day", mandating that coaching staff receive a specific day off in the week following specific swim meets throughout both short course and long course seasons.
- **Wellness-First Scheduling:** Integrating recovery blocks into the annual competition calendar to ensure that time-off is treated as a foundational element of employment, not an optional perk.

Implementation Roadmap

- **Pilot Phase:** Trial the recovery day policy for the two most demanding meets on the annual calendar to assess the impact on staff morale and operational continuity.

- **Minimum Viable Rollout:** Inclusion of a "Recovery Clause" in the staff handbook that guarantees designated time off following high-stress competitive events, with clear communication protocols for coverage during these periods.

Staff Recognition: Celebrating Excellence and Longevity: The leadership team establishes a recurring recognition program that moves beyond performance-based bonuses to celebrate the human element of coaching. This initiative reinforces the value of each staff member by acknowledging their contributions to team culture, mentorship, and administrative stability.

Program Structure

- **Culture & Mentorship Awards:** Recognition for coaches who demonstrate excellence in soft skills, such as peer-to-peer mentorship or fostering positive team culture, ensuring these vital contributions are visible.
- **Milestone Celebrations:** Formal recognition and tangible rewards for coaches reaching tenure milestones (e.g., 5, 10, and 15+ years), reinforcing the value of organizational loyalty and historical knowledge.

Implementation Roadmap

- **Pilot Phase:** Introduce a "Recognition Calendar" where specific months are dedicated to celebrating staff contributions and acknowledging tenure anniversaries.
- **Minimum Viable Rollout:** Establishment of a quarterly "Team Appreciation Dinner" where milestone awards are presented, creating a formal platform to honor the history and future of the coaching staff.

Appendix I: Coach's Resource Guide

Compensation

Wage Compensation Tool

Wage Benchmarking Tool: Compare Salaries Across All 50 States

Use this tool to research wage benchmarks in your current region or a potential relocation area. Data can support competitive contract development for you or your staff.

What the tool provides

- BLS mean annual wages by occupation across all 50 states + DC
- National benchmarks, top-paying states, and full state rankings
- OEWS-based figures for hiring, relocation, and compensation planning
- Important limitations: data reflects *means*, not total compensation, and represents a single annual survey snapshot
- Support for multi-state entity setup and compliance

PTO Structure

Types of PTO Policies

- **Accrued PTO:** PTO is earned gradually based on hours worked or tenure (e.g., 3.68 hours per bi-weekly period ≈ 10–14 days/year). Accrual often increases with seniority.
- **Front-Loaded PTO**: Full PTO allotment is granted at the start of the year or on hire date. Simple to track but may require payout of unused PTO depending on state law.
- **Fixed Allotment:** Employees receive a set number of days annually. Encourages flexibility but may lead to employees saving PTO for vacations and working while sick.
- **Unlimited PTO:** Employees may take time off as needed with manager approval. Highly flexible but requires careful staffing oversight.

Key Components of a PTO Policy

- **Accrual Method:** How PTO is earned and any caps
- **Eligibility:** Full-time/part-time distinctions, probationary periods
- **Usage Rules:** Request process, notice requirements, approval workflow
- **Carryover & Payout:** Rules for unused PTO and termination payout (state-regulated)
- **Types of Leave:** Vacation, sick, personal, floating holidays, bereavement
- **Tiered Structures:** PTO variations by tenure, department, or role

Health & Life Insurance Options

Insurance Available Through USA Swimming Membership

- **Participant Accident/Excess Medical Insurance:** Covers accidental injuries during USA Swimming supervised or sanctioned activities.
    - Beginning 2025: No deductible for uninsured individuals
    - Prior to 2025: $100 deductible if uninsured; no deductible with existing health insurance
- **General Liability Insurance:** Covers third-party claims (bodily injury, property damage, advertising injury) arising from Covered Activities. Facilities often require proof of this insurance for practice or meet hosting.
- Additional insurance summaries are available via SWIMS login. Questions: **RiskManagement@usaswimming.org**

If Your Club Does Not Offer Health or Life Insurance

Small businesses can provide coverage through group plans, HRAs, or ACA-compliant options.

Key Options for Small Business Health Coverage - (HealthCare.gov)

- **SHOP (Small Business Health Options Program)**
    - For businesses with ≤50 employees
    - Offers group plans and HRAs
    - Allows comparison of coverage options (HealthCare.gov)
- **Fully Insured Group Health Plans**
    - Offered by UnitedHealthcare, BCBSTX, Aetna
    - Fixed monthly premiums; insurer manages claims
    - Often includes medical, dental, vision, life, wellness programs
    - Bronze–Platinum tiers determine cost-sharing
- **Self-Funded or Partially Self-Funded Plans**
    - Monthly payments based on employee health trends
    - Includes stop-loss coverage
    - Potential cost savings and flexibility
- **Plan Features & Benefits**
    - Large provider networks
    - Wellness and mental health programs included - request options explicitly
    - Online enrollment and claims support
    - Customizable plan structures
- **Key Considerations**
    - Number of employees
    - Budget stability vs. risk tolerance
    - Employee needs (family coverage, dental, vision, mental health)
    - ACA compliance

Enhanced Coach Training

ASCA (American Swimming Coaches Association)

American Swimming Coaches Association

- Level-based certification system
- Online or in-person training at conferences
- Video archive for stroke development education
- Curriculum updates underway
- Membership required for access

USA Swimming Education & Certification

Structured programs supporting safe, effective, professional coaching.

Certification Pathways

- **Foundation Coach Certification:** Mandatory; includes Quality Coaching Framework (stroke fundamentals, communication, practice planning)
- **Core Certification:** Required for new coaches; builds on Foundation content
- **ADM Certifications:** Advanced coaching skill development
- **Note:** Certifications do **not** expire

Education Opportunities

- **USA Swimming University:** Self-paced online courses, including:
    - Summer League Coaching (90 minutes)
    - Officials' Education (stroke/turn judges, starters, administrative officials, referees)
- **ASCA Partnership (Nov 2026):** Redesigned certification program with modern content and flexible pathways New Coach Initiative offering cohort-based training for early-career coaches

Localized Education

Contact your **LSC** for local training opportunities. If offerings are limited, consider inviting ASCA or USA Swimming to host training at your location.

Social Cohesion

Coach Socials

Attend local coaching socials or host your own if none exist. These events build community, strengthen deck relationships, and create space for low-stress discussion of important coaching topics.

Examples include:

- Coach Coffee Meet Ups
- Regional Coaching Roundtable
- Virtual Discussion Groups
- Deck visits between clubs
- Collaborative practices
- Meet-day coach gatherings

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