

Woelk: Colorado's Rokos sets standard for coaches

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Posted: 02/19/2010 12:12:09 AM MST

Draw up the blueprint of the perfect college coach, and here are some of the attributes you'd likely include:

Success on the field (naturally). You'd probably want regular top-five finishes in the NCAA standings, team championships liberally scattered here and there, plenty of NCAA individual champions and dozens and dozens of All-Americans.

Success in the classroom. Ideally, you'd want his/her teams to match their athletic prowess with academic excellence. Say, maybe by regularly producing one of the best -- if not *the* best -- cumulative grade-point average of any team on campus.

Loyalty. Someone who takes the job and wants to stay. Someone who loves the school, loves the community and can't imagine doing anything else.

Modesty. Regularly wins coach of the year awards, but politely declines the honors by saying, "All the credit goes to the athletes. It is the kids who deserve the honor, not the coach."

Sound good so far?

Of course it does -- and CU has him. He's Richard Rokos, the one-time Czech defector who is in the midst of his 20th season as the head coach of CU's tradition-rich ski program.

Rokos has done nothing but add to CU's reputation. He's won five NCAA team championships, produced 28 NCAA individual champions and coached 150 (yep, that's one-hundred fifty) All-Americans.

And he never has a bad day.

"How can I have a bad day?" Rokos asks with a smile. "I have my job, I live in a wonderful place, I work with terrific people ... how can one have a bad day with all of that?"

Rokos overflows with optimism; drips with enthusiasm. Even the most chance of circumstances in his life, he believes, have turned out to be good ones.

Take, for instance, the moment when he and his wife were finalizing plans to emigrate. After escaping Czechoslovakia in 1980, where he had served as a coach with the Czech national team, he and his wife spent almost a year in a refugee camp in Austria. After months of getting paperwork in order and undergoing extensive background checks, they had decided to relocate in Canada, where he had some distant relatives.

But he was told by Canadian officials that the country's quota had already been filled. Sorry, they said. The Rokos' would have to wait.

No problem. He and his wife simply walked across the street to the American embassy, where officials inspected his paperwork.

"They told me that we would be welcome in the United States," he said. "It was freedom. It was a great day for me and my wife."

Like he said, every day's a great day.

Rokos and his wife first landed in Detroit, where he secured a job with a robotics company (along with being a ski coach, he also has a degree in mechanical engineering).

But his love of teaching and coaching skiing stayed with him. He landed a job at Pine Knob, a ski area outside of Detroit.

It wasn't what someone who had just left the Austrian Alps was accustomed to. Pine Knob is actually a mound of junked automobiles covered with dirt. "I remember asking myself, 'This is a mountain?' But it was skiing," he said.

From there, he made his way to Colorado. He worked with the U.S. Pro Ski Tour for several years before finally landing a job as an assistant coach at CU under Tim LaVallee in 1987. When LaVallee left in 1990, he was promoted to head coach by then-athletic director Bill Marolt (who still owns the CU coaching record for NCAA championships with seven).

"When I took the job, I had one simple goal," Rokos said. "I wanted to build a program the school would be proud of."

Mission accomplished. He won an NCAA championship in his first season, ending an eight-year Buff drought. Since then, he's added NCAA titles in 1995, 1998, 1999 and 2006, along with three runner-up finishes.

He's also maintained a tradition of academic excellence for his athletes. CU's skiers consistently have among the highest cumulative grade point average of any team in the athletic department.

"With skiers, it's easy," he shrugs. "The nature of the sport requires more organization and discipline. You must be flexible and able to adapt.

"If you want to be a good athlete, you must be good in academics. Skiing is a sport of balance. If you are not balanced mentally, you cannot be balanced physically. My best skiers are almost always my best students."

Example: Last spring, Lucie Zikova was one of 14 CU student athletes honored for maintaining a 4.0 GPA for the year. Buff fans may recognize Zikova as a three-time NCAA champion -- and Zikova's performance on the hill and in the classroom is the rule, not the exception.

Recently, Rokos did endure some tough moments when Jimmie Heuga died. Rokos had become a close friend of the former CU and Olympic great, who was stricken with multiple sclerosis. Rokos had served as Heuga's personal coach, and helped him ride his recumbent bicycle around the Potts Field track on a regular basis.

"I learned so much from Jimmie," Rokos said. "For him, the Olympics were the easiest thing in his life. My respect for him was tremendous.

"He never felt bad for himself. I would put him on that three-wheeler and he would put his head up, sniff the air and take off like it was a race. He tried to milk the best out of every situation, and he always had a smile on his face."

Rokos' time with Heuga only helped him reaffirm what he has always known. Asked to name his favorite memories in his two decades as CU's ski coach, Rokos didn't hesitate to answer.

"Every day," he said emphatically. "Every day is wonderful. People like Jimmie Heuga make me realize how wonderful my life has been."

There's your blueprint for a coach.

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