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## Jon Urbanek Moves On



*BY BOB SCHALLER // Special Correspondent*

Jon Urbanek was really just a kid. A kid at the University of Michigan. In engineering.

Urbanek had planned to be an engineer. But then things changed. As in his major. He got his teaching degree from Michigan, and then briefly taught high school in Anaheim, Calif.

And then, his life took a dramatic turn. He was offered a chance to get into coaching the swimmers at his beloved University of Michigan, a sport he loved, a school he adores.

So he took it. More than a decade later, he saw one of his engineering professors.

"You are doing a great job as our swim coach," the professor told him.

"Why, thank you," Jon said. "I had you for a class, right?"

The man smiled. A bit too widely.

"You did," said the professor, a man named Krakenbusch. "And let me say you made the right decision, getting into swimming."

That is to say, engineering wasn't exactly what Urbanek was cut out for – from the subject itself to the idea of sitting behind a desk 40 hours a week. He needed the interaction, the human factor.

He needed the water.

And with the telling of that story, Jon Urbanek cleans out the rest of what he left behind at the University of Michigan, freeing the office for incoming coach Bob Bowman, three decades younger than Urbanek. The two went on to coach the Olympic team together, as assistant coaches. Now, back in Michigan, they are morning jogging partners.

For Urbanek, telling the story about his life, which has revolved around Michigan for most of it, is closing a circle. Part of shutting down his office for the last time, loading up the boxes, meant taking down the butterfly.

Anyone who knows Urbanek knows the picture of the butterfly is so much more than one would think it is at first glance. He came here new to the world. He leaves this place

better than he found it.

There is tangible proof, from the 300 plus former swimmers who gathered in September to honor him for his contribution to their UM careers - and lives.

"What a great influence you are," says one email from a student some 35 years ago, a man in his 50s now. Urbancek gets goose bumps from this trip down Memory Lane.

"I always felt I was just doing my job - I never really knew if I changed anyone," he says with a shrug. "I looked at it as fun, providing a service, and helping the kids grow and learn."

His is the start of an exit of established coaches - not all at once, mind you. But several - perhaps as many as a dozen - of the college ranks' top coaches will be stepping down and retiring in the next handful of years.

"I'm starting the mass exodus that will occur in the next three or four years - and that's a good thing, because there is a wealth of great young coaches out there," he says. "A whole bunch of us will be leaving. I'm going to show them how to do it - or shall I say, not do it - not make the same mistake I did."

The only mistake, actually, Urbancek said he made was letting word get out that he was leaving. Indeed, he tried to do that for the "right reasons," so that the university and everyone involved could better prepare for the future. However, there were other side results.

"If I could have done one thing different...what I did was I was too honest with my decision because I told my recruits a couple of years ago that I would be here only through 2004, so I hurt recruiting in a way by being honest," he said. "But that's how I am. I just couldn't look at a mom who had just asked me if I'd be there for four more years. I know I could've said nothing, or said 'I will stay until they carry me out.' But these are part of my personal values - I have to be honest. Sometimes you pay for that."

Urbancek will not step entirely away from coaching. He now works part-time for USA Swimming in one of the organization's newly created master coaching positions. In this role, he will travel the country mentoring young coaches.

"I don't know if I have the knowledge," he says with a smile, "but I can at least pass on some experience."

And he really doesn't like the word "retirement."

"They can't get rid of me that fast," he says. "I don't feel any different from yesterday, a week ago or year ago. At the same time, I've taken it in four-year segments. In 2000 I was 64 years old and ready to (move on), but not quite completely ready. So I decided to go until 2004, at age 68. Plus, some of my older guys had decided to stay on, like Tom

Malchow, and I wasn't about to walk away from that group. So I said to myself, 'Okay, I can stick it out until 2004.'

And stick it out he did. As an assistant Olympic coach this summer, he worked with a distance group that included Erik Vendt and Larsen Jensen. Bowman marvels at the "kind of man Jon is - one of the few people in this world without a mean bone in his body."

Swimmers stick by him too, from veteran legend Tom Malchow, to the mercurial Klete Keller, who turned in one of the most impressive performances at the Olympics in Athens, and then the undisputable most memorable quote when he dedicated his performance to the troops. Those were Keller's words, of course. But having Urbanchek's influences seems to make a lot of people reach their full potential, emotionally as well as physically.

The hardest thing to remove from the wall was that butterfly. A teacher sent it to him, and it reads in the caption, "Happiness is like catching a butterfly. The more you chase it, the more it eludes you. But if you sit quietly, it lands on your shoulder."

He sends plaques to his graduates, former swimmers who are getting married - and on the plaque is the butterfly.

"The plaque itself isn't all that great - it looks like a wall tile!" he says with a laugh. "I'm silly, a really fun-loving person. The reason I am coaching is because I enjoy this interaction with the people I've been so fortunate to work with."

He points to the plaque.

"This butterfly," he says wistfully, but with pride, "seems to find them all."

Urbanchek has built his career in the water, but he's not comfortable with the moisture forming in his eyes. He's starting to swim in the emotions, but he won't let the tide take him away. He is buoyed by the kids, the parents, the university and community. Because Jon Urbanchek didn't just catch that butterfly, he did, in many ways, become one.

"I never chased success, I just hoped it arrived," he says thoughtfully. "That's one of the reasons I stayed at Michigan, because I knew it would."