

New Linn-Mar coach loves swimming

Written by Jim Ecker

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Tom Belin's sharp, distinctive whistle cut through the din at the Jefferson High School pool Saturday as he encouraged his Linn-Mar swimmers during their races.

Somehow, he sticks a few fingers in his mouth and emits a sound that is different from all the other whistling coaches in the building.

When he isn't whistling, he's demonstrating techniques to his swimmers by twisting his hips or rotating his shoulders and performing all sorts of gyrations, all with an earnest look and a smile on his face.

It would be hard to find someone who is more excited about swimming than Belin. Get too close, and you might be tempted to jump in the pool yourself for a few laps under his guidance.

"I love the sport," he said several times during a 10-minute conversation.

Belin, 51, is a lifelong swimmer. He was an NAIA All-American at Bemidji State (Minn.) during his college days and still competes in masters events.

Belin was ranked seventh in the nation in the 200 backstroke in the 50-54 age group last year. He also was ranked ninth in the 100 backstroke and loves getting in the pool.

He'll jump in the water with his Linn-Mar swimmers to get his point across and also performs some of their drills himself, just to make sure he's teaching them the right thing.

Belin was an assistant coach with the Lions for three years before becoming the head coach this season.

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"I'm having a blast," he said after the J-Hawk Relays Saturday. "I've got a good group of guys. It's fun in the respect, they want to get better."

"They're listening, they're trying, they're experimenting. This to me is a great position to be in as a coach. You have a group of guys who really want to learn and get better."

Belin does not teach in the Linn-Mar school system. He works in the field of international banking and real estate investment. He has his own investment company, KAJAT Properties, and also works for Discover Financial with its international accounts.

His mind is filled with facts and figures during his business ventures, which is one of the reasons he loves jumping in the pool at the Marion YMCA during the noon hour for a refreshing workout.

"It's nice to block out the world and swim every now and then," he said. "To me, it's a balance in life. It's a way to keep my sanity, is the way I like to put it."

"To get in the water and just swim, you can block everything else out. There's nothing like swimming, to me."

Belin said he'll probably skip the national masters meet this spring due to his coaching duties. Linn-Mar does not have its own pool yet -- it will next year -- so he puts in extra long days with morning practices at the Marion YMCA and evening workouts at Coe College.

"Next year is going to be great, because we're going to have our own pool," he said, the excitement rising in his voice. "We're going to have a dynamite facility."

A new \$5 million aquatics center is being built where the Linn-Mar baseball field used to be. The Lions will have a new baseball/softball complex at Oak Ridge Middle School, making room

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for the pool.

Linn-Mar has a competitive swim team, and Belin is looking forward to making it even better.

"When you run into kids that want to get better, that to me is the exciting part," he said. "I love the sport, I want to help make kids better people.

"Swimming has done a lot for me and it can do a lot for them."