

Bowling Globetrotters

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Those of us who coach bowling around the globe travel extremely long distances to share our knowledge and expertise. From April to May of this year, I traveled more than 20,000 miles from North America to Europe to Southeast Asia to coach bowling. Learn more here...

Bowling globetrotters (6/19/2006) USBC-certified Silver coach Joe Slowinski, front row center, coached the Hungarian men's and women's national teams. Pictured are members of the Hungarian men's and women's national teams during Slowinski's training in Budapest in December 2005. By Joe Slowinski
USBC Communications

Those of us who coach bowling around the globe travel extremely long distances to share our knowledge and expertise. From April to May of this year, I traveled more than 20,000 miles from North America to Europe to Southeast Asia to coach bowling.

In the world of international coaching, assignments vary from short-term stints to full-time annual contracts that cover benefits such as housing and travel. For many federations, budgets are extremely limited. Consequently, a coaching assignment can both be short-term as well as extremely intensive, causing the coach an unrealistic timeline to see result improvements.

USBC-certified Gold coach Susie Minshew was hired for two weeks by Panama to prepare the national teams for the World Championships.

"Panama had never had any formal coaching so I was the first," Minshew said. "Its federation hired me two weeks before the Championships to get them ready. The biggest hurdle, therefore, was that there was no time to properly prepare for such an event. We certainly made a valiant effort in the 12 days I was there. They worked incredibly hard."

Like the athletes, international coaches also work hard. From my experience, a federation will attempt to maximize a coach's value by scheduling many events during the stay. As you can imagine, they want to stretch their budget dollars, euros, dinars, rubles or riyals. To illustrate, during my recent April visit to Hungary, I was involved in taping an instructional bowling DVD, coaching the adult and youth national teams as well as working with individuals in an open clinic each evening. This required working anywhere from 11 to 14 hours each day. I hardly had time to eat. Thanks to Red Bull I made it through each of the nine days of training.

On the other end of the spectrum, many federations offer annual contracts which include a tax-free salary as well as benefits that include housing and one month of vacation on annually. These contracts can be renewed annually based on mutual agreement.

Coaches face challenges

Whether it is a short-term or an annual contract, a coach has a number of challenges working abroad. Specifically, there are two major obstacles an international coach deals with on a daily basis: communication and culture.

The challenge with communicating is two-fold. First, you have the technical side of the language, translating from a local language to English. In addition to this is the challenge of communicating in bowling terms. But, through shared effort, you reach a productive point.

Wichita State University Assistant Coach and past USBC Team USA member Mark Lewis experienced this when he was head coach of the United Arab Emirates team.

"Often many players and officials speak English very well but don't understand as much as you would like," Lewis said. "Usually we both learned from each other how to communicate while we were training."

In addition to communication challenges, an international coach must work within the cultural norms and expectations of those with whom he or she is working.

Brent Sims, Kegel Training Center coordinator and USBC-certified Silver coach, works frequently with international players when they come to Kegel for training.

"One of the other things that is very different for other countries compared to us is the amount of notoriety that their bowlers receive," Sims said. "In most countries, especially Asian countries, their bowlers are celebrities."

Facing these realities, each federation has certain expectations that a coach needs to work under and make an effort to understand. Sometimes cultural expectations cause amazing difficulties. Lewis had to overcome some amazing obstacles while working in the Middle East.

"One of the other unique experiences coaching overseas was in the UAE," Lewis said. "Because of the local culture, this practice session was closed. The only males there were myself and the vice-president of the bowling federation to help translate. [Most of] the girls/women wore traditional dress. With this attire, I worked with some girls whom I could only see their hands, shoes and eyes or face. It was an interesting challenge to work on a starting stance or approach for a new bowler and not be able to see arms, legs or torso. Try a video analysis while you cover the student's body."

Efforts are rewarding

Yet, it is these cultural differences that offer the coach on an international assignment access to unique opportunities and challenging moments that remain with the coach like a cultural gift. We are ambassadors of the sport with a mission to spread bowling knowledge to all corners of the globe. With these efforts comes a dedication and zeal for coaches to celebrate improvement as a personal reward.

John Fantini, current coach of the United Arab Emirates, has worked in bowling for more than 50 years and is one of the most respected coaches in the world. He illustrates that an international coach gains intrinsic value from each assignment.

"To go to a country that had no success and getting a silver medal in the Asian games and then getting a young Saudi bowler to third in the AMF World Cup remains a highlight of my coaching career," Fantini said.

This is an important reason why I coach around the world. A coach feels a great sense of pride to contribute to the development of a player. At the conclusion of my most recent coaching trip, all of the national team members competed in a tournament open to all bowlers nationwide. And, the national team members competed to earn their national ranking points.

As a guest of the Hungarian Bowling Federation, I was invited to choose the lane condition. I felt a great deal of pride, as a coach, as I watched one of the Hungarian national team members roll three straight clean games on one of the most difficult 39-foot USBC Sport Bowling patterns while shooting 690 for the first three games of a six-game qualifier. He had difficulty with the transition, but this is the next step in his development process. The advanced targeting system and the release work we did during the week helped him to score on the difficult condition. The joy of seeing a student apply knowledge and be successful is priceless.

Editor's note: Joe Slowinski is a USBC-certified Silver level coach and USBC-certified Level I Coach Instructor. Slowinski, who has been coaching for more than 20 years, recently relocated to Kuala Lumpur to assume the role of Director of Coaching and Coach Certification for the Malaysian Tenpin Bowling Congress, whose women's team was WTBA World Champion in 2003.