

Kulwant Singh knows he is a unique athletic director. As a two-time immigrant—born in India, spent nine years of his childhood in England, then settled in the United States—he uses his diverse background to guide the De Anza College athletic department.



“I don’t think you run across many

Asian athletic directors,” Singh says. “And I’m a former soccer player and coach. I think it makes my take on things a bit different.”

After serving as Head Coach of the De Anza men’s soccer team for 17 years and the women’s team for seven years, Singh became Athletic Director in 2004. Over the past decade, he has led the two-year school to six Coast Conference all-sport championships, established a scholarship fund, and initiated student-athlete recognition and Hall of Fame programs. He has also made retention and transfer rates a top priority.

Beyond campus borders, Singh is Vice President of the National Alliance of Two-Year College Athletic Administrators (NATYCAA) and a member of the Management Council of the California Community College Athletic Association. In the following, he talks about his career path, why he started women’s badminton at De Anza, and communicating with today’s student-athletes.

De Anza won California Community College Athletic Association badminton state championships in 2013 and 2014.

How have your experiences shaped your perspective as an athletic director?

I played soccer at both the community college level and what was then Cal State Hayward [now California State University East Bay]. After I graduated, I was asked to stay on as the assistant men’s coach, and when the school started a women’s team in the early 1980’s, I became the assistant coach of that squad, too. Coaching women allowed me to gain another perspective—even though it’s the same game, it’s different in terms of how to communicate and what strategies to use.

I also taught and coached at the youth, high school, community college, and other university levels. Soccer coaches were not paid very well, so I took on many different jobs because that was the only way to earn a decent wage and survive. Ultimately, those experiences helped me become a well-rounded leader.

And doing all that early in my career made me realize that I’m a very organized coach, which not everyone can say. It’s a strength that has served me well as an athletic director.

What is your philosophy on running a successful two-year athletic department?

I have a strong work ethic, and I’m visible. I try to be around to answer questions, meet with coaches, and attend games. I think that being available and approachable is the most important part of running an athletic department.

What are the current issues for athletic directors at community colleges?

Budgets are a big concern as are upgrading facilities. We aren’t going to be able to fundraise millions of dollars for a new facility at this level. Instead, we have to advocate for community bonds that can be voted in to promote capital for the school.

What was the greatest challenge you faced when you stepped into your role as athletic director?

When I took over at De Anza, we had 17 sports, but some of them, particularly on the women’s side, had low participation rates. It might have made sense to cut the sports that weren’t getting good numbers, but we have a large population—24,000 students—and I felt we needed some new ideas, instead.

I focused on bringing in coaches who would get more student-athletes involved and recruit well. And I promoted the idea of offering a variety of sports that would attract different types of students. I also added women’s water polo and badminton to accommodate the needs and wants of our student body.

Why badminton?

I got a lot of resistance when I first suggested the idea—even within my own department. But I felt it would work well on our particular campus since we have a large international population, including many Asian students. So even though it is not a traditional sport, I knew it could be popular here.

It’s worked out well for us. The squad is the California Community College Athletic Association (CCCCAA) two-time defending state champions and won last year’s



Q & A

CCCAA Scholar Team Award. The program has brought our school a lot of recognition, statewide and internationally. One of our former athletes recently went to China to play in an international exhibition.

How do you promote academics to your student-athletes?

Degree completion and transfer is our priority. When we recruit student-athletes, we let

a day for five days. It gives them knowledge about how the college works, accessing tutoring, and building a path toward transferring. It's not a unique program, but it's essential in preparing them for the next step of their academic career.

We also have a full-time academic advisor within our department, and we're in the process of hiring a full-time counselor. Our academic advisor meets one-on-one with every student-athlete to devise an education plan tailored to his or her needs. The plan is then revised over the student's time with us, as his or her educational needs change. Currently, our transfer rate for student-athletes is 90 percent.

What do you look for when hiring coaches?

I'm interested in finding people who are knowledgeable and disciplined, have good people skills, and can fundraise. I want them to be able to demonstrate success in getting student-athletes to degree completion and the next level in education. I also need them to understand

the diversity of our student body and how to be sensitive to issues that arise from it.

One more important aspect is flexibility. At the community college level, coaches do some recruiting, but we don't know exactly who we're going to get each year. The student-athletes show up on the first day of practice, and that's our team. I need coaches to keep an open mind because they can't always recruit players to fit a system.

How do you mentor your coaches on working with today's student-athletes?

The key is to find creative ways to communicate. Technology is a force among our young people, so I encourage my staff to use it as a resource instead of thinking about it as a hindrance.

Why have you chosen to be active in national associations?

When I was coaching soccer, I was always involved with regional and national organizations, which I enjoyed. Once I became athletic director, a dean advised me to get involved in NATYCAA, and I did so. I've found it important to learn about the national perspective because it can be very different than what we're doing and thinking about in California. It helps to see the big picture.

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them know that we have resources to both help them throughout their two years here and to matriculate to a four-year school.

We have a mandatory summer orientation for incoming student-athletes that runs two hours

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