

A FAMILY AFFAIR

The husband and wife coaching duo of Becky and Greg Buwick have put a new twist on the two-career marriage.

by Kathryn Jenson White

Greg and Becky Buwick really have it all together. As head coaches of the men's and women's gymnastics programs at OU, as husband and wife and as parents of two young children, they know where they are going and how best to get there, together.

Make no mistake, however. These are two separate human beings. Neither jumps in to finish a thought that the other begins. Neither feels compelled to explain or justify what the other says and does. Neither looks to the other for coaching or guidance while speaking. The Buwicks are, indeed, a couple of individuals.

Given that their lives overlap more than those of most couples, retaining individuality is no easy task. Lives spent immersed in gymnastics — a sport in which the ability to perform individually within a team framework is a prerequisite of success — clearly have prepared them well.

"She handles her program, and I handle mine," Greg says. "Even though we're both in gymnastics, she's women's gymnastics, and I'm men's. Those are two different sports.

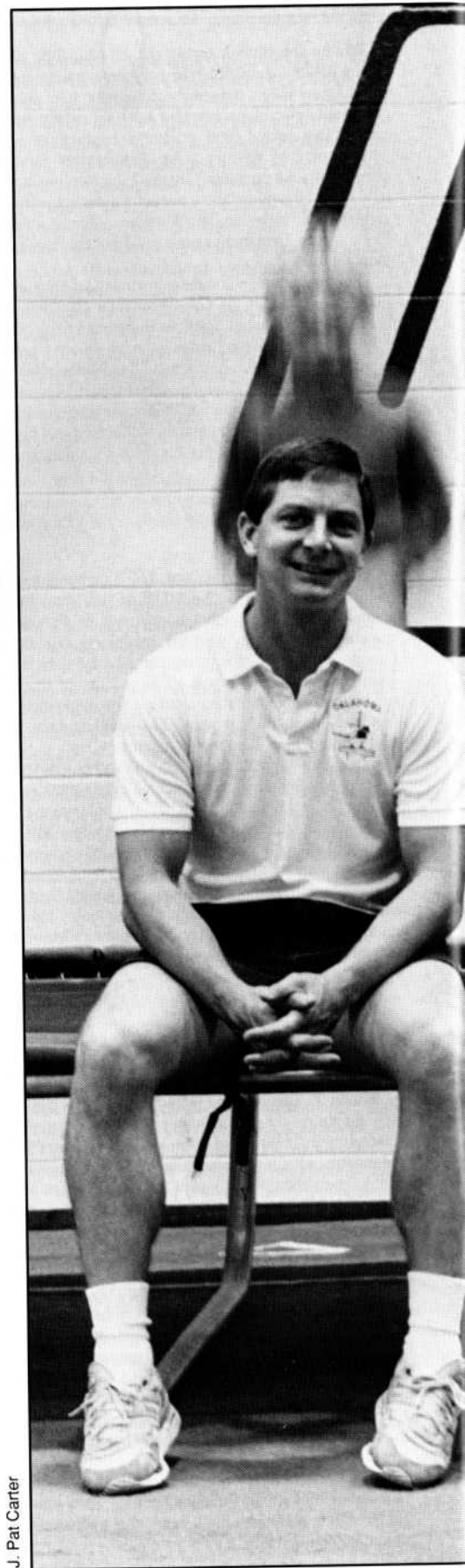
"Of course, we do talk gymnastics a lot. A lot of times, we think there's

nothing else that occurs in our lives *but* gymnastics. That's our fate, and it has always been the case."

The Buwicks would not argue that their fate is one of their own making. Although both say that where they are now is not the result of some grand life scheme, each admits that a series of life choices made their present positions inevitable.

Becky has been a gymnast since age nine and as a collegian competed for Centenary College of Louisiana in Shreveport. After finishing her studies at Oklahoma City University, she taught at Casady High School before opening her own gymnastics club in Oklahoma City. Greg spent two years competing at Illinois State University and two years as a varsity gymnast at OU. He was a two-time All-American and won two Big Eight titles in floor exercise while competing for the Sooners. In 1977, he became full-time assistant coach, then head coach in 1984. The same year, Becky was hired as the first women's coach to be on equal footing with the men's coach.

While the beginning of their relationship was not one of those romantic she-fell-off-the-beam-into-his-arms or he-vaulted-off-the-horse-into-her-path



J. Pat Carter



Coaching two highly competitive athletic teams or keeping pace with two very active children, the keys to survival are timing and balance.

types, their meetings at gymnastics competitions led to their marriage in 1982. Their son Hunter was born in 1985, and daughter Hartleigh in 1987. Balance and timing have proved to be as important in their private lives as on the beam and the mat in the gym.

"It can be very difficult," Greg says. "I think it's more difficult because we're in the same field. There are times from January through April when we have no latitude with the kids. I can't send my team on a trip to Lincoln, Nebraska, and not go with them. Frequently, too, we're both on the road at different sides of the continent at the same time.

"We tried for a while to schedule it so I had a home meet on the weekends when Becky was scheduled away, but we can't do that. We have to do what's best for our programs, and I think our kids pretty much understand. They think the gym is a big play area, but they also know this is where we work, and they understand why we do it."

Becky tries to maintain a sense of humor about her motherly guilt feelings. "It's hard not to feel guilty. You have to work, and I love my work. But I love my kids, too, of course. You have to make choices. All working men and women face this. Hunter told me last year, 'Ask your boss if I can go with you. Just tell him that your little boy *really* wants to go, and then it will be OK.'

"It may be harder on us than it is on them. But at least during the week, my schedule is flexible. Sometimes I feel sorry for the parents who are locked into a 9-to-5 schedule and have no access to their children."

The Buwicks meet the requirements of their separate but equally demanding lives with a philosophy summed up by a button Becky wears. On the button, the word *WHINING* is surrounded by the familiar red circle and cut through with the necessary red

slash. The message may not be deep, but it is certainly to the point. Meant primarily as a warning to her athletes, the motto has come to serve as a guiding life principle. The Buwicks definitely are not whiners.

They are winners, however. Greg was named 1991 National Coach of the Year after his OU team climbed to the top of the rankings in January and took the NCAA championship trophy in April. He became only the 10th coach in Sooner history to field a team that has accomplished that feat. He also has led teams to three Big Eight Championships, been named Big Eight Coach of the Year twice and coached a number of international teams.

Becky's teams took Big Eight titles in 1984, 1985, 1986 and 1991, earning her conference Coach of the Year honors three times. At the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, Korea, she was one of only five coaches for the U.S. team, which included her star pupil, Kelly Garrison. Becky also has coached the U.S. team at the 1987 World Cup in China.

Both Buwicks say that while they may be intensely competitive on the floor, they are not at all so at home.

"I just had to grin and bear it when Greg won nationals," Becky says with a laugh. "It wasn't hard, really. We know how hard we both work and how hard it is to get recognition. Even after Greg won the nationals, there wasn't much publicity."

Greg adds that he, too, has had his down years. "We've both been on both sides of the fence. I had my year in 1989 when I lost so many athletes, I couldn't even field a team," he says. "And actually, there *was* a story in the paper about our winning the nationals; it was about the size of a business card. It's never as much as you want."

Getting as much publicity for and interest in gymnastics as they want is a goal the Buwicks share. The average



J. Pat Carter

Although Hartleigh Buwick, 4, has started gymnastics classes, she still welcomes her mother's support when posing on the balance beam in the OU gymnastics center.



Becky Buwick, here with 1991 team members Tricia Bonomo, left, and Stephanie Casteel, tries to prepare her athletes for life outside the arena and refuses to emulate the women's gymnastics coaches who insist on dominating every aspect of their lives.

crowd at an OU gymnastics meet is about 2,200, according to Becky, but she is working hard to provide the audience education and marketing necessary to increase that number significantly.

"Once they come to the arena, they usually come back because they're pretty amazed by the talent of our team and the excitement of the sport," she says. "At Alabama, the average crowd is 9,000. At Utah, it's 15,000. It's as big as basketball. The audience can go just as crazy and wild as they do at the basketball games; the athletes know how to block it all out. When we're competing against top schools like Alabama and Utah in terms of recruiting, the attendance figures play a big role. The only reward these athletes get is the applause. That's what makes the hours of practice and the countless repetitions worthwhile."

Making it worthwhile for the athletes is at the center of all the Buwicks' decisions for their programs. Greg adds an extra dimension to what he offers by being involved in the United States Gymnastics Federation season. Top gymnasts are interested in enrolling at a place where the opportunity to train goes beyond that allowed by the collegiate boundaries. Greg volunteers his summers to offer this opportunity for international competition to Sooner athletes.

"We really don't have vacations," he says. "We did a recruiting trip last year when we both had athletes in Florida, and we took the kids with us. When she visited her athletes, I kept the kids and vice versa. We went one day to Disney World."

Both Buwicks have a deep commitment to helping their athletes achieve academically as well as athletically. Because gymnastics is not a professional sport, unlike football or basketball in which collegians can go on to well-paid jobs, the Buwicks feel a responsibility to coach their athletes toward careers as well as medals.

"We are like foster parents to the kids," Greg says. "We probably encourage them more academically than most people on this campus. But we aren't evaluated and paid on the relationships we have with our athletes; our status is based only on our athletes' performances on a competitive floor. No one goes over their GPAs at the end of

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Jacque Damrill

Everybody loves a winner. National and Big Eight Coach of the Year Greg Buwick enjoys his moment in the media spotlight after his Sooner men's gymnastics team won the 1991 NCAA championship.

the semester and congratulates us, but if we win a title, the letters come flying in.

"The athletes realize that they aren't going to be gymnasts for the rest of their lives, that they're going to have to make a career out of something else. I think that's why there's naturally more emphasis on grades and academics in this program."

Becky adds, "I want them to understand that even if they're here on scholarship, the free ride is over in four years. They're going to have to be prepared to succeed outside of the arena in the same competitive workplace as the rest of society. That has to be our ultimate goal. I love my sport, but it has its time and place. The question is: 'Are you ready to go out into society and make your way?' The *ultimate* question is: 'Can you survive out there?'"

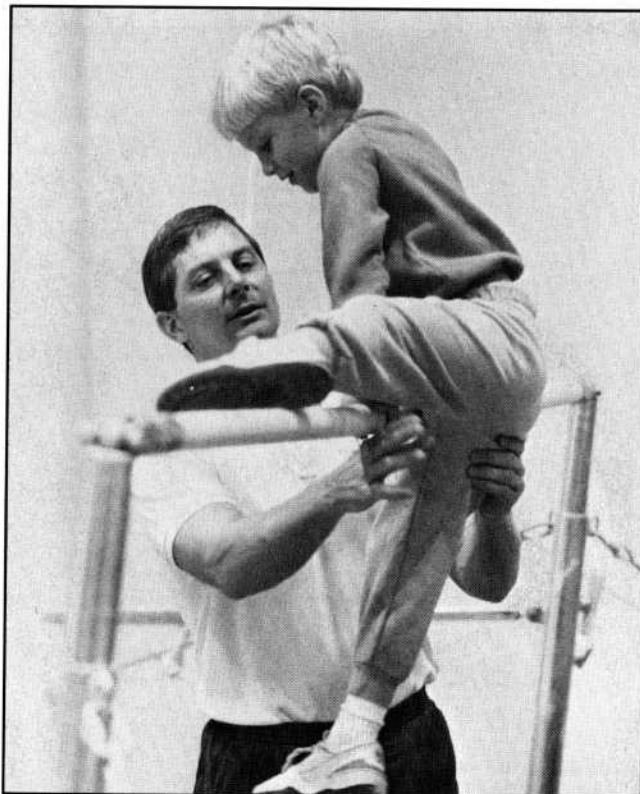
The two coaches see teaching not only survival but also character development as part of their task in dealing with student athletes. The men and women students present different challenges in that area.

"Often, women come here out of great programs where coaches are very dominant and control every aspect of their lives, socially, physically, whatever," Becky says. "To get them to start calling the shots for themselves is incredibly frustrating for me. I will not call all the shots for them. In their freshman year, they often just don't understand. 'I've never made decisions. How do I do that?' is their attitude.

"Being trained in that way is tough; and, I think, it's demeaning in some respects. I came from that type of training background, abusive both verbally and physically. I think today's coaches have moved away from physical abuse, but verbal is just as damaging. Many women athletes almost have to go through a recovery stage. You can get athletes in here who haven't been out of a gym since they were six. We encourage them to get into student activities."

With men, according to Greg, the problems are different.

"I think men's coaches are of a different philosophy from women's," he



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Naturally the Buwick children are completely at home in OU's Sam Viersen Gymnastics Center, but when six-year-old Hunter visits, there's more playtime with Daddy than serious gymnastics practice.

says. "They aren't as dominant. As a coach, my greatest frustration is that the athletes seem to be becoming more self-oriented than in the past. I mean they aren't as friend-oriented. I expect everyone to be self-oriented to a degree, but more and more athletes are 'all for me, period.' I encourage them to get what they want but also help their fellow man."

The men and women the Buwicks train also present dissimilar challenges because of physiological differences. Becky says that men have a longer competitive life than women do. By the time women hit their senior year—ages 21 to 22—they are nearing the end of competition. Men, on the other hand, are just peaking as seniors. The Buwicks' concern for the physical well being of their athletes keeps them ever alert to the messages the young bodies send out. Top-of-the-line computerized diagnostic equipment helps the coaches read those messages clearly and respond to them appropriately.

"They report each day to the computer system, which warns us if they



Becky Dunning Buwick, here with 1991 team standout Monica Fields, was a competitive 12-year-old gymnast when a coach told her that her talents lay in teaching the sport. Insulted at first, she soon accepted that prophecy as her career goal, one she never has regretted.

are going into overtraining or becoming ill," Becky says. "We have to be very cautious, and we're good at that. There's a lot of science that we have now that helps us carry the older athlete through a career here."

As the Buwicks approach the task, being a gymnastics coach is a combination of many roles: watchdog, athlete\technician, administrator, character builder, academic overseer and general motivator. Above all, of course, the great coach is a teacher. For Becky coaching seems to come naturally; Greg feels he has had to develop his skills more consciously.

"Actually, we both have to work constantly to be good coaches," she says. "But I was told when I was 12 by one of the best coaches in the country that I would be a coach. He said I had a natural teaching ability. I was really insulted, too. I told him I didn't want to

be a coach. I wanted to be a great athlete. When I was about 15, I stopped seeing it as an insult and began seeing it as a goal. I began absorbing how the best coaches in the country motivated, taught, did their politicking."

Greg, on the other hand, had to work at it. "I think I started coaching because it seemed easy to do, and I didn't have any other direction at the end of my competitive career. I thought, 'Well, I'll just do this for a while until I see what is my real purpose in life.'

"If I had to pick one weakness, I'd say I don't think I'm the best motivator. But, you know, that might be somewhat helpful in this sport. In gymnastics you don't want an athlete to be over-aggressive or over-motivated in his performance. You have to be controlled, doing everything just exactly as you practiced it."

What both Buwicks say they love

most about their profession is the very characteristic that makes it so time consuming and demanding: the wide array of responsibilities and tasks involved. Life as a gymnastics coach is a varied one, with the travel and the involvement in all aspects of the sport, from music for routines to leotard design to overall marketing strategy.

Although performing played a major role in both lives, neither coach does much anymore. Greg plays golf, and Becky jogs, walks and does aerobics.

"It's too dangerous for us to continue to do gymnastics," Greg says. "It isn't a lifetime sport. It's not something you can do on a sporadic basis and be proficient. It puts a lot of stress on joints and muscles, and, as you get older, you can't take it anymore."

Becky says she gets on the beam to play around but finds it more difficult. "I prefer the comfort of the earth these days. If you don't put in your hours every day, it's a whole new environment. Within 72 hours, if a gymnast doesn't train, he or she goes into detraining. There are lots of repercussions from that. Mainly, the risk of injury goes up tremendously."

Going into the 1992 season, both Buwicks have clearly articulated goals for their programs. Greg wants to avoid what he calls "the big slide," that slump that often hits national champions the year after they take the trophy. He has lost half of the top athletes from his 1991 team, but he doesn't want this to be just a rebuilding year.

"I want to be in the thick of it," he says. "It was so exciting and so much fun that I want that feeling again."

Becky understands Greg's position, and she is determined to be in it herself soon.

"Success is a great addiction," she says. "Once the bug bites, you need more and more and more. You do well, but it's not good enough. You want to do better."

"I want to bring the first women's national championship to the campus. It may test my patience, but I can do it. It's a tough goal because there are some great schools out there, but if you're patient and have great tenacity, it will happen."

It will happen. The Buwicks are winners, not whiners. And they are in control, doing everything just as they have practiced it, together. 