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Current Opinion in Psychology

Coaching effectiveness: the coach–athlete relationship at its heart

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Coaching has been often viewed as a context within which coaches operate to largely bring about changes in athlete's performance and wellbeing. One key factor to successful outcomes in coaching is the quality of the relationship between coaches and athletes. In this article, I propose that the coach–athlete relationship is at the heart of coaching. Moreover, the aim is to describe and explain how the *quality* of the relationship coaches and athletes develop and maintain over the course of their sporting partnership alongside coaches and athletes' knowledge and outcomes, form a system that is capable of defining coaching effectiveness and success.

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Current Opinion in Psychology 2017, **16**:154–158

This review comes from a themed issue on **Sport psychology**

Edited by **Peter J Beek**, **Vana Hutter** and **Raoul Oudejans**

For a complete overview see the Issue and the Editorial

Available online 26th May 2017

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.05.006

Coaching effectiveness: the coach–athlete relationship at its heart

At its simplest form, coaching concerns two people: the coach and the athlete. These two people form a unique dyadic relationship that holds a great deal of power and allows its members to achieve their individual and relationship goals. There is abundant anecdotal and empirical evidence to highlight that neither the coach nor the athlete can 'do it alone'; they both need one another to achieve in sport [1••]. When coaching is viewed as either athlete-centred or coach-centred [2,3] –, its scope, quality and functions become restricted, whereas, when coaching is viewed as coach–athlete-centred, its scope becomes readily inclusive and mutually empowering. A coach–athlete-centred approach supplies a solid basis from which to understand not only the entire process and practice of coaching but also its effectiveness. In other words, the effectiveness and success of coaching reside within the coach and the athlete and the unit relationship they develop. Within this conceptualisation the coach and the athlete need one another to develop, grow and succeed (however one defines success: inter/personal satisfaction, skill development or performance success, win/loss records). Hence, the emphasis is placed on the genuine purpose and positive intent of the coach–athlete relationship. The relationship becomes the medium that motivates, assures, satisfies, comforts, and supports coaches and athletes to enhance their sport experience, performance, and well-being [4].

The current thinking of sport coaching

Over the years, researchers from diverse disciplines including pedagogy, sociology, philosophy, and psychology have attempted to define and conceptualise sport coaching and coaching effectiveness [5,6,7•,8•]. While these attempts have been somewhat helpful in terms of capturing the breadth, diversity and prospect, they often lack clarity and specificity. Conceptualisations of coaching that are not accompanied by clear and specific operationalisations are strikingly complex to readily quantify and reliably measure. Nonetheless, measurement is a necessary foundation for social research and as such 'gathering data without . . . conscientious efforts to operationalise key concepts often is a wasted effort' [9]. In fact, the inadequacy of the various conceptualisations of coaching has been acknowledged by many scientists working in the broad field of sport coaching [10].

While the scope of this article is not to review the various conceptualisations of coaching, I will briefly refer to four approaches that have attempted to describe and define it over the past 15 years or so. On one hand, Bowes and Jones [11] explained that coaching is a complex system within which coaches work on the 'edge of chaos' (p. 235), negotiating peculiarities, intricacies and ambiguities. While more recently, Jones *et al.* [7•] proposed that the complexities of coaching can be managed or 'orchestrated'. Accordingly, the notion of orchestration brings a sense of order through such coaching interpersonal behaviours as engaging, interacting, communicating, perspective taking, empathising, reflecting, empowering, collaborating, trusting, and understanding to name a few [7•]. Both these approaches emphasise the chaos and order all at the same time, though its extensive breadth may currently stand against it, in terms of providing conceptual and operational frameworks from which empirical research can generate a body of knowledge that is organised and systematic.

On the other hand, attempts to capture the concept of coaching in its entirety may have been stimulated from work initially conducted by Lyle [8•] as well as Potrac

et al. [12] and subsequently others [13,14]. For example, Lyle [8•] describes coaching as a 'process . . . dependent on the integration of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts' (p. 97). While this description underlines the multifaceted nature of coaching, it does not spell out the facets that contribute to the integrated or holistic nature of coaching. The difficulty in endeavouring to capture all the parts of coaching in a manner that is holistic may simply be unattainable for a concept that has been characterised as chaotic as well as ambiguous and uncertain [11]. Cassidy [15•] explained that despite the complexity of the notion of holistic coaching, it is important to consider. In her account, she proposed an alternative framework where socio-cultural [16] and psycho-social [17] dimensions were bridged in an effort to better understand the current elusiveness and vagueness of holistic coaching.

Considering the extant coaching literature, Côté and Gilbert [18••] offered an integrating conceptualisation within which coaches' knowledge and athletes' outcomes delineated coaching effectiveness. Coaches' knowledge was divided into professional or specialised knowledge for sport, interpersonal knowledge for connecting appropriately and effectively with others (*e.g.*, athletes, coaches, support staff, parents), and intrapersonal knowledge for self-reflection and self-awareness allowing continued learning. Athletes' outcomes were understood in terms of athletes' technical, tactical, performance skills (competence), positive self-worth (confidence), ability to connect with others (connection) and display respect, integrity and responsibility (character). Although knowledge and outcomes were central to this integrative conceptualisation of coaching, contextual factors were also important. Both, the *performance* level and *developmental* issues within which coaches and athletes operated were thought to define whether the coaching context was participation-focused (recreational, developmental) or performance-focused (elite) [8,18••]. Accordingly, coaches' *knowledge* and athletes' *outcomes* were thought to be determined by the *context*, making all these three aspects important in the evaluation of coaching effectiveness.

Coaching is evidently conceptualised and understood through different approaches or frameworks and four of them briefly discussed: chaos, orchestration (order), holism, and/or integration. Whatever approach one chooses to utilise, the focus is or should be on the coach *and* the athlete. Coaches and athletes are inseparable entities within the context of coaching whether it is participation or performance. Although the conceptualisations discussed above may have placed more or less emphasis on the coaches' knowing, doing and/or being, none of these notions can be considered in isolation from athletes' knowing, doing and/or being. Coaching is an interpersonal process [8•] where both a coach and an athlete inevitably engage with one another and thus effective coaching could be more readily understood through the quality of the connections coaches and athletes develop. The quality of the relationship may more easily allow gaining insights into what goes on between coaches and athletes. Such an approach may then facilitate descriptions regarding what their partnership is like (how do they relate, connect, bond) and in turn explanations about why they act and interact in the way they do.

For example, research by Nash *et al*. [19•] explained that both long-term and all-rounded development of the athlete is a central aspect of coaching excellence. They further explained that expert coaches, plan and execute training sessions with the individual athletes' needs in mind. This can only be achieved successfully if indeed coaches and athletes connect in ways that allow them to trust and commit to, as well as know and understand one another. Thus, in this paper, I propose that the *quality* of the coach–athlete relationship describes and defines the essence of coaching, its effectiveness and success and, in turn, more accurately captures the interplay of coaches' knowledge, athletes' outcomes and the coaching context (participation versus performance). Fuelled by communication (verbal and/or non-verbal), the quality of the coach–athlete relationship can be a powerful vehicle for both coaches and athletes' long-term development, personal growth and transformation [1••].

The coach–athlete relationship at the heart of coaching

The coach–athlete relationship is defined as a social situation [1••]. This social situation is continuously shaped by interpersonal thoughts, feelings and behaviours of the coach and the athlete. The definition further explains that a coach and an athlete are mutually and causally interdependent and thus how one feels, thinks and behaves affects and is affected by how the other feels, thinks and behaves. Jowett and Shanmugam [1••] described the operational model of the quality of the relationship as follows:

- Closeness reflects *interpersonal feelings* of coaches and athletes that largely encapsulate an affective bond through their mutual respect, trust, appreciation, and liking for one another
- Commitment reflects *interpersonal thoughts* of coaches and athletes of maintaining a close (as opposed to distant, detached, unfriendly) relationship over time despite 'ups and downs'
- Complementarity reflects coaches and athletes' *interpersonal behaviours* of leadership (reciprocal complementarity) and co-operation (corresponding complementarity)
- Co-orientation reflects coaches and athletes' level of *interdependence* in terms of similarity and understanding