It's the winning that counts, not just taking part—opinions and aspirations of some entry-level sports coaches.

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Abstract

This paper discusses some interview-based research that focuses on the opinions and aspirations of three coaches currently working in the North West of England. The names of the three respondents have been changed to protect their identities. Tom is a freelance canoeing coach who is currently employed on a council project providing outdoor education experiences for young people. Jane is a university student who coaches hockey at amateur level and has also represented her country in that sport. Harry is a post graduate student and a Level 1 Rugby League coach working in the local community. These coaches were chosen specifically because of their diversity of experience. It was hoped this would give the researcher a broader range of perspectives about what counts as success in coaching. The contrasting aims of coaching for performance and coaching for participation provide a structure to analyse the respondent's comments. In conclusion a view is offered that in coaching for participation, the coach is controlled by the group's needs and at entry level coaching a coach's need for social approval and acceptance may be high. In coaching for performance the coach's responsibility may be to structure and plan for challenging experiences and that their athletes might not like in the short term, but can perhaps see the benefits in the long term. The level of commitment and consequence will increase according with approach to coaching but the sporting rewards may be higher.

Introduction: Coaching in sport, participation versus performance

Cross and Lyle (1999) claim that there is an important difference between participation coaching and performance coaching and that the distinction is fundamental to understanding the wide range of leadership roles found in sport. The distinction centres upon what sport is being used for; recreation or competition. Lyle (1999: 11, cited in Cross and Lyle, 1999) explains that,

Participation coaching best describes contexts in which the principal goal is not competition success and consequently, not all of the performance elements will be dealt with, and the emphasis may be on learning skills.

Performance coaching, then, may be focused entirely upon achieving success in sport at competition, defined more narrowly perhaps by the winning of money or medals.
However, if participation in a sport is for ‘mere’ recreation there can still be a strong competitive edge generated by people wanting to show how good they are, or at least be the best they can be in some challenging pursuit. To these ends the coach has a responsibility to teach skills correctly but also to manage a socially competitive situation that they help to create by virtue of being the provider of some sport for others. In relation to this idea, Tom said coaching was “…more about living the sport and promoting it as a fun activity for all to participate in”, whilst Jane said that, for her “…it’s about the love of the sport and having fun again, I just love to compete”.

Performance coaches are engaged in a different sporting atmosphere; often more intense with a different set of contractual conditions; often results based and more business-like in terms of a team’s return for their investment in a coach. Unlike participation coaches, performance coaches are involved in a detailed planning and monitoring process to which their commitment of time, effort and emotional energy is substantial to the point where for some, their sport shapes their lives entirely. Harry, the rugby coach, is a participation coach yet it would appear that he has serious aspirations towards performance coaching because a lot of his training sessions focus on improving fitness levels and meeting regularly to train around weekly fixtures. Currently working at community league level this may demonstrate his drive for success at a higher level. He states that,

**Harry:**

…the training is 50/50.

…Its not just [skills] training, it’s keeping up their fitness levels so we can win consistently throughout the season.

…There are very high demands of speed.

…It’s also to do with stamina,

….we spend a lot of our time doing that as well.

Harry continued to demonstrate a high competitive drive in response to the following question,

**Q. Is winning the most important factor in your coaching of the rugby team or are there other benefits that you stress about participation?**

**Harry:**

…Yes, I think it is very win orientated,

…winning is the main aspect of the game,

…if we haven’t won the game, the rest of the week’s a bit of a struggle, people are a bit down.
...When we do win games, motivation increases and it just builds up to the next game,
...so definitely winning is probably the most important factor for me and the players.
...At lower levels for younger children you have to stress the fun and enjoyment side of the game,
...but at a higher level winning is the most important aspect of the game, always.

As things stand at this point in time, according to Cross and Lyle (1999), Harry cannot be both a performance and a participation coach because the roles differ in terms of purpose and athletic aspirations, Governing Body support and financial demands. They state that, “...participation and performance coaching are two very distinctive roles and not two stages on a continuum” (Cross and Lyle 1999: 12). It may be that a person has to decide early in their coaching career which path they wish to follow as each may require a different kind of social engagement around that sport, bringing with it different levels of personal commitment.

According to Crisfield, Cabral and Carpenter (2003: 1) “...sports coaching develops people through improving their performance”. The notion of *developing people* by facilitating them in various ways to improve their performance goes beyond a traditional idea of the coach as someone that is simply concerned with techniques, skills and tactics. The ideal in coaching generally might be to improve performance at all levels of sport’s participation by setting appropriate and perhaps, increasingly challenging tasks for individuals. In this manner they may claim that their coaching is “athlete centred” (Kidman, 2005). The three coaches indicated a desire to tailor (or differentiate) their sessions to meet the needs of individuals they are responsible for, albeit for slightly different reasons, for example, 

**Harry said:** ...generally I set goals for individuals and see what they can achieve and then say, this is what you need to achieve by the next session.

**Jane said:** ... I try to assess what level they’re at and if they’re improving. Then I change my attitude and my strategies to coach them. If they are at a higher level already I am obviously not coaching them the same as I would a lower level person.

**Tom said:** ...depending on what the needs of the clients are, I will adapt and orientate the sessions so that it caters for the customer’s individual needs.

Each coach reported that they set targets for their performers using rudimentary goal setting to improve skills, keep things safe and “at the right level” for them which might also improve interest and enthusiasm for the performers to return to the sport; the coaching session and the coach at some point in the near future. The comments suggest that there may be a self-perception of “being a coach” for certain people and what it may mean for them to be a provider of a service. This may cause some coaches to alter their approach to learners and change their language and phrasing as a matter
of professionalism and/or respect for market forces. For example, Tom’s comments relate to the needs of the client and the “customer’s individual needs” indicating that he may regard himself as service-provider for payment. Whilst all three are providing a coaching service of some kind the concept of what counts as success in their coaching endeavour may not be so clear. That is, it is reasonably clear from Harry and Jane’s comments but if Tom is genuinely good at coaching and “developing people” he may lose his paying clients rapidly. If he does not lose his clients they may not be improving meaning that Tom may be failing them for profit! However, if his clients do improve and they wish to be challenged at a higher level, Tom will have to move with them if he is to continue being paid by them.

Each of these coaches has devised their own way of working with individuals in their sports-setting and as Tom indicates “…actually spending quality time with each of my students on a one on one basis” is an important aspect of his job. However, the personal interaction of each coach may alter from session to session and from performer to performer as a situation may dictate. It is then up to the coach to read that situation and attempt to act appropriately. The appropriateness of their action may depend upon whether they regard themselves as a performance coach or a participation coach. The performance coach should analyse and evaluate his or her athlete’s performances and at times this coach will be a friend who supports the performer or even a social worker giving counsel when problems occur. All performers will need protection from injury and harm in their sport but the serious competitor may need constant encouragement to stay in the sport. This seems to suggest that a guardian role from the coach is important for some performers. All the training programmes, competition schedules and planning sessions will need organising, meaning the performance coach has a considerable management role too as well as being a highly experienced, trained and qualified coach in their area. The participation coach may be involved in this way but to a much lesser extent. He or she is more likely to take the role of instructor in directing activities and practices with a different social emphasis, a provider or facilitator who has a relatively short term relationship with his performers. On occasion they may have to lend a sympathetic ear in a social role but this would rarely be with a view to improved sports performance in the long term.

The participation coach and the performance coach also have a motivational role, part of which is to create a positive environment for the athletes to work in and to develop their skills and relationships with team members. However, this important aspect of coaching should be accompanied by good skills knowledge to diagnose technical problems which in turn may improve a performer’s motivation simply by being able to accomplish what he or she couldn’t do before. Some of our youngest and perhaps most inexperienced coaches who are at entry levels in coaching schemes are patently aware of this responsibility as it seems to underpin their social-survival as
a coach. That is, at their most inexperienced and just-about-qualified positions they can be more concerned to promote themselves as being someone worth going to, to preserve the credibility of their coach-status. For example, Jane who is 20 years old and Tom in his early thirties commented that,

**Jane:** At an amateur level of competition, if you want to have a decent team all-round, you have to make it a bit of fun for them as well. If you don’t they just won’t come back and they won’t try. Sometimes it’s actually a little bit harder to get people to return and to keep their persistence in training at an older age and at an amateur level I find you have to make it appealing and fun in some way – or else no team!

**Tom:** If I am playing a game with the children, and I am on one side where they are winning and the other side is losing, it’s not about the winning, and it’s about taking part and enjoying that activity they are participating in. It’s about having a bit of fun. It’s got to be fun first for children or they might be put off the sport altogether and that, I suppose, could be my fault.

All three coaches have experience of working with children and they tried different tactics to motivate them to come back to the sports they provide. For example, Tom explained that, “…when it comes to children there are methods that myself and the other coaches can use like tell them jokes and [physically] lower themselves down to their level when speaking to them”. Similarly Jane said, “…I think that the main thing for children is to generate a massive element of fun and then, as things go on you have to build a slight element of competition into it; but you can only do so much at a young age”. This advisory note at the end of Jane’s comment seems to indicate that she is aware of the inclusion agenda in education and the threats that competition might make to social inclusion and participation in PE. However, the interview is not framed in the PE context although Jane has aspirations to train as a PE teacher. Harry’s interpretation of things was similar but interestingly, much more pro-active for competition, to realise the positive benefits of competition for his sport and some ideas on how he might bring about this kind of situation in his coaching of children, for example:

**Harry:**

…with younger children you have to make it more fun based,

…you have to take away all the technical aspects and change it to make it more interesting,

…get their hands onto the ball,

…play lots of miniature games, put a bit of competition into it.

…They also like a winner and a loser, just making it as fun as possible,

…nothing too complex, not talking too much, making it very basic.
…great fun, love it, I like coaching kids as they’ve got so much energy and love running around.

Harry explained a session he ran with children to illustrate this passage in his interview and continued,

Harry:

…explain the rules quickly, maybe a bit of demonstration,

…then if you see an area which they are still getting wrong, that needs to be corrected, then, just dive in and say, well that needs to be done differently,

…crack straight on and show’em, they don’t mind being interrupted,

…the’ld rather know they were doing it right and get some praise as well as have a load of fun.

…carry on with the game but very low standard.

…keep them warm, keep them active.

It was clear from the interview that Harry had a very good idea of how to adapt his sport, rugby, to make it accessible to children, as did Tom, but Harry was the most enthusiastic about this. Perhaps the level of energy he witnessed in children at his sessions was what he yearned for from his adult team or even saw in himself. According to Crisfield et al. (2003: 74) “…children like coaches who are friendly, happy, patient, understanding and have a sense of humour; have credibility in the sport; are firm but fair; are well organised and provide encouragement where its due and help them develop their skills”. It is clear from the transcripts that all three coaches demonstrated some of these attributes which will help motivate children (and others) to continue in their chosen sports.

**A successful coach is more than just a nice person**

Lynch (2001: 9) in his book on creative coaching states that,

An equally important factor is a coach’s ability to instil and inspire, in a nurturing environment, winning traits in athletes: enthusiasm, compassion, tenacity, desire, belief, selflessness, and patience. These qualities ultimately become the glue that binds a team, the spark that ignites the spirit and passion within the athletes enabling them to sustain high levels of performance during their competitive years and beyond.

This is seemingly a tall order for a mortal coach toiling in the sport’s world and in summing up a coach’s qualities in this manner it may be difficult for the entry level coach to go on a course to develop attributes as tenacity, compassion, selflessness and patience. Could any National Governing Body (NGB) coaching course claim to teach such things? Of course no such course will ever exist, they are a list of perceived traits
observed by an expert outsider who has interpreted these qualities in the hope they will be useful to others in some way. However, Lynch has been an influential sports psychologist in the United States for more than twenty years and has worked with numerous Olympic, national, collegiate and professional coaches and athletes and his comments are not to be underestimated. The point being made is that the important abilities and qualities he has observed in top performance coaches are not “hard skills” accomplishment to be certificated on an NGB course. They are “soft skills” stemming personal and personality traits blended in the contextual demands of competitive sport. Consequently, creativity in coaching may only emerge after many years of experience, practice and experimentation within a sport. That is, creativity cannot be gleaned from the pages of a book and may be of marginal use to entry-level coaches. Lynch’s (2001) quote is directed at performance-coaching whereas the coaches in this research were currently more engaged with participation-coaching. What follows are their thoughts on the attributes a good coach should have in this [participation] role.

**Tom suggested that,**

...You got to be good at what you do,
...in-depth knowledge into your sport,
...love for your sport and enthusiasm,
...be an ambassador for your sport,
...I am a paddler first and a coach second,
...and I think you engage in competition for a love of your sports”.

*He continued…*

...Imagine wearing L plates in your paddling career.
...they will never come off,
...they will only get smaller with experience,

By which Tom meant that learning was a lifelong process.

**Harry agreed that being knowledgeable about your sport was important. He said that,**

...You need to know what you are doing,
...you need to get your knowledge across,
...I would say I was an ambassador at this level.

*He continued…*

...I think I try to set examples and probably not for everyone,
...but I set examples for individual players probably.

Harry accepts that there may be players who do not agree with the example he sets as a coach.

**Jane commented that,**

...I think a really good coach is someone who has a really good background knowledge of the sport.

...I believe that the most important skills that a coach should have are,

...definitely, one is good communication,

...you need to be trust worthy,

...you need to be approachable,

...it's very important to try and have the answers to the questions people might come and ask you,

...being a good peer and role model is very important.

*On this last comment, the conditions under which a “role model” might also be considered a “peer” in the sports coaching relationship might need further exploration. This statement could reflect an under-confidence in the coaching role; almost approval seeking behaviour from the peers she teaches.*

The idea of being a good coach and adopting a coaching style appropriate for different situations was emerging strongly from the data. In order to be regarded as an effective coach it seems to be current wisdom to have articulated a coaching philosophy. This phrase may have been coined as an easily understood mission statement or personal aim in coaching rather than actually aligning one's practices with established “isms” in philosophy such as Idealism, Materialism or Epicureanism (which in itself might be an interesting experiment). The skill of explaining to others in simple language what their complex coaching actions are and will lead to has been demonstrated by some well-know coaches, for example, Sir Clive Woodward.

**Edited summary from Austin (2003) Woodward’s blueprint for glory:**

**Woodward:** “I always say that if you let me do it my way, it will work. I can’t do it anyone else’s way. Trust me.”

Before coming into the job, Clive Woodward set up a successful computer-leasing company that made him a millionaire. Many of the principles he adhered to in business have influenced the way he runs the England set-up.

**Woodward:** “Getting the right people is the biggest trick in business... get one wrong coach in there and it can take a long time to sort out”.

Another of Woodward’s key principles is to always provide a happy and stimulating working environment for his players. He enjoys thinking of new and innovative ways
to achieve this.

The England camp is also a very disciplined and regimented place.

Players have to adhere to “Lombardi time” - named after the legendary Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi - meaning they must be 10 minutes early for all pre-arranged meetings.

They must never swear in public or make public what goes on inside the camp - as hooker Richard Cockerill found out to his cost when he disclosed such details in print and was never selected by Woodward again.

As a player, Woodward was a free-running centre - something of a misfit in the functional and forward-dominated England and Leicester sides of the early 1980s (and latterly, Australia)

Perhaps most significantly, Woodward has introduced a new mindset - one of confidence, positive thinking and ambition - that was forged during his time playing in Australia.

Woodward: “We just don’t do it in quite the same way or take it as seriously [as the Australians] - which is our fault”.

Woodward: “My only goal when I took over was for England to be the best team in the world”.

(His ambition finally became reality in Sydney’s Telstra Stadium on Saturday, 22 November, 2003)

For the coach, having outlined some sense of what it is they wish to achieve in sport and the conditions they intend to create towards achieving it, it is then up to them to devise a method of practice which allows them to be effective. In practice for novice coaches, such reasoning may only occur as a result of practice and experience. If reflection has been constructive then a more effective coaching style may emerge from that person. Cross (1999: 61) points to some behaviours in coaching which may contribute to coaching effectiveness,

Various coaching behaviours have been identified which may contribute to a more effective process. Some of these have focussed more on the coach’s communication and the interpersonal skills, than on process-related skills such as monitoring, for example it has been suggested that good leadership skills and a humanistic orientated coaching philosophy may have positive benefits for improving coaching practice and enhancing athletic performance.

When discussing coaching style Cross (in Cross and Lyle 1999: 56) states that “… an autocratic approach is sometimes easier to implement than a more democratic or collaborative style”. However, unless safety is an overriding concern, democratic approaches to coaching are worth serious consideration to include in your ‘tool-box’ of pedagogic strategies. It can be far more satisfying for the learners to have an input,
ownership and variation in their development and may demonstrate a practical move towards a humanistic, athlete-centred style of coach-athlete interaction from the coach. The three coaches interviewed used a mixture of coaching styles and strategies depending on the type of activity and the make up of their groups. For example,

**Tom said:**

...that his style of coaching was democratic but sometimes it can become autocratic,

...I do have sessions where I let groups come and do what they want to do,

...but usually I try to find out what the clients want and what they need.

When discussing coach-effectiveness a significant feature from Tom’s transcript was when he explained how he would teach new skills to a group, Tom talked about having “...a little tool-box” of skills. This was an interesting use of metaphor to explain that he had a range of ideas or strategies already worked out that he could use when teaching someone to learn a new skill.

**Jane also used a mixture of styles:**

...well if the girls come down I let some people play and have fun,

...but if the level of play drops and their concentration drops,

...you need to have a bit of balance; you need to be on their back all the time.

**Harry argued that:**

...rugby is quite specific in its demands of the sport,

...so I think the coaching has to be very autocratic,

...very firm and it’s not really there to make friends,

...If you upset people, well, people have to be told,

...It’s a very strict sport; it’s a very technical game.

...If you are disciplined as a coach, and you can pass this [attitude] on to your players in the game, it helps as well.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the interviews showed that these coaches were constantly making decisions about the objectives of their sessions and that achieving these objectives to some degree informed their judgment of success although the coaches were their harshest critics. However, whilst these coaches were quite critical of themselves (self deprecating; were they seeking approval?) there was an ostensible trend within the transcripts of them wanting to provide experiences that their charges would approve of. That is, that a strong feature of being a coach at entry-level may be for social ap-
proval and peer acceptance, or mere survival in the role as “coach”. This begs the question of who is actually in charge of the coaching scenario and may hinder real progress for the performance coach and possibly maintain the status-quo for the participation coach, so dramatic is the contrast between the demands of each kind.

Each of the three coaches made clear distinctions as to how they differentiated their sessions for children and made them more demanding for adults. They similarly had ideas about how to cater for performers who were playing for recreation and those who were playing to win. However, given that these were entry-level coaches or were coaching novices predominantly, it was felt that their comments on winning and success and how to achieve it, related more to how they would like to be treated as serious competitors themselves. Further, that their comments stemmed directly from recollections of their personal experience of being coached at a high level. In this manner they may have taken on the values and approaches of the person who coached them previously, transplanting them as their own. This may not necessarily a good thing.

As a result of carrying out this research a number of other ideas have been developed that could warrant further investigation such as: researching ways in which children might strive to win, instilling in them the competitive instinct but maintaining a sense of inclusion; investigating how entry-level coaches intend to develop their professional career and following them on a longitudinal study, recording what they intend to achieve against what they actually do achieve.

References


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3. Dear reader, if this article has stimulated your thoughts and you wish to find out more about this topic the authors can be contacted on: Christopher Prior: chrisprior64@hotmail.com and Clive Palmer: capalmer@uclan.ac.uk