Win or lose, what counts as success in coaching?—analysing the opinions and aspirations of gymnastics coaches

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Abstract

This paper is based upon some field-research stimulated by the idea that, the higher the level of coach, there is more emphasis placed upon winning, particularly in the sport of gymnastics. Arkaev and Suchilin (2004:12) state that, “…a good coach, like a good gymnast, is bound to want to run ahead and scale the heights of the gymnast’s art”. This seems to suggest that in Arkaev and Suchilin’s (2004) view, a gymnastics coach may have a strong desire for competitive success and may want to take on the challenges of producing “the best” gymnast. A problem in gymnastics coaching, in terms of “scaling the heights” may be that, how good the coach is may only be revealed through the performance abilities of the gymnast. If the gymnast does consistently well in competition then the inference may be that he has a very successful coach. To investigate what emphasis may be placed upon winning in gymnastics three coaches holding varying levels of qualification were interviewed and asked their thoughts on coaching and whether winning is their ultimate aim. The paper concludes that there are various interpretations of what success might mean to different coaches at different levels at different times. Winning competitions is important in gymnastics but it seemed not to be the overriding feature that motivated the coaches interviewed in this research. The welfare of the gymnast, their enjoyment and continued participation in the sport seemed to be more highly valued.

Introduction

It could be claimed that all coaches aspire to win, but their perceptions of what winning is for them may differ. Their views on success and what counts as winning may depend upon what they want out of coaching; an activity demanding a huge devotion of time, effort, energy and expense. Their view may be informed by several influencing factors such as their personality, their social and economical background and their own experiences in the sport generally (Cassidy, Jones and Portrac, 2004). Depending upon whether they have a background in competitive gymnastics they may see the sport from a competitive angle or a participative angle. This may in turn reflect the level of aspiration they have for their gymnasts. Also, their level of knowledge about the sport may determine in some measure their approach to working with
young children who are training to be gymnasts. Their knowledge and experience of
sport generally may also affect how they understand and deal with success and failure
in coaching gymnastics. A further feature to consider may be whether their paid live-
lihood comes from coaching gymnastics or if they are coaching on a voluntary basis
as this may affect their motivation, their aims and sense of commitment. Martens
(2004: 11) stated about success and winning in coaching:

Is success as a coach the winning of contests? Yes, in part, winning is an aspect of suc-
cessful coaching. But successful coaching is much more than just winning contests.
Successful coaches help athletes master new skills, enjoy competing with others, and
develop self-esteem.

In the opening of this quote Martens (2004) appears to support the idea that the
success of the coach is manifested by the winning of contests. The alternatives he
identifies as being other conditions for recognising success in coaching; skill mastery,
enjoyment and developing self esteem seem to be basic aspects of good coaching
practice that perhaps should be directed at achieving success by winning contests.
This certainly may be the case for competitive gymnastics. Consequently, Martens
(2004) then, may offer no alternatives here, merely an explanation and qualification
of his first point. Furthermore, what counts as winning in a given contest and for that
matter, what counts as a contest may be questions which deepen the debate concern-
ing what may normally be assumed by coaches about these terms; i.e. that formal
competitions are contests and that Gold medals denote winning (Blythe, 2007). Hav-
ing developed these ideas about coaching, and coaching gymnastics in particular
the author set out to ask three gymnastics coaches about their views on winning and
what for them counts as success in coaching. The layout and structure of this paper
is a reflection of how the field research was carried out and how the data was dis-
cussed and presented. The initial interview schedule is outlined followed by selected
examples of responses or explanation to those interview questions. This may add
useful context about the research process and its findings. This is followed by a narra-
tive section of discussion which also includes examples from the data to develop key
ideas emerging from the transcripts in more detail; things that might be said about
the research idea, that, the higher the level of coach, there is more emphasis placed upon
winning, particularly in the sport of gymnastics.

**Going for Gold: what counts as winning at Levels 1, 2, 3 or 4?**

In exploring the relative merits of competition versus participation it may be a simple
claim that the “higher up” (more qualified and increased status within the sport) a
coach becomes the more they will be concerned about winning medals rather than a
gymnast’s enjoyment of the sport for participation or other positive social outcomes.
So how might the success of a higher level coach be measured? By the success of their
gymnast to win at competitions collecting medals of regional, national and international significance? Conversely, might coaches at a lower level, for example Level 1 or Level 2, be more concerned about children's enjoyment of gymnastics, their happiness and their healthiness as a person, than whether they become Olympians? These questions may highlight a stereotypical view about coaching aspiration for which there may be some truth but they may also highlight an erroneous assumption about coaching “success” (Cumming, 2007). After all, a Level 1 or Level 2 coach will not be accompanying their gymnast to the Olympics as national coach, so what can entry level coaches aim for and identify with as being success for them? The “big stage” of podium competition is not available to them. As a relevant aside, this raises an important ethical issue couched in the idea that all “great coaches” have to start somewhere and that all may pass through the lower levels of a National coaching scheme and progress upwards, perhaps because they remained focused upon competition success? Experiencing the whole package of a coaching scheme in the role of a coach may indeed bring greatness but this may not be a view shared by all as some entry level coaches who may be very experienced ex-gymnasts might feel they have right-of-passage to bypass the lower levels of coaching qualifications. This seems to be the view in some other sports such as Association Football which may transpire to be detrimental to success in that sport (see Lear and Palmer, 2007 for further discussion). The entry levels of a coaching scheme are seemingly well-reasoned courses which become qualifications of responsibility and accountability at that level for a wide range of “coaching” competences such as child protection, lifting and handling, dealing with aggressive behaviour, first aid, travelling abroad and duty of care issues, medication, injury, insurance etc.. Consequently the content of modern-day coaching courses extends far beyond the technical skill knowledge and perhaps accomplishment of an ex-player or gymnast and should not be bypassed on the basis of past reputation as a competitor. This said, all coaches and parents should care about the welfare of the children in their charge at whatever level of coaching they are at. With regard to this issue and the notion of competition some of the data from this research began to indicate some interesting points of view, such as, that some parents may care more about “winning” than anything else. For example, Level 2/3 Coach “Brenda” commented that, “…to some of them [parents] success is more important than the child's ability or the child's will or even the child's wish to be there”. Consequently, educating parents about success and development in a sport could potentially become part of a formal coaching course and qualification.

**Method — data collection strategy**

Three, fifteen minute semi-structured interviews (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Wengraf, 2001) were conducted with British Gymnastics qualified coaches. Each of them had been coaching for 15 years or more. They ranged from a Level 1 coach, “Alan”,
Level 2/3 coach “Brenda”, to a Level 4/5 coach, “Chris”, effectively listing/renaming the interviewees as A, B and C. It was thought that interviewing across these levels might provide differing views of what success and winning was understood to be, and thus a balanced view of these things might emerge. However, having conducted the research and having the opportunity to reflect on it in this paper; canvassing the views of coaches across a range of levels and simply striking for the “middle-ground” in the comments from their transcripts may not constitute a “balanced view”. It may in fact present a more confused one, an average of some kind which might be slightly more removed again from the picture of reality as they remembered it and reported during the interviews. The researcher chose to ask the coaches generally the same set of questions, albeit with slight alterations as interviewing practice improved and ideas were beginning to develop. Each interview was recorded using a Dictaphone. Notes of non-verbal communication, gestures, responses and interruptions were made on the interview schedule at the time of the interview. The use of a video camera was considered but the researcher believed that this could become a distraction to the interviewee, liable to the Hawthorne effect (Adair, 1984); “talking to” the camera (talking to a dictaphone may have been intrusive enough for these interviewees). The coaches’ identities have been protected by not referring to location and by allocating pseudonyms; coaches now being referred to as Alan, Brenda and Chris to satisfy ethical guidelines for this research exercise. The authors have also withdrawn any reference to either boys or girls gymnastics as a further measure to protect the identity of all participants.

**Interview schedule**

1. What level qualification of coach are you?
2. How long have you been coaching gymnastics?
3. What age and level gymnasts do you normally coach?
4. How often each week do you coach and where do you coach?
5. Do you see gymnastics as a competitive sport?
   
   *Prompt – Would you say it was more competing against oneself or against others in different clubs?*

6. How important is winning in gymnastics?
7. What do the parents want from you as a coach, is it more the development of their child as an individual or developing a world class gymnast?
8. Describe briefly a time when you achieved success with a particular child. Why was this successful?
9. Would you say success in gymnastics is more about natural ability or just physical effort?

Prompt – so would you say it was your job as a coach to ‘unearth’ the innate ability in a child or to ensure that everyone enjoys the participation and develops equally?

10. Would you say a training session is about: fewest injuries and how far they progress technically or how many turn up regardless of gymnastics ability, just for enjoyment?

11. Have you ever coached an elite gymnast on a one to one basis? If so, what do you get out of this and do you get more satisfaction out of coaching elite individuals or coaching groups of less ability?

**Interview question 1**

Question one asked what level of coaching qualification had been achieved by the interviewee. This was a warm up question and helped to start the interview exchanges by giving both the researcher and the interviewee a feeling that “things had started”. As the researcher was aiming to canvass the views across a range of qualifications, the interviewees and their status was already known. Alan is a Level 1/2 coach, Brenda a Level 2/3 coach and Chris a Level 4/5 coach.

**Interview question 2**

Question two revealed that all coaches who were interviewed had been coaching for over fifteen years at various levels and had been involved with both “coaching for participation and coaching for performance” Cross (1999: 11).

**Interview question 3**

Question three asked the age range and ability of the gymnasts they coached. All three had different experiences but in common they had all coached children aged about 10 years old. Some sessions were more recreational and were for larger size groups and some competition groups were much smaller in size consisting of about five or six gymnasts maximum.

**Interview question 4**

Answers to question four were the number of hours each week that a coach worked. The intention of this question was to reveal whether coaching was a career or a hobby. Alan worked approximately 6 hours per week, Brenda 4 hours but Chris worked 18
hours at the performance centre (gym).

**Interview question 5**

When asked “Do you see gymnastics as a competitive sport?” all the coaches gave different answers. Coaches such as Brenda and Alan who were working with younger, less experienced gymnasts saw their role as being with the less competitive side of the sport. Brenda commented that at grass roots and foundation level “…it is mainly about participation”. The higher level coach, Chris, talked more about competing against oneself and using competitions as a measure of their gymnast’s performance rather than winning medals and competing against others.

**Interview question 6**

How important is winning in gymnastics? The coaches talked about discipline, development, endurance, effort and commitment but not about winning. Although some coaches may say that winning is everything, the coaches interviewed here, say it isn’t. An assumption made by the researcher was that higher level gymnasts want to win at all costs (hopefully legally). As Brenda commented, “…winning is absolute, no one ever goes there to be second”. Winning seems to be very important as gymnasts work so hard to compete over many years, but their scores and meeting targets are just as important which may or may not mean medals. There seemed to be a curious verbal absence of the feeling that “winning is everything” from the interviews and discussions with coaches and gymnasts. But the efforts they made to learn routines for competitions, the recording of performances in personal logs and the notice boards at the gym posting competition results seemed to indicate that winning is extremely important to them. Sites (2007) talks about how we can find success in loosing even in a world where winning and achievement is the controlling factor, and these coaches seem to believe in this. One view is that to achieve your goals and enjoy your sport is to win. Alan believes it is too easy to focus on the winning (of medals) and to lose sight of the bigger picture. The ideal view of winning may depend on which stage of development they are at as a gymnast or a coach. One consideration from Chris was that “…if they compete to win too early in their gymnastic lives then they won’t stay in the sport”. Chris does not think that high level competitors are “win at all costs” minded, he thinks that if they enjoy the sport and peak at a later date they will have the background to achieve more success when they are ready. He says that “…maybe when we start to use principles like train to train and train to compete then winning may become more important” (see jargon associated with Long Term Athlete Development, Balyi and Hamilton, 2004). Chris pointed out that his, “…younger gymnasts use competition as a means to display their abilities, not [necessarily] to win medals”.

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Interview question 7

In question seven the coaches were asked about what parents want from them as a coach. Their answers were similar; that most parents want to see their children succeed, but their children’s enjoyment and welfare were the main concern. Parents can be pushy or disinterested but generally speaking they may all want success for their child (see Openshaw and Palmer, (2007) for a relevant discussion on the notion of “pushy parents”). They may also want gymnastics classes to be childminding opportunities, which is what the participation and grass roots coaches seem to provide in some cases., Alan says that:

The main concern with gymnastics being an “early specialisation sport” [Balyi and Hamilton, 2004] is that we are dealing with children who are still developing so their enjoyment and wish to participate is a main concern.

Some parents seem to live a vicarious existence through the experiences of their children and this can cause the training sessions to become a burden for the children and probably the coach in some circumstances. Coaches like Chris talked about explaining (having to explain) to parents what their child’s realistic goals were in the sport. His tactic was to get parents more involved in explaining to their children that it is their willingness to keep training that counts, and that the winning may come in time. In some cases parents had become impatient and frustrated; it was as if their parents and the children wanted instant competition success overnight, i.e. in six months or so. Gymnastics does not work this way and Chris seemed to be faced with the task of educating the gymnasts and the parents that success in gymnastics may only emerge after years of hard work, even at 10 years old. The physical and psychological demands of gymnastics mean that readiness to compete, particularly in Artistic Gymnastics, is relatively slow compared to other sports. Chris commented that he understood the difficulties for parents when, if their child took up football for example they stood a much higher chance of seeing them competing in a week or two at a match on Sunday with the team. Keeping gymnasts focused on their sport amidst increasing distractions can be a difficult task. Many gymnasts have a strong competitive streak in them but they can become unsure or under confident in their abilities as they get older, particularly through periods of puberty when growth outpaces strength. Consequently, the parents need to be on the coach’s side to reassure the gymnast that whether they win or lose, their efforts to stay within the sport are valued. However, all this ‘education’ seemingly has to come from the coach in the first place and as Chris says, taking on a child to train requires careful consideration as the parents will have to be ‘trained’ as well in terms of their expectation and appropriate support. The consequence of not doing this may be to alienate parents and the whole exercise of training a gymnast may become a massive waste of coaching effort which might otherwise have been avoided or more usefully directed.
Interview questions 8, 9, 10, 11: A broader discussion emerges

When the coaches were asked whether it is their responsibility to find (discover or identify) innate ability and develop it, it was the more highly qualified coach that gave the less specific answers. The Level 4/5 coach says that the gymnasts who stay in the sport the longest achieve the most. So did this mean that he believes success in gymnastics comes from the sheer physical effort that is put into training rather than the natural acrobatic ability or qualities of agility they may have? This question appears to centre upon the everlasting nature versus nurture debate and Chris seemed to side with nurture saying that gymnasts “…need to [learn to] enjoy gymnastics in order to achieve in the long term”. So even if they have a degree of natural ability, if they are not enjoying it the chances are that they won’t succeed. Chris explained further, “…it is self motivated within gymnastics it has to come from within, intrinsic motivation, to actually succeed which is really important”. If they enjoy the sport they may stay in it for longer and Chris says that early achievers in gymnastics actually have less success later on. This seems to pose an interesting challenge for gymnastics coaches who are normally tasked with teaching skills and the disciplines of gymnastics but now may also have to educate the gymnasts and their parents how to appreciate their sport in order to keep people in the sport for the longer term. This may involve coaches having to create the opportunities for young gymnasts to really “enjoy” the sport, whatever that means. Might it mean making fewer demands physically, socially and emotionally? Might it mean not being “bothered” about competition results? Might it mean that the efforts of entry level coaches are directed more at entertainment and increasing participation regardless of ability? In this context the process of educating coaches might have to be reappraised to encompass enjoyment of gymnastics for the long term and incorporated into NGB coaching qualifications. These questions may raise many issues about why young people might join or leave the sport of gymnastics – as a gymnast or a coach. One thing is certain that as gymnasts get older they become more independent as young adults and are “free” to make their own decisions. As pressures and distractions in their lives increase, for example balancing school/college work, social obligations or employment against the increasing demands of training time, they may think carefully about what success means to them and may appreciate their successes more than the younger medallists. Either way the pressures to drop out of competitive gymnastics as the gymnast matures seem to increase dramatically after leaving school and this may be an issue that demands more attention by the coaches and the coaching scheme in general. Brenda, the Level 2/3 coach commented that:

Most gymnasts are not natural performers; gymnastics is all about effort and improvement. The older they get and higher they get, it is more about the coaches’ ability to teach those technical skills than it is for the gymnast to rely on natural ability.
She continued that:

With gymnastics it’s mostly effort as children are born flexible, but we can help to develop their strength and co-ordination. So with gymnastics it is not just about the [natural] ability it is about their effort, their willing to put in everything to improve their gymnastics.

Alan, the Level 1 coach had some interesting views on the subject of varying ability in gymnastics and explained how he believes in the “participation of the many” idea to fund the elite end of the sport:

It is our job as a coach to do both, spot what appears like natural ability, and to develop it and ensure that everyone enjoys their participation. The younger gymnasts need the elite children to win medals so they can be role models. Most people in Liverpool have heard of Beth Tweddle and recognition of her as a role model therefore boosts the subscription and club fees to help the elite children succeed. So we need lots of people coming along, lots of people enjoying themselves, whilst at the same time spotting those who have the natural ability. All children need role models in their sport to help them succeed, even if they themselves don’t have much chance of becoming a champion.

When the coaches were asked what they thought a successful coaching session was, they all indicated that they wanted the children to progress in some way. However, for each coach “progress” seemed to be recognised slightly differently. Brenda had the most straightforward answer. She wanted children to enjoy each session, to learn something new and for it never to become a burden for them to attend, “…a good coaching session is where the children go away having learnt something and having enjoyed it.” After some reflection she said later on that gymnastics had taken over their life and to some degree the fun had gone out of it, “…they were training every night of the week, because training becomes everything, if you’re not enjoying the training, you’re not enjoying the coaching sessions you will not in the end improve”.

In response to the question of a successful session Alan certainly wanted fewest injuries, but he also wanted fewest tears and fewest emotions shown. He states that, “…after all, we are dealing with children who haven’t got a full handle on their emotions”. So a successful session is one with no crying? He said later on in his interview that “…the more successful the gymnast becomes, the more time I spend on the coaching skills and developing the children’s gymnastic abilities, than dealing with other associated emotional matters”. Chris talked about finding a balance in interpreting a gymnast’s achievements to judge the quality of a session overall, “…a good session one day does not mean the next session will be good too. Also, performance markers or achievement objectives are useful to judge the quality of the session which is helpful for communicating progress to the gymnast and perhaps their parents”. Chris went on to say that, “…we can’t move forwards if we don’t know where we’re moving forwards to [or have come from]”. Chris believed that the amount of objectives at-
tained determined the success of the session or the month or the year.

A question that was considered appropriate to ask the coaches was to describe a time when they achieved success with a particular child in gymnastics. Alan did not describe one particular event, but that of a general lesson in coaching, that might be learnt by coaches about not passing on your own fears to children, for example, he said it was really important to appear confident when supporting children doing tumbling or on the bars, “... if you are nervous they’ll read you like a book”. He also mentioned that a task needs to be broken down for children so they don’t see it as something immense but series of small achievable mini-exercises. Alan went onto say that:

The fact of the matter is that you are asking them to do something that is pretty incredible for a child to do and so you are deliberately holding back that understanding of the bigger picture, protecting them in a way, not scaring them off. Asking the child to do something incredible and then seeing the child do that incredible thing is being incredibly successful!

For example: If you show them a back flip, they will never believe they can do it, so you have to go through backward walkovers etc. the progressions to build up to the flip. Their later wonderment at the completed move makes the coach feel successful. A great feeling.

Brenda described a time when a trampolinist came up to her whilst she was coaching and wanted to compete in (Artistic) gymnastics instead. The child wasn’t successful after a number of attempts but then Brenda introduced her to Rhythmic Gymnastics (a different discipline of the sport) and the child flourished. Brenda commented that, “...for a child who lacked confidence, who wasn’t exactly brilliant she is now training at regional level and is very successful at it”. For Brenda this was a great achievement as a coach, helping a young gymnast find her niche in the sport to be successful. This made her feel successful as a coach as the ex-trampolinist is now winning medals, she is still training and has progressed onto bigger things in the sport.

"The most important thing in the Olympic games is not to win but to take part ………. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well” said Baron de Coubertin founder of the Modern Olympic Games (1942, cited in Martens, 2004: 57). The highest qualified coach, Chris, talked about goal setting and achieving targets rather than medals as a means of judging success. He also gave the most in-depth description of a time when success was being achieved in his sport. Chris sets all of his gymnasts performance targets. These targets may include getting on the medal podium, but they are mainly to correct a move, complete a routine or to give the best performance on the day. His example of a time when he achieved success with a particular child was when a gymnast attended their first open regional championships and the gymnast’s target was to give their best performance and to “go clean” (avoid
major deductions) on all pieces of apparatus. Chris reported that, “...the gymnast went clean on all pieces of apparatus plus they won a silver medal”. Chris explained his pre-competition brief which he gave to the young gymnast, “...this is what is expected of you, go clean, (don’t talk about medals, too much pressure), go and do your best on the day and let’s see how we get on”. The most positive thing according to Chris is not that the gymnast achieved a medal but that they achieved the target which was set by the coach, to “go clean”.

When the coaches were asked whether they got more personal satisfaction from coaching the elite gymnasts compared to group of lower ability children, they all said that they got satisfaction from coaching gymnastics to any age or ability. Brenda commented that she would much rather coach a group of grass-roots level children than an elite gymnast on a one to one basis:

The elite coaching is much more demanding for the coach as it’s harder and more technical, where as grass roots is simpler. Seeing grass roots children develop to me is more fruitful than seeing the one to one achieve. One to one coaching, its boring for the child and its boring for the coach.

Maybe one to one coaching is not for her and she doesn’t seem to want to climb the coaching ladder, perhaps in the manner which Arkaev and Suchilin (2004:12) discussed; she enjoys coaching at her level. Chris agreed with Brenda saying that:

It can be harder to coach on a one-to-one basis because they need time to rest and are constantly getting criticised which they would not get [in the same way] when training within a group of gymnasts. You have to keep the child motivated and at the same time not overwork them.

Chris seemed to get as much personal satisfaction out of working with foundation or “grass-roots” gymnasts as he did with elite gymnasts. He enjoyed seeing them succeed at their level. He felt that “...because they succeed then I feel as though I am succeeding as a coach”. Alan, like Brenda, gets more pleasure from coaching at an introductory level, i.e. “...lots of kids who may not become stars of the future”. They seem to derive pleasure from doing something good generally for these children which might be regarded as their making a positive contribution to the sport and perhaps the local community in their way. Brenda commented that, “...it is not just about medals and regional or world-class success, children can develop personally and become healthier through this sport which can count as success in their eyes and that of their parents”. Alan goes on to tell of a time when a parent thanked him for the fact that his son was healthy and had a six pack at the age of seven, “...he was never more proud of his kid and was grateful to me for the fitness he had developed”. The parent was seemingly unable to recognise his son's gymnastic abilities but could appreciate his gains in body conditioning. This may demonstrate a [low] level of parental understanding about the gymnastics which their children become
involved in and thereby justify further the tactic by Chris to include parents in the coaching and education of young gymnasts. Often in gymnastics parents may judge their child for a perceived “lack of commitment” however from Chris’ point of view it is probably more important for the parents to understand the level of commitment required of the child, because a far greater level of commitment will be required of the parents in terms of support for the child to succeed. For example, parents might consider/weigh up their commitment to support their child in the following terms which may be typical of a gymnast training 20-30 hours plus per week; considerable financial support, emotional support, time (years), division of family resources, balance of attention between siblings, disruption to family life, disruption to education etc. Consequently, through this increased and shared understanding of commitment in gymnastics the child may stay on within the sport for longer and may have a better chance of succeeding within it.

**Reflection on the research process: interview questions**

Reflecting on the experience of conducting this research a number of critical thoughts come to mind which, if this research were to be extended would be taken into consideration. At the start of the interviews some basic warm up questions were asked to help set the scene. However, a different question could have been asked at the start about coaching as a career perhaps, in order to get some personal commentary which might have been a more interesting, an individualised account of experience rather than asking them to state the number of years and the amount of hours per week they coached. They could have just written this numerical information down and was thus, perhaps and opportunity wasted. It may have been better to have asked whether they had competed in gymnastics or any other sport and at what level, to help the researcher understand their sporting background. The main part of the interview commenced by asking questions that focused on their opinions of gymnastics as a competitive sport, (question 5. do you see gymnastics as a competitive sport?). During the interview this question had to be constantly expanded/rephrased with the aim of finding out if it was competing against oneself or others that drove them in the sport. On reflection this question could have been either left out altogether or reworded in order to let them answer for themselves more fully instead of the interviewer leading them. In practice and on reflection this was not a good question. So perhaps if completing the research again or extending it, it would might be a good thing to devise more open questions (Kvale, 1996). The researcher also wanted to find out their views of success and how passionate they where about their coaching, so they were asked to describe a successful time from their coaching experience. The question on this seemed to work well and provided some interesting insight. It was then decided to incorporate a question about the influence of parents in coaching gymnastics and from these questions it was found that a parent’s view of success can affect a coach’s
work, sometimes negatively. The ability or effort question (question 9) was intended to invite coaches to think more deeply about gymnastics and explain their views about how success might be achieved. A question was needed during the interview that would force them to ponder and to explain their personal ideas at greater length compared to some of their previous answers. Responses to this question allowed the researcher to think about what their coaching motives might be, their coaching dialogue, their aspiration and ideas about working with talented and not so talented gymnasts; in a way, to consider what their coaching philosophy might be.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the experience of conducting these research interviews has been constructive and informative in terms of learning an approach to qualitative research and about some coaching in gymnastics. Some of the answers from the coaches were not what the researcher expected and some were not answered completely. This was not a problem and actually served to prompt new ideas to extend the research. For example, Chris showed some concern about the idea of medals being the only indicator of success, but he was not as concerned about winning competitions as predicted that he might be. He held a “winning is not everything” attitude and described success as everything from a good session to the winning of championships. He also did not seem to thrive and crave for the higher elite work which again it was anticipated that higher level coaches would, perhaps for status of better use of their qualifications. Chris enjoyed working with grass roots gymnasts just as much as the more talented gymnasts. Brenda seemed a little more focused on winning judging by one of her statements “…no-one goes to competitions to be second best”, but she also viewed success as the continued participation of gymnasts and their drive to carry on. Alan, also wanted success but showed that he interpreted success in another way. His main concern was not winning, it was the welfare of the children he taught “…successful coaching is seeing them build upon what they have already done and then to move up ladder while still enjoying themselves”. All three coaches wanted enjoyment for their gymnasts and they wanted success in some form or other, each having a different interpretation of success which may reflect the level of aspiration available to that coach at that level. Consequently, medals, selections and positions from competitions may be more of a priority for higher level coaches as they are expected to achieve these kind of results; it may be one measure of how good they are as a coach at that higher level. However, these may definitely not be the overall focus of the higher level coach as failing to pay enough attention to what might broadly be termed as the “welfare” of the gymnast, at elite level, may mean that in the near future for that coach, there will be no elite gymnast to work with.
References


**JQRSS: Acknowledgement Footnote**

1. Author’s Reflective Comment: I have thoroughly enjoyed the process of conducting research with coaches in a sport that I am passionate about and I have gained more respect as a coach and as a researcher from the whole experience. Thank you to the coaches who assisted me by kindly allowing me to observe and interview them over the course of a year. Stemming from that research, the experience of writing this article with my tutor has been equally valuable showing me that
I can do a lot more with my skills and ideas than previously thought. I am now more confident about my research ideas and the opportunity to present my work in this journal format, that is, writing for a much wider audience is a particularly valuable one which has not only raised my own academic standards it has also increased my knowledge of my chosen sport and my chosen career area, and given me further ideas for research other studies.

2. Author Profile: Jennie is a final year scholarship student at Liverpool Hope University studying a combined BA Honours degree in Dance and Sport. She has a special interest in gymnastics and understanding its aesthetic qualities. She has experience of performing gymnastics from a young age, and is now training for a coaching award in this sport. Jennie hopes to go into Secondary P.E. and Dance Teaching, and is currently applying for a PGCE.

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