

Coaches: Listening to Your Players

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While at first it may appear effortless to define a successful coach, when one examines the intricacies of the coaching process, the retort is not so clear cut. If we were to use winning a championship as the criteria for success, then each tournament or league would have only one coach who could be regarded as successful. What of the coach who has guided his or her team from a group of nobodies to a unit which has made the final series? What of the coach who's team has had a positive experience from participating? Have these coaches been successful? The purist may say no, but the realist (which every coach must be) would suggest otherwise.

Even using the criterion of winning as a determinant of a successful coach is dangerous. In some cases, the definition of success relates more to the experiences children have received during the season (Billson & Tiberius, 1991; Grant & Darley, 1993). One might suggest the major indicator of a successful coach in this context is the number of children who return to play the following year.

Successful coaching then, is difficult to define and is particularly context specific. As Martens (1990) commented, there is no stereotypic coaching personality or set of behaviors which leads to success in coaching. Rather effective coaching behavior is flexible and dependent upon the coaching environment. With this in mind, it is perhaps more appropriate to think of the successful coach as "one who strives toward the goals of the team unit." Reference is made to the team unit (that unit consisting of players and the coach) rather than the coach in iso-

lation. The meaning behind this is that many coaches may have different objectives from the players on the teams they actually coach. For example, a coach's major focus may be on the outcome of a game, while for the players, the key concern is to have fun or improve skill level.

In the youth setting, the coach is obviously seen the leader. It becomes increasingly important to be aware of this as many times athletes see their "worth" through the eyes of their coach. As a coach, it is important to realize that an individual's self esteem can be greatly affected by how they are viewed (Thompson, 1995; DeVoe & Carroll, 1994). The most effective coaches are able to build self esteem even during adversity (Smith & Smoll, 1990).

Although a loss certainly can bring about a sense of disappointment, a loss can not always be judged as failure. Remember, the coach is supposed to be the team leader and team teacher. If the coach loses his/her composure and is shouting, criticizing players and officials, how do the players perceive this? If on the other hand the coach is constantly teaching, no matter the outcome, what message is being sent? Sporting contests will always produce a winning and losing team. Much more however can be gained or lost depending upon what the athlete takes from the experience.

Research has presented data concerning the behavioral characteristics of coaches gauged to be more or less successful. While these studies use the coaches win-loss records as the criterion for success, they do provide us with a baseline for further examination. For example, in a study of high school tennis coaches, Claxton (1988) showed more successful coaches asked a significantly greater number of questions of

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their players than did less successful coaches. In another study, Markland and Martinek (1988) revealed successful coaches gave more auditory feedback than less successful coaches, and they gave more immediate feedback. In addition, players of more successful coaches received more approval from their coaches than players from less successful coaches.

Feedback

Feedback is the information an athlete receives from their own body and from other people about their performance. The value of intrinsic feedback (the athlete's own "feel" of the performance) is often underestimated. A good coach will encourage their players to reflect on their own performance before providing extrinsic feedback.

Constructive feedback is vital to young players, both for their learning and their self esteem. Before giving feedback, observe carefully. Your negative feedback should only cover the things that can be remedied, not things like "swim faster" or "pass the ball farther." The feedback the coach provides can take two forms. General feedback, such as "well done Sally!", helps to motivate the athlete but does not provide any information on how they performed. Specific feedback, on the other hand, provides athletes with information that will help them understand what they have done and how they can improve. For example, "Sally, your elbows are still lower than your hands when you are swinging the bat. You need to lift your elbows higher, and make them level with the ground."

Giving a athlete feedback on performance is very important. Feedback can be given:

- as reinforcement - it can cause players to repeat (or diminish) a behavior or movement pattern.

Example: "Simone, that was much better! You held your wrist right through the stroke and the ball went exactly where you wanted. Well done!"

- to provide information - so the athlete is more independent of your support and is better able to do the task themselves next time.

Example: "John, I think you would find it easier if you bounced the ball in place instead of trying to move your feet and bounce at the same time. That way your bouncing skills will become really good. Ok?"

- to motivate - framing feedback in a positive way can encourage your players to try harder next time.

Example: "Lennie you threw your arms up high and got two more inches on that jump, that is great! See if you can improve another two on this one."

Tips on Giving Feedback

- Be specific - give athletes the information they need to improve their performance.

Example: "Alex, your foot is pointing too far to the left. Move your toes a couple of inches this way so they point in the direction you want the ball to go. . . That's it!"

- Be positive - try to comment on something the player has done well first. Then, if you need to correct something, clearly explain how it should be done without harping on what was done wrong.

Example: "Bill, the ball toss was great. It was in just the right spot. Now let me see you reaching up to hit the ball with your body fully stretched."

- Give feedback promptly after performance, but do not forget to give the athlete the time and the opportunity to reflect on how it felt first.

Example: "How did that feel Nicky? Was it easier to throw the ball? Don't forget, you need to follow through all the way with your arm."

- Try to give both individual and group feedback. In that way, you will not be

“picking” on one player all the time. Try bringing the whole group together and share the feedback with everyone occasionally.

Example: “Okay, gather round. Everyone looked much better that time. The bounce passes were much stronger and you were starting to look for each other. Remember to push the ball hard towards the floor when you bounce pass, that will make the passes a lot “snappier”. Let’s do another ten good passes each, off you go!”

Remember, feedback should be:

- S - Specific
- P - Positive
- I - Informative
- C - Concise
- C - Clear

In an evaluation study of Australian Football (Hastie, 1991), coaches were unanimous in stating that their major goals were to teach the fundamental skills of the game. Enjoyment of, and fun at training were also identified as significant training goals (although the importance placed upon the fun aspect tended to decrease with the increase in the team’s age). While the players generally did agree that they learned much about the sport (4.4 out of 5), there was also a significant correlation ($r = .65, p < .05$) between this question and the question “My coach helps me a lot.” This would indicate players perceive a link between their coach’s skill and their own improvement.

Under Age 12

Key motives: skill improvement, fun, and friendship

Coaches can frequently monitor the achievement of these objectives through informal consultation or by handing out evaluation sheets. It is not difficult to design a simple questionnaire where the answers are either yes or no.

Sample Questions for Youth Coaches

- Do you learn a lot in practice?
- Is training fun?
- Do you look forward to playing?
- Do you enjoy playing with your teammates?
- Does the coach help you enough?

High School Setting

Key motives: skill development and participation

At the high school level, athletes are often faced with taking specific roles on teams, such as being starters or non-starters. A primary concern for the athlete then, is a chance to get increased playing time. Research has shown that coaches tend to give more feedback to the starting players than non-starting players (Mancini, Clark, & Wuest, 1987). The more skilled players are often given the more advantageous practice conditions (Markland & Martinek, 1988). This can only reinforce to non-starters that they have a lesser role. A characteristic of more successful coaches at the high school level is their level of democracy. Democratic coaching styles correlated with higher levels of team cohesion (Stier, 1988). Further study of coaching communication styles showed successful coaches as being viewed as less dominant, dramatic, or argumentative (Claxton, 1988).

At the high school level, athletes are more able to discriminate their responses to questions. Rather than providing yes/no answers, questions can be framed as opinions. Rating scales could be used, such as from strongly disagree through strongly agree.

Sample Opinions for Athletes

- The coach gives me enough praise during practice.
- I feel that I am an important player on this team.
- Different players receive different treatment from the coach.

- The coach allows us to have input into training sessions and match plans.
- The coach tends to dominate the players.
- The coach is easy to talk to.

Alternately, open-ended questions might be used. Although more time consuming to complete, open-ended questions often lead to original and practical suggestions about how training sessions and competitive experiences could be improved.

Examples of open ended questions include:

- Training would be more enjoyable if. . .
- My skills would improve if. . .
- In practice, I feel great when. . .
- What I like best is when the coach. . .
- I hate it when the coach. . .

In most sport settings, the coach is the source of all evaluative interactions. Players are given information about skill improvement, tactics, fitness, and game preparation. Rarely are the players given the opportunity to voice opinions about the performance of the coach helping them reach their goals. Research indicates that the coaches who are the most "successful" interact more and possess enhanced listening skills when dealing with their players. A blend of coaching knowledge, incorporating the proper teaching styles, techniques, and proper feedback can make for a more effective coach (Brunner & Hill, 1992; Moser, 1992). Remember athletes grow physically, mentally, and socially. It is the job of the successful coach to see that all of these characteristics are enhanced.

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