

## COACHING

# The Negative Behaviors of Coaches: “Don’t Be This Guy!”

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### Abstract

*Introduction: Kickoff is 11:00 am and all the players are on the pitch being warmed up by a parent—all the players except one, of course, and her father, the coach. Sure, it is only an under-8 recreational match, but don’t all players deserve a responsible coach? When he finally wanders in from the parking lot, he is in his cutoffs and flip flops, his appearance reflecting the attitudes and mutterings of many of the parents: “He is probably hung over again.”*

*This article is 10 years of athletes’ and former athletes’ perceptions and memories that characterize their worst coaches. Students in introduction to coaching classes were asked to recall their worst coach and list up to 10 characteristics of that individual. The students were instructed not to reveal names, but rather they were told to provide the gender of the coach along with specific demographic information about their own playing careers. The qualitative analysis of the responses allowed the author to summarize those behaviors that, in the memories of the students, characterized “my worst coach.” The objective was to use those memories in the coach education curriculum to exemplify what behaviors future coaches should avoid.*

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Participation in sport is an ever-growing event at all ages. Over 40 million youth up to age 18 participate in various sports at all levels (“The Facts About Youth Sports,” 2011), and youths’ level of participation continues to be of great interest. One important element in sport is the coach–player association, which according to Poczwardowski, Barott, and Jowett (2006) impacts all facets of sport. Several authors have reported on sports’ influence on basic adolescent development, both positive, such as adaptation to stress, development of positive work ethic, and opportunities for development of leadership, and negative, such as poor peer relationships, social exclusion, and exposure to inappropriate adult behavior (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). Other influences of sport were team cohesion, success, and player motivation (Murray, 2006); athletes’ sense of being valued and belonging to the team (Reinboth, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2004); and the athletes’ motivation and performance (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). In addition, others have defined the relationship between athletes and coaches as foundational to the total coaching process (Jowett, 2005; Olympiou, Jowett, & Duda, 2008). Becker (2009) argued the effects of coaches’ behaviors on athletes’ social and life development, perceived sports experiences, and self-perceptions are as obvious as those on players’ physical and skill development.

Understandably, coaching behavior is recognized as pivotal to the creation of a positive sport environment (Côté & Sedgwick, 2003; Cumming, Smith, & Smoll, 2006), but the development of the player–coach relationship is more important (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2009). Unfortunately, negative coaching behaviors have gained considerable notoriety of late. Witness the actions of former coaches Mike Leach, Bobby Gonzales, Mark Mangino, and Jim Leavitt, who were released from major universities for mistreating players. Coaching behaviors are experienced by athletes daily and are one of the few variables in sport that is totally under the control of the coach (Cushion, 2011). Thus, that many coaches cannot recognize their own negative behaviors, much less their effects on players, is perplexing (Smith & Smoll, 1997). Therefore, the primary rationale for this study was to document players’ memories of bad coaches to use them in the education of future coaches.

According to Gearity and Murray (2011), limited research exists on poor coaching even though athletes value coaching behaviors more than win–loss records. In 1991, Westre and Weiss presented coaching behaviors they described as *demotivating* such as *using*

*abusive language, ridiculing players, developing and upholding superior–subordinate relationships with athletes, showing favoritism, and exhibiting poor communication skills.* Smith and Smoll (1997) recognized that although negative coaching behavior occurred less frequently, the impact of those behaviors could be detrimental to the players and the program. Incidentally, they also determined that the players, not the coaches, had a more accurate perception of coaching behaviors. Many coaches were, to be blunt, clueless to their own behaviors.

Likewise, Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2009) identified categories of negative coaching behaviors such as *using poor communication, having favorites, being intimidating, modeling poor work ethic, and exhibiting inappropriate actions.* The authors called for additional efforts in coach education to exemplify the impact of coaches' behavior on general adolescent development and reemphasized that coaches fail to recognize their own negative actions. Similarly, Gearity and Murray (2011) identified four themes of negative coaching behaviors: *having poor teaching skills, showing uncaring behavior, being unfair, and inhibiting mental skills* (team cohesion, self-doubt, distraction, and demotivation). They recommended additional efforts in changing negative behaviors of coaches, especially in the area of *communication*, would increase the positive experiences of athletes and potentially reduce the number of dropouts. Because the power in the coach–athlete relationship will always favor the coach, researchers should explore how and why athletes endured negative coaching behaviors.

The purpose of this study was to use the recollections of athletes to describe negative coaching behaviors that were so memorable they characterized the players' *worst coach*. This information is being used in the basic coursework for entry-level coaches in hopes of eliminating bad coaching behavior.

## **Method**

Over the course of 10 years, convenience samples of students ( $n = 542$ ) in introductory coaching classes were asked to describe the behaviors of the coach they considered the worst in their athletic experiences. Early in the semester, an open-ended process was used in which they could list up to 10 behavioral characteristics that described their worst coach. Historically, researchers have supported the use of athletes as valuable resources for describing coaches. In 1997, Smith and Smoll determined that athletes are the most reliable

source of coaching behaviors and their ultimate outcomes. Later Côté and Sedgwick (2003) and Anshel (2003) recognized athletes were a beneficial but often neglected source for information about coaches and athletic experiences. Finally, Gearity and Murray (2011) stated that athletes' interpretation is essential to examining coaching behavior. In this constructive approach, determining and describing how athletes recognized and interpreted coaches' negative behaviors was imperative.

The coaching behaviors of worst coaches were compiled verbatim and then coded for patterns using constant comparison techniques (Babbie, 2005; Baumgartner & Hensley, 2006). When using these techniques, researchers coded responses and then determined common themes throughout. In addition, the author used a variable-oriented analysis in a nomothetic approach to further refine the responses. An example of the process, from raw data to general topics and later to more specific themes, appears in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Student Demographics (n = 542)*

<b>Gender</b>	<b>N of subjects</b>	<b>Years played</b>	<b>Highest level played</b>	
Female	247 (46%)	10.4	College varsity	27%
			High school varsity	66%
			Other	7%
Male	295 (54%)	11.6	College varsity	30%
			High school varsity	69%
			Other	1%

Along with the nearly 2,000 descriptions of negative behaviors, the students provided demographic information such as gender, years played, and highest level of play. The demographic data are presented in Table 2.

**Results**

As a result of the initial coding of raw data, 28 preliminary categories were established. The final coding combined those to the eight themes (Table 3) of personality, negative (behavior), communication, favoritism, knowledge (lack of), teaching (lack of), personal habits, and care (lack of).

**Table 2***Example of Raw Data to Primary Themes*

Raw Data	Primary Themes	Final Category
pushed us around	abusive	negative
got physical	abusive	negative
insulting	abusive	negative
poor ethics	sportsmanship	negative
let a player who cheated back on the team	sportsmanship (lack of)	negative
let people get away with breaking rules	sportsmanship (lack of)	negative
changed stats	dishonest	negative
cheated	dishonest	negative
abused power	power (abused)	negative
abused power	power (abused)	negative
controlling		personality
crabby		personality
cracked under pressure		personality
crazy		personality
creepy		personality
cried		personality
was a buddy too much		personal habits
watched girls shower		personal habits
sexist		personal habits
took all credit		personal habits
tried to compete with athletes		personal habits
alcoholic breath	alcoholic	personal habits
drank	alcoholic	personal habits
same workouts for all		teaching (lack of)
scrimmaged too much		teaching (lack of)
too many easy practices	planning	teaching (lack of)
always late		teaching (lack of)
always leaving early	planning	teaching (lack of)

As the most frequently occurring theme, *personality* must be addressed first. It is a difficult construct because of its varied nature. Personality is a unique human characteristic that, while organized, is subject to change and influences from individuals' cognitions, emotions, and physical behaviors (Ryckman, 2004). That variability

**Table 3***Total Behavioral Themes*

	Primary Themes	RANK	<i>n</i>	Final Themes	Final Rank	Final <i>n</i>
1	personality	1	435	personality	1	514
2	communication	2	229	negative	2	349
3	knowledge (lack of)	3	177	communication	3	229
4	favoritism	4	173	favoritism	4	215
5	teaching (lack of)	5	160	knowledge (lack of)	5	177
6	negative	6	152	teaching (lack of)	6	167
7	care (lack of)	7	90	personal habits	7	154
8	personal habits	8	84	care (lack of)	8	148
9	demanding		62			
10	motivation issues		55			
11	dishonest		55			
12	abusive		44			
13	winning (overemphasized)		43			
14	personal issues		43			
15	fair (not)		28			
16	angry		28			
17	immature		17			
18	alcoholic		17			
19	fun (lack of)		15			
20	politics		10			
21	burned out		10			
22	selfish		6			
23	sportsmanship (poor)		6			
24	planning		5			
25	parent influenced		4			
26	inconsistent		2			
27	power (abused)		2			
28	did not have respect of team		1			

was later described in Becker's (2009) account of coaches' cognitive, emotional, social, and psychological parameters of personalities. In that work, *passion* was listed as a key characteristic of emotional personality along with *inspirational* and *enthusiastic*. Becker wrote that athletes consistently provided negative descriptors such as *inconsistent* and *moody*; *authoritarian*, *power trip*, and *dictator*; and *arrogant*, *conceited*, *self-centered*, *egotistical*, *selfish*, and *cocky*. Therefore, the concept of coach personality is extremely diverse and must be discussed in terms of specific behaviors. In this study, examples of the terms describing coaches' personalities were *inconsistent*, *conceited/cocky/egotistical*, *rude*, *selfish*, *stubborn*, *moody*, and *dictator*.

The term that was used most often in the category of *negative* was *negative*. However, additional terms appearing regularly were *disrespectful* and *mean*. Likewise, *communication* had a number of descriptors that listed poor verbal and nonverbal skills. Coaches *yelled/screamed*, *cursed*, *were critical in public*, *were confusing/unclear*, *did not listen to players*, and *were generally hard to talk to*. Similarly, the theme *favorites* was most consistently represented by the phrase *had favorites*. Other terms used were *biased*, *sucked up to some parents*, and *part of the good old boy network*. Teaching and poor knowledge reflected coaches' lack of information on the technical and tactical skills of their sport and/or their inability to teach it. These coaches were perceived as *not knowing the sport, its rules, how to develop or plan a practice, and how to identify problems or correct them* and generally were referred to as *ignorant* or *dumb* by their former players. Some criticisms were very specific; for example, *coaches did not know athletes' events or positions*, *were overwhelmed at the level they were coaching*, and/or *did not understand the players themselves (often did not understand female athletes)*. Similar to personality, *personal habits* had varied responses. They ranged from issues that were out of the coaches' command (e.g., *too young* or *too old*) to behaviors that were controllable, such as *smells of tobacco*, *is sloppy*, *is lazy*, *is not a role model*, *has body odor*, as well as issues that were certainly unethical, if not illegal, such as *dated some of the boys*, *watched athletes shower*, and *drank on away trips*. The final theme, *caring*, like communication and favorites, was more often described as the coach not caring about the players both on and off the field. Other common descriptors were *not empathetic*, *no passion*, and *uncompassionate [sic]*.

## Discussion

As participation in and the popularity of sport has grown, the need for coaches often overshadows the pursuit of *good coaches*. That is especially true at the youth levels where, too often, the term *youth sport* has led some to discount it as a minor area where any adult volunteer can “coach” effectively. In fact, *youth sport* is a very broad term that refers to participation by players 18 and younger at levels ranging from intramural/recreational sport to high school varsity. Private club sports, such as Little League, volleyball, and soccer, have athletes as young as 12 competing at national and international levels. One result of downplaying youth sports, unfortunately, is in the pursuit of enough coaches for maximum participation; many negative and often detrimental coaching behaviors are overlooked.

Coach educators need to continue to prepare future coaches, regardless of the level of sport they will coach, not only in the Xs and Os of coaching, but also in the identification of good behaviors and the elimination of bad behaviors. This investigation attempted to expand the identification of bad behaviors that were remembered by over 500 former athletes who, on average, had over 10 years of athletic experiences.

The two most prominent themes, personality and negative behavior, present challenges to coach educators. The concept of personality is expansive and thus is difficult to change once established. However, students can identify and discuss the specific behaviors they remember as the personality components of their worst coaches. Extended class times can be used to identify the coach behaviors that were inconsistent and moody; authoritarian, power trip, and dictator; and arrogant, conceited, self-centered, egotistical, selfish, and cocky. Coach educators must recall that coaches fail to recognize negative behaviors in themselves more often than the players. Hopefully, if these behaviors are identified and discussed in coach education classes, they may be avoided and/or eliminated.

Changing negative coaching behaviors is difficult because the negative social environment exists. Theoretically, we know positive feedback should far outnumber negative comments, but too often that is not what occurs. Negative coaching behavior is often passed down from older coaches to their former athletes, and in the absence of formal coach education, beginning coaches mimic how their coaches treated them.

That concept is reflected as well in the third theme, communication. Jowett (2005) recognized communication as a foundational component for relationships in sport. The communication of shared values, goals, and approaches between coaches and athletes is key to establishing a positive sport environment. She stated that communication is particularly important with young athletes because it often involves aspects of their total lives and provides the beginning of strong personal relationships. These relationships can be strong and intensely emotional (Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005), resulting in memories that last a lifetime. Yet, communication skills are often a reflection of how a person was treated by significant others from his/her past. Coach educators can provide opportunities for students to recognize the characteristics of positive and negative communication and then to observe and record them in other coaches. For example, coach educators can place the coaches-in-training in coaching positions and provide them feedback on their communication skills.

The concept of coaches exhibiting *favoritism* requires special consideration. Stewart (2006) asked student athletes what was meant when they recorded favoritism as a negative characteristic of worst coaches. Stewart found that *favoritism* was used synonymously with *biased*, *politics*, and *the extra consideration some coaches gave to players in practice and games*. To avoid these situations, coaches should ensure that their behaviors in practice and in games reflect the program's goals and objectives. Understandably, in athletic programs where winning will lead to postseason play, better players will receive more playing time. Likewise, in recreational and development levels, where fun and/or the improvement of all players' skills are prioritized over a win-loss record, the determination of playing time is different. In any program that defines success by winning, and includes cutting or demoting less skilled players to lower levels (e.g., from varsity to junior varsity), the coach must determine objective criteria for starting a contest or remaining at the higher level and communicate this to players and their parents before the season starts.

Suffice it to say, good coaching is good teaching. The late great coach John Wooden stated in an interview, which can be viewed on TED (<http://blog.ted.com/>), that his background as a teacher developed his concepts of success and approaches to coaching. In most coach education texts, teaching is covered in ever-expanding details. However, many coaches still struggle with teaching.

As stated by coach educators, good teaching requires thorough knowledge of many areas (Hammermeister, 2010; Martens, 2004; Sabcock & Sabcock, 2011). It involves knowledge of the technical and tactical aspects of sport; characteristics of athletes such as age, maturity, skill levels, and learning styles; the logistical constraints of the coaching position such as time allotments, facilities, and financial resources; as well as the coach's personal characteristics, motives, and aspirations. In addition, good coaching requires the knowledge, willingness, and ability to apply sound pedagogical skills in the dynamic environment of sport. Students in this study reported coaches' lack of planning, disorganization, use of repetitive or outdated drills and activities, and inability to change as examples of poor teaching. Perhaps Becker (2009) best presented the teaching expectations of coaches: "All coaches teach, great ones teach the details. All coaches communicate. Great ones communicate honestly. All prepare. Great prepare meticulously" (p. 107).

Coaches and coach educators should accept that, like sport skills, teaching skills must be learned, practiced, evaluated regularly, and modified to meet the ever-changing demands of coaching. This is important, as young athletes are entering sport from fast-paced, highly computerized environments that often result in shortened attention spans.

The personal issues and habits presented in this study are diverse. As noted, students identified issues that were out of the purview of the coaches. Being either too old or too young should not be a concern. However, many of the behaviors listed were so serious that they could be considered unethical or illegal. Personal habits such as being out of shape, being lazy, smelling of tobacco, or being a poor role model are habits that should be addressed and improved. Primarily, the sport administrator is responsible for monitoring and addressing the coach in a private setting. However, flirting, dating, or having any unacceptable personal interaction with athletes is unacceptable, and whoever witnesses it should report it to the coach's supervisor. As professionals, we must eliminate any behavior that is unethical or illegal.

A fundamental component of a positive coach-player relationship is genuine concern or caring for the players (Sabock & Sabock, 2011). The younger the athlete, the more that concern needs to transcend the practice and game arena. Athletes need to know the coach cares about them in roles other than that of an athlete. When coaching behavior does not exhibit a caring or sincere

concern, the relationship is negatively affected. Jowett and Timson-Katchis (2005) found that athletes valued personal commitment in coaches and labeled behaviors such as *dislike*, *disrespect*, *restrain*, *disconnection*, and *disappointment* as negative. Later, Becker (2009) stated that trust, confidence, and respect between coach and athlete formed the personal relationships that could last a lifetime. Coaches who treated athletes honestly and with kindness were characterized as caring and supportive. Similarly, Gearity and Murray (2011) determined that athletes considered coaches who did not provide emotional or relational support, who were not there for them, and who made the athlete feel isolated as uncaring. Many of these coaches were described as caring only about winning and/or making themselves look good. In this study, the majority of athletes who listed aspects of caring as a negative behavior used the terms *uncaring* or *did not care about us*. It was evident that coaches who did not exhibit or provide an environment that made athletes feel that the coach cared about them were viewed negatively.

### Conclusion

Coaching at any level, if taken seriously, is a hard job (Jones & Wallace, 2005). Its goals are diverse and dependent on the position, the culture, the level of play, and the many human stakeholders. It is a profession that often presents coaches with serious ambiguity (“We want you to build self-esteem, allow the kids have fun, emphasize sportsmanship and academics, get everyone playing time.... and, oh by the way, win state”). Jones and Wallace (2005) referred to coaches as *orchestrators*, rather than leaders, who manage a great deal of uncertainty and contradictions with varied and undefined goals. Yet, within this environment of great uncertainty, coaches are expected to ensure that players have every opportunity to reach their goals and satisfy their needs (Loughhead & Hardy, 2005). A large component of player satisfaction is the social environment in which they are engaged and the degree of improvement they experience there. To achieve that improvement, a positive environment with a certain degree of player autonomy should be developed.

It bears repeating that in the complex world of sport, individual behavior is the only thing over which the coach has total control. As exemplified by this study, former athletes remember extreme coaching behaviors they have experienced, and those memories have a lasting impact on players’ perceptions of their total athletic experience (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2009). Ultimately, memories of

coaches' bad (or worst) behaviors have a negative influence on the players and the coaching profession. As Jowett (2005) concluded, the relationships between the athlete and the coach should not be considered secondary to the goals of the coach, an individual athlete, or the team and should not be contingent on the athletes' performance, age, gender, or level of play. The relationship that is based on the behaviors of coaches is the foundation of coaching as a profession. Negative behaviors should be identified and eliminated at all costs.

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