Coaching Behaviors: "The Way You Were, or the Way You **Wished** You Were"

Craig Stewart

Behavior is the "window" to the true philosophy of any coach. While most coaches, including myself, can talk a "good game" in front of parents, boosters or school boards, the real answer to what type of coach and person we are is the specific behaviors we exhibit "in game situations or behind closed practices". Those behaviors reflect our coaching philosophy and are observed and remembered by the individuals closest to us. If we become head coaches, then the whole athletic program will reflect our cognitive, affective and behavioral ethics (Sabock, 1991). Whether it is a handshake with an opposing coach at the end of a hard fought match, a verbal blast at an official or a swing at an opposing player, behaviors usually show our true selves. Any overt coaching behavior, whether viewed by a parent's video camera or a national television audience, can serve as a revealing source of individual revelation and self judgment, an origin for administrative evaluation or an invariable determinate of our future in the profession. But regardless of how endearing or shocking the behavior, it usually comes to no surprise to the people nearest to us . . . our players.

Athletes are a powerful, but often untapped, source of information for a coach (Anshel, 1990). Because of its extreme validity, player input can be very beneficial to the coach and the overall welfare of the athletic program. Athletes, regardless of age and experience, are exposed to coaching behaviors regularly and usually over a prolonged period of time. They not only observe the "peaks and valleys" of coaching behavior, but are the recipients of the consequences and are rarely asked for their insight. More often than not, player input is either ignored or underrated. To tap the reserve of information, athletes should be provided nonthreatening (to both players and coaches) opportunities to provide feedback concerning the athletic program. If coaches are interested in the reflections of their true philosophy via their behaviors, players who have completed their tenure under that coach (what player would jeopardize their position by being honest with a dictatorial coach?) are excellent sources. Unfortunately coaches have a natural tendency not to recognize the value which could be realized from ex-players, lose touch with their players, or fail to ask the right questions at the appropriate time. The purpose of the paper was to investigate the memories of future coaches as to the types of behaviors they associated with past coaches. It was hoped that by asking students who were also ex-athletes what types of behaviors they remembered and how they categorized those recollections, some insight for both present and future coaches could be acquired.

As part of class assignments for an introduction to coaching class, 87 students were asked to write a paper in which they anonymously described both their favorite and their least favorite coaches in their athletic careers. They were also asked to identify the specific behaviors which made the respective coaches the favorite and least favorite. Over 90% of the 87 students had been athletes at least through high school and about 50% had been (or were currently)

Craig Stewart is a faculty member in the Department of Human Development at Montana State University.

college athletes. As the papers were evaluated, the specific behaviors were separated into negative and positive lists and then categorized based upon commonalities (see tables). The categories were designated "cognitive behaviors"; those dealing with behaviors which reflected knowledge based attributes such as teaching, communication or development skills; "affective behaviors"; those behaviors dealing with feelings, or areas which are often referred to, but very difficult to quantify such as, motivation, caring, praise, love, humiliation and favoritism, and, finally, "physical behaviors"; those behaviors which could be quantified or documented with "hard" examples such as stressing winning above everything, showing up late or unprepared for practice, stressing doing your best, using player input and being available for the player on and off the field.

While the result of categorization was not as exclusive as desired, it still allowed a closer examination of what coaching behaviors ex-athletes remembered as positive and negative. The survey revealed that ex-players identified coaches as "favorites" who knew the rules and the game, could communicate that knowledge and exhibited a genuine desire to improve the athletes' skills. Favorite coaches were also described as demanding in both their design of practices and pursuit of personal greatness, but also ensured that the pursuit incorporated "fun" and diversity. Contrary to the positive coaches were negative examples who were poor in all the aforementioned areas and were often described as confusing and/or contradictory in their communication skills.

There were more descriptors in the affective area than the other two. Positive coaches were remembered as being good motivators, honest, warm and caring while exhibiting confidence and pride in the players and their team. Those positive coaches appeared to their players as enjoying coaching, their sport and the players as individuals, while the negative coaches were remembered as having no enthusiasm, being inconsistent and exhibiting no self control, no respect for players or being a bad tempered, non-caring individual. Favorite coaches were recalled as being good friends, honest, approachable and always interested in players beyond the sport, while least favorites were described as egotistical, inconsistent, impersonal and biased in their determination of who played or received praise. Perhaps the most deleterious descriptors of coaches in this category were those who used humiliation, shame and ridicule as coaching tools and made fools of their players in front of teammates.

In contrast to the afferent descriptors, physical designates were more readily identified. Coaches exhibiting positive behaviors were remembered as being a positive role model, acknowledging the inevitability of mistakes by players, stressing doing one's best, welcoming and using player input and providing every player an opportunity to make the team. Positive coaches were remembered as stressing improvement while not criticizing or belittling, demanding perfection without screaming or yelling at players and being creative and exciting while making players feel important by working one-to-one with them. The negative behaviors were just as visible. Least favorite coaches were remembered as stressing winning at any cost, lieing to players, demanding respect without earning it and overworking players. Some coaches were even recalled as abusing smaller or younger players, running up scores unnecessarily and using fear and degradation as motivators.

All in all, the characteristics of both favorite and least favorite coaches remembered by athletes were very enlightening. The categories and characteristics related in this report are very similar to the work of Anshel (1990) in which seven categories of undesirable coaching behaviors were identified. Most of those categories . . . the lack of effective communication (including inappropriate content in pregame and half time talks); lack of explanation of rationale of strategies to players; expression of anger toward athletes; not defining the role or status of non-starters; failure to treat players as individuals and

the ineffective use of assistant coaches were identified by the students in the coaching classes.

Discussion:

Few coaches, if any, begin their coaching experiences with the intent to be anything other than a very positive influence on their players and teams. The positive characteristics remembered by athletes and ex-athletes in this study are indicative of the qualities which all coaches hoped to exhibit. Most of us want to have a positive impact on the physical, psychological and emotional growth of the young athletes that we encounter. We want to care about players away from sports and see ourselves as always being patient, ensuring every practice is both fun and developmentally sound while preparing teams who are competitive and improving every year. The question then becomes, why do some of us end up in the "negative column", not in wins and losses, but in the memories of our players? Where do the well intentioned goals get misplaced and change some of us so drastically? The answer to that question is complex and stems from many of the problems which exist in the coaching profession today.

In some areas, the authenticity of coaching as a profession is being questioned. A profession is generally defined as an occupation which requires advanced education and training, involves a majority of one's professional time, and serves as one's primary means of livelihood. To be a "profession", therefore, coaching must satisfy each criteria. Certainly, at any level, coaching consumes a great deal of time, especially during the season. It has been estimated that a coach in season will spend as much as 40 hours per week or more with the players. Along with the time commitment, coaches are expected to know and apply more non-sport specific information than they have in the past. Whole curricula such as the American Coaching Effectiveness Program (ACEP) and the Program for Athletic Coaches' Education (PACE) have been developed in response to the instructional needs of coaches. Unfortunately neither the **requirement** of advanced education or coaching as a primary source of income is a reality to many coaching positions. Today too many coaches are still poorly prepared and are participating in coaching as either an additional professional responsibility or as a volunteer. The situation often results in a coach with limited professional preparation, minimal knowledge outside the particular sport and little understanding of the complexity and demands of the position, and who does not depend on coaching as a primary source of income. When a profession does not furnish the primary source of income, it is easier for it to become less of a priority. It is little wonder, then, that there are coaches who, in their struggles to survive in athletics, develop many of the negative behaviors identified in this study. That knowledge does not forgive or excuse the negative behaviors of coaches, but is a first step in understanding the foundations of those behaviors and therefore giving educators direction as in eliminating or preventing them from ever occurring.

Another step in the elimination or prevention of negative behaviors is a realization of the social inconsistency that many coaches face in their professional lives. There are numerous contradictions which a coach must endure in the athletic environment. One common contradiction is the failure of athletic departments, school boards or private clubs to define and adhere to a philosophy of sport. Too often, members of those organizations fail to accept the value of defining a philosophy for their sports. They see it as an exercise in academic frivolity or something to be postponed, often indefinitely, until after the more immediate problems, such as scheduling, hiring coaches or fund raising, can be addressed. It is not until more serious questions arise that the need for a philosophy, or basic underlining goal statement(s) is recognized as a necessity. By that time, it is often too late.

In the same way that behaviors exhibit the philosophy of a coach, the philosophy of a sport organization can dictate or guide the behaviors of a coach. In the initiation of a philosophy, sport leaders must answer basic philosophical questions such as . . .

"What are we trying to do in sport?"
. . . win at any cost?
. . . develop physical sport skills?
. . . have fun?
. . . develop psychological and emotional growth in athletes?
. . . make money?
. . . increase players' chances for scholarships?
. . . develop better students?
. . . build sportsmanship and the ability to cooperate with others?

The honest answers to those questions, and others, will reflect the true philosophy of that organization. Unfortunately, the honest responses are not always the ones given to the press, school board or parents. The "true" answer to the question "To what length will we go to succeed?" will give everyone an indication as to what negative behaviors will be tolerated by a coach whose teams win, or how quickly a coach who develops skills and other positive non-athletic characteristics in players will be terminated if the team loses too much. The development of a "philosophy" which is both honest and specific is very difficult to achieve, but is one of the procedures necessary in addressing the problems identified in this paper.

Another remedial procedure is to investigate and accept the nature of coaches. The vast majority of coaches get into the "profession" because they, initially at least, loved the sport, enjoyed teaching and/or benefited from having a positive impact on young athletes. In a study of nearly 300 coaches in Montana, Stewart and Sweet (1992) found that 89% had gotten into coaching for at least one of those reasons. Furthermore, Coakley (1990) stated that while there are inflexible, insensitive coaches in athletics, there are no more than outside sport. Coakley is one of the few professionals to observe that the role of the coach is, unlike the physical educator, directly related to competition and competitive success. The implication is that there needs to be a consensus that competition is fine, if accomplished within the proper parameters, and that the sport administrators, whether in the public or private sector, need to accept outright that striving to be competitive and successful is one of their program's primary goals. Society's failure to agree on an overall goal for athletics has contributed to what Coakley (1990) referred to as "strategic withdrawal" within the coaching profession. Strategic withdrawal is a formation of coaching sub-cultures where members share common values, beliefs and customs. Coaching sub-cultures, in themselves, are understandable and even acceptable, but the additional characteristics of "likely to perpetuate accepted methods of doing things within a group" and "discouraging change within a profession" denies the growth of knowledge in sport sciences, the change in personalities of today's athletes or the evolution of society's perception of the role of sport. Coakley (1990) concluded that the development of a coaching sub-culture "would appear to be the result of the requirements of the (coaching) situation and not a product of underlying, generalizable traits (of coaches).

If the theory of "sub-cultures" is true, then the perpetuation of negative behaviors is a serious concern and justification for an attempt to provide the necessary educational and administrative support for coaches. The support needed is typically in the form of change, and change for coaches is frequently resisted. Some sport psychologists have suggested that patent acceptance of the need for change in coaching style in response to the various personalities of athletes is necessary for the long term success and survival of coaches (Iso-Ahola, Seppo & Hatfield; 1986). To develop the ability to change, however, most coaches will need assistance. Society's view of athletics has changed from a relatively total acceptance of the command style, no-nonsense coach to a more questioning and demanding society which no longer places athletics or coaches in the same category as "Mom, the American Flag and apple pie" (even the sacredness of those three icons has been challenged). In so doing, society demands greater accountability from the coach. If coaches are continuing to be developed from, or even influenced by, the

closed "sub-cultures" with minimal prior preparation for their "new" roles, then they are destined to struggle. A "struggling" coach is one who is more likely to disregard some of the loftier goals for more traditional, "hard-nosed" approaches to coaching. An adherence to a command style coach could foreseeably reduce stress by the elimination or devaluation of human interaction or concern for players.

Coakley (1990) presented nine reasons why coaches might fall back on more traditional coaching styles. He wrote that many coaches are so absorbed with game preparation, tactics and skill development that they do not hold players' feelings or personal needs as a high priority. A general lack of preparation in the non-sport specific areas of coaching contribute to that characteristic. The individuals become coaches who coach the game and not the players. Since most are ex-athletes, they know the game better than they know the characteristics of athletes. Understandably, if the new coach's input was not encouraged as a player, then players' are not recognized as valid sources of feedback. If coaches do allow player feedback, they can be highly selective to which player(s) they will listen. Typically coaches accept feedback from players who mimic their own perceptions and ignore players whose ideas might conflict with theirs. Comparably, coaches may see themselves as meeting the needs of some of their players, and do not see it as part of their professional responsibility to meet the needs of ALL athletes. A coach who accepts that philosophy will certainly experience conflict with parents and administrators who see all athletes as deserving of individualized attention and consideration. In a minority of cases, the personality of the coach may be such that open communication, healthy player/coach relationships, or player input are not possible. Some victorious coaches honestly see themselves as successful and neither have the desire or see the need to change. Finally, the players have responsibility in some cases. There are players who are either too shy or reluctant to communicate their feelings directly to the coach or see the traditional coaching style as the only way to ensure "success" as it is customarily defined . . . WINNING.

Conclusions:

Players are important sources of information as to what behaviors a coach is actually exhibiting. If coaching behavior is important to the coach, athletic administrators or parents, player input should be sought as a viable source of documentation. To fully appreciate the information received, those seeking it should adhere to certain guidelines and interpret feedback carefully within the context given. Players and coaches should be assured that the evaluation process is an anonymous, non-threatening situation whose primary goal is the improvement of the total athletic program. Players should not feel coerced nor intimidated if they are to communicate honestly, nor should it be just a case of players venting petty complaints at a coach. Players should feel that at least some of their input creates a change in behaviors or the situations which caused them. By the same token, athletic administrators must be responsive to coaches' circumstances and understand what environmental considerations might need altering to assist in behavioral changes. Goals and expectations for coaches and athletic programs might need to be re-defined, varied or diversified.

To achieve goal clarification, parent groups need to be included to delineate further the objectives of the athletic program. If the coach and the administrators are in agreement on the athletic mission, but parents, who often are a chief source of pressure and stress for coaches, are either unaware or have not participated in the development of an athletic philosophy, little has been achieved. Whether or not parents are included in the creation of athletic objectives, the goals must be unambiguously communicated to them repeatedly. Whether the goals are total commitment to a recreational, noncompetitive athletic program, a "win at any cost" approach or a logical compromise, parents and players must be aware of them prior to participation.

Table 1:

BEHAVIORS OF "BEST" COACHES

COGNITIVE BEHAVIORS	AFFECTIVE BEHAVIORS	PHYSICAL BEHAVIORS
good teacher taught every player, every aspect of the game took time to teach players taught sportsmanship & respect for opponent stressed fundamentals stressed the total student/athlete demanded personal greatness knew the sport set weekly goals for team great knowledge, communication & motivation skills good training techniques knew the rules of the sport practices were intense, but fun anged routines & used new drills set goals organized, calm, but in control stressed fundamentals first, winning second	good motivator made the game fun could talk to & trust him cared about the players very positive patient, supportive & interested in players as people practice was fun cared about me off the court was honest always could go to coach about anything thoroughly enjoyed coaching upbeat & encouraging a great friend knew how it felt to have a bad performance always believed in team's ability warm, compassionate, understanding & honest cared for the development of total player good personality traits built confidence in players sparked pride in players was enthusiastic was honest supportive motivated players loved the game caring, helpful & understanding proud of players regardless encouraged players friend 1st ----coach 2nd showed and earned respect had confidence in players interested in players motivated & disciplined players	never humiliated players individual attention to players seldom yelled & showed confidence in players was a creative, exciting coach a role model was fair and consistent easy to talk to treated all players fairly listened to players fair & consistent let players know it was OK to make a mistake was more than a coach... a friend was there for players, on & off the field participated with players did not leave anyone out stressed doing your best stressed improvement let players make some decisions used player input did not scream or yell at you... told you why you were taken out a perfectionist; demanded my attention... did not dwell on mistakes... never critisized or belittled... made us feel important by working 1 to 1 with us... fair, gave everyone a chance...

Table 2:

BEHAVIORS OF "WORST COACHES"		
COGNITIVE BEHAVIORS	**AFFECTIVE BEHAVIORS (feelings...)**	**PHYSICAL BEHAVIORS**
no knowledge of game no insight into game no communication seldom a word of praise always contradicted himself never an explanation as to why we had to run did not teach or motivate us was confusing did not know how to condition us did not enforce his own rules did not know the game did not want to develop unskilled players lack of experience unprofessional poor communication skills poor listener did not know the game uninformed & inconsistent did not develop skills	used negative comments for motivation no positive reinforcement for things done well showed favoritism very impersonal no respect for players shameful if team lost selfish was not dedicated no self control inconsistent showed favoritism lacked motivation poor sportsmanship non-caring bad temper no praise or confidence building did not motivate showed favoritism no love of sport inconsistent let personal factors influence who played too much joking at practice not dedicated totally alienated players only best athletes got praise did not care about us as individuals his goals were way out of wack with ours no emotion an egotistical maniac played favorites with seniors worked himself into a frenzy was always reliving his past never gave credit for doing a good job used humiliation & ridicule... was moody made fools of us in front of other players	did not take responsibility when things went wrong lazy always "my" team, never "our" team stressed winning at any cost overworked players screamed degrading comments used fear as motivator ran up score treated players as objects did not know when to quit too dominant very critical winning is everything just wanted the money showed up late for practice obsessed with statistics wouldn't tolerate opinions or questions 'cut' players down was not dedicated lied to players abused younger/smaller players was strictly into winning was dishonest to me & other players demanded respect without earning it

If philosophies are developed and communicated to all involved in athletic programs, great strides will be achieved to alter many of the negative behaviors still documented in coaching. If coaches, players, administrators and parents are, literally and figuratively, on the same page of the philosophical "play book", then less stress will be encountered by all. The reduction of stress in coaching will lead to a more positive relationship between the coach and players and contribute to a more positive athletic environment.

Finally, the lack of reference to winning by players as a prerequisite for a coach to be considered a favorite must be noted. The future coaches surveyed in this study said little concerning the win-loss record of their teams. According to Iso-Ahola, Seppo and Hatfield (1986) player satisfaction in sport participation is often a direct result of coaching behavior, not successful team performance. That observation is supported in this study.

References

Anshel, M.H. (1990) Sport psychology: From Theory to Practice. Gorsuch Scarisbrick, Pub. Scottsdale, Arizona.

Coakley, J.J. (1990). Sport in Society. Times Mirror/Mosby College Pub., St. Louis, Mo.

Iso-Ahola, Seppo E. & Hatfield, Brad (1986) "Phychology of Sports: A social psychological approach". W. C. Brown, Dubuque, Iowa.

Stewart, C. & Sweet, L. (1992) "The professional preparation of coaches: The problem continues." Journal of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance. August.