

SPORT MANAGEMENT

Failure to Rehire: Why Coaches Get Fired

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Abstract

The purpose of this work was to identify reasons coaches were not rehired in public school coaching positions. The intent was to use this information for content modification of courses in coach education. At the entry level, coaches are too often concerned only with their particular sport and how to develop successful athletes or winning teams. To fully prepare beginners in the stressful profession of coaching, novices must understand and accept that their success and longevity in coaching will be impacted by expectations other than winning. Athletic directors and principals from a northwest Rocky Mountain state were surveyed as part of a periodic evaluation of the state association's online coach education program. Two of the questions asked were as follows:

- If you did not rehire (fire) a coach in the last 3 years, what were the reasons?*
- What are the primary weaknesses you experience with beginning coaches?*

Approximately 50% of sport administrators responded. Their answers were analyzed and implications for the education of future coaches were found.

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According to Gearity and Murray (2011), research on poor coaching is limited, though, ironically, the incidence of negative behavior is highly reported in the popular press. Perhaps a component contributing to the continued poor behavior is the difficulty in convincing beginning coaches that it is not the Xs and Os of their sport that will affect their success, but the hidden 50% that will present them with the most struggles. The hidden elements include their abilities to teach their sport, communicate with groups other than their players, attend to the administrative rules and procedures required of their position, and achieve the major transition from athlete to coach.

In a report by the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency (2011), sport, and its potential for positive effects on participants, was recognized as a national asset. The coach ranked first as the primary influence on youth who participate. That reinforces the observations of others (Jowett, 2005; Olympiou, Jowett, & Duda, 2008) who stated coaches and the relationships they form with players are foundational to the total sport experience.

The coach–player dyad is a critical component in sport. The relationship between coaches and players, especially the behaviors of coaches with their athletes, affect not only the players' physical and skill development, but also their social and overall life development (Becker, 2009; Côté & Sedgwick, 2003). Coaching behaviors also contribute significantly to the atmosphere of the sport environment and, as such, are important in the evaluation of coaches. However, it is confounding that many coaches have difficulty recognizing their own negative behaviors (Smith & Smoll, 1997). Stewart (2013) used the memories of players and former players in identifying negative behaviors of their worst coaches. He found most of the behaviors had nothing to do with win–loss records, but rather were concentrated on personal, affective, or pedagogical conduct. Likewise, Stewart and Owens (2011) found the majority of characteristics of best coaches were related to variables that fit the area of social support. To better prepare the novice coach, strategies to improve behaviors in areas of identified weaknesses should be incorporated into curricula. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to continue the investigation into which coaching characteristics should be emphasized in preparatory classes for young coaches. This was accomplished by surveying current athletic directors and principals throughout the state who supervised their sport programs. These sport administrators were asked why coaches were not rehired (fired) in the last

3 years and the specific weaknesses experienced in current young coaches.

Method

The administrators ($N = 179$) responsible for sport in their schools were sent an introductory e-mail explaining the purpose of this study and requesting their participation. The e-mail contained an embedded link to a commercial online survey service. The voluntary nature of participation and their confidentiality were assured in the communication. After waiting 3 weeks, a second invitation/reminder was sent. A final request was sent 2 weeks later.

The survey is part of an ongoing evaluation of the Web-based coach education program developed and maintained by this author. The coaching curriculum has been successfully administered for approximately 15 years. The content is based upon national standards and reviewed and updated quarterly. Presently, all head coaches and many assistants are required to complete the material at least every 3 years.

Nearly 50% of the sport administrators ($n = 84$) responded to the survey. Each of the four high school divisions (by enrollment) in the state responded (Table 1).

Table 1
Level of Schools by Student Enrollment

Level	responses (n)	% of that classification
AA (826 or more students)	8	57%
A (825–340)	7	39%
B (339–120)	24	60%
C (119 or fewer students)	42	41%

Results

The sport administrators who responded provided 149 qualitative descriptions as to why coaches were not rehired and 204 weaknesses of new coaches. Of the reasons coaches did not return to their positions, the researcher of this study labeled 44 as Coach's Choice (retired, moved, resigned, etc.) and eliminated them from additional analysis. Qualitative analysis techniques (Babbie, 2005; Baumgartner & Hensley, 2006; Côté, Salmela, & Baria, 1993) were used to code the remaining responses. As a result of the initial coding of rea-

sons for firing, two general categories were established: Coaching Behavior (CB) and Coaching Effectiveness (CE). The 49 items in CB were then grouped into the subgroups Coaching Behavior-General (CBG); Coaching Behavior-Morals (CBM); Coaching Behavior-Parents (CBPA); Coaching Behavior-Players (CBPL); Coaching Behavior-Rules (CBR), and Coaching Behavior-Affective (CBA; Table 2). Likewise, the general category of CE was divided into the subcategories Coaching Effectiveness-Performance (CEP); Coaching Effectiveness-Communication (CEC); Coaching Effectiveness-Knowledge (CEK); and Coaching Effectiveness-Teaching (CET; Table 3).

Table 2
Subcategories of Coaching Behaviors (CB) That Resulted in Being Fired (n = 49)

Subcategory	<i>n</i>	% of total
CB-General	13	26.4
CB-Players	10	20.5
CB-Rules	10	20.5
CB-Affective	8	16.2
CB-Parents	4	8.2
CB-Morals	4	8.2

Table 3
Subcategories of Coaching Effectiveness (CE) That Resulted in Being Fired (n = 41)

Subcategory	<i>n</i>	% of total
CE-Teaching	22	53.7
CE-Competition	11	26.8
CE-Knowledge	5	12.2
CE-Communication	3	7.3

Within the area of CB, responses were evenly distributed between four subcategories. CBG and CBPL each had 11 responses. In CBG, the comments included generalities such as behaved poorly, misconduct, poor role model, lack of professionalism, and was not a fit for the position. In CBPL, the responses were more specific.

They included behaviors such as unable to create boundaries between themselves and players, behavior toward players, failure to treat athletes as students, and not fair to players. The next most frequent subcategories were CBR ($n = 10$) and CBA ($n = 8$). Ten participants commented that coaches were not rehired due to their inability or unwillingness to follow association, administration, district, or school rules. In the area of CBA, examples of responses were poor attitude, lack of commitment, lack of interest, and lack of motivation. In the final categories, five participants commented on the inability of the coach to work with parents (CBPA) and two commented on a specific moral issue (CBM).

CE was divided into four subcategories. Nearly half of the responses concerned coaches' inability to teach (CET). Participants commented on specific items such as poor supervision of practice and away games, poor organization of practices, canceled practices too often, and general comments on coaches' lack of leadership qualities and overall ineffectiveness and incompetence. Paralleling these comments was the area of knowledge (CEK; $n = 5$). Five administrators identified coaches' lack of knowledge in their sport or their ability to coach. The second most prevalent subcategory in effectiveness was performance (CEP). The coaches' win-loss record was recorded only twice in the 11 responses in this category, but the other nine responses related to poor performance, lack of improvement, not competitive, and administrative/community dissatisfaction with performance. Three respondents specifically identified the coaches' poor communication skills as reasons for dismissal (CEC).

Not surprisingly, the weaknesses of young coaches closely reflected the reasons for dismissal. The respondents provided 204 weaknesses of new coaches. Using the aforementioned qualitative analysis, the weaknesses were categorized into 15 areas (Table 4). Six categories represented approximately 70% of the identified weaknesses: Teaching (17%), Knowledge (Lack of; 12%), Interaction With Parents (12%), Interaction With Players (9%), Communication Problems (9%), and Attitude (8%).

Table 4*Areas of Weakness of Beginning Coaches (n = 204)*

Category	<i>n</i>	% of total
Teaching	35	17
Knowledge	25	12
Working with parents	25	12
Working with players	24	12
Communication	18	9
Attitude	16	8
Commitment to winning	13	6
Following rules	12	6
Work ethic	10	5
Experience	9	4
Sportsmanship	6	3
Morals	5	3
Behaviors	3	(less than 1)
Injuries	3	(less than 1)
Emotional stability	2	(less than 1)
Administration duties	2	(less than 1)
Leadership	1	(less than 1)
Organization	1	(less than 1)

Discussion

The behavior of coaches has been linked to the development of strong, positive relationships with their players, players' satisfaction, and players' and team's performance (Jowett, 2005). Therefore, it was expected that coaching behavior would play a pivotal role in why coaches in this survey were not rehired.

Participants whose comments were coded in the prominent subcategories in CB (CBG and CBPL) identified coaches who exhibited actions that could not, should not, exist in this profession. Related to CBG, coach educators should attempt to be more specific in describing poor behavior, misconduct, poor role model, and lack of professionalism. Coach educators err when they assume that a general discussion of being a good role model or being professional will produce positive behaviors in students. Likewise, more specificity is needed when presenting coach and player behaviors such as creating boundaries, treating athletes as student-athletes, and eliminating negativity toward players. Equally, a careful determination of fairness is needed. Stewart (2006) found that players defined fa-

voritism and fairness as it related to former coaches in many ways. Similar information would be needed from sport administrators as to how they defined the concept. Does fairness mean everyone plays an equal amount, or does it mean the best players earn more playing time?

Unlike fairness, the inability or unwillingness to follow school, district, or association rules is more objective. It was the third most identified area for cause of dismissal of coaches and should stand on its own merit. Of course, the assumption is that coaches have been presented and required to read the rules under which they will be evaluated. Unfortunately, some sport administrators have neither the resources nor the will to follow up on a determination of coach understanding and compliance. The number of coaches supervised by one administrator often compounds this problem. However, with the continued legal and risk management expectations of programs, rule compliance will remain essential. One coach education class cannot present the specifics of local, district, or state requirements. However, the emphasis of knowing and following rules and the consequences of overlooking them should be continued.

Like the concept of fairness, coaching behaviors in CBA are often subjective. When administrators identify areas such as attitude, commitment, lack of interest, or motivation, it is difficult to determine what specific behaviors they mean. However, until additional information is gleaned from sport administrators, coach educators should do their best to specify how the positive sides of these behaviors are exhibited. Administrators usually determine attitudes, commitment, lack of interest, and motivation by behaviors. Positive examples of these concepts should be identified and discussed thoroughly throughout a formal coach education curriculum. In addition, educators can observe negative behaviors in young candidates prior to the entry level of coaching and initiate corrective procedures. If remediation fails, candidates should be eliminated from the coaching profession.

CE was the second category determined for dismissal. Not surprisingly, the most common subcategory was CET. Teaching, while widely accepted as a key component of coaching and often deemed synonymous (Becker, 2009; Bergmann-Drewe, 2000), has been identified as pivotal in the effectiveness of coaches at all levels. Likewise, it is one area that continually is mentioned as a weakness (Stewart, 2013). Sport administrators in this study listed coaches' inability to organize and/or supervise practices and games as well as

general references such as poor leadership and being ineffective and incompetent. They also regularly identified coaches' lack of knowledge in the skills, tactics, and rules of their sport. Teaching and lack of knowledge were also identified as the primary weaknesses of new or young coaches representing 29% of the 204 responses of administrators. The conclusion, therefore, is that teaching is valued in sport programs. Teaching is a skill that may be learned and improved, and it is a misnomer that because athletes once played the sport, they can teach or coach it. Unfortunately, the trend of having to hire coaches from outside the education profession where training in basic principles of teaching is limited is increasing. There appears to be no end to that tendency. Therefore, more emphasis should be placed in entry coach education classes and sport-specific coaching classes on the science of teaching, stressing not only what to teach but also how to teach.

The second subcategory was CEP. Of the 11 respondents who mentioned this area, only two specified a poor win–loss record. The other nine mentioned poor performance, no improvement, and community dissatisfaction. Granted, these concepts probably are somewhat related to a win–loss record, but evidence has been found to support that winning, although important, is not the primary reason for coaches' firing (Mikel, 2003). Obviously, the majority of coaches want to compete well and win within the rules and expectations of the program, yet the zeal of public opinion and parental pressure often subjugates the reasons for dismissal.

Conclusions

The interest in and criticism of coach education have never been greater. With that attention comes the required evaluation of the content and methods of coaching curriculum (Gilbert, Gallimore, & Trudel, 2009). Many researchers have noted that current practices of classroom and 1-day workshops are ineffective and often dismissed by sport administrators and coaches as wastes of time and resources (Bowes & Jones, 2006; Jones, Armour, & Protrac, 2003, 2004; Saury & Durand, 1998). However, others have noted that although true, few alternatives are available (Stoszowski & Collins, 2012). A shortage of resources—money, time, and facilities—combined with high turnovers and even higher cultural expectations restrict what may be accomplished in coach education.

Often the traits of elite coaches provide clues to the requirements of success in the profession. Nash, Sproule, and Horton (2011) found that experienced coaches were committed to planning their training

sessions carefully in relation to specific criteria. These coaches not only had extensive understanding of learning theory and teaching strategies but also emphasized the individual athletes and the specific demands of their sport. They also administered their knowledge in a competitive environment while developing and maintaining positive environments for their athletes. The coaches were able to apply the knowledge of their sport, understood the individual nature of their athletes, had well-developed interpersonal skills, and gave their athletes individualized attention, which assisted athletes in reaching elite status. Of course, these coaches were at the highest levels, where they were full-time, paid professionals and coached in a unique environment. The majority of beginning coaches in public schools do not have the resources of elite coaches. However, just as the coach of the beginning athlete maintains high aspirations for the novice, so should the coach educator for the beginning coach.

To reach that higher level of coaching, coach educators should establish foundations of knowledge for beginners that would increase the chances for excellence in all aspects of coaching. To do so, more concrete examples of coaching should be incorporated into the content.

Jones and Wallace (2005) stated, “Coaching is a tough job” (p. 119). It is hard because it combines the complexity of sports—the athletes, the opponent, the environment, the society—in a public arena. That scrutiny is public and usually plays an important role in the coaches’ community. Jones and Wallace also identified other sources of ambiguity in coaching such as unreachable and unrealistic goals, the lack of prioritization of those goals, and conflict between coaches’ and players’ goals. Coach educators and sport administrators could assist the beginning coach by emphasizing the need to identify and prioritize program goals. Goals of shareholders of an athletic program may conflict. For beginning coaches to survive the early years in the profession, they must be guided through identifying and then navigating those dangerous situations.

The purpose of this study was to gain a “more intricate grasp of the coaching process” (Bowes & Jones, 2006, p. 243) to improve coach education. Coach education, like coaching itself, is complex (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006), and coach educators must consider practical constraints. The majority of young men and women entering the coaching profession enter at a basic level. Often, they are volunteers or meagerly paid for their time and efforts, yet they are truly dedicated to their programs and athletes. Rarely do they or their school dis-

tricts have the resources in time or money for extensive tutorships or mentoring. Likewise, few universities or colleges have the resources to duplicate the efforts of student teaching or supervised internships in coaching development. Yet, athletic programs continue to grow in participants, cultural interests, and expectations. Therefore, coach educators are responsible for considering the practical aspects of the athletic environment for which they are preparing coaches by identifying the expectations, constraints, and weaknesses and addressing them in entry-level coursework.

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