

Effectiveness of different coaching styles in sport



Sports Coaching

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Principles and best practice in coaching

The ideal of sport has changed markedly in the past fifteen to twenty years (Polley, 1998) ^[1]. What was once seen as leisure and/or a recreational activity is now viewed primarily as a vehicle through which one can instigate deep-seated cultural and societal change. This is especially true in the UK which has a particularly insipid connection to sport with a variety of games considered endemic in British society; indeed, many of the most popular sports in the world were played first in Britain and their governing bodies still reside within British state borders. As a result, as Dawn Penney (2000: 59) declares, sport, society and equity are interlinked to a degree that has only very recently been acknowledged by academic, specifically sociological, study.

“ Physical education and sport are part of our social and cultural worlds. The relationship is dynamic, with the policies and practices of physical education reflecting, but also clearly shaping (reproducing and/or challenging), the values and interests of broader society.” ^[2]

It is for this reason that the concept of 'best practice' has attained a new level of significance in recent years relating specifically to the adoption of the finest possible academic, psychological and ethical procedures especially with regards to children and young people so as to prepare them mentally and physically for the multiple demands of adult life whether this be in a sporting or non-sporting context. 'Best practice' utilises research conducted primarily between the years 1950 to 1980 with the implementation of these strategies taking place over the past thirty years. It is a wholly recent phenomenon and, as such, is lacking in some areas of research compared to other fields of sociological study. However, in the twenty first century the amount of attention devoted to the subject is likely to increase with the dual spectre of globalisation and commercialisation making sports a highly lucrative hub of activity.

The principles governing the concept of 'best practice' are centred upon the twin aims of forging a common sense of unity and teamwork within a group of players and at the same time to nurture individual skill and flair on a one-to-one basis so that the more gifted players' skills are honed without neglecting the primacy of the team as the over-riding ethos of 'best practice'. This essential dualism which resides at the epicentre of 'best practice' coaching concepts is inherently affected by the evolution of sports players as they grow up. For instance, young players (aged six to ten years old) are much more inclined to gravitate towards the individual element of sports and competition with the group dynamic coming at a later age (developing primarily between the ages of twelve and sixteen). For this reason, there is no 'best way' to 'best practice'; no right or wrong. Rather,

there is a great exchange of fluidity between concepts, principles and practices that should be implemented on an individual basis. This is as true of coaching adults (clients) as it is of coaching youngsters where Jennifer Rogers (2007: 7-10) ^[3] has outlined six core principles that 'define' the role of the coach in the modern era. These are:

1. The client is resourceful (the coach's sole aim is to work with the client to achieve all of their potential – as defined by the client).
2. The coach's role is to spring loose the client's resourcefulness.
3. Coaching addressing the whole person: past, present and future.
4. The client sets the agenda.
5. The coach and the client are equals.
6. Coaching is about change and action.

The common denominator outlined by Rogers is that coaching is always triggered by change – be it a change in age, in circumstance, in style or technique. Furthermore, because change is the currency in which the coach does business, there is bound to be wildly fluctuating styles of coaching that fit wildly different social and cultural contexts and it is towards these different styles and contexts that attention must now be turned.

The effectiveness of different styles of coaching in different contexts

It has been shown that the evolution of young people greatly affects the implementation of coaching methods pertaining to the precarious balance between coaching the individual and the group dynamic. This is necessarily dependent on the kind of sport being coached: team sports such as football require a dedication to the team ethic while sports such as tennis and golf

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stress the individual element of competition. Sports such as cricket combine the team ethic with a heavy emphasis upon individual ability, certainly with regards to batting, which is a very solitary skill that requires intensive levels of concentration and individualism (Palmer, 1999) ^[4]. Thus, in the first instance, effective coaching requires the practitioner to tailor his or her coaching style to the sport in question and then to further tailor these coaching techniques to the age group of the team or individual being coached.

This inherent diversity in coaching styles is also true of the economic context of coaching adults. Certain sports require greater levels of economic participation than others. Golf, for example, is an expensive sport that demands that the participant is well funded so as to purchase the necessary equipment such as clubs, bags, clothing and, most importantly, membership to a golf club. The same can be said of tennis and cricket where the equipment is a vital part of the ultimate success or failure of the technique of the client in question. Economic context is also important with regards to the psychological element of coaching with the social, cultural and political problems of urban poverty playing an important part in the types of coaching techniques which are likely to yield the best results from any given demographic. There can be no doubt that a coaching style employed for a group of middle class practitioners with free access to capital, time and resources is going to be markedly different from the kind of coaching style deployed for children and adults who do not have access to the same luxuries and who therefore are going to respond to different coaching techniques.

Economic context, demographic context and age context are further compounded by the increasingly common problem of multiculturalism and, specifically, globalisation, which has obvious consequences for teachers, mentors and coaches operating at all levels of society throughout the UK. When one thinks, for instance, of the impact of language upon coaching (relaying tactics, pointing out areas of strength and weakness, and, most significantly, attempting to instil a team ethic) one can see the extent to which the role of the coach is inexorably intertwined with the fate of mass movement of peoples across the planet in the twenty first century. As Jones (1997: 27) declares, “ there is no more important task within the wider coaching process than that of communication.” [5] Bains and Patel (1994) have long pointed out the blatant under-representation of Asians playing professional football in England despite some areas in the Midlands and the North-West of England having urban areas with a higher than 50% ratio of ethnic communities.

“ Recent Sport England national statistics confirmed that people of South Asian origin have markedly lower participation rates than other minorities or the indigenous population.” (Collins, 2003: 75) [6]

This anomaly with regards to the high numbers of Asians living in modern Britain and the disproportionately small number of Asians playing football, it has been argued, is due to coaches indulging in outmoded stereotyping when it comes to coaching players from the Asian community. Asians are still seen as primarily academic achievers over sports players and where they are perceived as sports players they are still pigeon-holed in typical Asian

images of cricket players; rarely are they ever seen as potential professional footballers. Likewise black players are still seen as primarily quick, powerful players; rarely, the tactical brains or the spiritual heartbeat of the side.

This cultural element to sports coaching is exacerbated by the historical gender divide between males and females in a sporting context. Here, just as with ethnic people, stereotypes remain the dominant coaching paradigm. Girls and women are expected to play traditionally female sports such as netball, hockey, lacrosse, swimming and tennis. This, however, is in direct opposition to the growing numbers of women playing traditionally male-dominated sports such as rugby, cricket and football with the latter in particular experiencing a veritable boom in female interest since the beginning of the 1990s.

“ A generation ago, sport was a core, patriarchal institution in a larger, contested gender order. Now, with the dramatic growth of girls’ and women’s athletics participation, sport no longer simply or unambiguously plays this reactionary role in gender relations. Sport is now more internally contested.” (2002 *introduction xxii*) ^[7]

It is, in the final analysis, up to the sports coach to take each of these mitigating factors and contexts into account so that the practitioner is able to coach skills and techniques that are relevant to the contemporary era as opposed to perpetuating anachronistic stereotypes that do little to advance civilised society in both a sporting and non-sporting context.

How models of coaching can help practitioners

Studying different models of coaching represents the scientific element of sports mentoring whereby the student and practitioner can attempt to explain the essence and purpose of coaching via the development of models (Fairs, 1987: 17-19) ^[8]. It can be separated into two distinct camps: the ' of' coaching camp and the ' for' coaching camp. Models ' of' coaching are based upon empirical research investigating best practice while the ' for' coaching models are idealistic representations that arise from attempts to identify a concrete set of assumptions about the coaching process. The majority of practitioners tend to employ a symbiosis of the two models incorporating an ' of' and ' for' model of best practice. In this way, empirical data can be used in a realistic setting that takes into account the age, skills and other contexts that affect the coaching process. However, these two models of coaching underline the extent to which academia and intellectual analysis has come to dominate the empirical study of sports performance when in fact the first hand experience of established practitioners ought to form the basis of all models of coaching sports. The difference, essentially, comes down to one of theory and practice with the concept of ' expertise' necessarily clouded by the arguments of the academics and the professionals respectively. Once again, though, the individual element of the coaching process must be highlighted so as to reflect the inherent complexity that takes place within the field of sports with vastly differing levels of skill and ability being matched by the vastly different psychological reactions to slumps in form and technique.

It is, ultimately, up to the national governing sports bodies to ensure that the primacy of holistic coaching practice does not become relegated at the expense of literature, theory and academia (Lyle, 1999: 1-24). [9] For this reason, organisations such as Sport England have been established by the central government in a bid to impose a centralise model for sports development on regionalised sports bodies so as to directly influence and aid practitioners. The primary model deployed by Sport England is the “traditional sports development continuum” - a pyramid which locates foundation as the core, base value followed in hierarchical terms by participation, performance and, finally, excellence (Bramhan et al, 1999: 3).

This generic model is dovetailed by more advanced models for practitioners to use with athletes at a professional or elite stage in their sports. As is so often the case it is the Australians who represent the pinnacle of academic research into the coaching process with the revolutionary ‘Old Way, New Way’ technique correction model offering an intensive ‘one session’ approach to the problem of proven performers suffering seemingly inexplicable dips in form and technique with the case of Australian fast bowler Jason Gillespie standing tall as the most prominent example of therapeutic success achieved via sports practitioners embracing new means of solving old problems. ‘Old Way, New Way’ is consequently a manifestation of the much sought after collaboration between academic researchers and sports practitioners which works on a psychological as well as a physical level in a bid to continue the sportsperson’s quest for skill development and continuous technical improvement.

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Footnotes

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