

Part 1

The sports coach meets the executive coach: what can we learn from sports coaching?

In the first of this two-part series, **Erik de Haan** and **Pat McCarry** review the role of the contemporary, elite sports coach and consider the skills that might be realistically applied to coaching in other contexts.





We would argue that modern sports coaching is a discipline that is often misunderstood, and intend to highlight how it is far more nuanced than a simple act of skills training.

The role of the sports coach

The sports coach has slightly different roles depending on the sport and the country that they are working in. For example, a football coach in the English Premier League is understandably called the manager because of added responsibilities of leadership and conducting player transfers. In other sports, coaches can have more specific roles that focus primarily on player/team performance. Generally, in the world of professional sport, performance is our main concern as it normally (but not always) translates to measurable results. Like executive coaching, sports coaching does not follow one singular approach and will be conducted differently, depending on the background of the coach and the needs of the client. Success will be determined by the client, who may have no immediate interest in elevating skills or performance. The focus might be, for example, on living a balanced life or on developing as a mature and empowered human being. We are unable to draw sharp distinctions between these disciplines as we review how approaches and outcomes may have a different emphasis.

Competitive advantage through marginal gains

In the sports industry today there is an almost forensic interest in and fascination with how success might be achieved at the elite level. It has become such big business that the accountability for those involved is now extreme. Feedback in this profession for both players and coaches is constant, conflicting, and at times unforgiving. This has sometimes encouraged the adoption of practices which are, at times, questionable in terms of ethics, but it has, at the same time, helped to create highly effective approaches that could, in our view, be transferred successfully to other industries.

To ensure a competitive advantage where small margins make such great differences,



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the successful sports coach must not only possess personal qualities such as considerable resilience, 'steel' and 'nous', but also an in-depth knowledge of their specific discipline and an acute understanding of the processes by which people learn and are (intrinsically) motivated. Arguably, the most skilful contemporary practitioners, such as Pep Guardiola (football), Steve Hanson (rugby), Greg Popovic (basketball) and Carlo Ancelotti (football), are exhibiting such understanding today. There are also exceptional, less well-known coaches, choosing to work at the developmental (youth) level rather than the performance level, because there is less demand for short-term success and perhaps more of an opportunity to facilitate the growth of the whole person. Unfortunately, we rarely get to hear about their work in the same way, but we certainly see the results of their efforts when, for example, a small country or less glamorous club produces a disproportionate number of outstanding players. →





Truly great coaches possess humility in that they are always learning and this learning comes mostly from the experience of rigorous inquiry. In an arena that has become increasingly professional and pressurised, the coach is accountable and is always in search of an 'edge'. This edge is found in constant learning, distributed leadership, high-quality practices and an acute understanding of the learning and relational processes



The evolution of coaching

The role of the sports coach has been transformed over the past 40 years. Since the 1970s there has been a movement, slow at first, towards an athlete-centred approach that engages the individual and team in the spirit of inquiry. This trend is certainly not universal and depends to a degree on the coach's personality, the level of player being coached, the sport in question and the cultural context. However, successful coaches have certainly discovered that professional sport evolves at ever increasing speeds and, as such, it is essential to develop and engage intelligent and motivated decision makers who can adapt, in the moment, to fluid and complex situations.

The history of sports coaching philosophy and methodology in many ways mirrors other changes in society, education and business organisations that have occurred in the last five or six decades. The emergence of humanistic and self-actualising (Maslow) models of human needs and development (Rogers) slowly influenced societal attitudes, in addition to changes in practices. By the 1970s, an evolution and greater understanding of the learning environment was occurring, after many years of traditional education. Within this there was also a more intuitive and sophisticated sense of what components motivated individuals to work and perform. The increasingly accountable sports coaches and teachers at this time began to question whether their previous methods were actually effective. Were their students and players actually improving? If not, then it was time to review and innovate their methods. The progressive coach was observant, reflective, and openly embraced change. In an arena that was becoming increasingly professional and pressurised, the coach needed to find an edge.

In the US at this time, the tennis coach Tim Gallwey was discovering that the more he taught and corrected his players, the worse they often performed. He noticed that the less he taught, the more they learnt for themselves. He concluded that it was important for the player to pay more careful attention to his or her own experience in the moment rather than an ongoing commentary (whether internal or external). The age-old idea that a coach

imparting knowledge and correcting errors would automatically guarantee a player's improvement was now under scrutiny. From these observations, Gallwey developed his 'inner game' theories and first published the *Inner Game of Tennis* (1974).¹ Many people argue that his ideas gave birth to the field of executive coaching as we understand it today. Gallwey argued that optimal performance is a natural phenomenon that evolves organically, but is often hindered by the interference of negative, distracted thinking. Such thinking can be the result of all the advice, feedback, checklists and negative criticism received over time – and it can be compounded by inflexible coaches who take away the player's autonomy. Gallwey was proposing and promoting a coaching method where the sports coach created an opening for the player to improve and perform optimally through *direct experience*.¹

Soon afterwards, two physical education lecturers at Loughborough University, Rod Thorpe and Dave Bunker, developed a new way of teaching physical education, known as Teaching Games For Understanding (TGFU),² which was a radical change from the old system of teaching. They proposed a methodology, which focused more on playing modified games, where students and players could explore strategy and decision making together in a context that was far more realistic and enjoyable than isolated technical activities, such as standing in line and shooting unopposed at a goal.

This new method was an exciting and innovative movement that caught on in some areas, but many practitioners were (and still are) reluctant to modify methods that had been in place and unquestioned for a long time. Many coaches and teachers were anxious about handing the learning over to the players, fearing a loss of control or a perception from others that they were not actually doing anything. The philosophy was more enthusiastically embraced in Australia and New Zealand, where it became known as 'game sense'.

In this new player-centred approach, the emphasis was on empowering athletes as individuals and yet also on integrating them into cohesive, committed and highly intelligent

teams. The development of technical and physical skills was increasingly complemented by honing perception, self-awareness, reflexivity and openness. A key part of this process was the building of a healthy confidence and ego strength while at the same time nurturing a personal humility that benefits the team. This is a highly demanding challenge for sports coaches and creates a need for traditional, omniscient and omnipotent (transformational) leadership to make way for a more humble and reflective approach. Sports coaching now requires a much more rigorous, inclusive and nuanced interaction and a better understanding of what confidence and humility actually signify in high-pressure environments. Ideally the experiences at youth level have prepared the athletes/players for these demands, which have led to a more comprehensive, professional approach across levels, with considerations for the technical, physical, tactical and mental side of the game.

Authentic communication

The role of the coach in the context of sport requires a more proactive approach than in many other professions because the coach in sport is often, but not always, a manager as well. Their position is unique and challenging in that they will need to combine direction, inquiry, mentoring, and sometimes even counselling, on a daily basis while critically establishing an atmosphere of trust and respect. Without this trust, the coach will be unable to engage in the often direct and challenging conversations that are essential in the role. There is little time to withhold plain truths and feedback. This can be a real challenge for coaches who are overly concerned with protecting their own and others' feelings. A lack of directness confuses players and endangers trust in the same way that stinging criticism does. The New Zealand All Blacks have an important phrase: 'In the belly, not in the back', which operates as a mantra for authentic communication and cultural cohesion.

By establishing this trust, the coach also models a blueprint for honest and transparent player-to-player relationships that are so essential to success. Successful coaches know that cultural dysfunction kills team success and even the greatest coaches can fall prey

to this, as José Mourinho experienced when his championship-winning football team, Chelsea, collapsed in 2015. This was no coincidence. Mourinho is a wonderfully astute tactical coach and forges intense relationships with his players, yet each of his highly successful campaigns has ground to a shuddering halt after a three-year period.

A holistic approach to sports coaching

The former Manchester United coach, Sir Alex Ferguson, has recently been teaching his leadership philosophy at the Harvard Business School. Ferguson emphasises the need to develop and engage the whole person if they are to contribute fully to a highly functioning team: *'The job of a manager, like that of a teacher, is to inspire people to be better. Give them better technical skills, make them winners, make them better people, and they can go anywhere in life.'*³

Similarly, the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team's mantra is 'Better people make better All Blacks'.⁴ The All Blacks, back-to-back rugby World Champions, primarily recruit players based on personal character (given a baseline of skill) and then develop and promote self-awareness and emotional intelligence within those players as key drivers of success.

Great coaches bring this holistic approach, combining caring for and a commitment to the personal development and wellbeing of the individual players, with an unflinching dedication to the success of the team and club. These are not seen as mutually exclusive concerns to the likes of Ferguson, Dave Brailsford (Team Sky), Steve Hanson (All Blacks) or Pep Guardiola (now Manchester City); however, the coaches who successfully manage this apparent dichotomy are few.

The progressive coach exhibits humility

The progressive coach is, therefore, challenging, innovative, observant and empathic. Such coaches involve their players in constant inquiry and rigorous debate. There can be no resting on laurels and if they passively accept coaching models and processes from books and courses, then they will fail quickly and unceremoniously. In addition, if the process becomes too much about themselves, then failure is likely to follow

swiftly. The truly great coaches (defined by longevity) possess humility in that they are always learning, and this learning comes mostly from the experience of rigorous inquiry. In an arena that has become increasingly professional and pressurised, the coach (even at the youth level) is accountable and is always in search of an 'edge'. This edge is found in constant learning, distributed leadership, high-quality practices and an acute understanding of the learning and relational processes.

The coach has limited time to make an impact before the next game and must, therefore, take every possible opportunity to maximise improvement in what is a ruthlessly competitive arena. Graham Henry, a former head teacher and the national coach of the exceptional 2011 World Cup winning rugby team, puts it this way: *'I'm from an educational background so I'm very keen on it being a learning environment. The result of this is that people get better, they're always improving... how can we make this better, how can we improve this?'*⁵

Henry brought in wrestling coaches to help with scrummaging, jujitsu experts, psychiatrists to work with stress management and even Maori cultural experts to help reconnect the team with their identity. He also wanted to know what the best practices were in business and has let us know that the All Blacks' 'bible' was Jim Collins' leadership book, *Good to Great*, which emphasises the need for genuine humility.⁶

A constraints-based approach to coaching

Henry also organised dynamic coaching sessions that directly mirrored the most competitive matches in terms of intensity and structure. This system of coaching is referred to as 'constraints-based coaching' where the coach will add and modify constraints to the players, task or environment in order to facilitate improvement in a certain area.⁷ For example, the coach might make the field smaller to add pressure on technique or they may make the field larger to increase fitness levels. This is more likely to be seen as relevant by the players, which in turn nurtures a higher level of motivation. This method of coaching is derived from dynamical systems theory (DST). When applied in the →



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Sir Alex Ferguson



context of sports coaching, DST implies that individuals and teams are self-organising, adaptive organisms that will evolve, given a variety of different stimuli. The key for the coach is to provide realistic challenges that drive deep, nuanced and situation-specific learning, as opposed to providing the players with simplistic solutions to those challenges from the outset. It is this work that allows players to respond, at speed, to different stimuli when engaged in pressurised competitive environments.

The power of observation

Sir Alex Ferguson was very aware of the importance of the involvement and intrinsic motivation of his players in facilitating constant improvement. He also learned early in his career that it was difficult to develop his team optimally without the ability to observe his players accurately, so he increasingly allowed assistant coaches to organise the sessions while he observed. His words on the importance of the 'wide-focused' viewing of training sessions are most surprising: 'Once I stepped out of the bubble, I became more aware of a range of detail and my performance jumped. Seeing a change in a player's habits or a dip in his enthusiasm allowed me to go further with him. Is it family problems? Is he struggling financially? Is he tired? Sometimes I could even tell if a player was injured when he thought he was fine. I don't think many people understand the value of observing. I came to see observation as a critical part of my management skills. The ability to see things is key; or more specifically, the ability to see things that you don't expect to see.'³ This comment has an almost Zen-like quality about it and is remarkably similar to a phrase written by Charles Darwin in his autobiography: 'I think I am superior to the common run of men in noticing things which easily escape attention, and in observing them carefully.'⁸

Is this completeness of presence and clarity of observation not an essential skill for any coach? In addition, is it not an attribute that any coach would wish to facilitate in their players or clients?

Ferguson's quote is representative of the fact that he was extremely observant and acutely aware of the wellbeing of his players. Despite his occasional and infamous 'hairdryer treatment' (vernacular for stinging reprimands of players) Ferguson was also intuitively cognisant of the influence of wellbeing on performance, and this is a key area to his success that has often been understated. By no longer having to coach every group session, he created space and energy to conduct more one-to-one coaching sessions and informal conversations with his players. Consequently, no one wanted to let down Ferguson, their team-mates or themselves. It was his genius to combine a sense of community with player autonomy and the licence to take risks within clear tactical frameworks.

There is much that coaches in other contexts can learn from the exceptional sports coach. Sports coaches now have increasingly rigorous approaches to development and are uncompromisingly dedicated to the success of their athletes/team. Inherent in the process is a perfect feedback loop based on hard 'results' that is possibly more ambiguous in most other professions. In sport, the coach is never without clear performance goals, and their skill is in converting these demanding goals into high quality, structured coaching sessions within an effective and highly interactive learning environment. Sports coaches tend to be more responsible than executive coaches for 'winning' and results and they exert more influence in the context of their coaching sessions. Nevertheless there are in our view certainly areas where executive coaches can learn from sports coaches:

Finally, one must not underestimate luck. Sometimes the luck is with you, sometimes it is not. By this I mean that a set of matches fall in the right ways where you play lesser teams and confidence grows. That is a random act, over which you have no control. Clearly a good coach must make the best of what they are given and how events fall; but if things go your way, a referee misses a call or makes a mistake and you benefit, it is always helpful. Good coaches make the best of the luck or opportunities which come their way.

John Neal, Professor of Practice in Sports Business Performance, Ashridge Business School, private communication

1. Good sports coaches know that what makes a good coach... is a good player. They know we should not underestimate the capability of the performer and overestimate the role of the coach. The factor that matters most in all sports is the quality and creativity of the players, and so that is what sports coaches are after, relentlessly.⁹
2. They have the ability to transcend the dichotomy of 'player' and 'club' ('leader' and 'organisations') and so help to align competing forces.
3. They also know how to transcend the dichotomy of internal locus of evaluation and external feedback and so help players to have the best data at their disposal as they make their autonomous choices.
4. They aim to be ruthlessly and uncompromisingly direct and open when it comes to feedback, within a humble and containing frame.
5. They understand the powers of observation for client and coach - reading the game and reading the player.
6. They allow for a highly personal, unique, trusting and spontaneous player-coach relationship to develop, despite the many pulls from the environment.

The most successful coaches in sport are driven to learn from other elite sports coaches, successful corporations and even the military. We intend in our next article to highlight what sport can learn from the field of executive coaching. It is our belief that the psychological and relational elements of coaching might be the next frontier in the development of elite individuals and teams.

In the next instalment of our research into 'sports coaches meeting executive coaches' we will consider what sports coaches can learn from executive coaches. ■

Erik de Haan is Director of Ashridge's Centre for Coaching, a psychodynamic psychotherapist and Professor of Organisation Development and Coaching at the VU University of Amsterdam. He has written 11 books and more than 150 articles in the area of executive coaching, organisation-development consulting and leadership.

Pat McCarry worked as a football coach and coach educator in the United States for 10 years and during this time applied this learning in the context of organisational development. Since returning to the UK he has obtained an MA in Coaching and has worked as a leadership coach in schools, business corporations and with officers in the armed forces.

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