

What we can learn from Sports and Sports Coaching?

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Welcome to this issue of *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*. Alongside the high quality submission of coaching related research in this journal, there has been a gradual increase in articles that explore different facets of sports coaching. In consequence, as editors, we have been asking the following questions: Is sports coaching research relevant to the readers of our journal and other relevant journals that publish coaching research? If so, how can studies in sports coaching contribute to our understanding of coaching in spheres such as business, leadership development, education, health, and, generally, life? Moreover, how can studies in sports coaching help advance the growing body of coaching research?

I would like to start this editorial by categorically arguing that the sphere of sports can offer significant insights to fields such as business, health, and education, amongst others. This is because fast-paced and competitive environments such as those of elite sports, business, and health can be considered ‘rigorous laboratories for effective coaching’ (McCarry, 2015, p. 245), and, in consequence can offer significant ‘lessons learnt’ for anyone involved in this fascinating professional service.

Sports coaching can be divided into three main areas: sports-specific coaching (technical/physical); game-day or event-related coaching (tactical/strategic); and individual or team coaching (emotional resilience/mind-set) (De Haan and McCarry, 2017, p. 21). In the first instance, one might argue that this type of coaching is a completely different ‘kettle of fish’. Indeed, for all of us who work as coaches in contexts such as business organisations and public sector institutions, to name just a few, the definition we have of the coaching professional is somewhat different to that of the *sports coach*. According to Bresser and Wilson (2010: 10), a coach empowers clients to achieve ‘self-directed learning, personal growth, and improved performance’. She does so by facilitating structured conversations that are based on specific conversational techniques and skills, and that aim to enable the coachee to set and achieve goals that lead to personal and professional development (Van Nieuwerburgh, 2017). But isn’t sports coaching premised on similar attributes?

In a recent enlightening article on the similarities between Sports Coaching and Executive Coaching, Erik de Haan and Pat McCarry (2016, p. 7) argued that ‘modern sports coaching is a discipline [...] misunderstood’, and it is ‘far more nuanced than a simple act of skills training’. Despite particular nuances of specific sports, in professional sports coaching the main focus is improved performance, which is primarily measured through tangible outcomes (Ibid.). This is not distinct from other types of coaching, such executive coaching, where the client strives to improve specific aspects on their professional (and personal) conduct. In non-elite sports, especially in contexts of youth sports, enabling the development of the whole person is amongst the sports coach’s responsibilities (Ibid., Iordanou et al., 2017, pp. 157-165), which is more akin to developmental interventions such as life coaching. Elite professional sports coaching has also increasingly become more attuned to combining

technical finesse with personal development. In this respect, physical performance and mental wellbeing are complementary objectives in several types of coaching, including sports coaching. As De Haan and McCarry (2016, p. 9) argue, ‘Great [sports] 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’, and the same can be maintained for, say, executive coaches.

What stems from the above is that the psychological essence of performance is deemed paramount to continuous improvement and development (both personal and professional) in both sports and other types of coaching. This attitude has accentuated the significance of a deep and trustful relationship between a coach and a coachee that, while it is taken for granted in coaching, only fairly recently has started to emerge in the sphere of competitive sports (Jowett, 2005; De Haan and McCarry, 2017). It this new-found focus on such trustful relationships, based on a respectful attitude conducive to continuous improvement and development (both personal and professional), alongside optimal performance, that, I believe, can offer insightful lessons-learnt to coaches who work in spheres such as business, healthcare, education, and overall life. In this respect, while work that focuses on tactical and technical nuances of specific sports might not be of direct relevance to readers of coaching research, any aspect of sports coaching that opens up new optics or offers fresh insights into how structured sports coaching conversations can help athletes optimise their professional performance, while respecting the principles of fair play and team-spirit, and, importantly, supporting an attitude of ‘a healthy mind in a healthy body’, offer welcome, even essential contributions to the high quality coaching research that journals such as *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice* aim to publish.

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