

Developing and Practicing an Athlete-Centered Coaching Philosophy

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Much like a “mission statement” should serve to guide daily operations and decision making in a business function, a coaching philosophy should act as a “business plan” for coaches to consult when making decisions that affect the team and its players. A well-conceived coaching philosophy provides the foundation upon which coaches and athletes can learn in a consistent and coherent manner without becoming too situation specific, or too reactive (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2009). Martens (2004) contends that a coaching philosophy “will remove uncertainty about training rules, style of play, discipline, codes of conduct, competitive outlook, short- and long-term objectives, and many other facets of coaching” (p. 5).

The importance of an athlete-centered coaching philosophy is clear given the number of youth involved in organized sport today, and the number of coaches responsible for their tutelage. In 2006, approximately 57.3 million youth under the age of 18 participated in organized sport programs, of which 7.3 million were interscholastic sport participants (National Association for Sport and Physical Education [NASPE], 2008). These numbers represent an increase of 10.2% since 2001, while girls’ participation alone has increased 47.1% since 1991 (NASPE, 2008). Meanwhile, although a conclusive number of individuals involved in coaching youth sport is unavailable, in 2006 American Legion Baseball reported 20,000 coaches, American Youth Soccer Organization 82,000 coaches, Pony Baseball/Softball 90,000 coaches, U.S. Youth Soccer approximately 300,000 coaches, and the National Federation of State High School Associations 750,000 coaching interscholastic sports (NASPE, 2008).

How are coaches doing? The results of at least one report suggest not so well. In 2005, the Citizenship Through Sports Alliance (CTSA), a national coalition of professional and amateur sports organizations, released its first Youth Sports National Report Card. Of concern here were the grades for two categories in particular: a

grade of “D” in the category of “Child-Centered Philosophy,” which focuses on the child’s perspective of the experience, and a grade of “C-” in the “Coaching” category (CTSA, 2005). The “expert panel” charged with issuing the report card voiced its concern for the fact that youth sport has “lost its child-centered focus, meaning less emphasis on the child’s experience and more emphasis on adult-centered motives, such as winning” (CTSA, 2005, p. 2).

Wishing to provide direction for the coaching fraternity, NASPE (2006) developed the National Standards for Sport Coaches. The first of 40 Standards concerns the development and implementation of an athlete-centered coaching philosophy. “A well-developed coaching philosophy provides expectations for behaviors that reflect priorities and values of the coach. An appropriate coaching perspective focuses on maximizing the positive benefits of sport participation for each athlete” (NASPE, 2006, p. 7). The purpose of this article is to provide youth sport coaches with strategies for developing and practicing an athlete-centered coaching philosophy.

Developing an Athlete-Centered Coaching Philosophy

Diefenbach and Lauer (2009) suggested that coaches should develop a coaching philosophy that embraces goals commonly related to youth sport, which include the personal and social values associated with, and the life skills that can be learned from, participation: character, morals, teamwork, resiliency, sportsmanship, fair play, time management, and the value of hard work. Ensuring that a coaching philosophy is athlete-centered requires that these objectives are not compromised for the purpose of increasing the chances of winning (Hammermeister, 2010).

Because a coach’s values will shape the coaching philosophy, answering the following questions will assist in identifying those values and help to guide development of an athlete-centered coaching philosophy (Hammermeister, 2010; Martens, 2004):

- Why do I want to coach youth sport?
- What goals do I hope to achieve as a youth sport coach?
- What are the characteristics of a “good” youth sport coach?
- What are the goals/priorities for the team, and how will I communicate them?
- What do I want my young athletes to learn as a result of playing under my tutelage?
- What rules must my athletes observe, and what consequences might be administered?
- What values will be communicated in my coaching philosophy?

After reflecting on your answers to these questions and amending if necessary, unite them with what NASPE (2006) refers to as the “Benchmarks” for Standard 1, which are:

- Identify and communicate reasons for entering the coaching profession.
- Develop an athlete-centered coaching philosophy that aligns with the organizational mission and goals.
- Communicate the athlete-centered coaching philosophy in verbal and written form to athletes, parents/guardians, and program staff.
- Welcome all eligible athletes and implement strategies that encourage the participation of disadvantaged and disabled athletes.
- Manage athlete behavior consistent with an athlete-centered coaching philosophy.

This exercise should result in creating the framework for constructing your coaching philosophy. Remember that an athlete-centered coaching philosophy will differ based on the ages of the athletes being coached (e.g., the primary goal of professional athletic competition is to win, however this should not be the case with youth sport).

Practicing an Athlete-Centered Coaching Philosophy

In addition to being presented in the form of a written document, the coach’s philosophy will be communicated through the many decisions that are made directly relating to the team and its players, as well as in the coach’s conduct. Martens (2004) reminds us that a coaching philosophy is not expressed only by what the coach says, but also by what the coach does. As such, the following strategies are offered to assist coaches in demonstrating evidence of an athlete-centered coaching philosophy:

Team Goals

In this section we will offer suggestions for creating team goals, which can be powerful motivators (Burton, 1989). Allowing athletes to be involved in this process can not only increase their commitment, but also provides the coach with valuable information about the team. Some suggestions for creating team goals are:

- Involve the players in identifying and determining the team’s goals and objectives. Ask the players why they want to play, and what they hope to achieve through the experience. This process will enable the players to take ownership of the team’s goals, which will be important when referring to them later.
- Ask the players if they’re interested more in winning as a primary objective, or in playing simply to have fun. The team needs to reach a consensus on this issue, or problems are sure to arise regarding division of playing time.

- Make certain that your reasons for coaching are harmonious with the players’ reasons for playing; if they are not you may be coaching the wrong team.

Both long and short-term goals are necessary. Be sure that daily process goals are planned and communicated to the athletes, with an emphasis on how each will help achieve one of the long-term goals.

Note that we are not suggesting that the goals of winning and having fun cannot co-exist, just that the mentality of “win at all costs” may represent the opposite of allowing all players equal playing time regardless of their ability.

Practice Plans

As noted by Martens (2004), practice plans are an integral part of effective coaching. Having a well-defined practice plan will allow for more productivity and fun at practice. Consider the following when planning for practice:

- Youth sport practice must be fun. Too often, coaches conduct practices that are unnecessarily lengthy. Young athletes will find it easier to maintain focus and intensity during shorter practice sessions. Make use of the “games approach” (Wrisberg, 2007) for skill development in the practice setting, which emphasizes competition-like drills and activities while keeping practice fun.
- Involve the players in practice-planning; they will know what the team needs to improve upon. Allowing the athletes to take ownership of their learning will increase their retention of important skills and ideas (Kidman, Thorpe, & Hadfield, 2006).
- The ratio of practice-to-play time should be based on age and maturity; five afternoons of practice in preparation for a single day of game play is heavily weighted against the goal of having fun.
- Teach athletes to focus on the process of performing technical and tactical skills versus simply using an outcome to measure success. Development of a process focus will enable athletes to manage their emotion and arousal during competition (Wrisberg, 2007).
- If the coach has the right to expect players to arrive at practice at a certain time, the players should be able to expect that practice will end at a certain time, regardless of whether the coach is finished coaching for the day. Coach Wooden said it best: “I felt at practice, for example, we start on time, we close on time. The youngsters didn’t have to feel that we were going to keep them over” (Wooden, 2009, para. 11).
- As a practice closure, ask players to assess the team’s effort level and overall effectiveness of practice that day, and strategies for improving the next practice session.

- Communicate to athletes that practice is the place where errors are expected. Creating a practice environment where athletes can take risks without fear of failure opens the door for improvement and growth.

Coaches typically expect players to put forth effort during practice. Players, then, should be able to expect that their coaches will put effort into designing practice plans that allow for individual and team development. Creating well-designed practice plans can be time consuming, but they are vital to conducting efficient and effective practice sessions.

Game Day

Competitions can be a source of anxiety for athletes (Woodman & Hardy, 2001), but having structured processes for game day can help with this and make the day more enjoyable for the coach as well. Try to incorporate any or all of the following suggestions:

- Have a clear formula for determining who starts games, and communicate the formula to the team. Every once-in-awhile, allow the players to decide the starting lineup; when they are in agreement with the team's goals and objectives they will know, and do, what is best for the team.
- The coach's job is to develop the players' skills, and put the players into situations that provide the greatest opportunity for success. The challenge for the coach is to find the right opportunities for everyone to contribute to the team's effort during competition.
- Focus on performance goals instead of outcome goals (Wrisberg, 2007). Performance goals will "enable athletes to evaluate improvements in their own performance, irrespective of the outcomes they achieved or how they did relative to other athletes or opponents" (pp. 82-83). Many times outcome goals are heavily influenced by the abilities of the opposition, and consequently may not provide a true indication of the athlete's performance (Wrisberg, 2007).
- Remain calm and supportive when players make mistakes. Know that they will make mistakes, and that they will look for your response. How you respond, both verbally and with body language, can have a tremendous effect on a player's confidence and the likelihood for success with the next opportunity.
- Designate a role to every player for every game, even if they are not in the initial line-up. Providing athletes with specific roles and duties reduces the ambiguity in the game situation. They will be focused on their duties, and may be less concerned with when they will enter the game.

A lack of organization on game day can translate to disorganized play, such as a lack of execution, and penalties. Further, players like to know

what to expect on game day, e.g., who will start, what position they will play, and what the team's strategy is for the game.

Communication with Athletes

To be a truly athlete-centered coach, it is important to effectively communicate with your athletes. In fact, effective communication is necessary not only for athletes to improve skills, but also to develop a positive relationship with the coach (Martens, 2004). The following are examples of ways to incorporate more communication into your coaching:

- A "Player's Code of Conduct" will communicate the rules and expectations for participation in written form, and make clear the consequences should violations occur.
- Be certain that your choice of language and tone of voice serves a constructive purpose, and is not demeaning, disrespectful, or damaging to the relationship between player and coach.
- Engage in one-on-one interactions with each player during every practice. Establishing interpersonal relationships with your players will assist in creating a learning environment that is comfortable for them, and subsequently productive.
- Schedule individual weekly meetings with players during which they are encouraged to share concerns, problems, and ideas with you, to include the inevitable unhappiness that results from a lack of playing time. This can be an effective forum for communicating strategies intended to help the player increase opportunities for playing time.

Communication with your players is critical to developing and maintaining quality coach-player relationships, without which many teaching-learning opportunities would be lost. Equally as important, relationships forged with players can last a lifetime.

Communication with Parents

Parents can be the most valuable resource a youth sport coach has, but coaches often try to avoid talking with parents. Being "up front" and communicating with parents from the beginning can help the coach avoid conflict with parents. Consider the following:

- Although many coaches will avoid fielding phone calls from parents, an athlete-centered coaching philosophy suggests that the coach is willing to work with parents for the benefit of the athlete. An "open-door policy" will reinforce the notion that, for the purpose of helping the athlete achieve goals and objectives associated with participation, a collaborative effort is encouraged.
- The subjects the coach deems eligible for discussion with parents should be communicated

during the preseason meeting conducted with all parents. For example, perhaps the coach believes discussions regarding playing time should occur between player and coach only, while discussions involving academic performance should involve parents. The coaching philosophy and players' expectations should also be shared and discussed at this meeting.

- Maintain an athlete-centered view when talking with parents. At times the coach may feel he/she is being personally criticized by the parents. Maintaining an athlete-centered focus will allow the coach to communicate with the parents without arguing or being defensive.

Like it or not, parents will want to be involved in their son's and daughter's lives, and this includes having a voice with respect to their experience playing on the team. We suggest that coaches be proactive and attempt to create a "like it" relationship with parents, which can only benefit the players.

Administering Consequences

Team rules are essential for maintaining organization and proper behavior. If rules for participation are clearly identified and communicated at the beginning of the season, athletes are forced with the choice of complying with the rules or breaking them. Therefore, consequences for choosing to break rules should also be clearly established and communicated. The following suggestions may be helpful when determining how to administer consequences:

- When having to administer consequences, be fair, consistent, and explain the rationale behind the decision-making process. Consequences that are athlete centered are appropriate and contribute to the learning process, both on and off the field.
- Using the Player's Code of Conduct as a guide, allow the team to participate in determining consequences for player misconduct (similar to baseball's "Kangaroo Court"). When held accountable by their peers players will take ownership of their actions and, if necessary, consequences.

Be cautious, for if you outline rules and consequences for breaking them, you must enforce the consequences even if doing so means sitting a star player during an important game.

Coach Conduct

Coach conduct is, arguably, one of the most important topics to address. However, because it is 100% within personal control, a coach's conduct should be easy to modify; yet coaches often display behaviors that make them less than effective models for their

athletes. The following suggestions may help you regulate your behavior:

- If the players are expected to conduct themselves in a manner that reflects favorably on the team, certainly the same should be expected of the coach. Coaches need to model the behavior they wish to see in their players.
- Create a system in which athletes have an opportunity to evaluate you as the coach. Oftentimes, athletes feel as though they have no voice in the sport environment. Providing frequent opportunities for anonymous evaluations can provide the coach with valuable formative information.
- How you communicate with officials can have a direct effect on your players' conduct and performance. Berating officials will lead your players to believe they can do the same. Just as important, emotion and energy directed at officials by the players will distract them from their process focus and negatively affect performance.

Remember also that today's coaches face a level of scrutiny unlike their colleagues from years past, and technology (video, camera phones, YouTube) allows for almost anyone to engage in the scrutiny.

Finally, the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) addressed the subject of coaches' conduct in its Coaches Code of Ethics (NFHS, 2009), which states the following:

The function of a coach is to educate students through participation in interscholastic competition. An interscholastic program should be designed to enhance academic achievement and should never interfere with opportunities for academic success. Each student-athlete should be treated as though he or she were the coach's own, and his or her welfare should be uppermost at all times. (para. 1)

Conclusion

A clear coaching philosophy will articulate a coach's beliefs, values, and morals; support the goals and objectives of the team; and serve to guide a coach's practice or conduct (Diefenbach & Lauer, 2009). When athlete-centered, it will speak to the importance of the players realizing physical and social development, as well as fun. A coaching philosophy should articulate what the players can expect from the coach, and should be communicated in written form. Ultimately, it may be the players' perspective of their coaches' philosophies that matters most, for their perspective will help the coach to determine whether or not he or she is practicing an athlete-centered coaching philosophy. After all, if you are truly practicing an athlete-centered philosophy, the athlete will feel as if he/she is important to you. For example, listening to former UCLA Bruin Bill Walton speak of former coach John Wooden one

can get a sense for how an athlete-centered coaching philosophy can manifest itself. “The joy and happiness in John Wooden’s life comes from the success of others,” Walton (2007) said of his legendary mentor. Likewise, former San Francisco 49er Steve Young recalled his coach, the late Bill Walsh, in a similar vein. “Bill was blessed with one of the greatest gifts you can have, which is the ability to see the future potential of another human being . . . that is the ultimate compliment to the word coach,” Young (Stanford.com, 2007, para. 4) said of Walsh. It is difficult to imagine that coaches could want something more than to have their players remember them so fondly, and equally difficult to expect that this would occur without practicing a coaching philosophy that best represents the interests and desires of the athletes.

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