

Defining the Expert Coach Within the Olympic Movement: A Study Performed to Enhance the Outcomes of Coaching Education Programming in the United States

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Introduction

By definition, participation at the elite level of sport is a rare opportunity that is most often granted to those athletes who display competitive excellence in their sport of expertise. As Allen (2007) reminds us, sport expertise is far more than physical prowess and good genetics. To be considered elite, athletes must perform at a high level on a consistent and long-term basis (Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2007). To be a fixture at the top of sport, it is commonplace for athletes to acquire the assistance of a coach. In fact, Gould, Greenleaf, Chung and Guinan (2002) found that a majority of the athletes competing in the Olympic Games held in Atlanta and Nagano correlated their success with the positive influences of their coach.

For coaches, the body of work that is typically assessed for advancement in the field is the competitive success of the athletes under their supervision. While consistent winning in sport is a reliable barometer in determining if an athlete is elite, it is not the case within leadership. Cote, Young, North and Duff (2007) provide insight into the weakness of this measuring system by explaining, “if we identify and describe the competencies of coaches who we deem as excellent solely based on athletes’ performances, we are mistakenly basing our search on indirect behavioral measures”. Ericsson et al. (2007) support this claim by stating that most leadership challenges are highly complex and specific to a given scenario, which makes it hard to compare performance across organizations and situations. Therefore, it is difficult to make a correlation between job advancement and expert status.

Considering the paucity of literature existing on elite sport coaching, the purpose of this research endeavor was to develop a standardized definition for an expert coach. Through the identification of common practices and beliefs regarding expert coaches, the aim of this study was to further the abilities of our national sporting system to sustain competitive success at the international level of competition. An additional priority of this research project was to expand the body of literature that exists on elite sport leadership by unearthing the key constructs of expert coaching status. The researcher believes that a clearly articulated definition of expert coaching can assist in the refinement of coaching education curriculum, which will improve many components of the coach-athlete relationship.

Within the United States, formalized coaching education programs have become a popular method of disseminating important information to the coaching profession. In Olympic-based sports, many coaching education programs are delivered by National Governing Bodies (NGBs). These independent federations that fall under the jurisdiction of the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) serve many purposes, but of primary importance is the development of athletes capable of attaining podium-worthy performances at international competitions. Initiatives, including coaching education, have been developed within the framework of most of the NGBs in order to equip coaches with the most up-to-date training theories for the athletes under their direction in hopes of bolstering competitive performance.

Although many studies have alluded to the benefit of various coaching education tactics, no study

to date had set out to determine the constructs that define an expert coach. Therefore, if a goal of coaching educators is to increase the pool of candidates that can be considered elite-level coaches, a working definition of expert coaching should be determined in order to tailor curriculum and modes of delivery. Specifically, Larkin, Duffy and O’Leary (2007) discovered that younger, developing coaches listed the ability to observe elite coaches at work was one of the most valuable tools for increasing their knowledge base. If this is the case, coaching education programs must have a template for defining an elite coach so that lower-ranking coaches have the opportunity to work with an expert in the field. Gilbert, Cote and Mallett (2006) find it surprising that the lack of conceptual framework to explain coach development is surprising, as this is a requisite for optimal coaching education program construction and delivery. Acknowledging the lack of framework and formal definition of expert coaching, research should be carried out in order to develop a definition that embraces the theoretical underpinnings of expert development through the acquisition of human capital over a career span. In addition, Cote, Young, North and Duff (2007) recommend a definition of coaching excellence should be multi-faceted so that it is reflective of the highly variable roles that a sport coach assumes, as well as emphasizing the constant personal interactions between coaches and their athletes in the training and competitive environment.

Research Methods

In order to determine the division between expert coaches from the remainder of the profession, this study utilized Q methodology. A benefit of Q methodology lies in the fact that it helps identify the similarities and differences in the subjective perceptions across a sample group. A considerable difference between Q methodology and correlation coefficients is that “Q does not need large numbers of subjects as does correlational research, for it can reveal a characteristic independently of the distribution of that characteristic relative to other characteristics” (Smith 2001; as cited by Brown, 1994). Simply put, instead of a large number of people receiving a small number of test items, now a small number of people are receiving a large number of tests. This inversion of traditional quantitative research tactics allows the investigator to correlate persons instead of tests.

For this study, seven current U.S. National Team coaches and eight current U.S. National Team athletes with previous experience at the Olympic Games sorted 34 statements regarding expert coaching on a scale of “most like an expert coach” to “least like an expert coach” using Q-assessor, an online software program developed by Stan Kaufman. In addition to ranking the 34 statements, each participant was asked a series of open-ended questions regarding their decisions behind his or her final statement ranking. As a result of the factor analysis on the 15 sorts and post-sort questionnaires, a total of five factors emerged from the data.

Table 1

Breakdown of sporting discipline for coaches sampled		
Sporting Discipline	Participants	Percentage
Bobsled	1	14.29%
Skeleton	1	14.29%
Ski Jump	1	14.29%
Canoe/Kayak	3	42.85%
Biathlon	1	14.29%

Table 2

Highest competitive level of athletes under coach supervision			
Coach	Sport	Highest Level of Competition	Olympic Medal Earned Under Coach's Supervision
1	Bobsled	Olympian	No
2	Biathlon	Olympian	No
3	Canoe/Kayak	Olympian	Yes
4	Canoe/Kayak	Olympian	Yes
5	Canoe/Kayak	Olympian	Yes
6	Skeleton	Olympian	Yes
7	Ski Jump	Olympian	No

Table 3

Breakdown of sporting discipline for athletes sampled		
Sporting Discipline	Participants	Percentage
Bobsled	4	50%
Freestyle Ski	1	12.50%
Luge	1	12.50%
Biathlon	2	25%

Table 4

Highest level of competitive success for sampled athlete population			
Athlete	Sport	Highest Level of Competition	Olympic Medal
1	Bobsled	Olympian	Bronze
2	Bobsled	Olympian	Gold
3	Bobsled	Olympian	Gold
4	Freestyle Ski	Olympian	No
5	Luge	Olympian	No
6	Biathlon	Olympian	No
7	Biathlon	Olympian	No
8	Bobsled	Olympian	No

Results

The five factors identified in this study represent the unique perspectives and beliefs regarding expert coaching within the United States Olympic Movement. The five factors were identified as (a) the Knowledgeable Coach, (b) the Evolving Coach, (c) the Communicating Coach, (d) the Trustworthy Coach and (e) the Teaching Coach. Additionally, common themes were discovered between the factors.

Factor A was responsible for most of the variance unearthed in this study with 40% (6) of the respondents loading onto this factor. When considering the results of the online card sort and post-sort interview data, the coaches and athletes loading onto Factor A considered an expert coach to be knowledgeable. In other words, the individuals relating to this factor believe that an expert coach should have the technical knowledge to outwit their opponent while at the same time having the ability to identify and act upon the individualized needs of the athletes under his or her supervision. In addition, coaches who are unwilling to pay attention to the individual needs of the athletes competing at this level may be less likely to keep athletes motivated.

Factor B accounted for 33% of the variance explained in this study with five of the 15 respondents loading on this factor. Evidence from the data analysis and post-sort responses indicates that individuals loading onto Factor B consider an expert coach someone who evolves throughout their career. In other words, the belief presented in Factor B suggests that expert coaches continue to refine their knowledge through interactions with other expert coaches or informal, self-directed educational opportunities. These coaches are motivated to maintain their education as a result of a desire to provide their athletes with competitive advantages. Concurrently, the coaches and athletes who loaded onto this factor argue that an expert coach is also able to keep things simple for the athlete under his or her supervision. That is, the coach is cognizant of an athlete's threshold with regard to information overload in the practice and competitive setting.

Factor C accounted for 13% of the variance explained in this study with two of the 15 respondents loading on this factor. These two individuals loading onto Factor C consider an expert coach as someone who is an effective communicator. In other words, the belief presented in Factor C is that coaches at the highest level of competition are effective communicators who have previous experience as an athlete in the sport they supervise. Based on the data analysis, the respondents who loaded onto this factor assert that an expert coach effectively communicates logistical and high-performance-related information to the athlete on a regular basis. This open line of communication builds the trust between the coach and athlete, which may improve the competitive chances of the athletes under his or her supervision. In addition, the coach's previous experience as an athlete in the sport may provide him or her with technical knowledge that can be used in the development of athletes. Lastly, respondents loading onto Factor C do not believe that an expert coach has to be involved in the personal matters regarding his or her athletes. According to this factor, it can be suggested that athletes at the Olympic level of competition prefer a coach to communicate technical knowledge rather than providing insight into personal information.

Factor D accounted for 7% of the variance explained in this study with one of the 15 respondents loading on this factor. This individual considers an expert coach to be someone who is

trustworthy. More specifically, the level of trust between the coach and athlete may play a significant role in competitive outcomes. In addition, the expert coach described in Factor D is a good teacher who is astute on sporting principles from previous experience as an athlete in the sport, not his or her involvement in coaching education programs. Further, the respondent loading onto Factor D presents additional evidence that a coach is not deemed an expert by his or her confirmation as a National Team coach. Regardless of title, the coach must work to gain the trust of the athletes under his or her supervision.

Lastly, Factor E accounted for 7% of the variance explained in this study with one of the 15 respondents loading on this factor. The data analysis indicates that the individual loading onto Factor E considers an expert coach as someone who is a good teacher. The ability to teach may come from their adaptations to specific occurrences in their sporting careers. In addition, this individual described an expert coach who not only teaches well, but also has garnered respect from other coaches in the profession.

Table 5

Highest Rated Statements for Each Factor			
Factor	Highest Rated	2nd Highest Rated	3rd Highest Rated
1	Advanced Technical Knowledge	Identify Athlete Needs	Effectively Communicate
2	Commitment to Profession	Consult Other Expert Coaches	Keep Things Simple
3	Effectively Communicate	Competitive Experience in Sport	Commitment to Profession
4	Trustworthy	Good Teacher	Doesn't Over-Coach
5	Adapt	Good Teacher	Clearly Defined Role

Table 6

Lowest Rated Statements for Each Factor			
Factor	Lowest Rated	2nd Lowest Rated	3rd Lowest Rated
1	Assigned by NGB	Degree in Sport Science	Coaching Certification
2	Competitive Experience at Elite Level of Sport	Competitive Experience in Sport	Assigned by NGB
3	Exposed to Early Leadership Opportunity	Understanding of Athlete's Personal Issues	Advanced Ability in Program Design
4	Assigned by NGB	Coaching Certification	Advanced Ability in Program Design
5	Exposed to Early Leadership Opportunity	Assigned by NGB	Understanding of Athlete's Personal Issues

Discussion

Upon further investigation of the five factors and data collected from the questionnaire, it was apparent that coaches and athletes participating in this study shared particular beliefs regarding the meaning of expert coaching. Specifically, these commonalities in describing an expert coach were categorized as (a) the value of interpersonal skills, and (b) development of coaching knowledge.

Within leadership theory, coaching is defined as a high-directive and high-supportive approach style found in the Situational Leadership II Model, developed by Blanchard et al. (as cited in Northouse, 2004). The assertion that coaching is both a directive and supportive leadership style is supported by the factor arrays resulting from the data analysis. First and foremost, a majority of the individuals participating in this study believe that an expert coach is a good teacher, which was a positively scoring statement for four of the five factors. In addition, four of the five factors were highlighted by the belief that an expert coach is trustworthy. Lastly, three of the five factors demonstrated the opinion that expert coaches attempt to create a positive training environment. Therefore, the ability to teach an athlete utilizing effective communication strategies while at the same time nurturing a trusting relationship may give a coach the ability to create a training environment that is favored by the athlete. Collectively, the information gathered from the factors resulting from the data analysis suggests that an expert coach is someone who values effective interpersonal skills as they relate to the coach-athlete dyad.

Just as important as the component of interpersonal skills is to defining an expert coach is the coach's development of coaching knowledge. A majority of the participants in this study agree that an expert coach is one that has attained an advanced level of technical knowledge regarding the sport. Interestingly, data collected from the post-sort questionnaire gives rise to the interpretation of valuable educational experiences. Initially, it can be suggested that individuals taking part in this study believe that field-based experiences are the most influential educational opportunities for developing coaching expertise. Specifically, many of the respondents replied that daily interactions with peer and mentor coaches provides the necessary technical knowledge needed for sporting success. In addition, the individuals taking part in this study believe that an expert coach knows how and where to go for answers regarding difficult questions, and is motivated to pursue this information by his or her commitment to the profession and desire to improve an athlete's competitive abilities.

Collectively, the data unearthed in this study expands the current understanding of coaching theory by providing the constructs of how expert coaching is defined. Specifically, an expert coach is an individual who is knowledgeable on the technical demands of his or her sport and can convey this information to each athlete according to individual needs and motivational patterns. This ability not only improves the coach-athlete dyad, but also portrays the coach as an effective teacher. In addition, expert coaches demonstrate a continued desire to hone his or her craft through self-directed educational opportunities. The aim of the continued study is to further the competitive chances of the athletes under their supervision.

Conclusion

This study and its findings are meant to provide insight into the current attitudes and beliefs regarding expert coaching at the highest level of international competition, namely the Olympic Games. The

data collected and interpreted in this study is meant to elucidate important themes that can be used by coaching educators within higher education and coaching education programs within the United States to further improve the profession of coaching. Using these defining constructs of expert coaching as a guide, coaching educators can provide curriculum and educational activities that increase the probability of creating expert leaders. This type of programming may be of utmost importance to sports in the Olympic catalog since most of the them, such as bobsled, canoe/ kayak, biathlon, ski jumping, archery, and weightlifting, witness the rise of former athletes to coaching positions due to a lack of participation, visibility, and/or interest at the grassroots level of sport in America. While the reasons for this matter are beyond the scope of this research study, it can be deduced that the overriding popularity and economic impact of traditional American sports such as baseball, football, and basketball leave little room for the development of Olympic-based programming at the club, scholastic and collegiate levels. This limited exposure to a wider population of potential athletes and coaches results in even lesser pools of candidates for high-performance coaching positions. Therefore, for lesser-known Olympic sport programs to continue, former athletes may need to graduate into the coaching ranks in order to pass on valuable information regarding technical and tactical developments in the sport. A side effect of the promotion of former athletes to Olympic sport coaches may be the existence of a coaching profession who understands the technical aspects of their sport, but lacks awareness in methods of improving interpersonal skills, leadership, pedagogy and andragogy, self-directed learning, and critical reflection, which have all been alluded to play a role in defining coaching expertise by the participants in this study.

As such, the author recommends that coaching educators within the U.S. Olympic Movement utilize the constructs provided in this study to guide the process of refining educational material and delivery systems to match not only the needs of athletes who are competing in elite sport, but the demographics of the entering coaches to the profession. Through improved coaching education, the U.S. Olympic Movement can maintain sporting excellence by fostering a collection of coaches who are armed with the characteristics necessary to achieve success on the international stage.

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