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COACH OF THE YEAR AWARD WINNERS



L- R: Sean Kerr - University Coach of The Year, Bronwyn Jackson - Junior Coach of the Year, Mike Spracklen, Caitlin Reed – Young Coach of the Year, Adrian Higgins – Senior Club Coach of the Year

PHILOSOPHY

COACHING THE Y GENERATION

We live in an age where we all chase 'best-practice', whether in sport, the corporate sector or the community at large. Much is written by the world's leading lights and we all look for those words of wisdom, supported by research and expounded with the jargon of today. I fully understand that what I attempt to set out here is probably verging on heresy, uncalled for under the spotlight of modern day coaching methodology and certainly not backed up by any research. To be honest I don't care. I am doing what my Dad did and his father before him – I am speaking my mind as an 'old-fart' who the current generation of athletes, coaches, scientists and administrators will not give any time to at all.



Nicole Jeffery wrote an intriguing article in the Australian in early 2007 entitled "Coaching the Why Generation" where she outlined the changes in our current generation of developing athletes. This generation, apparently, are bringing different needs and values to the table and as such we, as coaches, should understand and accommodate them in their needs. Offering different coaching methods and structures, appealing their need for 'quick training and competition results' and getting them involved in the decision making because the "new breed will not accept that the coach is always right" were statements in the article that illustrated the psycho-social changes we all face. This new generation are 'outcome-focused' and therefore need to know all the reasons for why they are doing things in their training; especially those parts of training that are uncomfortable.

Sports science has been the major consumer of physical and financial resources in all national sporting strategies around the world. This arm of the sports development world has given us wonderful guidance in 'best practice' in the biomechanical, physiological and psychological aspects of high performance attainment. Without doubt this section of the sporting community has made us all question our assumptions and certainly given us a heap of measurements to put

into our daily coaching practice. We can, or are expected to, measure just about everything from RPE's (Ratio of Perceived Exertion – how tired are the poor dears?) to how far and at what velocity did they run today using Global Positioning Satellite data.

I am just completing my 40th year in coaching. I have experienced the trials and tribulations of this profession from my days as a teacher through to the heady heights of Olympic finals and Championship winning football finals. I have embraced sports science, the computer age and all the waffle that goes with establishing those previously mentioned National Performance Strategies (the reams of 'warm and fuzzy' words, the copious diagrams and flow-charts etc). I think that I have reached the stage of having to finally own up to the fact that I have grave misgivings about where we are heading in all this.

When did we all give in to this 'welfare state' stuff where the athlete is concerned? When did we appease the weak-minded or the athlete that simply wants something for nothing or will only commit if the reward is high enough? When did we as coaches stop doing it because we loved it and gave up on the lengthy apprenticeship we all must serve before being paid for it? My problem is that I still have in me some of the traits that I learned from the adults that surrounded me as I grew from childhood to being an adult. All the adults around me in my formative years were my teachers, my teachers in behaviours and values. They had been forced to endure the unspeakable Hades of war where their fortitude and courage were tested on a daily basis. They were stoic and resilient and in the post-war period they suffered from a lack of just about everything that we take for granted today. We were, or are, the 'baby-boomers' and those of us who have not completely capitulated to the slothful, greed driven, easy living needs of today may still have something to contribute.

If this 'Y' generation are as described then we seem to have two ways to approach them. We can either appease their weaknesses or we can retain a grasp on some of these fundamental traits of human-kind that have seen us survive hardship.

It is only a decade ago that I was heavily involved with the Brisbane Broncos Rugby League Club and I reflect on this period of my professional life as an illustration of the changes that have accelerated us towards this potential mediocrity. At that time the playing staff held down full-time jobs outside their sport. Many of them spent the day in physical labour as plumbers and concreters or at the docks scrubbing down the hulls of ships. They would turn up for training, on time, covered in the dust and dirt of their daily grind. No RPE's for them, no complaints from them either. They got on with their work and gave us the very best they had every session, every week and every year. They got some rest when they had earned it.



No ice-baths, hot & cold showers, massage, special classes of this and that to consume all the available training time – they kept at their trade minute by minute, day by day, week by week in a relentless pursuit of the winning formula. Don't get me wrong, sports science has unearthed some fabulous examples of recovery methods and I have used them all with significant success. The key issue is that they had better be 'pushing out the envelope' to earn these recovery methods. I see too many athletes 'recovering' from some very unimpressive levels of fatigue. The Championship winning squads of 1992 and 1993 contained men who overtly displayed fortitude and stoicism.

I had been appointed with one phrase that still burns in my memory, "put some 'steel' into them." My interpretation was that as well as the football speed, strength and endurance components coupled with some decent injury prevention plans that had to be delivered, and delivered better than any of our opposition; the minds of these guys had to be strengthened to be able to overcome both physical and emotional adversity. After all, if you want to be a champion these traits will be sorely tested throughout the campaign. The idea was to give them physical and emotional resources way above what they would experience in a game.

Whatever intensity the opposition brought to the table we had to know that we had reserves that they could never match. The game had to become the easiest part of the week by setting emotional and physical standards so high that we were never at our limits, ever. Don't for one minute think that I had all the answers to this challenge. I had no text book to turn to or physiological scoring tables to check against. This was 'seat-of-the-pants stuff' where I applied the known theories of training and periodisation to the distant echoes of greatness those previous generations had displayed. A hero is not a celebrity, or someone who wins a contest in the sporting arena. A hero is someone who does something extraordinary, against all the odds and with maximum sacrifice. I took the standards that I had been exposed to as a child as a guide to 'what was possible' for the Broncos. The bar was set high, the road was a relentless exposure to the real interpretation of attitude commitment and discipline and the players were to be challenged in all aspects of their lives.

In some cases my job was a lot easier than that of my counterparts today. Many of the young men in our charge were hungry for personal and team success, driven by a deep desire to win and carried little or no 'baggage' that might keep them from their dreams. The 'baggage' I refer to are things like, "What's in it for me?", "Is there an easier way?" Of course I tried my best to give them the best balance of training that was well periodised and well thought out but the key issue was to find out how they could develop their 'mental toughness', the ability to overcome adversity and for them to accept that whatever dreams they had about winning would have to be earned – and the price would be high, very high.

We can all train athletes hard, that's not difficult to do. If it was just a matter of giving them horrendous numbers of reps and sets at a high intensity then anyone could do it. The key is to train smart and hard and to know when to take a mighty step forward and when to back off. Here I was in the hands of the players. Don't get me wrong – I hardly ever asked them for an opinion – I watched closely for all the tell-tale signs of 'too-much' or 'too-little'. Put simply, I got to know them as individuals, to understand when they were giving up due to being weak-willed or when they had

really had enough physiologically and psychologically. I put the edge of the physiological envelope lower than the edge of the psychological envelope.

These guys had to take it psychologically, just like my Dad and his fellow battlers of the 1940's and 50's. They 'couldn't die doing this' was a typical response to the oft heard cries of complaint and submission. Put another way, I was unfair to them – for a reason. Every missed target, every missed rule, every smart comment, every 'collapse with feigned exhaustion', every 'tactical limp', was met with a firestorm of reaction. Repetitions and sets of exercises were started again, sessions were started again from scratch, those that gave up were sent home in disgrace to 'never darken my door again' or 'get him out of my sight'. Unfair, unjust, yes, but this scheme always found their weak traits. They could either quit on themselves or the team or find the fortitude and stoicism to get through it. They had no protection from this onslaught; they could not turn to a Players Association to get them off the hook, or go bleating to coach Bennett.

In today's 'welfare' environment none of this would work. Complaints are met with benevolence and charity. People are appeased on their way to mediocrity and they drag a load of other 'do-gooders' with them. We continually shift our social standards and accept less and less as being acceptable. Laws are written, agencies resourced and society capitulates to the bleating of the weak.



Championship winning or winning in life, whether doing this as a family, an athlete or in the corporate sector will demand that you survive at the very edge of your psychological, physiological and structural envelope. I believe that these traits are trainable. Maybe it is time to re-visit some of the methods in the light of the current "I want" generation. Why can't we test out their mettle rather than appease them? Why can't we expect good behaviour, punctuality, respect? Why do we continue to list all the reasons why an individual can't achieve something instead of challenging them to do what they think they can't do. Sports science has given us the tools to help us decide when an athlete should reduce or adjust training so that the training system can be precise. Great, I have tried all this stuff and it works. What I would like to also see as a tool is something that indicates when

the athlete should take a 'leap of faith' into the unknown, whether this is to do with the psychological or physiological aspects of training. Stop finding all the reasons to "back-off" training and give them the tools to go to the dark places that their talent will take them. In other words what are they willing to give-up or sacrifice to improve their current status? What psychological or physiological 'shock-level' are they willing to experience as the payment for their success.

We often use the words attitude, commitment and discipline as the underpinning requirements of any successful person. The trouble is they are only words and we often award the individual with the trappings of these words without them really earning them. We devalue these words but more importantly we fail to see that they should be used as a result of consistent, repeatable ACTION. I see coaches handing out these words to athletes who try to lead two lives – one life, the shallow simulation of attitude, commitment and discipline when in the training environment and the other one completely the opposite when outside the training environment.



PHILOSOPHY

THE IMPORTANCE OF COACHING CREDIBILITY

"Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are." John Wooden

While searching for new ideas on coaching and leadership, I recently read an article by Nilsen and Hernez-Broome, titled "Integrity in Leadership." 1 It was a valuable reminder of the importance of credibility and integrity for any leader or coach.

Based on research by David Campbell of the Center of Creative Leadership, the article reported that the primary quality separating the most effective and least effective leaders was credibility — defined as “being believable and worthy of trust.” Examples of credible leadership included being consistent in making decisions (even when this resulted in a short-term problem) and “walking the talk.” The results of this study of business leaders were so dramatic that the authors concluded that once a leader’s behavior caused the loss of credibility, “it is probably gone for good.”

This article reminded me of the times I have seen elite coaches lose credibility with their athletes. Talented coaches, who lose credibility with their athletes and NGBs, can never retrieve this key ingredient of coaching leadership success. The two most common examples I have seen in elite coaching are: 1) giving up on athletes, and 2) disappearing in bad times, re-appearing in good times (fair-weather coaching).



Giving Up On Athletes

Coaching at the elite level requires tremendous energy and sacrifices, often without significant rewards. When a coach’s team or individual athletes perform poorly, it is easy for a coach to question whether the sacrifices and energy required to coach are worth the commitment. This is especially true when family or other non-coaching responsibilities also are important to the coach.

Poor performance on the field can be so discouraging that a coach’s outlook can change for the worse; thinking, language and behavior can change dramatically. These changes are usually visible to other people in the coach’s environment and can become poisonous.

One Olympic coach told me that her athletes would never be internationally competitive due to disadvantages the sport faces in the U.S. Months later at the Olympic Games, an athlete in the sport said, “It’s amazing, but it is so hard to ‘get up’ for the Games, because nobody on the team thinks we can do anything here. Even our coach gave up on us after our last trip. She doesn’t even try to motivate us anymore. Why should I care? Half of my teammates are here just to go to the parties.”

When a coach gives up on athletes, they know it, and credibility and the chance to lead towards success is gone.

Fair-Weather Coaching

Fair weather coaching is the act of disappearing when results are bad and paying attention to athletes when things are going well. Like giving up on the athletes, coaches under tremendous pressure and stress may find it difficult not to fall into the behavior pattern. Because of time pressures, coaches often must focus their energies on the athletes with the best chances to succeed. This is simply the nature of high pressure sport. Athletes don’t always like this aspect of elite sport, but they usually understand it. On the other hand, coaches who carry this behavior to extremes may lose credibility and the ability to lead athletes.

For example, one athlete described her feelings towards her coach after winning an international competition, “*It is pathetic. When I was performing horribly, he told me I was lazy and didn’t even know what I was working on. Now that I win, he is jumping in front of reporters to tell them that it was his program that ‘turned things around.’ It was really his assistant who worked with me when I was struggling, and we both know it. He is the same way with injured athletes, never calling them and ignoring them unless they are ready to compete. It makes you feel like a piece of meat, and it makes you want to think only about yourself.*”

Giving up on athletes and extreme fair-weather coaching are coaching behaviors in and of themselves - athletes learn that “coach doesn’t care about me.” Conversely, coaches who lose credibility become quite lonely when things are going poorly. The two-way street of good will and patience that can benefit a coach with struggling performers is absent when a coach loses credibility with athletes, other coaches and administrators. A coach who loses credibility loses the chance to lead, which may lead to a loss of his/her job.

Building and Maintaining Coaching Credibility

Losing credibility is devastating. What can coaches do to build and maintain it? The opening quote by Coach Wooden suggests a good starting point, character; but reputation is also important. As research has indicated when it comes to

leadership roles, perception (and reputation) can become reality. Many coaches in danger of losing credibility are unaware of it, because they don't realize how they are perceived by others.

Tips for Coaches Who Want to Maintain Credibility

- Get feedback. Do you have a feedback mechanism to get an accurate reading of how others perceive you? If not, this should be a starting point. Coaches who get over the initial fear and discomfort of soliciting feedback from coaching peers and athletes find it to be extremely useful. If you are lucky, your sport organization has a system in place, but if it doesn't, you should start one.



- Increase consistency. "Walking the talk" is easy to say but often difficult to accomplish. One common mistake is to make a rule that is applied strictly for some athletes and less so for a star athlete. This is a classic example of the kind of inconsistency that leads to a loss of credibility. Taking an occasional short-term loss of long-term credibility is rarely a mistake. On the other hand, I have frequently advised coaches not to establish rules or expectations that they are unable to enforce. If you know that you can't be consistent in your behavior, don't pretend or you will lose credibility with your athletes.
- Know your strengths and weaknesses. Loss of credibility may be related to a blind spot within

yourself. Coaches who understand their own motivation, personality and preferences can build an environment that helps maintain credibility. For example, a coach who thrives on constant change and new challenges might not want to preach the gospel of consistency, unless they have other people in the environment (such as a strong assistant coach) who will maintain a consistent approach.

Credibility is the key to strong leadership, and the loss of credibility is a major factor when coaches lose the ability to lead. If leading others is one of your goals as a coach, consider your credibility and determine what you need to do to build and maintain it.

Nilsen, D. and Hernez Broome, G. (1998), *Leadership in action*, 18, 2, pp13-14.



COACHING CHILDLIKE SIMPLICITY

Do the following phrases sound familiar to you?

"Race you to the light pole,"

"Whoever gets ten points first wins,"

"Coach said I get to start in the game today. I can't wait."

They are all things that you likely would hear come from the mouths of young athletes.

Contrast that with the following quote, "I've never played so poorly in my entire life. I can't believe how nervous I was and how I collapsed under the pressure."

This actual quote came from an athlete who had been playing and competing in her sport for years and years. It came after a poor performance in a major, international competition where she felt she had prepared herself to do well yet failed to do so.

In these competitive scenarios, there seems to be contrasting emotional experiences. In one, there is an overriding pressure or expectation to perform and in the other the athlete exhibits a joy and excitement about performing. Which emotional reaction or perspective of competition do you think facilitates optimal performance?

There is something positive to be learned from kids and competition; have fun and treat your sport like the game it is and this attitude will translate over to great performances. In this article, we will take a look at how to bring this

childlike simplicity back into your training and your approach to competition and see how it can enhance your enjoyment of your sport while also improving your performance.

Think for a minute about your own childhood athletic experiences. What words come to mind when recalling competition? Ask a group of adults to reflect back and you will hear them use words like "fun," "easy," "enjoying the process of performing," "naive," "not too stressed." And now ask yourself about how you perceive competition as an adult? You are likely to come up with words like "overly complex," "stressful," "not so much fun" and "anxiety provoking," and that is what competition can become, if we let it.

Many elite athletes tell me, when recounting competitions as a child, that "it was so easy back then." By easy, it seems athletes are referring to having the ability to just compete, to get up and do what they have been training for while not worrying too much about the outcome or the environment. Somewhere along the way a shift occurs where athletes worry about the outcome, worry about the environment ("This is the US Open" or "This is my first nationals") and they then force their performances. And such thinking sure takes the fun out of competition.



While there is no one answer as to how to keep competition light and fun, I present some thoughts and ideas about how to help you bring the simplicity and ease back to competition:

Alter Your Perspective

I had an athlete once tell me that to get in an effective competition mindset he recalls when he used to race with his childhood friends. Specifically, he would remember walking home from school when someone would yell "race you to the end of the block" and all the kids would take off. Everyone would just race, there was no worrying about who was going to win. Now, in his competitions as an

elite athlete, he tries to bring back this unencumbered, simplified approach. He reminds himself to "just race to the end of the block." It can be that simple.

What, Really is the Task?

Kids do not get too caught up in the environment. It is about getting from point A to point B or hitting the ball over the net. This is true whether it is competing with friends after school or competing on a local or regional team. As adults, we sometimes let the environment complicate what needs to be done. Athletes often make the task more difficult by telling themselves it is the Olympics, or that a college recruiter is in the stands and that they have to be even better, faster, and more perfect. This is not true, the task is the same regardless of the environment. Remind yourself of this. Get back to the task stripped bare of the surrounding, getting from point A to B as fast as possible or hitting the ball over the net.

Let the Outcome Take Care of Itself

Of course, kids want to win. They want to be the first to the end of the block, they want to catch the ball and they want to score a goal. But, they seem caught up in the joy of competing and trying one's hardest. As adults, instead of directing our energies to the process, we are consumed with the outcome. We forget that the process of performance is what influences the outcome. Acknowledge that winning, placing, running a specific time are important. Then, let it go and focus instead on what you need to do to perform well. The joy and ease of competing is sure to manifest itself with such an approach.

It is not often you are instructed to act like a child, in fact in most cases we are told to grow up or act our age. However, in this one regard, you should be like a child. Leave all your baggage at the door. Simplify things in your mind so all you are doing is really jumping as far as you can or racing your buddy across the pool. Bring this attitude to your competition and watch your performances improve.

About the Author

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(NGBs) to develop and enhance coaching education and training. Suzie currently works as a sport psychology consultant at the University of Miami.



SELECTION

INFORMING YOUTH OF THEIR NON SELECTION IN COMPETITIVE SPORT

Questions for Coaches to consider when making elimination announcements:

- To what extent does the way that I plan to inform athletes of their elimination:
 - Answer their questions of 'why didn't I make the team'?
 - In a way that is personal and relevant?
 - In a way that is sensitive of their age?
 - In a way that considers their investment and future goals in this sport?
 - Let me inform them of their strengths?
 - Provide me with the opportunity to discuss with them the alternative programs, leagues, or lessons in our sport?
 - Invite them to ask future questions about their evaluation and follow-up questions about the feedback I provided?
 - Consider the environment (surroundings, other people) in which they will react to being eliminated?
 - Encourage or discourage confrontations with the youth or their parents?
 - Match with the amount of time I can, or am willing to spend?



- To what degree do I care about the subsequent physical activity of non-selected athletes and is maintaining their motivation in this sport or potential other activities important to me?
- How well am I informed about other programs, leagues, clubs, or lessons in my sport offered within my community?
- How best can I provide information about alternative sport choices to non-selected athletes?
- Do the provided reasons as to why they are unsuccessful in making the team:
 - Include mostly areas that are controlled by the youth?
 - Include information about how to improve in those areas needing improvement?
 - Significantly overshadow any positive feedback I can offer about the areas in which they have strengths?
- Are the eliminated youth already expecting some of the feedback that I will provide:
 - Because I indicated that I would provide feedback following the tryout?
 - Because feedback and coaching has been offered throughout the tryout process?

- How do I feel about the ways in which I have experienced, or observed others being eliminated when I participated in youth sport?
- What can I learn from the examples of other coaches regarding the manner that tryout decisions are announced?
- What can I do to clarify how tryout results will be communicated?
- Can I offer choices to the athletes that would allow them to receive news of their elimination in a manner that is personally desirable?
- What is the role of parents and would it be beneficial to increase their role?
 - Should I/how can I inform parents of the tryout process?
 - Should I/how can I inform parents of their child's elimination?
 - Will the child require support and parenting to deal with their elimination and what is my role in helping the parents?
- How can I solicit feedback about the way in which I inform athletes of their non-selection?
- How do I want the youth to feel when he/she leaves here as an eliminated athlete? What have I done to help make this happen?

Questions for Athletes facing elimination:

- How can I ask for (more) feedback?
- How can I respect the coach's time whilst still gaining answers to my questions?
- How can I demonstrate respect for the coach and the coaching decision?
- How can I deal with my pain and disappointment and still learn from the situation?
- What are my other options in this sport and how can I learn more about them?
- How do I want my parents to be involved and what is my role in helping them to become involved?

Questions for Parents of Athletes facing (or potentially facing) elimination:

- What should I know about the sport system before my child attends the tryouts?
- What can I do to remain informed about the tryout process?
- What are the options facing my child should he or she be eliminated?
- What can I do to become informed about the alternative choices within their desired sport?
- How can I respect the coach's time and effort whilst still gaining answers to my questions?
- How can I help my child appreciate the varying levels of competitiveness within their sport?
- What can I do to collaborate and demonstrate my support for the coach's decision?
- How can I reinforce the positive feedback that was provided to my child?
- How can I provide feedback to the coach and/or to the organization about the way in which nonselection was communicated?

Questions for Club Administrators of youth sport:

- Whose responsibility is it to ensure that families understand the club, community, Provincial, or National developmental systems of the sport? How does this occur?
- Whose responsibility is it to ensure that families receive information about alternative options (other playing levels) in the sport? How does this occur?
- In sports where consecutive eliminations (trickle down cuts) occur in order to form teams at the highest levels first, whose responsibility is it to ensure that the process works properly and how is this achieved?
- To what degree does our team/club/organization have policies, recommendations, best practices or resources about communicating tryout results that are available to coaches?
- How can we solicit feedback about the way in which our coaches inform athletes of their nonselection?