SPORT:
Why Bother?
From Athletic Leaders to Expert Coaches
Revisiting the NCCP
Features

Sport: Why Bother? .......................................................... 4
A frank examination of sport's place in the Canada of the future.

The CPC Honor Roll .................................................... 14
Recognizing the accomplishments of athletes and their coaches.

Being a More Helpful Coach ............................................. 16
Andy Higgins muses on coaches and their responsibilities to athletes.

Taking A Pragmatic Approach To Preparation .................... 21
A revealing look at Canada's world junior hockey championship program.

Revisiting the NCCP ..................................................... 28
A provocative and timely call for changes to the Canadian system of training coaches.

Departments

News Roundup ............................................................. 3
Highs and lows in Canadian sport.

Speaking Personally ..................................................... 12
News of coaches on the move.

A Forum on Ethics ....................................................... 15
National coach Gary Ness describes a leadership role for coaches.

S•P•O•R•T•S .......................................................... 18
Patricia Miller, Gordon Bloom, and John Salmela examine how coaches develop leadership skills.

Peter Ennis—A Profile .................................................. 22
An Olympic dream unfolds.

Perspectives from Abroad ................................................ 24
Victor Zilberman penetrates China's intriguing sport system.

Knowing the Law ......................................................... 26
Corbett and Findlay on fair treatment.

Business Bulletin .......................................................... 27
Simmons on how to diversify and Hendry on the recent federal budget.

In My Opinion ........................................................... 32
Patricia McGarry ponders the future shape of ice hockey for girls and women.

Jean-Luc Brassard powers his way to the 1995/96 World Cup overall moguls title.
The Roots of Success:
From Athletic Leaders
To Expert Coaches

Patricia S. Miller, Gordon A. Bloom, and Dr. John H. Salmela of the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa are conducting research on coaching expertise. The present study is part of a larger research project examining the development, knowledge, and beliefs of expert Canadian coaches of team and individual sports.

The three minimal conditions necessary for the existence of leadership are, one, involvement of a group of two or more persons, two, involvement of a common task, and three, existence of a differentiation of responsibility. (Cox 1994, p. 322)

Many athletes who went on in sport to become successful coaches were often exceptional leaders who possessed keen perspectives and winning styles. Over the years, sport researchers and enthusiasts have speculated on which characteristics facilitate the transition from athlete to successful coach. The purpose of our research was to determine how Canada's top coaches of team sports developed leadership skills during their athletic careers.

There is evidence that athletes who later became leading coaches began to acquire the fundamentals of coaching during their early participation as athletes. Researchers at the University of Ottawa tracked the career progression of six expert Canadian basketball coaches (Schanke et al. 1995). They established seven career stages, beginning with the expert coaches' early participation in sport and ending with their elite coaching positions. The researchers concluded that the acquisition of coaching knowledge follows a fairly consistent developmental process which is rooted in early athletic experiences. They suggested that athletes acquired skills during their early athletic careers that may have prepared them for successful careers in coaching.

In a larger research project, these six expert basketball coaches and 15 others from the sports of volleyball, field hockey, and ice hockey were identified by their respective sport governing bodies as being the top amateur coaches in Canada. All were past or present national team coaches and some were very successful university coaches. All had impressive win/loss records, had produced a number of national and international athletes, and were respected as educators.

In-depth interviews were conducted with each coach, spanning their athletic and coaching careers. The portions of the interview transcripts dealing with the expert coaches' leadership skills while they were athletes were analysed. Although the interviewer did not probe the coaches about their leadership skills and experiences, 14 of the 21 experts alluded to the development of certain leadership skills during their athletic careers.

Three distinct categories of leadership emerged. As athletes, the coaches developed leadership skills as a result of their unique personal characteristics, their role as team leaders, and their involvement as youth coaches.

Personal characteristics

The expert coaches often had strong personalities marked by a work ethic and intensity in training and competition that directed them into leadership positions. They were committed to excellence in their sport and were enthusiastic in their pursuits, which differentiated them from their teammates.

A coach of the national men's volleyball team reflected on his experiences as an athlete.

In 1974, I went to see an international game of volleyball, and the Japanese were doing these serves. The next day, I went to the gymnasium and said to myself: "I'm going to serve the same way." I applied myself in practice and I was able to do it.

The coach exhibited this drive on a personal level, but also expected commitment and intensity from other teammates and coaches.
Never let a ball drop without trying to get it because if you did, I would kick you out of practice. I did kick my teammates out of practice. When guys would come to watch and they talked too loud, disturbing our practice, I asked them to leave. And when the coach didn't push hard enough, I pushed the coach. I don't know how I came to be this way, but I was always like that with my aspirations.

An international field hockey coach remembered having to take charge of his own training and preparation as there were few specialty coaches available when he was a young field hockey goalie.

I was pretty well my own coach throughout my career. I was surrounded by ice hockey players doing a little bit of coaching, but no real coaches. That meant I had to work an awful lot harder at being prepared, like getting players to shoot at me. Now we have ball machines for firing, but we didn't have them in my day so I would get anybody to come out and shoot at me for hours on end. I would go to the local gymnasium and kick a tennis ball because that was the reflex I was looking for.

Their athletic involvement in sport was definitely preparing some of these athletes for later coaching careers. A successful university volleyball coach recalled one such experience:

It was an incredible eye-opener for me. I was very good technically and probably as ready as anyone would have been. I didn't know this at the time, but I was a pain in the butt to the coaches because I always wanted an explanation: "Why are we practicing this way?" "Why does this skill work?" I didn't even know that I did that, but all the girls I played with knew it. I challenged the coaches, not to be rude, but just to find out why we would do this.

By questioning their teammates and coaches, the future coaches also expanded the performance boundaries of their athletic careers. Sport is an arena that thrives on tradition and history and sometimes these future experts broke away from the conventional way of doing things and began to establish new standards. An international volleyball coach shared a part of his athletic history.

We had to do our own fund-raising to go to Europe in 1972. I think we were the first team in the country to go to Europe. We broke down a lot of barriers and set out on new frontiers. Now it is commonplace for kids to go to Europe; it is like a recruiting tour. In those days, when the idea was presented, they didn't even know where it was, let alone how to get there. We didn't have a plane that flew directly there; we had to land in Greenland before we could get across.

While the female coaches were competing as athletes in the 1970s, women's sport was gaining increased attention and support. However, many people still felt that women athletes were not as committed or as talented as their male counterparts. One expert coach, then a young basketball player, recalled the attitudes and opinions that had to be changed.

When I was coming through, a girl basketball player had to fight a lot of society's opinions of what girls should be doing. The women knew it a lot easier nowadays; there is absolutely no stigma attached to it. To be a basketball player on the women's team is a very big thing, but that wasn't the way when I came through.

By breaking down conventional training and competition methods for women, a number of these expert coaches were also able to develop strong leadership skills. Exposing themselves and their teammates to international competition exemplified the personal characteristics that would later contribute to winning coaching careers.

**Role as team leader**

During their own athletic careers, many of the coaches acquired social skills through their role as team leaders. Many had been assistant or team captains with their youth and competitive teams. They were often responsible for guiding new players, setting positive examples, and helping their coaches make decisions about team matters.

A former Olympic coach took control of his team on the field.

As an athlete, I was always a guy you could describe as a leader, but I never sensed that; it just happened. If the leadership was there, it was only because of the way that I played, and not because of anything I said. I don't recall ever consciously thinking, "It's time for some leadership here in the group." We needed a touchdown—give me the ball—let's go.

A men's Olympic basketball coach also acquired strong leadership skills through his experiences as a team captain. Looking back, he recognized the value of his athletic experiences in his success as a professional coach.

I knew I worked very hard, was very team-oriented and very positive all the time. I got along well with people and I think the coaches identified with me so I evolved into being captain. I liked the opportunity to make the calls while playing football. I broke down things piece by piece and put them back together. I understood them better and found that I could relate it to the crew I was working with at that time. I think I was probably preparing myself whether I knew it or not. In fact, you are starting into that whole coaching realm when you do that kind of thing. I really enjoyed it.

Some coaches competed in their sport until their late twenties and were recognized by their coaches and teammates as well-
grounded, veteran players. They were given considerable responsibility based on their experience and leadership qualities. For example, a successful volleyball coach recounted:

"I felt like I was almost a step above the other players, because I was older and I knew the coach so well as a friend. I was used to being captain and a lot of things came about, like leadership. Also, I was always the one who would go to the coach and negotiate things for the team. I was starting to feel like I was almost an assistant coach. I was in on a lot of the decision-making."

These opportunities were clearly preparing this veteran athlete for the transition from player to coach.

Becoming a leader among their teammates facilitated the acquisition of strong leadership skills and the development of effective decision-making abilities. These competencies would prove vital to their success as team coaches.

Role as youth coach

As they personally advanced to higher levels of competition, some athletes started to coach younger teams. When they began competing in high school, they then went back to help their primary school coaches. While in university, some returned to help out their high school coaches. The chance to coach a youth team gave these future coaches a sense of the responsibilities and rewards inherent to the coaching profession. The responsibility to act as role models for young athletes helped refine the leadership skills they had acquired as athletes.

A national men's volleyball coach spent part of his youth coaching local teams.

"I worked at summer camps for children from the age of 16 to about 21 or 22. I coached young teams in basketball, hockey, volleyball, and all other sports. When I started, I was the monitor for the six- to eight-year-olds and continued to coach the older groups until I was finally coaching the teenagers. I always had groups of between 30 and 40 kids a week. That was really an extraordinary experience. I went through all my development. I think it helped make me who I am today."

A former coach of the national junior hockey team became interested in coaching through his experience coaching youth teams.

"In grade 12, I coached a pee wee team that went to a provincial final. That whetted my appetite. As a high school student, looking ahead at what I might do in order to stay in a leadership role in sport and athletics, it seemed that the best route was to take a phys ed degree and then go into teaching. Certainly everybody who was a major influence on me at that time had done that kind of thing. So I headed off to university to take a phys ed degree."

As a varsity athlete and coach of a high school team, a university volleyball coach with international experience began to recognize the appeal of coaching professionally.

"I didn't play at university until my third year because there was a coach who didn't excite me to play. I spent some time coaching at a high school, and that coach got me involved in coaching. That is when I really got interested in coaching volleyball. I liked coaching because I don't think I was ever that talented as a player. I was not very big in volleyball and not very athletic. You really have to be a student of the game and I think that is where I came through. I liked to be involved and I couldn't be as a player, so coaching was the best thing."

Many of the coaches started to coach youth teams while they were still competing. They began building a repertoire of skills, including those related to leadership, that would promote their initiation to professional coaching.

Conclusions

This paper is part of the work done at the University of Ottawa on career progression and the development of coaching expertise.

The results of this analysis show that the expert coaches began to acquire leadership skills during their athletic careers through their own personal characteristics and initiative; their roles as team captains; and experience as youth coaches. Even as young athletes, several of the expert coaches were thinking about coaching as a career and were developing skills that would advance their goals.

Researchers who have looked at the evolution of coaching careers of expert basketball coaches (Schinke et al. 1995) found that their success as coaches was rooted in their early athletic experiences. Whether they knew it or not, their experiences as young players and interactions with youth coaches were building the foundations of winning coaching careers. The current findings support this research and highlight leadership as one of the skills coaches acquired during their athletic participation that formed the foundation of successful coaching careers.

The implication of these findings is that athletic leadership may be one of the markers of future entry and success into the realm of professional coaching. Certainly the appointments of assistant and team captains to head coaching positions, suggest the importance of strong leadership in amateur and professional coaching.

These findings can also help young and aspiring coaches realize that one aspect that may assist them in their coaching careers is the acquisition of strong leadership skills. Even as players, there are a number of opportunities to build leadership. Getting involved as youth coaches, for example, could further their coaching aspirations and provide young athletes with strong role models.

References


20 Coaches Report