The Career Stages of Elite Canadian Basketball Coaches

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In-depth open-ended interviews were conducted with six expert Canadian basketball coaches. The purpose of the interviews was to examine the evolution of these coaches from their first athletic experiences to their present coaching positions. The results reveal seven chronological career stages of expert basketball coaches: early sport participation, elite sport, international elite sport, novice coaching, developmental coaching, national elite coaching and international elite coaching. As athletes, the eventual coaches were influenced by parents, sport instructors and their accessibility to physical resources. During their progression in sport, they became elite level athletes due to high levels of training, commitment, talent and passion; some even competed at the international level. When athletic careers came to an end, the coaches searched for possible ways to remain affiliated with sport. The novice and developmental coaching levels reflected a search for an appropriate coaching philosophy and new skills. Concurrently, the developmental coaches acquired theoretical and applied knowledge from academic institutions and mentor coaches. Due to their winning records, the coaches were all hired to work with university teams. The difference between national and international level coaches were minimal; those who became international level coaches made winning a priority.

Des entrevues en profondeur ont été faites avec six entraîneur(e)s canadien(ne)s expert(e)s en basket-ball. Le but des entrevues était d'examiner l'évolution de ces entraîneur(e)s à partir de leurs premières expériences sportives jusqu'à leurs postes actuels. Les résultats indiquent sept étapes chronologiques dans la carrière des entraîneur(e)s de basket-ball: début de la participation sportive, sport d'élite, sport d'élite de calibre international, entraîneur(e) novice, entraîneur(e) en développement, entraîneur(e) d'élite nationale et entraîneur(e) d'élite internationale. Comme athlètes, les entraîneur(e)s éventuel(le)s furent influencés par leurs parents, leurs instructeurs de sport et leur accessibilité aux ressources physiques. Pendant leur progression en sport, ils et elles sont devenus des athlètes d'élite à cause de leur haut niveau d'entraînement, leur implication, leur talent et leur passion. Lorsque leur carrière d'athlète se termina, ils et elles étaient à la recherche de façons de rester impliqué(e)s en sport. Aux niveaux novice et développement, les entraîneur(e)s ont cherché de nouvelles habiletés et une philosophie du coaching. En même temps, les entraîneur(e)s en développement ont acquis des connaissances théoriques et pratiques dans des institutions académiques ou en s'associant à

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des mentors. À cause de leur fiche gagnante, ces entraîneur(e)s ont tous et toutes été engagés pour travailler avec des équipes universitaires. La différence entre les entraîneur(e)s de niveau national et international est minime; ceux et celles qui sont devenus des entraîneur(e)s de niveau international ont fait de la victoire une priorité.

Salmela (1994) noted that sport psychology researchers have recently studied the development of coaching expertise to compliment earlier work on elite athletes (e.g., Orlick & Partington, 1986). For example, the research of Gould, Giannini, Krane and Hodge (1990), and Gould, Hodge, Peterson and Giannini (1989) surveyed American national team coaches to elicit the needs of professional coaches. When the expert coaches were asked to identify factors contributing to their current professional knowledge, they emphasized the importance of “coaching experience” and “other successful coaches.” These examples indicated a need for further research on coaching expertise. The present research attempted to address this issue by considering the chronological career advancement of expert basketball coaches.

Bloom (1985) examined the development of expert performers through in-depth structured interviews with world class performers in the art, science and sport domains. Bloom found that world class performers in all domains progressed through an analogous three stage process. In the first stage, performers were introduced to their eventual sport domains. The coach provided the athlete with an enjoyable first experience, mainly through large amounts of positive feedback. During the second stage, the performers became increasingly committed and self-directed within their domains. Thus, they searched for more advanced coaches, who in turn, demanded more from their athletes. When the performers reached Bloom’s final stage of development, they were totally committed to their domains and to furthering their potential. Inevitably, the relationship between the athlete and coach evolved into one mutual respect and collegiality with both parties focusing on the refinement of the performer’s skills.

Berliner (1988) also studied the development of experts. More specifically, he examined expert teachers and identified five distinct stages in their professional development. Initially, novice teachers based their teaching on theoretical principles. After two or three years of experience, the educators became "advanced beginners" with an ability to construct teaching strategies based on theory and some personal experience. During the third stage, the teachers improved the timing of their feedback to students, but their methods of orchestrating classroom procedures was not yet automated. In the final two stages, the teaching approaches progressed from a cognitive to an automated state, and then finally to a higher conceptual level of interpretation. Specific to the final stage of development, teachers created a unique and personalized holistic approach based as much on intuition as previous classroom experiences. More importantly, Berliner found that teachers progressed through a natural sequence of stages before they reached
the highest metacognitive level of development.

Salmela (1994) initiated a study that influenced the present research. In a topical analysis of 21 expert coaches of four team sports, three stages of coaching development were identified beginning with early involvement in sport, extending to early coaching positions and culminating with either a university or national team coaching position. The significance of this study can be seen in the relationship between early sport experiences and eventual coaching knowledge and philosophy. Salmela's research demonstrated that the early athletic experiences of elite coaches played a role in the consolidation of their coaching knowledge, something that until this point, had not been considered.

Following this, Salmela, Draper and Desjardins (1994) conducted research on expert coaches that considered both their athletic and coaching evolution. Using expert field and ice hockey coaches, Salmela and his colleagues identified the following six phases of athletic and coaching development: diffused involvement in sports, initial coaching role, passive to active transfer of coaching knowledge, established coaching role, specialist coach, eminent awareness. Initially, all the coaches played a variety of sports and exhibited high levels of dedication and commitment. When they started coaching, many taught a variety of sports which helped them acquire basic coaching fundamentals. This was supplemented through contacts with mentor coaches and coaching clinics. When they attained their first established coaching positions, they specialized in one sport. Being labelled "eminent" meant that the coaches had a successful winning percentage and that they began to produce other expert coaches. The research by Salmela and his colleagues provided coaches with the applied knowledge and procedures that characterized their evolution. However, the focus of their research was on the knowledge acquired by these coaches rather than grounding this knowledge into stages outlining career advancement.

In another study, Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria and Russell (1995) looked at expert gymnastic coaches. Their findings contributed to sport research on two levels. For one, Côté and his colleagues provided the sport scientist with a study in which expert coaching data was gathered, organized and interpreted employing qualitative methods. They also identified the conceptual and operational knowledge of elite coaches which was organized around the following six components of a coaching model (CM): training, organization, competition, coach's characteristics, athletes' characteristics and contextual factors. The six components of the CM will undoubtedly emerge through the various stages of the present study. However, the intent of the current research is to focus on the stages of the career development of expert coaches rather than on their formalized coaching procedures.

Progress in qualitative frameworks has included improvements in all stages of inquiry and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss
& Corbin, 1990). These writings have provided researchers with sound guidelines to formulate appropriate methodologies for data acquisition and analysis. More specifically, they elaborated on methods of conducting open-ended interviews in order to gain a thorough understanding of the subjects' knowledge.

A growing number of authors in sport research have supported methods of qualitative data gathering and analysis in place of traditional quantitative approaches (Côté, Salmela & Russell, 1995b; Martens, 1987; Orlick & Partington, 1986; Strean & Roberts, 1992). For example, Martens advocated that qualitative interview procedures provided the sport scientist with a clearer understanding of the information being elicited in complex sport environments. Similar to its predecessors, the current study also employed qualitative methods.

Methods

Subjects

Six expert basketball coaches were selected by Basketball Canada as being the most successful in the country. The average age of these coaches was 51.5 years, varying from 42 years to 64 years. Their coaching experience at the elite level averaged 19.7 years. The six basketball coaches, five males and one female, included two former men's national coaches, two former women's national coaches, the current women's national team coach and one successful Canadian university coach.

All the expert basketball coaches had a minimum of 10 years of coaching experience (Chase & Simon, 1973), and all were selected by peers and administrators based on win/loss percentages at the university or national team level. The coaches were also selected based on the quantity of performers produced at the university and national team levels.

Interview Technique

Patton's (1980) approach for interviewing subjects was employed during this study. More specifically, this included a combination of structured and unstructured questions. The interviews were directed by the researcher in order to provide a better chronological understanding of each coach's development. However, the content themes that emerged during the interviews were guided by each coach's experiential knowledge and coaching philosophy. A procedure termed "probing" (Patton, 1987) was used to redefine and further elaborate some of the terminology used by the coaches whenever it was confusing or lacking in detail. Detailed probe questioning included the basic "who," "what," "where," "when" and "how" in order to gain a better understanding of coaching develop-
ment and procedures. Each coach was also questioned to the point of saturation during the interview so that little or no information would be overlooked by the researcher. The format in these interviews began with the early athletic involvement of these coaches and extended through their progression of the coaching ranks, up to and including their current elite-level positions.

Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim from their original cassettes to a typed format immediately after the completion of each interview. In total, 296 pages of double spaced interview transcripts were obtained. Sole alterations to the manuscripts were grammatical corrections that clarified, but did not detract from the content and its implications (Tesch, 1990). Qualitative analysis procedures outlined by Côté, Salmela and Russell (1995a) were followed, using a version of Borland’s Paradox for Windows, designed specifically for qualitative data. The analysis involved two separate phases: creating tags and creating categories. The emphasis during the first phase was to produce a set of concepts which adequately represented the information included in the interview transcripts. The meaning units or segments of text that contained one specific idea were identified, and the researchers developed in vivo tags to represent the meaning units (Côté & Salmela, 1994). Initially, these tags were provisional, and evolved as the analysis progressed. During the second phase, “like” tags were grouped together, eventually forming larger, more representative categories.

Results

The purpose of the current research was to examine the evolution of expert coaches from their first athletic experiences to their present coaching positions. Based on the analysis, the following seven chronological career stages emerged: early sport participation, national elite sport, international elite sport, novice coaching, developmental coaching, national elite coaching and international elite coaching (see Figure 1). A definition of each stage will now be provided as well as quotations to help clarify and justify the seven stage process of coaching expertise.

Early Sport Participation

This category comprised the early experiences of these coaches when they were beginner and early competitive athletes. Initial sport activities in this stage took place at recreational and community levels and eventually advanced to more competitive levels at provincial or state championships. An initial love of sport, combined with help from parents and other family members facilitated the athlet-
Figure 1. The career stages of elite Canadian basketball coaches

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ic development of these individuals. The first sport experiences varied with respect to the accessibility of physical resources and coaches, as well as the athletes’ level of interest and motivation. Some of these coaches became involved in basketball at a young age and remained committed to it:

My parents didn’t come out to a lot of the games because they worked when I played. Every Sunday I would be in the back yard. The hoop was right against the house and I made a terrible racket practicing. I was extremely good. I was able to go and practice for three hours on my own.

Others were introduced to a variety of sports before becoming involved with basketball:

When I was young I played every sport just like everybody did in those days; in a very disorganized way. I loved sports and this was where I spent all of my public and high school years.

Regardless of the sport, all athletes were strongly influenced by their initial coaches. These experiences helped each individual begin to shape a personal coaching philosophy. In some cases, lessons were acquired on both the coaching content and the process:

My coach was a good fundamental teacher who helped get me emotionally under control. I was very intense and competitive and he helped get my act together in
terms of what was acceptable conduct in the realm of sport. They were tough learning experiences but in the long run more valuable in terms of personal nature than the other technical stuff.

Negative experiences with early coaches often resulted in the identification of behaviours and attitudes that they were certain they would never use themselves as coaches. Hardships and humiliation were some of the early childhood sport experiences that directed eventual coaching philosophies:

My phys-ed teacher was the guy that I remember most of all. Although he was a fairly good coach in the sense that he put in time, I remember mostly negative things. He wasn’t a very positive or encouraging person.

The high school coach was a disciplinarian. You weren’t allowed to talk or breathe during practice. In basketball, someone would say “nice play.” He would respond that “it is not a damn debating society, you are here to play basketball, so shut up.” It was definitely intimidation.

Nonetheless, all eventual coaches had an initial love and dedication for sport regardless of early sport experiences:

I remember when the basketball season was over I was waiting for the next basketball season to start. Even though track season or softball season were going on, I was always getting kicked out of the gym and told to go out with the track team. I would go out, but I would sneak back into the school, and find a place to play. It was an obsession.

Early sport participation began with the introduction of sport at a young age and ended with competitions at the provincial or state level. Fundamental information was gained from most of their coaches, although not all of this was positive. Despite this, an initial passion for sport was evident from an early age, and continued as they progressed up the athletic ladder.

**Elite Sport**

Athletes in this category either represented their university or province in national level competitions, or competed in the lower levels of professional basketball. This first intensive elite level sporting experience now became an obsession as opposed to a recreational activity, as most of their spare time was spent practicing or playing basketball or another team sport:

I got through school and I was in university. I wanted to be a doctor, while a friend helped change my life. I was playing in the Eastern league and I was a throwback. My friend got traded to a team that was all black and he didn’t want to be the only white guy on the team so he brought me along. I was about 15 or 16, and they put up with me. We used to make money: I made about $10 a game,
and I would go home with $30 - 40 at the end of a week-end.

In university we had a special and committed core. I think it was the first time most of us had this opportunity to train intensely, and we thrived on it.

Early sport participation showed the love and devotion that these coaches exhibited for sport. At this first elite athletic stage, however, the early love for sport was combined with an ability to excel in the physical component of their sporting domains.

**International Elite Sport**

The final athletic stage was only for the best performers. To qualify as an international caliber athlete, the individual had to be a member of a national basketball team. Two of the six expert coaches competed at this stage, although no assessment of their ability was made:

They were a senior team and completely removed from the norm. We weren’t in the league or anything, so we were beginning to play all these exhibition games and ended up playing in the senior championships. The senior championships would only take about a month so the rest of time we were playing in the United States. We played Division One schools and we had given everyone a good licking. As a result, we ended up going to the Pan Am Games and the Olympic Games.

One cannot be certain to what extent, if any, the ultimate level of athletic experiences influenced eventual coaching careers of these individuals. However, it is interesting to note that both members who competed at this level eventually became coaches of Canadian Olympic and World Championship teams. While it could not be inferred that performing at this level was a prerequisite for future coaching success, the high level of commitment required at the international level apparently contributed to the progression of these coaches.

To get somebody who was obsessed with the game as I was is very unusual. Some of the top coaches were that way as players, and that is why they are still in it. As you go down to the lower levels, it becomes harder.

**Novice Coaching**

Entry level coaching positions varied and included coaching a variety of sports or teaching academics in a primary school or community setting. At this stage, all the coaches taught athletes at a non-competitive level. Novice coaching lasted long enough for the coaches to acquire sufficient knowledge to specialize in one sport. All coaches discussed the many difficulties with their novice level positions:
I remember at my first job I taught six periods. I supervised the lunch period, baby-sat in the study hall, chaperoned at the dances on a Friday night, coached all three teams in football, baseball and basketball and cleaned up the gym on Monday because the janitor didn’t get to it. I remember the principal calling me in and telling me if I did a good job next year he would put me on full-time.

Some of these expert coaches competed for their university sport teams while serving as player-coaches. Despite their experiences as athletes and their commitment to hard work, many experienced hardships due to a general lack of coaching experience. In some cases, these coaches had no playing or theoretical experience in basketball prior to their involvement as a coach. As a result, knowledge acquisition occurred concurrently in an applied coaching setting and through access to books and clinics:

I know how I started coaching. I still remember the names of the players at my school. They had never played basketball before and I had never coached basketball before - this was going to be a great move on both our parts. I had a book by Adolph Rupp which told you how team work should be. I had this idea that you had two little guys, two big guys and then one real big guy, that is how I picked the team.

The coaches chose different routes to begin their coaching careers; most taught a variety of sports, which may or may not have included basketball. A quest for basic physical education or sport science knowledge led many coaches to enroll in a combination of undergraduate physical education courses and coaching clinics.

Developmental Coaching

The transition to the developmental coaching level was distinct from the novice level in two ways. First, positions were at the high school level as opposed to previous recreational or primary school levels. Second, coaching responsibilities now included higher level competitive tournaments where the results served as an evaluative form of measurement:

When I went to the girls’ team it was already one of the stronger teams in the city, with some very good athletes. We started off just killing everybody. Then we played a team that I knew we were better than, and we lost. At that point, I thought I have to know more about this game. I really felt that I had let the kids down. I said to myself, if you are going to do this you had better start doing something about it because we are not getting any better, and these kids are demanding more from me and I don’t have it right now.

Knowledge in the first two coaching levels was neither consolidated nor exhaustive. To acquire more knowledge, half of the coaches returned to school during this career marker in order to pursue a master’s degree in a sport related
topic. This acquisition of knowledge was combined with interactions with master coaches who served as mentors and played a role in the development of their coaching knowledge and personal philosophy. Coaches were selected by their mentors as assistant coaches due to a combination of personal compatibility and coaching potential:

I took an advanced basketball course and I did pretty well. At the end of the course, I got a phone call and he [the coach] asked me to come in and see him. I didn’t know him very well, just from the class. I worked with him and I found it opened up a whole new interest for me; the way he coached, his management style, his organization, all of the things that he did really caught my interest.

Some of the coaches were selected by their mentors while competing as an athlete. Many hypothesized that their opportunities to work with mentor coaches were due to their tenacity and character as athletes:

A guy I had played with wanted me to be his assistant coach, and he was a genius. I really learned a lot from him. He was the coach at my old high school, a job you would dream to have.

In the first coaching level, teaching competencies were of little importance. However, during the developmental coaching phase, coaching became a career with a competitive orientation and an emphasis towards understanding the needs of the athletes and the sport of basketball. All coaches were now fully committed to a basketball coaching career, and were ready to progress to higher, elite levels.

National Elite Coaching

Coaches in this stage differed from lower level coaches because they worked with successful university teams or coached provincial teams at national competitions. All coaches aspired to and obtained elite level positions that they attributed to an awareness of opportunities based as much on intuition as ambition. Their first opportunity to work at this level often occurred due to chance, or due to being in the right place at the right time:

A successful university coach came and watched a couple of our high school games and said to me, “I’m taking the year off, do you want to take my team for a year?” I wasn’t sure because he had the best team in Canada. I wondered if I was ready for this. I said “yes” and he never came back. I think my coaching was formalized by then.

Initial coaching appointments at this level were often a shared responsibility. As a result, several of these coaches experienced a gradual transition to higher profile coaching positions. At the national elite coaching level, the coaches identified that they had a formalized conceptual understanding of the game they called
their own.

I got involved with the Ontario Basketball Association representative for our region because they had a problem with the provincial team. I guess they did not want their coach back the next year. So myself and another coach took over the Canada Games Team.

All coaches became more self-sufficient and successful at this stage and eventually began mentoring developing coaches. They also gave something back to the coaching profession by providing novice coaches with the same mentoring opportunities that they were fortunate enough to experience:

An important part of my job as a university coach is to work with high school coaches. I accept this as part of my job: to help coaches learn to develop players. I do this through clinics, bringing them to games and letting them come to practices.

Although no common pathways led to national elite coaching positions, previous coaching success played a significant role in the progression of their careers. While at this level, the coaches achieved a high degree of success by winning national university championships and producing professional and national caliber basketball players. There was also a recognition of their coaching success from their peers, as witnessed by their eventual role as mentor coaches. The progression to the final level was by far the most difficult due to the small number of positions available.

*International Elite Coaching*

Five of the six coaches sampled achieved positions with national teams, which qualified them as international elite coaches. All coaches at this level realized that this was an opportunity to further their professional coaching careers:

I got the opportunity to coach the national women's team after I had spent eight years coaching in high school and another six years coaching at a university. I was very successful, producing athletes and programs. Then I got this opportunity to coach the national women's team and I thought this was an opportunity to do something really ideal.

The pressures and expectations related to coaching international level sport became outcome-centered as opposed to a previous process orientation. Although personal development of the athlete was important, the coaches quickly realized that the security of the coach and the athlete depended more on results than the athletes' personal development. This in turn, redirected their coaching philosophies and approaches at this level:
When the athlete gets on the field or court to train, there is total commitment and devotion given at that time. They have to know that the process they're undertaking is valuable. It is not only valued by them and their demented coach, who is so possessed by it, but it's also valued by all those demented other people.

The difference between coaching at the national and international elite levels did not reflect a change in coaching knowledge, but rather a change in coaching orientation. In the international level, coaches prioritized performance results as they were accountable to more people including national sport governing bodies, the media and the public.

**Discussion**

The present study was the first to explicitly outline the career stages of expert basketball coaches, taking both their athletic and coaching careers into consideration. The results of this study relate to earlier research on expert performers and coaches/teachers.

Many similarities between Bloom’s (1985) research and the present study were found with respect to expert coaches. In the first of Bloom’s three stages, the coaches were responsible for providing the athlete with a pleasant sporting environment; this resembled the novice coaching stage of the present research. Along the same line, the developmental coaching level paralleled Bloom’s middle coaching stage. In both studies, the coach/teacher facilitated a training environment to improve the athletes’ skill and to provide them with their first competitive experiences. In the final stage of Bloom’s study, the athlete’s were responsible for refining their own skills, while the coach/teacher oversaw this process. This also occurred at the national and international coaching stages of the present research.

Differences also emerged when comparing the demarcation points in the career evolution of the coaches in each study. In Bloom’s study, the transition between stages was not set within a chronological time frame. In the current research, the precise career markers identified one stage of sport development from the next. For example, the present research differentiated between the national and international coaching levels that can be attributed to a shift in coaching orientation at the international elite stage. At this level, the coaches adjusted their priorities so that performance results were placed above all other concerns. Ultimately, these coaches understood that they were expected to prioritize successful performance results due to the differences of the coaches’ priorities. In Bloom’s research, they would all be classified into the final stage of expert coaching. Nonetheless, the discrepancy between the two studies was more a result of the nature of their proposed objectives rather than variations between the two samples.

Another difference was that Bloom’s research selected athletes from the indi-
vidual sports of tennis and swimming, which were only accessible to middle and upper class performers. The current study, however, interviewed coaches from the team sport of basketball. The athletes in basketball were from a broader population base spanning a greater variety of social classes. Also, due to the interactive nature of basketball, many new variables were added to the professional coach's responsibilities. For instance, the elite coaches directed the team's vision despite the fact that the athletes were self-motivated at the international level. One could hypothesize that the coaches' responsibilities were more proactive in team sports because they were responsible for team unity.

Some recent studies were designed to explicitly examine different aspects of expert coaches. Salmela's (1994) research on elite team sport coaches provided an understanding of coaching progression. Due to the premise of the present research, Salmela's stages were further divided into smaller, more specific stages. While Salmela classified all athletic experiences into one developmental stage, the present study identified three distinct stages.

Differences were also found in the early and elite coaching careers of both studies. Salmela divided the coaches' careers into two stages, called early and mature coaching. The present study, however, found four stages of coaching development. The novice and developmental coaching stages in the present study were similar to Salmela's early career coaching stage. However, the present study found that novice coaches were unable to produce successful competitive athletes. Coaching success did not take place until the developmental stage. Finally, Salmela's mature coaches were similar to the national and international coaches in the current research. The differences are similar to those mentioned earlier between the present research and the coaches/teachers working with elite performers in Blooms' final stage of development.

Salmela, Draper and Desjardins (1994) conducted another study on coaching expertise. The differences between this study and the present one are due to their different objectives. The research of Salmela and his colleagues focused on providing conceptual stages of coach development of expert ice hockey and field hockey coaches. In the present study, expert basketball coaches were interviewed, with an emphasis on the stages of the coaches' career evolutions. Thus, a coach could not be considered an expert in the present study unless they were coaching athletes at the national or international level. On the other hand, it can be inferred from Salmela and his colleagues that the coach was an expert before or after reaching the elite level because they did not base their coaching evolution on career appointments.

**Future Directions**

Although only a small sample of basketball coaches were examined, the
results merit consideration given the high levels of success of these coaches. It is hoped that future studies will also examine the paths of aspiring expert coaches of both team and individual sports.

Researchers interested in coaching development and expertise could explore whether this is unique to the elite levels. For example, are there expert novice and developmental coaches with formalized coaching procedures? Inevitably, coaching expertise at all levels would contribute to coaching certification programs and produce competent athletes and coaches at all levels.

To conclude, this study provides aspiring basketball coaches with a blueprint of how one sample of expert basketball coaches progressed up the coaching ladder. As more research in the sport sciences begins to recognize the importance of expert coaches, one can only imagine the positive effects that studies such as this will have on coaching development programs worldwide.

References


