GREAT JOB COACH!

Getting the Edge from Proven Winners

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Foreword by Geoff Gowan
Chapter Five

COMPETITION

Preparing For and Operating in Competition

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Canadian sport enthusiasts will always remember Joe Carter's home run of 1993, which clinched the World Series in the bottom of the ninth inning for the Toronto Blue Jays. Americans still remember “the miracle on ice,” the stunning gold medal victory of the 1980 U.S. Men’s Olympic Ice Hockey Team. People fail to realize, however, the importance of behind-the-scenes factors that may have contributed to these victories. Did the head coach speak differently before the game, make a crucial strategic maneuver during the game, or uncover valuable information from earlier post-game analyses? These factors have received little systematic attention. The purpose of this chapter is to emphasize the importance of what happens on the periphery, before, during and after a sporting contest.
PRE-GAME: PREPARING FOR COMPETITION

It is easy for spectators to overlook the role preparation plays in enhancing team play, both during training and on the day of a competition. It is much more exciting, for example, to talk about Wayne Gretzky’s incredible play-making skills. What we often fail to realize is the amount of preparation that occurs before the game begins, the attention spent on specific details by coaches watching game films or creating the master game plan.

On game day, most of the players’ activities are set up by the coaches. The plans include the team’s arrival at the stadium, the time players suit up for the game, and the moment coaches give their pre-game speech. This section outlines these activities as well as our coaches’ own pre-game routines to assure mental and physical awareness. Two other areas of pre-game preparation will be considered in greater detail and from a unique perspective: the pre-game warm-up and the pre-game talk.

Game Day Preparations of the Athletes

You can’t sleep. The game is all you can think about. You’re wondering what time the team bus leaves or if your players will be ready for combat. Although it’s common for coaches to mull over many things the night before the game, planning a number of areas ahead of time can help them catch a few extra winks of sleep.

Early morning routines

Most coaches started their athletes’ day with mandatory team activities designed to first get them in step and then to enhance team unity and morale. The first step, the pre-game meal, is a time of relatively low stress, during which our coaches encouraged their players to take more time to better know one another.

Sometimes I say I want the guards and the forwards to eat together today. We change it a little bit, so they always say, “Who is eating with who today?” Sometimes I don’t care and sometimes they don’t care. Yet it is interesting to watch and see who they go with when you say you don’t care. (BB2)

Our coaches realized they could not force the team together. This initiative had to come from the players, especially the team veterans and captains. The need for leadership and cohesion is why teams with an abundance of young players recruit veterans. One of our coaches acknowledged that veterans, especially team captains, had as great an impact off-field as on-field:

A great time is when the captains come to the fore and start corralling the group,[organizing] where they eat and go for a run together. There is very little input on my part. I don’t even have to schedule it. It is easy stuff that has built-in success. (FH5)

Another pre-game ritual that unifies the team is the morning practice. Of course, the practice is more than a ritual; it is the final step to get the team physically and mentally prepared for the game. It also serves to reinforce each player’s commitment to the team. Professional ice-hockey coaches especially found this to be the case:

I’m not sure how important the morning skate is because I could never understand what it does. I don’t know if it is proven that it is important. It would be an interesting study to do because a lot of teams play their best when they don’t have a morning skate. However, it is the ritual the players seem to have gotten into and they seem to like it, so I don’t disagree with it. (IH1)

Morning practices for other sports such as field hockey, basketball, or volleyball depend on a number of factors, including the players’ individual schedules and the competition starting time:

During my four years with the national team, 95% of the time we have a practice in the morning where we do some things, including simulating the opposition. We have lunch at 12:30. The afternoon is for resting. We have a snack at about 4:30 and we play at about 7:30. The routine is pretty much the same. (VB2)
In addition to morning practice, some coaches on game day concern themselves with the players’ state of mind. Are they too boisterous or quiet, too confident or uncertain? Our experts, however, emphasized that a player’s mood at any particular time was not an accurate indicator of how they would play that evening. They generally chose to roll with the current mood of their athletes:

When we get on the bus to go to the game, often times you get a feel for what they are like. But it varies. Sometimes the bus is just rocking with music and other times there is not a word. You may win the game and you may not. (FH1)

While a game may not begin until 8 PM, our coaches used the whole day to prepare their athletes, to ensure they got a feel for the new location. They tried to let this familiarity sink into their pre-game routines by imposing a regular set of drills:

When we get to the place, we always try to get into the gym before we play, at least for serving. If we fly to the competition site on game day, we will drive directly from the airport to the gym so they can serve and receive. They see the lights and get accustomed to what it looks like. If we can’t do that, then we will try to be there a little bit ahead of time. (VB1)

We had pre-set days of what we were going to do, especially on the road. It was so the guys knew everything so we didn’t even have to post a schedule. (VB5)

**Mental preparation of athletes**

Once they arrived at the competition site, our coaches ensured that a number of pre-set routines had been mapped out for their players, including the exact time and location for every event of the day, to help the players focus on the upcoming game. One essential component of that schedule was time allocated for mental preparation. Due to an increased awareness of the importance of mental preparation for success, our coaches gave their players time to set their final sights before a match:

It is always my greatest fear to come to a game and find the players are not mentally prepared. I know they are ready physically, tactically, and technically. Controlling the mental part is so difficult, although it is easier on the road than it is at home. (BB3)

Now I have a sport psychology consultant as my assistant coach. I really feel the players trust her. The players have 10 minutes by themselves and then she goes in for 10 minutes. I don’t know what she says because she doesn’t tell me. She hasn’t coached volleyball before, though she is becoming more used to the problems we encounter in games. (VB1)

The coaches also let their players “take the bull by the horns” when it came to mental readiness. Each member of the team had a unique way of preparing himself or herself. Some chose to listen to relaxing music with their walkmans; others preferred to blast rock tunes on the stereo; still others sat and visualized upcoming game situations, who they would guard and how they would stop them:

We’ve always required players to be at the rink an hour and forty-five minutes before the start of the game so they can get dressed comfortably. We also stressed in later years, as we got into goal-setting and self-talk, about setting up a plan for themselves that they were comfortable with, for their individual game day preparation. (IH3)

They have their music; they know what gets them up. They eat, sleep, drink, read or go for a run. I think the danger in coaching a team is that you get them into a marionette stage where they all dance at the same stage and are like a kick line. Although the game plan calls for a concerted joint effort, they are individuals and I think the preparation for something as stressful as a major tournament has to take their individuality into account. (FH5)
Sometimes the activities of the players could exclude the coach. It is not unusual for teams to hold closed-door meetings where everyone but the athletes leave the dressing room. The players need this time to voice their concerns about the team, including their relationships with the coaching staff, how well the players are working with each other, or the actions of the management. Interestingly, one coach said her players have taken this routine one step further by having a closed-door meeting before every game:

The players have taken on their own responsibility. About 15 minutes before the game, they have a team meeting with no coaches. What they are talking about is their attitude and how they want to play. They want to be supportive of one another and feel good about themselves. (VB1)

Meetings

As the start of competition nears, coaches concentrate on the actual game itself. The on-site routines of each team may differ, but all of our experts set aside time in the dressing room to discuss strategy. One tactic they employed was downplaying the opposition’s strong points:

During our meeting, we talk about our own strengths and weaknesses. We always have more strengths and fewer weaknesses than they do. We discuss two or three strategic points. (FH4)

Team strengths are emphasized because coaches know their players must be confident in their own abilities. Fear of failure is the worst frame of mind with which to enter a game. Thus, to win a contest, coaches help their athletes focus on their own positive qualities:

Everybody has to do some work, some mental imagery of what their job is. Before our meeting I wouldn’t talk about the opposition; I would talk about what we had to get done and what we are trying to do. Going in, I try to get them focused on themselves and on the team rather than what they have to do to win the game. (BB5)

We spend a lot more time talking about our own team, what we will do rather than what they will do. We talk a little bit about their defense and talk to individual players about the spikers and servers they will use. It is almost like football where they have a defensive meeting. We have a meeting for the players on the right side of the court, one for the players in the middle of the court, and one for the players on the left side of the court. (VB4)

Another important component of the team meeting is the discussion of strategy, the game plan. This plan contains key information that can increase chances of a win:

You build knowledge and understanding. You have to prepare a game plan that is short, exact, and very specific. I say short because you cannot sit there for hours. Athletes just can’t do that. Twenty to thirty minutes is preferable. I have tried to be extremely specific with each athlete, so there are no questions in anybody’s minds. It is not wishy-washy; it is not gray; it is black and white. (FH2)

One concern in team meetings is over-teaching. Should a coach teach the players a new offensive or defensive formation? In general, the answer is no. Our coaches felt that if anything new was taught, the material should be brief and concise:

I do very little teaching and I have to watch myself because I am always trying to think of something I could teach them. I have to watch that I don’t teach too much on the day of competition because they are already getting ready. (BB2)

Usually I try to keep the meetings short, 15-20 minutes - never more than that because they get tired or bored. Then I will give them 10 minutes to gather their stuff before we head off to the field. On the field, I will go around to each of the players as they are warming up to see if there is something
specific they need to know. Then I will remind them or ask them how they feel. (FH6)

One volleyball coach recounted a game in which he gave his athletes too much new information. The results were disastrous. Coaches cannot expect their athletes to perform pre-game routines if their concentration is altered. No matter how enticing a new strategy may seem, teaching it on game day will usually harm rather than help the team:

We give them limited information on what needs to be changed in order to be successful. At one competition, I saw coaches who used forms that showed the service formation for all teams, and their kids were studying them. I gave them to our guys and they were so busy thinking about what was on the sheet, they didn’t think about how to react to the game. That was one of our worst matches. That is why we give them only a little bit of information. (VB4)

Game day preparation may seem overwhelming. But for our experts, pre-game routines maximized the performance of their athletes. Team-building activities such as the pre-game meal, morning practice, common transportation to the competition site, and fixed dressing room routines were designed to allow players to fully concentrate on the upcoming match.

CHALK TALK

- Set up game day routines to maximize preparation and performance of your team.
- Set aside some time for your athletes to mentally prepare themselves.
- Set aside time (or a short i.e., 15-20 minutes) team meeting before the warm-up.

Game Day Preparations of the Coach

Coaches must also prepare physically and mentally for a competition. The quality of their performance on the floor is often affected by the amount of preparation accomplished earlier in the day.

Physical preparation

Our coaches were careful to get enough rest before a game so they would be physically alert and ready to compete:

When coaching the national team, I had to practice controlling my arousal because I had high anxiety at that level. I began to rest a lot, something I had never done before. I also started to practice relaxation techniques and formalize my pre-game stuff. (BB4)

I try to be rested. I always try to have a short nap on the day of the game. You go home and have a bite to eat and have a nap. The players do that, and I found that as a coach, it was helpful to me, too. I get up early enough and have a shower. Then I am refreshed and ready to go. (IH3)

Anxiety coaches face is rarely discussed. Our coaches had their own game day rituals to control their nerves. Between the early practice and pre-game meeting, many of our experts prefer to spend time alone. Several escaped the pressure of competition by going for an early morning walk or run:

I do a lot of things, like a daily run. On game day, that run is very important to me because it is my quiet time to think. No phones and nothing but me
and my dog. He doesn’t talk; he just runs. That’s great. (IH4)

I consistently try to get my game plan done in the morning. I like to have lunch with the athletes so I have the afternoon to run. The last thing I like to do is be around offices and be busy and frazzled. It helps me for the evening to be calm and composed. (VB2)

I don’t know that I do anything special to prepare myself. I usually don’t have trouble getting up for competition. I am always excited and want it to unfold. Sometimes it is tough to wait, so I’ll go for a run in the morning and think about what we are going to do and how I am going to approach the athletes. (FH4)

**Mental preparation**

Rest and exercise are two factors that help coaches to physically prepare themselves on game days. In addition, physical preparation can be maximized if combined with proper mental preparation. Our coaches’ methods for mental preparation were similar to those used by their athletes. While the players concentrated on their opponents, our coaches thought about the opposing coach, and more specifically, the line combinations or strategies they were apt to use during the game. Coaches also reviewed what mental stance they would take with their players, officials, and the opposing team:

I try to mentally rehearse some of the things I will have to do [during the pre-game talk]. I’ll go through in my mind what things are important. Then I try to remind myself how to phrase them so they come out in the most positive manner. (IH5)

I have a specific plan for myself during the game. During my preparation, I try to go through things I think I am going to do. It is like practicing my game plan. I try to run through some scenarios, saying, “If this doesn’t work, then I will do this.” I don’t get too

locked in because too many things can happen. (BB2)

I read a lot of coaching material that has given me some great ideas. One example is the idea of rehearsing my reactions to the athletes. It makes sense for a coach to do this. In the last six or seven years, I’ve gone through bad penalties, bad goals, and how I will react to them. (IH4)

**Individual rituals**

Aside from physical and mental preparation for the upcoming game, most coaches also have personal rituals. The activities they choose vary according to their individual needs. Our experts knew what worked best for them:

A half hour before game time, I have to be on my own. I ritualistically get a coffee, sit and think about what I am going to do, how I am going to react. To keep people away, I usually go to my office. (BB3)

I have a pretty set schedule, whether it be on the road or at home. It’s not superstition based so I can modify it. However, I do have a group of things I like to do. I like to run early in the morning. We have our morning skate and then I’ll go home and review a short tape of the team we are going to play. I come to the office about four hours before the game and go over my game notes and scouting report. (IH4)

I usually walk by myself to get ready for a game. I don’t need as much time as I used to. I like music and watching sports, although I don’t watch basketball because it makes me nervous. I would rather watch something else like WWF wrestling. At some point I walk to where the athletes are being taped and hang out there for a few minutes. I meet with my assistant coaches for 10 or 15 minutes and then get dressed and put on my suit of armor. (BB2)
CHALK TALK

• Develop strategies to physically and mentally prepare yourself for the game.

Pre-Game Warm-Up

After the physical and mental preparation by coaches and athletes has taken place, game time draws nearer. For the pre-game warm-up, like other aspects of game day, our coaches had a number of expectations and routines for both themselves and their team to follow.

Team preparations

To casual observers, the pre-game warm-up may appear to be a relaxed time for both coaches and athletes. This is not the case. Our coaches demanded that the team warm-up be well-organized, structured, and cohesive so the athletes felt well-prepared going into the contest. One ice hockey coach discussed his view of the team warm-up:

Warm-up is part of the team’s preparation and the players have to understand that it involves two things. It’s a physical warm-up with stretching and time to loosen up the body to avoid injury. More importantly, it’s a mental game, to get you back to the level you were at the last time you played. I hope that while the athletes are warming up, they are rehearsing what they are going to do in the game. (IHS)

A good warm-up shows that coaches and athletes are committed to professional conduct and take pride in their work. One coach noted that athletes who behave in a professional manner during warm-up help attract more good people to the team:

All my warm-up drills are formed with various rest-to-work ratios that make me feel we are really coming across as professionals. As I stabilize the team’s routines, kids would come to watch the national program and I am able to show them this is a team whose conduct is professional. (BB4)

Coach preparations

Our coaches also had their own routines during warm-up. The most common was scouting the opposition. This involved observing line combinations, weaknesses in implementing offensive or defensive tactics, and tendencies of the opposition:

Warm-up is one of the things I do. While my players are warming up, I am watching the other team. I watch the setters’ tendencies, what sets they are practicing, and where the hitters are hitting most regularly. (VB1)

In field hockey, and no doubt in other sports, coaches actively participated in the team warm-up:

We have a very set warm-up. I deal with the goalies and the other coach does this game simulation to get them going. (FH1)

Due to personal idiosyncrasies, other coaches preferred not to participate in the team warm-up. A veteran basketball coach noted:

I usually don’t watch the warm-up because I am never satisfied with the way they do it. I would rather not watch it and get upset. I usually stay in. Sometimes I take a 10-minute nap. (BB1)

CHALK TALK

• Structure the pre-game warm-up of the team in a cohesive manner.
• Take advantage of the team warm-up to prepare yourself.
Pre-Game Talk

Following the pre-game warm-up, our coaches returned with their athletes to the locker room to offer some final words of advice. There is a common perception among members of the public that these talks are meant to serve as inspirational pep talks. The reality is quite different. In less than five minutes, the coach gave the team a few quick reminders before the game started:

I go into the locker room about 10 minutes before game time. By then, people are pretty well dressed. We talk for five minutes before we go out on the court. I also stand in the corner to see if there is anybody who wants to talk to me. Sometimes you see a guy trying to make eye contact. Mostly I want to leave them alone during that time because I don't want to tell anyone how to get ready for these games. We have talked about how important preparation is, but we know each guy has to get ready in a different way. (BB1)

Two minutes before the game, the players come in. This is their last minute adjustment, mouth guards in, things like that - just be ready. I will pull them in a huddle and remind them of one or two key things. I don't tell them to win; it is more like, remember our game plan. (FH6)

I would talk to them just before the game and I would only say a couple of words. You have to be careful not to overload them. I wouldn't try to say too much in one setting, maybe a quick couple of points. I usually try to outline three things. (IH3)

Just prior to the game, I have three or four key things we've said in meetings and I get everybody into a huddle and I remind them of these key points. (FH4)

The stereotype of the pre-game talk was popularized by Hollywood's perception of Knute Rockne. The script is always the same. The coach begins talking to the team in a calm, collected manner, then gradually raising the volume of his voice. By the end, the players are so wound up, they charge out of the locker room and onto the field. Our coaches preferred a more even-tempered approach:

In coaching, we tend to think we have to get them all frenzied. There is no way you can consistently get them frenzied. We cannot whip people into a lather and get all the juices flowing day in and day out. (FH5)

I wouldn’t call it a pep talk like Knute Rockne’s. Have you ever heard that recording? I have it on tape and when you listen to it, it sounds good. However, I don’t use that kind of pep talk. I always use a couple of words just before they go out for the game - mostly reminders and a word of encouragement. (IH3)

Despite this, our coaches understood that on some occasions they should break from traditional routines and show their emotions:

We have lost many games by being too elaborate. The best year we ever had was when the coach said the game plan was too elaborate. She walked in and got up and said, “Get the f***ing pennant” and walked out of the room, and we did. Now that only works once, but sometimes that is all you have to do. (FH1)

With the team, we had three tasks to get ourselves started, and then away we went. Touchy, feely, eye contact, pleasant, and focused. I really try to be all these things. I am trying to say we are in control of this, we are organized, I am with you and you are with each other. We have got this package so let’s go out and do it. (BB4)
SHOW-TIME: COMPETITION ISSUES

After all the organizing, training, and pre-competition planning is complete, the fun begins. The most memorable sporting events are emblazoned in our minds during competition, whether it is the clutch goal, the crucial check, or the game-saving play. For our team coaches, there is still much work to do. They play an active role in competition by implementing the strategies they have taught their athletes in practice.

Coaching Strategies

Before discussing the specifics of game strategy, it would be helpful to profile coaches who have excelled at this task. Good coaches have been compared to chess masters, individuals who possess the ability to think many steps ahead of their opposition. Their understanding of sport goes beyond the basic textbook strategies. They have an uncanny ability, while reading a game, to notice what few others do. As with chess, a good coach must learn to read his or her opponent’s strategy. If a coach fails to master this skill, he or she will lose:

*My first reaction during the game is to check out the opposition. We invariably drop into a defensive mode to ensure that what we see happening is correct according to the game plan. This is how we keep teams like Japan and Korea at bay for a long period of time. We hold them for a while and then start chewing away at them.* (FH5)

There is never a dull moment in competition. Coaches are always busy, sizing up the opposition, preparing athletes for substitutions, talking and posturing to the referees, and trying to motivate players to higher performance levels:

Basketball is one sport where coaches are an active part of the game. Coaches are probably not supposed to be, but the rules allow it. You are making a ton of decisions, and in very few sports are coaches allowed constant input to the players. You are always reminding and teaching. You are in their ears and in their heads. You are on the refs and you know they allow a lot of that. There is a lot of action in basketball and we have to be a very big part of the game. (BB5)

Our coaches also stressed the importance of using players at the right time and place, putting them in positions where they were most apt to succeed, which in turn maximized the team’s strength. In ice hockey, this may mean deploying a face-off specialist at a crucial time; in basketball, it may involve playing a top three-point shooter at the end of a game:

*You are trying to time it so at the end of the game you have the best players in the best positions to finish off the game. You want to use a defensive specialist to give you one more dig or a blocking specialist to make one more block.* (VB5)

Officials

Aside from the use of players, interactions with referees and other sports officials is also an important dimension of coaching strategy. While most of our coaches subscribed to the adage, “A good referee is one that you never notice,” some referees are impossible not to notice. It is therefore no surprise that our coaches devoted a great deal of thought to their interactions with referees. At times, our coaches lost their emotional control. But there were other times when their actions were carefully planned out:

*Sometimes I will swear at a referee and get a card. You have to use a referee as a great play if your team is not doing well. You can create an outside focus point for the team. The referee is screwing us around and the coach is mad, so let’s get up and show him how we play.* (VB5)

*Things like officiating throw me off in a game. I am very proud of myself this year because if I have lost*
it, it was on purpose. I did that once and then later I told the players, "Don't worry, I'm okay. I just had to let the referee know that he is doing a terrible job." I found that if I am really mad at a referee, I can usually blast something and get it out. Then it's gone, I can breathe again and come back. (VB1)

Our participants also suggested that getting to know referees on a personal basis could result in advantages for their team. This may involve talking to the refs after the game as they walk off the court, or talking to them in the corridors. Friendship is not necessarily required. Our experts maintained that a cordial relationship with referees could only help the team, especially at opportune times when a favorable call can work to the team's advantage:

Most coaches get on the refs. The good refs tell me they know they need the good coaches getting on them now and again. They do not want stupid and constant nagging, because then they never listen to you. If one player is physically being hit off the ball, and they are getting really upset, you tell the player to stay cool and you will take care of it. Then I go up to the ref and say, "Just watch the ball a little bit more; my player seems to be getting held and pushed a lot." They will say, "Okay," and then they will start watching. That is a good interaction because it takes it away from the player and the ref will be more aware of it. (BB5)

As coaches mature, they begin to view referees more as allies, than enemies. An ideal situation is a relationship based on mutual respect. Coaches must learn and respect the limits of the referee and vice versa. They must also learn to argue in a manner that is neither embarrassing nor offensive:

You have to learn who you are dealing with and what makes the best referees. If you have been in it as long as I have, you know the referees inside and out. I know the ones I can talk to and those who will talk to me. They have a really nice manner and they are very comfortable and secure. (BB5)

**CHALK TALK**

- When interacting with officials, treat them with respect. Mutual respect often develops between good coaches and referees.

**Time-outs**

Imagine it is the last five seconds of the championship basketball game, the final game of the season. Your team is ahead by one point. The coach calls a time-out and brings her troops together. The play she calls will either win or lose the championship, depending on whether her players are able to execute it properly. This is the drama of high caliber sport, the late game time-out that often receives much coverage and generates debate. All time-outs, however, are important. They are often called for reasons other than designing a new defense for the last play of the game. One reason is to stop the momentum of the opposing team:

Usually when I call a time-out, it is to stop another team's momentum. Most of the time I call a time-out if the other team is pulling away from us and I want to stop it. Maybe we need a different offense or defense, or maybe we need a reminder that we need to work harder. (BB4)

I look at how the players breathe and the way they move their feet. I can feel if they are in control and I try to bring them back if they are not. I will call a time-out in order to bring them back. (VB3)

Our coaches expected all their players to listen attentively during time-outs. This includes starters and back-ups, as well as third- and fourth-stringers who have no chance of getting into the game. Our experts considered this another area where the whole team must support one another. As well, reserve players may encounter a similar situation later in their career when the coach may not have the luxury of a time-out. The players are expected to make the most of every learning experience:

My time-out was never a free-for-all for everybody to talk about the party on Saturday night. (VB2)
We remind guys not to count the crowd unless they are getting a piece of it. It really annoys me when the coach is talking and the guys are looking elsewhere. If they don’t think they are going to contribute to this game, they still better listen, or I will get rid of them. Although they may not be contributing to this game, eventually that may change, so everyone has to listen. (BB1)

Coaches only have a short period of time to relay a new strategy. One volleyball coach remembered a colleague using an interesting solution to convey her information:

I heard of someone who used to come in the time-out with six pieces of paper, one for everybody. The players then wanted to compare, like “What did you get?” You have to maximize that 30 seconds so you get information across. (VB1)

A simpler solution is for the coach to prepare what he or she is going to say before a time-out is called. The coach should not ramble or overload the players with too much information:

If we are getting ready to call a time-out, we have a pretty good idea of what we are doing. The minute is a long time. If you tell somebody something, they should remember it. If you tell them three things they are not going to remember anything in a stressful situation. Therefore, we tell them the most important point. (BB1)

The coach must read the game when calling a time-out. Sometimes, they may not have to say anything at all:

The time-out has many objectives that cannot all be met in a single one. It depends on how many things are going on at the time. Sometimes you use it to rest because volleyball can last for three hours, whereas sometimes you use it to drink some water and breathe and give them some pointers. Sometimes, I’m not present during a time-out because I think I shouldn’t be. It all depends on adjusting to the situation at hand. (VB3)

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**CHECK TALK**

- Ensure your entire team is paying attention during time-outs. Effective use of a time-out can enhance your team’s chances to win.
- Use time-outs to regroup your athletes and modify team strategies.
- Make your information concise and constructive, giving at most two points during time-outs.

**Intermissions**

The importance of the intermission for both the coach and the team should not be underestimated. Lasting approximately 20 minutes, it is the only sustained period that coaches have to speak with assistant coaches, to analyze the effectiveness of the game plan, as well as that of the opposition before making modifications.

Our experts made the most of this time. At the beginning of intermission, they preferred to stay away from players for a few minutes, so they and their athletes could collect themselves. During this period, head coaches met with support staff to map new strategies to relay to the team:

Between periods is a key time. When we leave the bench I will go into the dressing room for one quick second and say, “Guys, have a good rest, lots of good things happening out there,” then I leave them. I go back and meet with the three coaches, and I ask, “What are some key things you want to talk about?”(IH4)

Between periods you give the players some time to themselves when they first come in. You want the players to become familiar with your routine. (IH3)

We ask players to go to the bathroom, keep the talking down, and get something to drink. The doctor and trainers are there. We have little laws in there. Right outside the locker room I have two coaches with clipboards and offensive charts. They try to figure out how the game is going and what we
need to do. We want to get one or two points clear in our minds on what we need to do in the second half. (BB1)

Our coaches realized the content of their talk depended on whether or not their team had played well. One coach, in particular, had experienced both the joy of leading and the disappointment of trailing during half-time. He had interesting strategies to deal with each situation:

If we are in the locker room and we are ahead, we must be careful about being too fast. Normally we say, “Put that first half out of your mind, we are starting off even and we are going to beat these guys - the score is 0 to 0, or 100 to 100.” (BB1)

When we are behind, we want to be encouraging. We want to remind people of statistics. It is horrible to be down by 15 points, but we remind people that 15 points are not insurmountable, because the other team has already done that. Second, we are going to get the ball X number of times, which means we are going to pick up one point per minute in the first 15 minutes. So we are very positive. We remind them of a game they played where we were behind and we came back. (BB1)

Sometimes if the team was behind, or our coaches felt their team was playing below capacity, they would give the team a “wake-up call” during the team address. Yet, they also wanted to ensure they were relaying relevant information to the athletes, not just venting their frustration:

I’d like to think that everything I do during all parts of the game is pre-planned with a specific idea in mind, even when I blow up at the team. Generally speaking, I like it to be a staged event. I may be feeling that way anyway, but I want to be in control so that the right things are said. A lot of times I’ll tell the assistant coaches that I’m going to blow up or I’m going to say something to these particular individuals or that I’m going to focus on these particulars without saying any names. My players have told me they know exactly who I’m talking to even though in some cases I haven’t singled anybody out. (IH3)

I try to distinguish whether the problem has to do with attitude, focus, or skill. I do that before going into the dressing room so I know exactly how to behave myself. I find it useful to sometimes be emotional. It is not that I have to be passive all the time, but I seem to have a feel now for when I have to be really vocal and passionate, and for the most part it works. They react and they respond favorably because they know it is not going to happen all the time. (BB3)

Contrary to popular belief, coaches do not change the grand strategy of the game plan during intermission. Rather, they concentrate on refining a few, select points:

After you give them some time, you come in with one or two of the assistants and you make two or three points. I think you have to be careful because even though there is five different things the team isn’t doing well, I don’t think you should mention all five. You should prioritize it and pick out the two most damaging things. (IH3)

At half-time, I focus on two or three key things. If the team is executing properly, I try to emphasize
something that is really positive for the team. I don’t do individual analysis at half-time as there is not time to do it.” (FH6)

Major tournaments are often played in unbearable climatic conditions. We may spend a whole half-time getting them to replenish and cool their bodies down. If we do have extra time, it is minimal. One, two, or three things is all I say.” (FH5)

I’ll go back in the dressing room and give the guys four things to focus on. Then I leave with about four minutes left to go before the period, which gives them time to get ready on their own. Then I come back in with one very short message, and out we go. It’s always going to be this scenario.” (FH4)

For many coaches, proper use of intermission time is a learning process, one which takes shape as experience is gained. It is difficult for coaches to limit themselves to only two or three major points, especially if breakdowns are occurring all over the place. However, saying too much can be damaging:

When you are a young coach, you want to talk about everything during half-time. All of a sudden, the whistle blows and you haven’t got to the main points. I think it is important to learn how to clearly and concisely pick out three or four main points.” (FH4)

### Coaching Styles

During competition, three areas define the leadership style of the coach: their emotional control, communication skills, and interactions with support staff.

**Emotional control**

Coaches are frequently under a great deal of stress. The pressures of team management, media criticism, and the fans often lead them to lose self-control. The fact that coaches are often led to emotional outbursts is understandable. The pressure is unrelenting; much of the criticism is unfair. But coaches should ask themselves if they are willing to pay the price for such outbursts. Do they really want to impair their ability to coach during a game? Do they risk losing the respect of their players? According to our experts, the answer to these questions were obvious:

The perception of most people is that I am very calm, cool, and collected, that I never show any emotion. In fact, I am quite emotional. I have to be very careful about making sure that when my emotions get on the negative side I’m not showing it because it’s not enhancing our performance, it’s deterring it.” (IH5)

I learned to be less intense, but still be intense. Not getting too high is really important because you have to be alert. The other team might try something totally different and you have to respond. If you are too high, you are not going to make the adjustments. That is the whole role of coaching.” (FH2)

While emotional displays can harm the effectiveness of the team, a coach can also use them to fire up the team. Coaches using a pre-planned emotional outburst must retain the ability to think rationally to help their team:

I think every coach has to be prepared to show some true emotions. I think if you want to lose it a little bit, you lose it by design. I don’t mean it the wrong way. It’s not phony. You really feel it but you say this is the right time to get emotional. But to me, if you lose it involuntarily, then you’re not doing yourself any
favors. You’re taking yourself out of the rational thought process. (IH3)

Coaches find it as difficult to control their emotions as do the athletes. Our coaches emphasized the importance of retaining control, but sometimes it was more difficult than others to practice what they preached:

I used to lose it during the game when I was younger. I would get angry and frustrated because you could see what people had to do and they weren’t doing it. Now I am quite calm. It develops with time. I encourage my athletes to make mistakes, but as a young coach I made some doozies myself. (FH4)

I’ve learned to control my competitive drive in terms of showing how I’m feeling inside. I’ve heard a lot of people over the past few years say I’m very unemotional and under control. Yet I know that’s not necessarily the case. I’m not in control a lot of the times, but I’ve learned to make it look like I’m in control. It allows those people around me to be in control and the situation to evolve more positively. (IH5)

Our coaches were not suggesting that emotions be taken out of their repertoire. Rather, they had seen through experience the benefits of remaining calm. There is much to be said about the old saying, “There is a time and a place for everything.” If a coach is going to explode, the right time might be at the next team meeting or practice, not at the game itself.

**CHALK TALK**

- Keep your emotions on an even keel during the game. If you choose to “lose it,” it should be a strategic decision, not an involuntary, uncontrolled reaction.
- Monitor your behavior, ensuring it is productive to the performance of the team.

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**Communication**

Effective communication is central to success. When a coach is hired, you often hear, “One of his strengths is his ability to communicate with his players.” However, more is involved than this simple message. An effective coach must also know when and how to say things:

If I’m going to give an athlete a “look” before he is going out on a shift, I realize that it can sometimes be a detriment to his play. Therefore I now have to say something positive with my look. My look may remind him of some of the things I want him to think about, but he has to have that reinforcement, that positive communication. (IH5)

The communication style of a coach depends to a great extent on the sport. In ice hockey, coaches have few opportunities to interact with their players, since shifts occur at such quick intervals. While coaches of baseball and football teams do not have to deal with constant shift changes, they must keep their focus on the game, and thus their comments must also be brief. In field hockey, the rules forbid coaches from talking to athletes. They must remain on the bench and show proper game decorum. Communication does occur, but it has to be done in its own unique way:

I am always talking to the athletes on the bench where I will push the technical table to the limit. Field hockey is a very prim and proper game. The girls wear skirts and you aren’t allowed to coach from the bench. However, the technical delegate will allow gentle coaching, yet you are not to be critical. (FH4)

Learning when to communicate with players is an intangible in the art coaching, a skill that separates the competent coach from the great one. It takes years to learn to distinguish the best communication style for each player. Some have to be pushed, others encouraged:

There is not much info that you give which sinks in during the game. The best coaches are taught not to
yell at someone in the middle of what they are doing. You pick and learn your spots. There are a lot of dead times, such as foul shots, whistles, jump balls, when you relay information. (BB5)

Our participants realized the value of listening to the ideas of their athletes. It is not unusual in any sport for players to disagree with the call of their coach. Some of our participants urged coaches to give serious consideration to the views of their players during a game:

I would say when in doubt, the athletes are right because we can’t see it from the bench. For instance, on the new technique of curling around with the ball in field hockey, we say to them, “You have to back off, you have to catch them as they come around the corner.” They may say, “We can’t back off because when I do she turns me, so I have to get closer.” I am not going to argue with that. (FH5)

**CHALK TALK**

- To communicate effectively, control your emotions and retain a willingness to listen to your players.

*It’s good to have help*

Our coaches relied extensively on their support staff during competition. The assistance available to coaches depends on the sport. Professional and university football coaches have 10 to 12 assistants, while ice hockey coaches have three or four. Most head coaches choose support staff that complement their own strengths and weaknesses. For example, most professional ice hockey teams employ a goaltender coach since few head coaches have ever played the position. Similarly, baseball teams hire assistant coaches to teach the mechanics of batting or running bases. The importance of qualified support staff cannot be overestimated:

I really rely on my assistants on game day. There are a lot of times when there are things I want to do that they will talk me out of. Other times, they think of things I would never think of. (BB1)

Giving the assistant coach a specialization during the game enhances the quality of coaching, and allows the assistant coach to feel he or she is making a contribution. For example, some head coaches concentrate on the offensive players and let one of their assistants deal with the defensive players. In baseball, one coach is hired to work specifically with hitters and another to help pitchers. It is important that the head coach not undermine the assistant:

I try to have an assistant coach do some scouting during the warm-up. I am still not good at it. I mean years later I am still not very good at watching the other team. So I get the assistant coach to help me. (VB2)

During the game, I worked with the forwards and my assistant coach worked with the defensemen. We would watch for things and talk to the players during the course of the game. Then if I saw something I wanted to mention to the defensemen, I’d say it to my assistant and he’d talk to one of them. It’s a cooperative arrangement between two coaches. (IH3)

Assistant coaches are especially helpful during the intermission. They offer a different perspective of the game, especially those who have observed the match from a different part of the field or arena. Head coaches appreciate their input, both on a general level, and in relation to their area of specialization. Some of our coaches incorporated their assistants’ advice into their talk during the intermission with athletes:

Before half-time I usually have a chat with my assistants and I see if there is anything they have seen. After that, activity at half-time is centered around the adjustments we are going to make. We only have five minutes, so we have to talk fast. It has to be bingo, bango, bongo. (FH2)
Good coaches hire strong support staff. They rely not only on assistant coaches, but also on team physiotherapists, statisticians, and sport psychologists. There is much truth to the saying, “You’re only as good as the people around you!”

**CHALK TALK**

- Rely on the input from your support staff throughout the entire game day.
- Make it a special point to consult with support staff during intermissions.

**WRAPPING IT UP: AFTER THE GAME**

Our coaches did not relax once the game had finished. They had to gauge how they would deal with the outcome. Many questions had to be answered. Should they vent off steam immediately after a game if they felt their team had performed poorly? Or should they save their reactions until they had a chance to review the films and collect their emotions? How long should they talk with the team after a game, and should the duration be dependent on performance? Many of the answers our coaches gave to these questions will now be considered.

**Dealing With The Outcome**

As we saw earlier in the chapter, one of our expert basketball coaches referred to the different approaches he used with his team at half-time, depending on the score of the game. Similar concerns shaped his reactions after a game. While much depends on the final tally, most reactions of the coach are also based on the perception of how well the team played. Winning is obviously the easiest situation to handle. Even if they felt their team performed poorly, our experts generally chose not to spoil the joy of victory:

> I usually let them celebrate the win. They have to get some joy from it and I don’t ever want to tarnish the win. That’s the essence of the game. They know if they didn’t play well, so I’m not going to mention it.

I’m going to say that we won; we’ll work on some things tomorrow. We got our two points; here’s some things you did pretty well; tomorrow we’ll talk about a few other things. (IH4)

The euphoria of winning almost always takes core of everything. Once the euphoria dies down, you might say a few things to the players after they’ve had a chance to change, about 20 minutes or so after the game. Generally it’s not a reminder of something that we didn’t do well because you talk about that the next game. More likely, it would be a reminder about the importance of the game tomorrow or of something else that is coming up. (IH3)

After a loss, coaches tend to take more factors into consideration. The most important one is whether the team played to its full potential, or at least gave an honest effort. If the coach believed the team tried its best, the loss was easier to handle:

> I always tell my players that if we lose and play well, I don’t have a problem with that. Sometimes we can be beat because the opposition played better. (VB1)

When we lose, it depends on how it happened. If we lost with a good, honest effort, I’m very supportive of the players. (IH4)

Addressing the team after a loss is a difficult task. Coaches understand that other reasons aside from poor play contribute to a defeat. Players can be hurt, overworked, or experiencing personal problems. Coaches must evaluate their team’s performance in light of these possibilities:

> There are some losses where you might have to pump them up and make them feel better. It depends on the circumstances. We get a lot of media coverage here and we have a lot of
tradition, so some losses are very hard for the players. If they lost because they are fatigued or because we have had injuries and sickness, then let’s take a day off. To me it is finding the right approach, depending on why it happened. If they worked hard, then they should feel good and find something good out of it. (BB5)

The worst loss for a coach to deal with is when he or she feels the team played below its abilities. Poor performance can be a result of overconfidence, poor play, lack of concentration, or loss of motivation. In the long run, the underlying cause does not matter; the bottom line is the team did not produce. This is where the coach may choose to chew out the players, impose an early curfew, or hold a tough practice the next day:

When we lose and I think the team’s effort has not been there, that’s when I deal with it. I’m very demanding. If we beat ourselves, meaning if we took a lot of penalties, or made a lot of big mental mistakes, I’m very demanding. I’m very good at reading the situation correctly when we lose. Should I give them some heat or should I be very supportive? (IH4)

If I thought we could at least have tied the game, and we lost 6-0 or 6-1, that is the type of game where I would be extremely upset. It wasn’t easy being out there, but now they have to deal with it. Sometimes people come and they are not ready to play, so I have to deal with that. (FH2)

A lot of times I make sure to find the right approach. If they didn’t work, then I am going to come down pretty hard on them. If it’s a number of other reasons, well, let’s just fix it up. If they are dogging it, let’s go back out and run. You have to find the right approach that matches the problem. (BB5)

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Reactions and Routines of the Coach

Analyzing the outcome of a match is only one aspect of a coach’s post-competition routine. Coaches must also deal with their own emotions after a game. It is human nature to be frustrated after a tough loss. However, it should be remembered that players are likely to feel the same way, and they look to their coach to set the proper example. A mature reaction by the coach is essential:

When I first started coaching, the highs were really high and the lows were really low. With more experience, I have found a medium. (IH4)

I used to be crazy and out of control after a contest. I used to read things in the paper the next day and think, “Why did I say that?” So I have learned, and when I talk to the kids about emotional control, I say, “I want you to understand that nobody understands more than I do how difficult it is.” (BB3)

One coach said that the best post-game emotion for him was to always remain the same, to maintain a similar composure no matter what the score:

The ideal situation, is when the game is over, nobody can tell by your expression if you won or lost. You’re vulnerable after a big emotional event. Human nature says that you will have a
super let-down after you’ve marshaled so much energy and you were successful and you celebrated. (BB6)

One volleyball coach developed a post-competition task for her players that helped them and gave her extra time to gather her thoughts and emotions under control:

Having the players fill out a post-competition form gives me 10 minutes to get my act together. I will take a look at some of the stats, so I can give them some objective information. Most of the time a loss is about how they played, but sometimes it has something to do with me. Either I’m frustrated because I didn’t prepare well enough or the other team did something I didn’t expect them to. (VB1)

Since dealing with a loss is a turbulent event, our experts tried to develop a routine that allowed them to release their emotions before meeting with their athletes. Some of their behaviors included going for a walk, or blowing off their displeasure with support staff:

I can talk to my assistant coach and go, “Argh!” Let’s get it all out because we can’t do it in front of the players. When I am in front of them, I want to say something useful. It doesn’t mean I never get mad at them, because I’m always calm and in control, they don’t like that either. (VB1)

It is a time to reflect with the coaches. It has to happen quickly. If I’m upset, I have to vent some of my frustrations, usually behind closed doors. (IH5)

If the game doesn’t go well, I have learned to go for a walk or count to one thousand before talking to them. In other words, try not to make the talk just emotional, try to make it constructive. (VB2)

Some coaches are very concerned about setting the proper example for their players regarding sportsmanship. Some coaches had special rituals to which they adhered regarding either the opposition or umpires:

Regardless of whether we win or lose, I always go and thank the umpires. Sometimes umpires made bad calls, but you can’t let that effect you. There is something about coaching and your code of ethics; you have to be polite even in difficult situations. I shake hands with the officials, with the technical team, and with the other coach. (FH6)

I make sure that when the game is over, I always shake hands with each of the opposing players. Sometimes it is quite a shock to young opponents because they think you are the enemy. I think it is really important as a role model to make sure they start seeing it as just a game. It is the same with coaches. I really believe that coaches have a lot to learn about respect, especially women coaches. (BB5)

**CHALK TALK**

- Develop your own routine such as going for a walk or talking to an assistant coach to deal with post-game emotions.

**Back in the Locker Room**

After assessing their team’s performance, and finding ways to deal with their own personal feelings, coaches meet with their team. This is another aspect of the coaching profession in which few outsiders are privy. What really goes on behind closed doors following a game? While post-game meetings are an important part of the team’s routine, our experts often said very little due to the emotional climate both for themselves and their athletes:

We are not ones for long post-game talks. I think you have to bring them together, win or lose. Win and it is easy. Lose and it is a little more difficult because there is so much anger and disappointment in you. I don’t think it is time for the team to engage in self-analysis. We never have kids blaming other kids. If you get into a discussion, the kids might say things they would later regret. (FH1)
Win or lose, we always have a team meeting. We would go in right after the game, but not necessarily to examine the game point by point. (VB5)

Our coaches tried to follow the same routine for team meetings, regardless of outcome. Especially after a loss, it is the safest and most effective option:

By the time they get to the post-game everybody should be mentally exhausted. To then shoot off at the mouth is like spitting in the wind. There is no real gain from it. If we won, “Yeah, wasn’t that great.” If we have lost, I don’t see it as the appropriate time to be dealing with anything. I try and keep that perspective unless there was a real disastrous blowout that we have to deal with immediately. (FH5)

I have a very short meeting with my players, maybe half a minute to a minute. I always thank them for playing well, regardless of what the score was. We could be beaten by five goals, but I always thank them for playing hard because I know they tried. (FH6)

As we have seen, our coaches chose their words carefully during the post-game meeting. Most preferred to give a quick summation of the game and saved the in-depth analyses for the following practice or team meeting:

We usually have a post-game chat just to evaluate what happened from the perspective of our goals. I will be very careful if I am angry because I don’t think you are rational when you are angry. It is enough for them to know that I am not happy and I want to see things in perspective. (FH2)

I don’t know if it’s right or wrong, but I always like to sum up the game a little. I’ve always tried to tell the teams I coach that I feel it’s my responsibility to be honest with them. However, it might be different if I was in a circumstance where we weren’t a very good team. (IH5)

You’re up high at the end of a match, win or lose.

You have to try to keep focused on the next competition. I try to redirect their focus, find the teachable moment, and point out when they were most successful and address it. (BB6)

But how do our coaches deal with individual athletes after a contest? If a player has committed a critical error or taken a costly penalty, do the coaches address the problem immediately? Our coaches’ perspective was that teams win or lose together. Players should not be singled out immediately after a contest:

I have to be in enough control that my comments are not demeaning to any of them and that I won’t single out anybody in the meeting. If I have a real problem with someone’s performance, I have learned to discipline myself to talk one-on-one with that person, so I don’t berate her in front of everybody. I feel really good about being able to control that because it’s just not worth doing that to the players. (VB1)

Ninety per cent of the time in the post-game meeting I’ll go, “Well done, guys, good job, practice is at 10:00 tomorrow.” I don’t talk about the game. I’ll say to so and so that the press wants to talk to him. The players know they are not getting analyzed right after a game. It is too emotional, especially if you lose. You can’t communicate with someone who is emotional. It is a waste of time. (BB3)

**CHALK TALK**

- Take time to meet with your team after a game. Hold off the analysis until a later date.
- Never blame an individual player in front of your team.
Post-Game Evaluation

An important part of the coach’s job is to assess the performance of the players. If the team’s performance was poor he or she must also determine the reason for the problem. Were the players not properly prepared, or did they not play hard enough? This evaluation is then fed back into the next practice plan as a marker of the effectiveness of the overall game plan. Most of our coaches evaluated the game the same night or early in the next morning. There are several advantages to postponing giving feedback to players. It allows coaches to get their emotions under control. It also permits them to use other resources, such as video equipment, statistical information, and the opinions of assistant coaches, to shape their analysis of the game:

I want to make sure I see the game film. I want to sleep on it. I don’t want to say something that is not necessary and I don’t want to repeat myself at the next practice. (FH2)

I always want to be sure. Although some things are obvious, sometimes when you watch the video, you realize somebody else committed the mistake. So I always want to look at the video before I come in with what I thought was wrong. (IH1)

One important by-product of the evaluation process is that it gives the coach the opportunity to draw lessons from the previous match and incorporate them into the next practice:

The best approach to evaluating the way the team plays is not to miss the point of a successful situation. You made a great shot and you beat that team. That is nice. But let’s look at what we did right and what we did wrong. Next time we can do some more things right. It is a whole parcel. (BB2)

If the game plan was all right, then why did we get blown out? Are they faster than us or was our man-to-man marking not good enough? Then we list how we are going to do better next time. (FH5)

I really don’t get too uptight about winning or losing. I mean, I hate to lose, but I am more concerned about the way we performed rather than if we won by 12 or 30 points. I give them feedback all the time. (BB3)

Our coaches generally followed the same routine after a competition. At the next practice or team meeting, they provided feedback to the team and started working on weak points detected during the previous game:

After competing, you go back into training, usually articulating the areas of weakness you found during competition. Then you go back into the gym and the weight room and start working on the problem again. (VB5)

I have to react to how we played the last couple of games. They know if our power play was anemic for two games that we’ll be working on it in practice. I say, “Here’s where it broke down, and here’s what we are going to work on.” (IH4)

For one field hockey coach, practices following a game were as intense as any other during the season. Whether the athletes played well or poorly, they were expected to come ready to learn and work hard:

How do I deal with people who aren’t ready for practice? Don’t come to practice if you are not ready. Yet there will always be some who won’t be ready. One has to deal with that. You call a spade a spade at that point, especially after a difficult loss. (FH2)

Successful coaches have the ability to pounce on errors and correct them right away. If they see a drill or strategy they believe can improve their team, they will implement it into their training as early as possible:

As soon as we go into a new country and we see a new technique, the co-coach will break it down and we will have it the next day, whereas other people are more hesitant. Some coaches are hesitant to move with the times. I think that has been one of our
successes. As soon as we see someone doing something new, we immediately adopt it. (FH1)

CHALK TALK

- Conduct a post-game evaluation within 24 hours of the completion of the match, and extract lessons to be implemented into the next training session.
- Use the first practice or team gathering following a game to address any areas you believe need improvement.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter examined the three phases of competition. Coaches have extremely important jobs to do during each phase. Before the game, they must establish routines for both themselves and their athletes. During the match, they must master the contingencies they can control, such as time-outs and intermissions, and maintain a good rapport with game officials. After the match, coaches must first deal with their own emotions, and, as a result, limit the immediate feedback they give to the athlete. Evaluation generally occurs later on after they have had the opportunity to cool off, and consult with their assistants and team video tapes.

The last few chapters have shown that coaches who are organized and train their team properly have a better chance of faring well on game day. Coaching is a complete package and this will become even more evident in the next two chapters. In chapter six, a detailed discussion of how coaches adapt to different contexts will be presented. This will be followed by a chapter on what coaches have learned over their careers, with suggestions for developing coaches in the future.