Chapter Two

LIFE AT THE TOP

Philosophies of Success

Gordon A. Bloom

So far we have seen the paths taken by our coaches at the start of their athletic and coaching careers. The focus of this chapter will be on their concerns once they reached the top of the coaching profession. Coaching a high performance sport is like climbing a difficult hiking trail for the first time. Along the way, you encounter broken bridges and crossroads where quick decisions must be made. Our experts have traveled these trails extensively, and have an advantage in selecting the best course. This chapter will begin with some personal philosophies our experts felt were crucial in helping them climb to the highest pinnacles of coaching and will show how these ideas allowed them to guide the careers of expert performers. You will see that there is a lot more to coaching than overseeing training and competition. Although our participants have a
sophisticated knowledge base for the coaching process, it was often
difficult for them to express what distinguishes them from their
colleagues. As a first step, a look at their personally crafted-
philosophies will help us to uncover how our coaches “reached the
top” of their profession.

**DRAWING THE MAP:**

**PERSONAL PHILOSOPHIES OF EXPERT COACHES**

Winning coaches have a desire to actively seek knowledge
that distinguishes them from other coaches. We found that our
coaches strove to regularly update their knowledge, a quality they
shared with top-notch athletes. Expert athletes know that unless they
change their moves, their opponents will anticipate and eventually
stop them. The same principle applies to coaching. Unless coaches
continually adjust their offensive and defensive tactics, opposing
teams will quickly neutralize predictable events.

Our coaches had key personal attributes which were crucial
to their success. One of these being a strong work ethic. Coaching is
a competitive field; only those who run the extra mile succeed.
Another attribute is developing a unique operational style. Our
participants did not clone other successful coaches, but developed
their own coaching style through constant change.

**You Never Know too Much**

We found that our coaches, although at a high level in their
profession, retained the same hunger for knowledge they had earlier
in their athletic and coaching careers. One coach regretted not having
this attitude earlier, during his playing career:

*“I wish I had been more alert to taking things down when I was playing. I only started writing things down when I was in college hockey. If the coach ran a good drill, I’d write it down. I think about all the hockey I played before that. I never thought about keeping or filing away anything that I did. I’ve become a very good person at recording everything I do and I’m also a real student of somebody else’s practices.”* (IH4)

When our coaches saw a radical or effective strategy or technique
being used in their sport, they were quick to add it to their training
regime. To illustrate, we’ll use a hypothetical example from baseball.
Let’s assume we have a baseball coach who notices that one
particular team has been successful pitching to the top hitter. An
astute coach will study the films to see how the team defeated this
hitter, and then relay that information to his own pitchers. The desire
to learn not only contributed to the quality of our participants’
coaching, but undoubtedly had a direct bearing on their winning
records:

*“When I think about volleyball and sports, I think about attention to detail because I am always looking for new, small things. I figured out by the early 1980’s that coaching was people management and training. There are only so many ways to bump, set, and spike a ball. However, if there was ever a new innovation internationally, I’d always implement it. I would travel and watch the Japanese team play defense and see the ball never hit the floor. Unbelievable! So I would learn.”* (VB2)

Coaches have to be flexible. I would describe my co-coach and I as unbelievably flexible. As soon as we see something new, we use it. For example, our goalies always had the most up-to-date equipment. A lot of goalies wear their old pads because they saved the last shot four weeks ago with them. Our kids have always been willing to move quickly to the next step. (FIH)

Our experts realized they were working with elite athletes,
some of whom might one day become coaches themselves. Our
master coaches respected their athletes and were not afraid to solicit
their views and ideas. Sometimes, this knowledge was even
incorporated into their coaching portfolio:

*“One thing that has obviously been key in terms of me becoming a better coach is that my athletes have taught me a lot over the years. Their feedback has always helped me clearly focus on what they require”*
to be successful. Ultimately it's helped me adapt. I've accepted them in a positive manner. (IH5)

The beauty of it is that I have my athletes and paid professionals, peeping into my plan and constantly giving me feedback. I think it is a great idea and you have to embellish it a little bit more. It is like having your gas tank constantly being refueled. (FH5)

There are many ways to learn, and some of these have been addressed in the preceding chapter. One important point is that our coaches never let their guard down. They were constantly looking for new systems or chunks of information to put into their arsenal:

I look at a guy like our national team coach, and he's never remained the same. He's always learning, adapting, and making himself a better coach. By no means do I think I have reached the saturation point in terms of knowledge of the game. There are still things I have to learn. There are more experiences that I need. As I get those experiences, I'm going to grow as a coach. (IH5)

There have always been lots of evaluations. I have been one of the most evaluated coaches in the country, but I enjoy it. I invite their feedback because you can't help but improve with it. (FH5)

Being a successful coach involves the ability to adapt. Coaches who think they have achieved perfection are in big trouble and risk having their career come quickly crashing down. Today, sport goes through constant transformations. Teams have state-of-the-art equipment and sophisticated scouting staffs, which makes the game more exciting for the fans and more challenging for the coaches. One of our participants noted:

Sometimes we don't want to change. I think most people are the same. You get into a groove and you think, "Why should I listen?" For me, it involves looking at myself and sometimes saying I am out of line and I should change, without a token, "Oh yes, I will work on it tomorrow or next decade." Rather, you need to start in the gym right now, and have the strength or discipline to do it. (VB2)

Perfecting one's coaching abilities often takes years of reflection and refinement. One coach noted that although he had successfully coached at the university and professional levels, it wasn't until he took time off and began coaching in Europe that he was able to assess his coaching weaknesses and make necessary changes:

After a poor experience, I got back into coaching by going to Italy. That really helped me. I took a team that wasn't doing too well, and we did well. A lot of things I hadn't realized before, I changed. I was a little more demanding and impersonal. I didn't worry as much about the player. I just pushed them and a lot of times I didn't care how they felt. (IH1)

The issue of emotional control was discussed by many of the coaches. This meant adopting a philosophy that included having self-awareness, accepting criticism from others, and altering one's coaching style accordingly:

I would say that you can't go nuts and start doing cartwheels because we got two points in a row. Your team is thinking, "Yes, very nice, coach. You are giving us this speech about composure, yet you are always going off the deep-end." Over the years, I have been told that a big point in coaching is that if you make mistakes, you should be able to see and accept them, and then have the willingness to change. A lot of people disagree, and continue doing things their way. (VB1)

It has been 10 years of struggle with maintaining my emotional control. I have learned to control my emotions when things happen that are out of my control. (BB3)
Sometimes it takes a poor showing at an important competition for a coach to recognize a flaw in coaching style or choice of strategies. One Olympic field hockey coach reflected on how her lack of emotional control was a detriment to her team. She readily admitted this problem and vowed to improve:

_I tend to be a bit hysterical, but I am trying to improve. Actually, I was awful at the 1991 Olympic qualifier. I really wanted to qualify for Barcelona and I am afraid I might have been a bit rough._ (FH1)

Successful coaches can be characterized in two ways. They carry a motivation to become a better coach every day, continually striving to acquire more coaching knowledge. Our coaches displayed a remarkable ability to accept criticism from themselves and others. They realized that failure to embody these qualities might be a ticket to the unemployment line, rather than the sideline!

**CHALK TALK**

- Strive to acquire and implement new tactics and strategies into your coaching repertoire.
- Never stop assessing yourself and making adjustments when they are needed.

**It Takes Many Years: The Maturation Process of Coaching**

Coaches learned to reflect on earlier stages of their careers, to see how they had progressed. Although not a unique practice to coaching, reflection is an important dimension in any profession without job security. A coach’s future employment was often dependent on personal assessment of past performances. Reflection also had a direct impact on the coach’s teaching methods, as one of our participants noted:

_When I started coaching, we would do something technical and I wouldn’t move on it until everybody got it. Consequently, we didn’t get very far. Now, I realize we have athletes at a high level and others at a lower level. We try to bring the lower athletes up, and keep moving on. You have to go on, even if you don’t have that one piece in place. Eventually it all falls together._ (FH4)

At the beginning of their careers, young coaches are often afraid to admit they are unaware of aspects of their sport. Some wish to be known as brash, hot shots; gun-slingers who come to town with a wealth of knowledge, immediately leading their team to success. Our coaches emphasized the importance of accessing knowledge, often by listening to more experienced colleagues:

_I’ve learned that everybody has their area of expertise. The hardest thing with coaching is you can’t be all things to all people. I wish I was the greatest motivator, best organizer, and most knowledgeable tactician. What I do is hire staff and look for complementary people who offset what I do._ (IH4)

_Now I don’t feel bad if I haven’t seen something, whereas I used to be pretty defensive. When you first start out, you want to say you have seen everything and know everything. As you get older and a little smarter, you recognize that is virtually impossible._ (FH4)

_I realized I was becoming sounder in terms of the softer sciences. I had a more responsible job. [but also had] dilemmas in terms of time conflict. We had to do fitness training and we had to do it right. So I brought people in, something I never did in the past. I felt the professionalism [developing] in me. I was confident and I was now a resourceful person. I really liked that, and felt I had really evolved._ (BB4)

The process for the coaches’ maturation also extended to their dealings with athletes. The style transformations of our participants were partly a sign of the times. Formerly, athletes were sportsmen or sportswomen, but today’s players are a combination of
entertainer, entrepreneur, and athlete, sometimes in that order of priority. One expert noted how modern coaches cannot yell or degrade players, a practice previously considered acceptable. Experienced coaches today are conscious of dealing with the emotions and attitudes of their players:

With today’s kids, it is that critical you don’t bully or browbeat them. You have to coax them, define standards, and let them know when they don’t meet those standards. I think you have to do it in a much softer way, so they almost think it is their decision as opposed to yours. I have completely changed my management style and my coaching style has evolved. (BB3)

There is simply no substitute for experience. How often do you see a rookie coach out-maneuver the seasoned veteran? Although the rookie coach might lead his or her team to victory, it is not a result of the veteran being out-coached. One hockey coach reflected on the key role experience played in enhancing his effectiveness behind the bench:

I think you become a better bench coach in hockey. Although hockey is a game of training the athletes, the coach has a lot of bearing on the outcome of a game because he is putting players in and out. Sports like soccer and rugby don’t have many substitutions. In others like gymnastics they perform alone. In hockey, you learn more about the game and how to react to certain situations, plus you learn about handling situations. Things come up and if it worked before, you do it again, but if it didn’t, you have a new way of approaching it. (IH1)

The culmination of the maturation process is reached when a coach is labeled as an expert by peers. Young, aspiring coaches begin seeking advice from their senior colleagues. Many of our coaches willingly encouraged their younger colleagues to ask them questions, taking pride in their role as educators. Most participants were happy to share tactics and approaches with colleagues, partly because they realized coaching involves more than X’s and O’s on a chalk board. Good coaching is also dependent on the ability to teach, and to read and react to situations during a game. There is, in sum, a personal dimension to coaching, as two of our coaches noted:

There are no big secrets. Some people coach better than others because that is the way they are. I don’t have any problems showing anybody what I do because I think I teach better than anybody around. (BB2)

I’ve done many coaching clinics where coaches ask me, “Gee, why would you give information away: Now I know what you are going to do next?” I always say it doesn’t matter because they don’t know how I do it. He’s got [the information], but he doesn’t know how I teach it. To me that’s the secret. It’s nice to have the information, but it isn’t the secret. It’s how you teach and explain it, what drills and teaching cues you use with the athletes. I could even give the teaching cues away. It’s how you sell them, how you’re emphatic, and how you look the guy in the eye. (IH4)

The ability to analyze one’s own abilities is never easy. Our experts, however, have cultivated the ability to be self-critical. Hopefully, their experiences will inspire other coaches to do the same.

**CHALK TALK**

- Maturing as a coach takes time. Be patient and honest with yourself.
- Just because something worked three years ago does not mean it will work today. Constantly evaluate and adjust your approaches and strategies.

**Hard Work**

A cliché concerning hard work warrants repeating: Our experts believed that to reach the top of their profession, and stay there, they had to work harder than their competitors. Our coaches
also understood that in the field of sport, there are plenty of highly motivated and competent individuals ready to take their job should they falter. To maintain their success, they worked late nights watching game films, sacrificed family time while at coaching clinics, and gave up long weekends at the cottage to scout or recruit. For the love of their sport, our coaches put a premium on hard work:

One thing I have always believed is that I don’t want to feel my players are working harder than I am. We are doing this together and both parties are putting everything into it. (BB1)

Hard work is important. The work ethic for a coach is just as demanding as the work ethic for the players. (IH1)

You start to understand it’s not luck; it’s preparation. It’s work, and when you get better at what you are doing, give yourself some credit. I realized I didn’t need superstitions. If I did my job and worked hard, things took care of themselves. (IH4)

I was seen as a power monger and that always makes me smite. If you look at anyone who is identified as a power monger, you will find that the only difference between a power monger and a nonpower monger is the power monger is willing to put in 24 hours a day. They accrue power simply by being there. (FH5)

Hard work, however, is not the be-all and end-all of coaching success. It is most effective when combined with strong personal attributes:

You have to be extremely industrious, self-motivated and have an inner drive to excel. You need an ability to push yourself and you need tremendous will and determination. These are the prerequisites for success. (BB6)

There are always going to be certain levels of teachers. There are probably math teachers who are very good, and others who are barely there. They probably all aspire to be very good, but some are good for different reasons: enthusiasm, salesmanship, knowledge, and rapport with people. A lot of little things, rather than just one, makes them better than the other guy. (IH4)

In sum, the importance of hard work hard cannot be overstated. It is something that younger coaches should strive for because it is one variable where they have total control. In areas of coaching such as recruiting or dealing with budget cuts, uncontrollable factors may hinder a coach’s chance of success. Hard work, however, does not have limitations, and as such, is a crucial factor that brought these coaches to the top of the coaching ladder.

**CHALK TALK**

- Hard work is important and must become an accepted way of life.
- If you want to excel, be prepared to devote more hours than you originally thought necessary.

**Finding the Right Style**

Our coaches also understood that more is involved in their profession than hard work. Part of our coaches’ philosophies related to the perception they conveyed to their athletes, the fans, and the media. Should they yell or be quiet? Should they be friendly or impolite, autocratic or democratic? Making choices such as these is part of developing a personalized coaching style. According to our participants, there is no clear way to develop a unique coaching style. Coaches must transform their personal characteristics into a style with which they are comfortable:

The biggest challenge when you’re young is you want to emulate somebody. You see a coach and say, “Gee, I would like to coach like that; that’s my kind of coach.” Although you might like some of the things he does, in essence, you coach the way you
naturally react using your own instincts. If you try to be somebody you're not, I think you will have a real problem with coaching. (IH4)

I have a different style altogether from the coach of the men's national team. I am demanding, but in a softer way, and I only yell once in a while. I have a different way of dealing with people. I tend to talk more individually, whereas he talks more to a group. I tried in my early coaching years to be more like him and other basketball coaches, but I found I had more success being a little softer with my feedback and expectations. It basically deals with my unique personality. (BB5)

One of our experts, a veteran basketball coach, was seen by many of his players as a father-figure. His players were at ease while speaking to him. This was a result of his personality, and he had adjusted his coaching style to reflect it. His philosophy was to spend time with each of his athletes and support staff, on and off the basketball court:

I figured that every day I had to spend some one-on-one time with my players, and it was very hard to do. It is hard to do with your family and is hard to do with your team, especially because we always had about 20 people. I had to spend time with the doctor, the trainer, the best player, the worst player, and anybody else who was in our little world. (BB1)

At times, maintaining a certain style of conduct proved unnerving for some of our coaches, causing stress, pressure, or uncertainty:

I think it starts with me. A lot of coaches say that you should be neat and look after yourself physically. I have to live with this if I am going to preach it. At times, there is more pressure for me than for them, but it is good. (VB2)

I now try to stay away from superstition. I went through a phase when I first started coaching where I was very superstitious. I thought I couldn't be good; there had to be some luck or superstition to it. It was ridiculous during those first years that I coached. I'd get up and say, "Now yesterday, what foot did I put my sock on first?" (IH4)

I had to realize that professional sport is entertainment and even the coach should be more entertaining. We probably should do things just to be colorful, which really isn't my style. My style is to coach and do the job. (IH1)

Developing a personal style is not only a challenge for coaches, but for people of all walks of life. This includes lawyers who develop their courtroom demeanor, school teachers who polish their speaking skills, or salespeople who refine their "pitch." Our experts realized that all coaches have their own unique style. It is essential to find a style that you, as a coach, are most comfortable with.

**CHALK TALK**

- Do not emulate the coaching style of others just because they have been successful.
- Find a coaching style that suits your personality and brings the best out in you.

**ALL ABOARD: PHILOSOPHIES RELATING TO ATHLETES**

Interpersonal skills are essential for the coach of the 1990's. Due to the current practice of paying elite athletes inflated salaries, it is often easier and cheaper to get rid of coaches than athletes. Coaches thus have an incentive to maintain a good relationship with their players. This point is especially evident when we consider the greater degree of power that athletes now enjoy. For example, respect was once demanded by coaches and was a one-way process. It is now earned and is seen as a two-way street. This is one of the
many philosophies guiding our coaches’ relationships with their athletes that will be examined in this section.

More than just a Player: Athlete Development

While winning was always important, especially in the higher levels of sport, our coaches maintained the personal development of the athlete was just as meaningful. This point was especially true for coaches working with amateur athletes, their hope being that athletes would extract lessons from the sporting realm and implement them into their own lives:

_The idea is you want to develop independent thinking, creative, responsible individuals who can make decisions when they leave. Clearly, it’s incumbent upon the athlete to develop self-discipline and properly manage their time and priorities. There will be ups and downs, pitfalls along the way, but in the end, if they’ve survived a rigorous, demanding, and intense athletic involvement, and if they’ve also done well academically, achieving their degree, what more rewarding experiences could you ask for? (BB6)

I’ve talked to the guys about a lot of other things besides hockey. At the start of the season, for example, I talked about the opportunity they had to be hockey players. I collect all kinds of articles, including those on people who have gone through some really tough times. I gave them one about this 16-year-old girl who had spinal meningitis, and within hours lost both of her hands and feet. It was interesting to read what the girl went through. I wanted my players to understand the great opportunity they have. (IH4)

My strength is I can motivate kids to excel. If they want to do well, I get them to do well. My practice affects not only basketball, but other parts of their competitive lives. They will be more disciplined, so I harp on that, sometimes too much. We are playing basketball, but we are learning a hell of a lot of things that are going to make them tremendously successful on the court and elsewhere. (BB2)

Many university coaches strove to develop top students and athletes. One, in particular, did not find a conflict between sports and academic study, a quality which continuously attracted top players to his program:

_You see these kids and it is like a lightbulb going off. I am not interested in robots. I am interested in every kid becoming a good basketball player and a good student. I teach so that both the players and I feel really good about [this]. If that means we haven’t won a national title, that is okay. I can live with that. It is no big deal. (BB3)

One should not believe that our experts had a lower degree of concern for their players’ skill development. The views of two of our participants well represents those of many amateur coaches:

_The tradition of this program indicates to players that we are here for one reason, and that is excellence. My philosophy is that every player comes here with a predetermined potential and my job is to get them as close to their potential as I can. If they want to be national team players or if they just want to be good college players, then I have always taken the attitude that each individual athlete has to continue to work towards her potential. When she stops doing that, then she has to leave the program, because once you stop growing, what is the point? (BB3)

We confuse recreational objectives with athletic objectives and the pursuit of excellence. We cover behind the academic gown. It’s easy to say, “We can’t be good at sports because if we do we’ll automatically forfeit the academic process, putting undue pressure on the students that will impede
their academic performance.” I have a strong belief that you can do both. (BB6)

Our expert coaches were concerned with all facets of their athletes’ lives. They wanted to help their athletes excel inside and outside of sport. In fact, the dominance of many Canadian hockey teams at international events was partly attributable to the fact that the athletes were treated as people, not just as instruments for winning games.

**CHALK TALK**

- Help your athletes identify and achieve their own goals.
- Show concern for both the athletic and personal development of your athletes.

Respect is a Two-Way Process

Interactions with athletes involve more than face-to-face discussions. Coaches and athletes must get along. There must be mutual respect, especially in settings where athletes are being paid little or no money. We found this to be a common principle for our participants. They extended respect to their players, both as persons and athletes, and found their approach induced them to reciprocate:

_I respect the players as people, and they respect me. Not just as a volleyball coach or player, but as a person. I felt that was missing in a lot of the coaches I had._ (VB1)

_I think they had respect for me because they knew I would always tell them what I was thinking. I guess one thing about me the athletes really appreciate is that I let them know exactly where I stand. I don’t play any mind games. I know some coaches do, but I don’t operate that way._ (FH4)

_I don’t think that you can command respect and instantly get it. If you are thorough, organized, and have some basic knowledge, the guys are going to give you a chance. The athletes will open the door and say, “This guy’s on the ball; let’s give him a chance.”_ (IH4)

Stated another way, respect is a guaranteed right our coaches extended to their athletes. It started from the first encounter and was the athlete’s to lose:

_That’s the respect thing. My personal feeling is that everybody deserves my respect until they prove otherwise. I always give them the benefit of the doubt, and if they act like idiots or are unfair, then I have the right to remove myself from them. Until you prove otherwise, I respect you - that is generally how I deal with people._ (VB1)

The relationship between athlete and coach sometimes becomes strained, especially if a coach does something at odds with the athlete’s beliefs or ideals. Problems can arise when an athlete disagrees with a coach’s decision, especially if that decision has a bearing on the athlete’s position on the team. For example, problems can occur if a top athlete from a high school team arrives on the national team and discovers he or she has to prove him- or herself before earning the status of first stringer:

_If I asked you to play a very minimal role and you believe in your own mind that you should play a greater role, I hope you are going to respect me and accept that on this team you are going to play a lesser role. If you don’t accept that, you are not respecting my knowledge as a coach._ (IH2)

_I could come into a gym and have 14 wonderful athletes who all work very hard. I could tell one athlete to make an adjustment and it will get done right away, whereas I could ask another athlete to make an adjustment and we would still be fighting over it one week later. That is one of the things that I had to learn when I started coaching team sports, because I couldn’t believe that some people wouldn’t always listen to the coach._ (FH2)

Our coaches offered some interesting views on to their relationships with athletes. In particular, they stressed the importance of respect in the coaching domain.
Friend or Foe: Relationships with Athletes

Mutual respect between coaches and their athletes does not necessarily indicate friendship. Generally, it is not until players retire and begin to reflect on their athletic careers that they appreciate the real impact of their coach. This sometimes lends to the development of a personal friendship. Most of our coaches were adamant that they did not want to become too close to their athletes during their playing careers. While our participants respected the views of their athletes, and occasionally socialized with them, they were consciously cautious about becoming too friendly with them. Our experts felt that close relationships with their athletes would hinder their coaching effectiveness:

I try to stay a little bit separate from the players because I don’t find I am a good coach if I am a friend. I have trouble separating those two things. I have trouble yelling at you if you are a friend. It is more important that they become a good player, rather than just be a friend. (VB4)

I don’t let anything go. I talk and get involved with my athletes. I don’t discern myself as their friend. I would rather have their respect. (FH3)

I think the guys sense that I understand the game. I think I’m demanding, yet fair. I don’t think the players would say I was a great guy, but I think they’d say something like, “If you screw up, he’ll deal with you fairly.” (IH4)

Some of our coaches, especially those coaching female athletes, made it explicitly clear when criticizing them that their comments only applied to sport. If they yelled at a player during a game or practice, it did not mean they disliked her as a person. Some coaches of women felt the best way to approach this dilemma was to talk openly about it with their athletes:

I pride myself on how I treat my athletes. The biggest thing I had to learn in coaching is that whatever happens in a practice or game stays there. I have to discipline them in such a way that I am dealing with their behavior and not with them as people. Especially with women, you have to convince them at the end of a tough practice that it was to help them as athletes. You are not mad at them, you are just trying to improve their game, and you are dealing with their athletic behavior. (BB5)

A lot of times I make comments to the athletes with regard to their field hockey ability and they know I am not making comments about them personally. I make that distinction very clear. I tell the athletes at the beginning that the best thing for me would be to be your friend, and I want to be friends with you. However, the bottom line is that I am paid to coach, not to be your friend. My job is to make you the best field hockey player that I can, and I am going to do what I think it is going to take. (FH4)

While the coaches didn’t cultivate close friendships with players, they hoped their players would respect them enough to have a casual social encounter:

We have enough of a rapport so that even though I am tough and critical of players, we could have beers and socialize. You want your players to respect you. If they like you, it is a bonus. (VB2)

Despite the philosophy of not being too friendly with players, our coaches often demonstrated their care for their athletes. This point was rarely explicitly stated by the coaches, but their words and actions certainly gave the impression of active concern:
I had a marginal player who made the team. I still remember that I used to tell him, “You made the team, you can smile.” The kid had gone through a divorce, but he said making him smile made him feel better. (BH1)

I remember two veteran hockey coaches saying to make sure you somehow acknowledge every player each day. It might be just saying, “Hi, how are you doing?” or it might be going over and talking to them specifically about something. I remember one coach saying he always met every two weeks with his players on a rotating basis. I think that is very important. You are talking about being a hard arse, but I think it is important you know where the players are coming from. (IH1)

Our experts also realized that elite athletes are not immune to life’s woes, facing common crises such as illness, death, divorce, or problems with children:

I sensed that one of my players was not doing well, but we didn’t know why. Our sports psychologist came to me and said I should talk to the player. The player came in and said, “I don’t know if I should be bothering you, but my daughter is in the hospital at the other end of the country. My wife called and we are having a lot of problems, and we are both very concerned.” He said he wanted to make this team and he was very serious. I said, “We will evaluate you on what you have done up to now. I can’t tell you what to do because you are a big boy, but if this were me, I would be on a plane right now.” I also said, “I am telling you I would go home, and if you say you don’t want to go home, I might send you anyway.” That was how strongly I felt about it. (BB1)

Coaches had different ways of showing they cared. Some showed the personal or family side of their lives, others enjoyed talking to athletes about matters unrelated to sport:

I’ll always find time to tell the guys stories about my dogs. They just love to hear about my dogs. I actually roll on the floor and talk with my dogs. I make sure the players know there is another dimension to me. I’m human and not just a coach. Sometimes they think all we do is eat, sleep, and drink hockey, and that all we are is a coach, that we are never satisfied, and we have no life. (IH4)

Sometimes showing you care involves disclosing insights about yourself you would not ordinarily share with other people:

We have a couple of kids from very poor families. I talk and relate well with them. I tell them I understand their problems because I also came from that environment. I came from a family with no money, but I didn’t let that be an excuse for not being successful. I think by disclosing this, they know I can identify with their problems. (BB3)

Our coaches preferred to maintain a certain distance from their players. It allowed them to do their job more professionally, especially when discipline was required. Despite this, they demonstrated a genuine concern for their athletes’ well-being, both as individuals and performers.

CHALK TALK

- Keep your relationships with athletes on a professional level.
- Demonstrate care for your athletes in subtle ways.

Establishing the Ideal Setting: Steps to Facilitate Athlete Improvement

So far we have presented information pertaining to the coaches’ views of dealing with athletes. Along the same line, emphasis has been placed on the manner that coaches have chosen to carry out these interactions. Creating an ideal setting and environment was important to our coaches. This section will discuss three areas for facilitating athlete improvement: making
the environment educational and fun, communicating effectively with athletes, and letting athletes voice their opinions.

**A place to work, learn and have fun**

At the highest levels of sport, teams spend as much as eight months training and living together. The coach must construct a positive and pleasant working environment in order to build good rapport between athletes, forge the team into a compatible unit, and enhance performance:

*I have found that when you work, you work, and when you play, you play. It is important to have both. Sometimes we play floor hockey, and it is great fun. They check me and I check them. This is the kind of rapport I had when I was coaching at university. We always had time for play, whether it was a wind-up, social, dinner, or some other activity.* (VB2)

*Obviously, the individual psychological make-up has begun long before the coach becomes involved. But I think the environment allows characteristics to be shaped. It involves the careful crafting of the practice and training environments, and the construction of a support network necessary to nurture specific behavior.* (BB6)

*We went back to square one this morning. I realized they were thinking, “Oh my goodness, she is going to do that drill again.” I thought about the best way to approach this. I did something they liked to start with, and then I slipped it in there. I don’t know if they knew it, but sometimes you have to be a little sneaky. We were a lot better this morning after practice than we were last night. This is where as a coach you have got to have some fun.* (FH2)

For many of our coaches, the creation of a positive working environment was the first step in helping their athletes become successful. A comfortable working environment ensures maximum learning:

I’d hate to think a player went to my university and did the same things in his freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior years. The most important part of coaching may be providing an environment that supports learning new information, and structuring it so that drills are progressive and interesting. (IH3)

*The supportive environment is critical. The coach must be able to communicate a level of commitment and passion to the athlete. When the athlete trains, there must be total commitment and devotion. They have to know the process they’re undertaking is valuable.* (BB6)

*I enjoyed having kids totally committed to an environment for the six months they are in the program. I would help them with their fitness, diets, and rest. When they had emotional downers, I would give them time to regroup without saying, “See you tomorrow; you’d better be regrouped,” which is the other way of doing it at university.* (BB4)

One coach had an interesting viewpoint on how to create the ideal learning environment. Athletes must be made to know they should not be afraid to fail or that making a mistake is a learning experience:

*I believe you have to put the athlete in environments where they feel comfortable if they fail. You don’t want them to fail, but if they do, it is not a major crime.* (BB2)

The creation of appropriate learning environments should not be taken lightly by coaches as it directly affects both the athletic and personal development of the team.

**CHALK TALK**

- Create an environment that is educational, supportive, fun, and challenging for your athletes.
Constant and clear communication

Assuming a proper environment has been created, what should a coach do with it? According to our participants, it was important to communicate effectively with the team. Many of our coaches strongly believed that effective communication was the cornerstone of successful coaching. It had a direct bearing not only on a coach’s performance during competition and training, but also in building good working relationships with athletes, their families, and colleagues:

_The biggest and toughest part of coaching is delivering information the players don’t want to hear. Sometimes people say you’re not a good communicator and I argue, “No, I am a very good communicator. It’s just I’m not telling you what you want to hear.” (IH4)_

We discussed communication styles and strategies, which was a terrific learning strategy for me. I could say, “This is what some of the athletes are saying. Is that what you meant?” My athletes would say, “No, not exactly.” We would have another meeting or get it cleared up another way. It was a good learning experience. (FH4)

In the high-pressure world of elite athletics, our coaches employed a number of strategies to cope with player dissension or discipline. Our coaches believed that without pre-planned solutions, there was a greater chance of alienating team members:

_I’ve ended up with a crisis situation a lot of times where a kid was in my office attacking me or in tears about something I did not even know was a problem. It is quite solvable, especially if we talk about it. If it is not solvable, then I like to think it is because we have different goals. (VB1)_

If a guy deserves to be given some static, regardless of who he is, I do it. We’re going through that right now with a few players. They’re not used to getting this kind of feedback. The young players love it because they’re seeing that nobody is immune to this guy; he’ll take on anybody. (IH4)

One of the coaches had a rule on communication. It was designed to enhance team cohesion and the relationship between players, coaches, and support staff:

_We have a little rule. If on day one you are upset about something, whether it is with me or another player, you sit on it because it may be you are having a bad day. If on the second day it is still there, then talk to a teammate or friend and try to find out what is bugging you. Then, if people say you have a point, deal with it on the third day. If it is with a player, take them out for coffee, sit down, and talk about it. If it is with me, come and ask to see me and we’ll talk it out. I think this allows the players to communicate, so they feel they have some input into what they are involved in. (VB1)_

Sometimes more drastic measures were taken by our coaches. Again, the coaches’ solutions were often simple, yet effective. For example, one coach noted that when an athlete was disruptive at practice, the punishment was always the same:

_I used to tell my players there was a door at the end of gym with a little window in it. I told them that if they got sent out of practice, unless they wanted to quit this team, they better stick their nose in that window and watch practice so they don’t miss anything. I was so pleased that we had this open relationship. (BB1)_

Finding an effective communication style was a challenge for many of our coaches, both in terms of finding the correct method and in assessing their own performance:

_I remember a professional hockey coach talking about communication. He said there are two types of coaches in the NHL, those who coach with fear and those who are the friendly coach, and he classifies himself as a friendly coach. He talked about communicating with players, about working with_
them and trying to motivate them, and he said the
two guys who get paid the most money are those
who do it the other way. I still think that you have to
communicate with players. (IH1)

I think I failed as a communicator. I worked my butt
off at it. I failed at a standard that I arbitrarily set. I
didn’t fail by judgment. I failed by my standard
because I didn’t think the information [I was
conveying] was clear enough. (BB4)

Communication is an area that encompasses much of
the coaching profession. In fact, it is an essential component for dealing
with the modern day athlete.

**CHALK TALK**

- Learn to clearly communicate your thoughts and beliefs to
  your athletes.
- Planning reactions and responses ahead of time will help
  you communicate more effectively with your athletes.

**Letting athletes have a say**

One of the most intriguing aspects of our coaches’ personal
philosophies was the input they solicited from their athletes.
Successful coaches adopted many different approaches. Coaches
who took a more old-fashioned approach limited their personal
interactions with players. On the other hand, a “players coach”
believes an open line of communication should exist between
themselves and their players. Many of our experts subscribed to this
view. Some coaches, of course, interacted more than others. Some
regularly encouraged their veteran players to provide input, while
others only wanted it on certain occasions:

*People tell me I am fair. I listen to people’s concerns
and if someone has a problem, I will take it into
consideration. I encourage my captains to talk to me
if they do not like what is going on in practices. I
might not do what they say, but I’ll listen, and if it
makes sense, most of the time I will incorporate
what they say. I think I listen well and respect other
people’s thoughts and opinions. (VB1)*

*I think you have to be prepared to hear input from
the people involved. I’ve always tried to give the
athletes as much say as possible, and tried to make
sure they understood they could speak openly with
the coaching staff. I also make them understand we
may not always agree. Sometimes they may have to
accept that we don’t agree, just like I don’t always
agree with everything they do. (IH5)*

*My philosophy is to coach them so they can play
without me. I don’t want them to become dependent
on me. I want them to make decisions on their own.
So, the practices are held in such a way that they
start making their own decisions. (FH6)*

*In discussions with my athletes I would say, “Here
is what I think. What do you think?” They may say,
“Yes, I agree with that,” or “What about this?” We
work together to make the team better. (FH4)*

These remarks must be read with a degree of understanding.
Our coaches were not always confident about seeking input from
their athletes. As with anyone starting a new profession, they came
to their job with a lot of new ideas, formulated from their playing
days, or from their stints as assistant coaches. As a result, they were
not about to turn power over to someone else, least of all their
athletes. The ability to delegate responsibility to the athlete is a skill
which took our coaches many years to develop:

*Now I am to the point, and it has taken me a while to
get this way, where I think I am more empowering as
a coach than I used to be. It is very difficult because
you have to give up some aspects of control. It is a
more effective way to coach. It is a learning process
that you go through as a coach. (FH4)*
Sometimes a player gets mad and says, “Coach, what the hell is going on?” I don’t want them to be mad, but it is okay for them to have the forum. I couldn’t handle that when I was younger; it was a challenge to my integrity and ability, and it was threatening. (BB4)

While our experts acknowledged the importance of intensity and trusting other people, they insisted that ultimately, the final decision had to rest with them:

No matter what goes on, I have learned that the coach has to be making the final decision because your livelihood or reputation depends on what you do; this is certainly exemplified in the pros. (IH1)

I tell them the problem and they tell me the solution. I think about it, and then I’ll come back and say this is what we will do. (FH3)

I came to the idea that I better know as much as I possibly can about every area and try to synthesize it. Then I should step back and receive some information and force myself to do what the information says rather than what I want to do. Not many coaches do that. Most do whatever the hell they want. The bottom line is you have to win and the bottom line is that I make the judgment. (BB4)

There is a fine line between letting people have a say and making the final decision. Coaches capable of using feedback judiciously are likely to have the best results.

**CHALK TALK**

- Allow your athletes to express their views and opinions without feeling intimidated.
- Understand that as coach, the final decision rests in your hands.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Successful coaches have mapped out unique philosophies in their pursuit of excellence. Along the path of success, they learned the importance of hard work, listening to others, and developing a unique coaching style. Even at the top, our coaches made it a point to keep evolving. Several saw this as a general formula for success, regardless of profession.

In this chapter, we have also seen several dimensions of the coach-athlete relationship. Coaches interacted with their athletes and cared about their overall well-being. They emphasized the importance of mutual respect, a positive working environment, effective communication, and the opportunity for athletes to express their opinions.

So far, the athletic and early coaching careers of our participants have been described, along with some of their philosophies once they had reached the top. Now the stage is set for the next chapters in which other, more specific dimensions of their job are addressed.