

## The Importance of Mentoring in the Development of Coaches and Athletes

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*Mentoring has been considered an increasingly important element of coaching development programs. It occurs when a teacher willingly invests time in the personal development of a student or athlete, when a trusting relationship evolves, needs and interests are fulfilled, and imitation of behavior takes place. The purpose of this study was to examine the mentoring experiences of expert team sport coaches. More specifically, the intent was to determine if any of the coaches were mentored through their development as athletes and subsequently as coaches, and if in turn they mentored other athletes and coaches during their careers. Open-ended semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 coaches. The data were analyzed inductively using qualitative procedures outlined by Côté and colleagues (1993, 1995). Results revealed that most coaches were mentored by more experienced coaches during both their athletic and early coaching careers. As a result, they gained valuable knowledge and insights that helped shape their coaching philosophies and enhanced all facets of their performance. Once they reached a level of expertise in their field, they themselves began to mentor athletes and younger coaches. The benefits of establishing structured mentoring programs for developing coaches and athletes are highlighted throughout the article.*

KEY WORDS: Coaching, Mentoring.

Mentoring is a process that requires further research and is believed to lead to high levels of success in both personal and professional endeavors (Merriam, 1983). In sport, it is evident that the role of the expert coach entails more than teaching individuals how to shoot correctly or how to dribble

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a ball around cones. There is a personal dimension to coaching that involves expanding one's role to go beyond traditional, required tasks. This process is referred to as «mentoring» and has been empirically examined in the educational and sport science domains (e.g., Abell, Dillon, Hopkins, McInery, & O'Brien, 1995; Bloom, 1985; Gould, Giannini, Krane, & Hodge, 1990; Heinrich, 1995; McNamara, 1995; Perna, Zaichkowsky, & Bocknek, 1996). According to Merriam, the word mentoring has its origins in Greek mythology, where a father trusted his son to learn from a wise old man named «Mentor.» Mentoring is a popular term currently being used in several domains, including that of sport.

Mentoring has historically lacked a clear conceptual definition. In a thorough review of the mentoring literature, Merriam (1983) stated that «a precise definition of mentoring – at least one that all could agree upon – was not to be found. Its meaning appears to be defined by the scope of a research investigation or by a particular setting where it occurs» (p. 162). Although few researchers have attempted to define the term mentoring, there are a number of similarities in the ways academics have alluded to it. Several studies have indicated that mentoring occurs when there is a trusting relationship between the teacher/coach and the student/athlete, when there is an interest on the part of the coach in the personal development of the athlete, when the coach purposefully allocates his/her time to fulfill the needs of the athlete, and when an imitation of behavior takes place. Kram (1988) and Merriam (1983) reported that mentoring is applicable when a nonfamilial and nonromantic relationship develops between the young adult and the more experienced mentor, when the mentor supports, counsels, and guides the protégé within a chosen context.

### **Mentoring in the Educational Domain**

The largest body of research on mentoring has been conducted in the field of education. Stroble and Cooper (1988) noted that articles addressing mentoring programs began to emerge in the 1980's, although it is speculated that mentoring was taking place a long time before it began to be empirically examined. At the time, the local governing bodies decided if and how they were going to have a mentoring program for students graduating from teachers' college. Since then, researchers have been studying various mentoring programs created for young teachers, as well as the mentors who assisted and evaluated them (Carter, 1988; Stroble & Cooper, 1988). Some important suggestions have been forwarded, such as the need for more standardized

programs for training and supervising student teachers (Stroble & Cooper, 1988), and for numerous funding changes to ensure their success (Carter, 1988).

Bowers and Eberhart (1988) and Hofmann and Feldlaufer (1992) investigated the many positive outcomes of successful mentoring programs. Their research was unique in that they also studied the benefits experienced by the mentors themselves. More precisely, Bowers and Eberhart noted that: «In such an environment teachers will continue to learn more about how learning occurs when working with students, reflecting on their teaching, and observing their most successful colleagues. Professional development of this nature will make the school a learning place for both the novice and master teacher, thereby enhancing the school as a learning place for students as well» (pp. 229-230).

In a study conducted with collegians, Borman and Colson (1984) revealed that mentoring facilitated their development of interpersonal skills and enhanced their knowledge of the work place. Moreover, Cosgrove (1986) found that mentored collegians experienced more positive changes in their self-confidence and overall developmental status compared to their matched controls. Positive effects of mentoring on vocational maturity, identity, and intimacy have also been recorded by Vaillant and Milofsky (1980).

Abell et al. (1995) provided an exhaustive summary of previous studies outlining the effects of teacher mentoring programs. They found that beginner teachers involved in these programs improved their self-confidence, classroom management strategies, lesson planning, discipline, voice inflection, eye contact, and review techniques. These researchers were more interested in both the interns and the mentors' views regarding the states' mandated programs. For example, mentors revealed it was important to work with beginning teachers as it helped the latter refine their teaching style. Other significant findings were that mentors assumed a helping role as opposed to an evaluative one, and that respect and trust between the two individuals were crucial for the program to work effectively.

### Mentoring in the Sporting Domain

Compared to the educational domain, research on mentoring in sport is scarce. Until recently, the process had never been explicitly examined, although there have been some implicit findings. Perna et al. (1996) empirically investigated the prevalence of mentoring relationships among collegiate

male athletes and nonathletes, and examined the effects of mentoring on their psychosocial development. Results indicated that mentoring occurred more frequently among athletes than nonathletes. Furthermore, coaches were the most frequent mentors of athletes. Athletes who had mentors acting as confidants, counselors, or positive role models reported a higher degree of comfort to express emotions and commit to relationships.

Gould et al. (1990) studied the educational needs of 130 expert American coaches. They found that structured coaching educational programs incorporating learning sources other than coaching manuals were needed. It thus appears that mentoring programs are sought not only by developing athletes, but also by developing coaches. Bloom, Salmela and Schinke (1995) investigated methods for training young coaches and found that a formalized and structured mentoring program was considered by the participants as the most important factor in their development.

In a study conducted with expert tennis players and swimmers, Bloom (1985) found that athletes were mentored by coaches at different stages of their development. Coaches worked with the athletes on a daily basis and were involved in all aspects of their lives. Although most athletes did not view their coaches as mentors at the time, they retrospectively reported that they were instrumental in helping them reach the pinnacle of their sport.

Comparable findings emerged from Walton's (1992) book on the lives and philosophies of six expert coaches. Walton found these coaches were more than just teachers of sport skills. They taught their athletes life skills that remained ingrained throughout their lives. One coach was the legendary swim tutor, James «Doe» Counsilman. Walton outlined how Counsilman mentored his swimmers using an adapted version of Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. The following is an example of how he mentored them: «He took a deep personal interest in them [his swimmers], knew their studies and pinned to memory their grade point averages, best swimming times, and best workouts; he knew their goals and aspirations, their girlfriends and their problems» (p. 84). In summary, although very little research has focused on the process of mentoring in sport, it appears to be an important element in the development of a coach or an athlete's career.

The purpose of this study was three-fold: a) to examine whether expert coaches were mentored by a coach during their athletic careers, b) to determine whether expert coaches were mentored by a coach during the early stages of their coaching careers, and c) to investigate the extent to which expert coaches felt it was important to mentor athletes and young, developing coaches. Having at least one influential coach as an athlete was thought to be helpful, although not a mandatory precursor to becoming an elite level coach. Being mentored as

a young coach was hypothesized to be a necessary step for progressing to the top of the coaching ladder. Finally, it was predicted that expert coaches would have served as mentors for certain athletes and young coaches.

## Method

### PARTICIPANTS

The present study included 21 expert Canadian coaches from the team sports of field hockey (n=5), ice hockey (n=5), basketball (n=6), and volleyball (n=5). These coaches were recognized as experts by their National Sport Organization based on several criteria, including a minimum of 10 years or 10,000 hours of high-level coaching experience, the number of elite athletes they had developed at the time of selection, and their win/loss percentages. Subjects were past and present Canadian national and university team sport coaches. They were aged from 40 to 62 years, with an average of 45.5 years, and had coached at an expert level between 12 to 32 years, averaging 18.1 years.

### PROCEDURE

All 21 coaches were individually interviewed by the senior researcher for a period of one and a half to three hours. They were given the opportunity to discuss their athletic and coaching histories, including their evolving philosophies of coaching, organizational skills, training and competition routines and recommendations for educating aspiring coaches. Fourteen of the 21 interviews took place in the coaches' offices before or after a training session. Of the remaining interviews, six were conducted at universities and in hotel rooms, and one at a coach's home. The interviewer was familiar with the area of study, that is, with the coaches' history and the nature and terminology of their sport. This was one method of ensuring the trustworthiness of the data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

*Interview Technique.* The interviews were open-ended and semi-structured, thus the subjects were not guided or forced to respond in a particular manner. Dexter (1970) revealed that unstructured, exploratory interviews allow the subjects, rather than the investigator, to emphasize and discuss areas of relevance. As suggested by Patton (1990), interview questions were clear and included words that were familiar to the participants. In addition, probing techniques were used to help the subjects clarify or expand certain statements. For example, the interviewer asked the coaches to further elaborate on their experiences as mentors by using probe questions such as: «Can you give me specific examples of ways you mentored young coaches?» The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, after which grammatical changes were made, but did not alter the content or meaning of the transcripts.

### ANALYSIS

The unstructured data were analyzed inductively using the qualitative techniques postulated by Côté and colleagues (1993, 1995). Categories of information pertaining to the process

of mentoring were not determined prior to the analysis. The analyzing procedure for this study involved two steps: creating tags and creating categories.

*Creating tags and categories.* In the first step, the interview text was divided into separate pieces of information or «meaning units» (MU) containing one idea or concept, and capable of standing on their own (Côté et al., 1993). Once identified, MU were named or tagged based on their content. Only those MU relating to the process of «mentoring» were considered for this study.

The second step consisted of listing and comparing all the tags identified in the first step. Subsequently, MU having similar tags were regrouped into broader categories, which were also named or tagged. For example, the tags «lack of mentoring programs for coaches» and «teaching younger coaches» were regrouped with similar MU into a larger category entitled «mentoring coaches.» Such a label was given to capture the substance of the topic being discussed (Côté et al., 1993). Four separate categories emerged from this analysis: 1) being mentored as athletes, 2) being mentored as developing coaches, 3) mentoring athletes, and 4) mentoring coaches.

*Establishing trustworthiness.* As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Patton (1990), a knowledgeable researcher conducted the interviews to ensure credibility and the integrity of the data collection. Through probing, participants were able to provide exhaustive and comprehensive reports. They were given the opportunity to re-address important or unclear issues at any time throughout the interview. Member checking was another method employed to establish trustworthiness, that is, the transcripts were returned to the subjects for authentication prior to the analysis phase (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Regular peer debriefing sessions enabled members of the research team to discuss all aspects of the analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Two individuals with experience in qualitative research acted as debriefers and judges. One of their tasks was to randomly examine 25% of the meaning units, in which a list of all the tags was provided and the tag best representing each meaning unit was individually selected. The judges subsequently compared their results, including discrepancies, and deliberated until a consensus was reached. The same process was undertaken to verify the grouping of meaning units within the broader categories and the appropriateness of their tags. As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), a clear and organized trail of records was kept in order to maximize the dependability and confirmability of the inquiry.

## Results

The data in the present study consisted of 146 meaning units (MU), representing almost 8% of the total MU identified from all 21 interviews. This exhaustive data base has been used for different purposes, including studying the career development of elite basketball coaches (Schinke, Bloom, & Salmela, 1995) and the pre- and postcompetition routines of expert team sport coaches (Bloom, Durand-Bush, & Salmela, 1997). The present investigation suggested that different types of mentoring occurred throughout the evolution of the expert coaches' careers. More specifically, these coaches were mentored themselves by more experienced coaches during both their athletic and early coaching careers. Once they reached a certain level of expertise in

the coaching field, they began mentoring both athletes and younger coaches. These four types of mentoring will be discussed in the following section.

#### BEING MENTORED AS ATHLETES

As athletes, the present expert coaches were strongly influenced by some coaches. Their mentor(s) had a great impact on them and their performance as they grew older and their level of competition increased.

*I went to a top Canadian university basketball program and the coach was very driven and committed to learning. I would go along with him to coaching clinics even before I was a coach.*

*I was still playing when I saw how hard the other coaches worked, how they were constantly upgrading their education. It really gave me a good role model. At that time, I didn't even know that I wanted to coach, I just knew that I loved basketball. (Basketball coach)*

*He was a very rigorous man as far as his personal life and training. He would get up at 5:30 every morning and bike for an hour and run for 45 minutes. He was very involved in biathlons. He was very disciplined and that was good for me because I was wild during those years from 16 to 19 years of age. He had an impact on me. (Volleyball coach)*

Their mentors not only taught them the technical, tactical and physical skills but also shared philosophies, beliefs and values about coaching and dealing with people. It took many of these expert coaches several years to realize how much their coaches/mentors had influenced their life both inside and outside of sport.

*For sure he was the greatest influence on me as a coach. I think the way he handled the players and his knowledge of the game, I mean he really was able to motivate the players in a very quiet way. He didn't yell and scream and he never raised his voice. Everybody wanted to play for him. (Ice hockey coach)*

*I think that my experiences as an athlete grounded me. Having her as a coach really made it all come together. Her strength is her great knowledge. She has a great vision of the game from a strategic perspective. She doesn't make choices for you, she gives you all the alternatives along with the technical ability to do it. (Field hockey coach)*

*I remember my Peewee coach because he was the type of person that prepared himself and was very demanding. Although I was a decent player and giv-*

*en a lot of responsibility, I saw him as the first coach who cared for me as a player and as a person. He cared for how I played and how my career was going to evolve. I remember him because he got the best out of me and made me work hard. (Ice hockey coach)*

As athletes, these coaches were fortunate to receive the guidance and attention of outstanding coaches from whom they acquired knowledge that was useful at the time, and became indispensable later in their coaching careers.

#### BEING MENTORED AS DEVELOPING COACHES

In addition to being mentored as athletes, it was revealed that expert coaches were also mentored throughout their coaching careers, particularly during the early to middle stages.

*At the time I was doing my Ph.D. and was fortunate to meet three coaches. They were all very good coaches with different perspectives. We used to have many discussions and most of the time I was a little sponge. I would sit back, listen, watch closely, and say, «I like that, don't like that, or would never use that.» (Field hockey coach)*

According to some of our participants, finding a mentor was often the case of being at the right place at the right time. With a bit of luck and personal persistence, novice coaches were able to find a mentor with whom they shared their passion for their sport and for coaching.

*In my first or second year as a coach, I had a unique opportunity to meet the best coach in Japan. He was an English teacher in Japan and won the volleyball title that year. He came to Canada on an exchange program and stayed very close to where I was working. We practiced three nights a week and built a very good friendship. He really taught me the Japanese mind set of the game. When he left, I tried to address some of those things with my team. The players were going wild, saying this was really good. (Volleyball coach)*

*Working with this well-known coach was tremendous. He was like my mentor and I had tremendous respect for him. We developed a real strong personal relationship and became close friends. He was probably the most influential person in my career. (Basketball coach)*

Coaches may have the desire and motivation required to excel in their profession, however, it appears they also need a special person with whom



they can develop a more personal relationship to learn the skills and knowledge necessary to maximize their potential. This mentoring process enables them to live authentic practical experiences that cannot be acquired from books, workshops or seminars.

#### MENTORING ATHLETES

The coaches in the present study worked with a myriad of athletes throughout their careers. Strong ties were developed as they helped them achieve personal and sport-related goals. Overall, an important objective was to nurture the development of their athletes in all facets of their lives.

*The idea is that you want to develop independent thinking, creative, responsible individuals who can make decisions when they leave. There is going to be ups and downs along the way, but in the end, if they have survived the rigorous, demanding and intense athletic involvement, and if they have also done well academically and achieved their degrees, what more rewarding experiences could you ask for? (Basketball coach)*

*You cannot eliminate the athletes' private lives. We talk about nutrition, their home, school and business life. If one of these stinks, it will distract them from their sport performance. I don't want them worried about school when they are in the gym. Similarly, I don't want them dribbling basketballs in the back of chemistry class. We try to tell them that they have to jump back and forth whether they like it or not. (Basketball coach)*

*This year I've often talked to the guys about other things besides hockey. At the start of the season, I talked about the opportunity they had to be players. I collected articles from all kinds of papers, for example, of people who have gone through really tough times. I gave them one about this girl in Washington who got a case of spinal meningitis. Within hours, they had to amputate her hands and feet. I wanted the guys to see this article to understand the opportunity they have. (Ice hockey coach)*

All in all, it can be seen from these quotes that the overall well-being of the athlete was an important concern. Coaches sometimes modified their training schedule or even sacrificed possible victories to serve the best interests of their athletes.

*I think we may have lost a couple of national championships because of the coaching style that I have. I don't care because I think the kids are becoming*

*better players and better people. I am not interested in robots. I am interested in every kid becoming a good basketball player and a good student. (Basketball coach)*

*The greatest problem I have with most athletes is keeping them healthy. My demands in training have not changed, but the demands of school have definitely gone up for the players. They suffer by pulling all-nighters before we travel, and they get sick when we get home. That's why I can't think of asking them to do weights 3 times a week. (Volleyball coach)*

Aside from teaching sport-related skills, it was found that an inherent coaching responsibility is to prepare athletes for life outside of sport. Being aware of and sensitive to athletes' personal needs and interests can notably enhance their learning experiences. Furthermore, mentors themselves can derive lessons and satisfaction from their mentoring relationships.

#### MENTORING COACHES

Once the present coaches reached a certain status and level of expertise, they were perceived as potential mentors for developing coaches. They were honored and willing to serve as mentors due to the positive experiences they lived in the earlier stages of their careers.

*The best way of developing young coaches is working with a mentor. The problem is that there are not a lot to go around. Here we have a really good situation, they work with us and they go to the coaching institute. To match up with a mentor and hang around a specific area to work with that person is very difficult because you still need to earn a living. (Basketball coach)*

*I really think mentoring is important for young coaches. If you can work with somebody, especially a very good coach, no matter how much you think you know, you will learn a lot; not only by doing some of the things they do, but maybe some of the things you do a little differently. (Ice hockey coach)*

According to our participants, mentoring often involved taking a young coach under their wing as an assistant to teach them the various tricks of the trade. Although they were extremely demanding as mentors, they provided them with opportunities to access valuable information and make important contacts. They did not judge their protégés, they mainly assisted them in developing effective tools and strategies for improving their coaching style and technique.

*I drive my assistant coaches so they work to death, which is what I picked up from my mentor. If I am going to help them become better coaches, I have to demand things from them right now. I have one of my ex-players with me as an assistant, and she said, «I thought it was tough when I was an athlete, but this is even worse.» (Basketball coach)*

*The art of coaching is very hard to describe to people unless they see it. To me, the best way to facilitate this kind of information is through the apprenticeship program we currently have. There is a master coach who takes a young coach through the process. I had this novice coach work with me with the National team every day for a year. He was a very knowledgeable guy, but I think he really enjoyed that year. He had heard a lot about me, and we had done several clinics together, but he had never worked with me full time. I think he must have found it interesting to finally see me in action. (Ice hockey coach)*

Based on our analysis, mentoring occurred not only between male coaches but also between female coaches. One coach in particular revealed that it is important to have positive role models with whom novice coaches can identify and feel comfortable to share different needs and concerns.

*A fantastic thing we introduced was «Promotion Plus,» a program designed for women in sport activities in our region. We started this because there was a missing link here. The only people women had as role models were men. Unfortunately, we often see really powerful men who coach with all this control, and instead of being ourselves, we copy them. Mentorship is the purpose of this program, and it's what I think is missing across the whole spectrum. (Volleyball coach)*

Results indicated that there were no set procedures for mentoring aspiring coaches. However, our adept coaches saw an enormous potential in instilling formalized programs. They believed it was important to give something back to the profession from which they chose to make their living. Mentoring up-and-coming coaches was seen as an ideal way to make a positive contribution.

## Discussion

It can be seen from this analysis that mentoring is an ongoing process in sport. Mentor coaches develop trusting relationships with their athletes as well as with beginner coaches to nourish and catalyze their personal and ath-

letic development. In such contexts, apprentices acquire valuable hands-on experience and gain insights about the «do's» and «don'ts» of their profession. Advantages are that they can emulate the coaches' behaviors most suitable to them. They can also integrate the information relevant to crystallizing their own philosophies and unique coaching styles. Mentor coaches also have much to gain from engaging in this type of partnership. Bowers and Eberh art (1988) commented on the fact that master teachers, or coaches in this case, expand and diversify their learning experiences when working with apprentices. Young coaches are often conveyors of new ideas and challenges and it is an occasion for them to reflect upon and refine their teaching or coaching methods.

The importance of providing novice coaches and athletes with opportunities to work with skilled coaches cannot be underestimated. Perna and colleagues (1996) suggested that mentoring should be further investigated among coaches and athletes to shed more light into the types and quality of relationships they develop. The prevalence of mentoring was as strong among the college athletes in their study as it was among the expert coaches in the present inquiry. Our participants were not only mentored as athletes, but also as young coaches entering their profession. It is noteworthy that coaches were the most frequently identified mentor of athletes in Perna et al.'s study. Many expert coaches in this investigation said they became mentors of athletes and of other coaches once having attained an elite level of performance.

The coaches in this study were advocates of more structured mentoring programs. This need was previously raised by several researchers in education (Hofmann & Feldlaufer, 1992; Stroble & Cooper, 1988) and in sport (Bloom et al., 1995; Gould et al., 1990). The present study used a qualitative research design, a recommendation from authors studying teacher mentoring programs (Abell et al., 1995; McNamara, 1995). Using a qualitative design was significant in the current study because coaches were given the opportunity to express personal views on their athletic and coaching careers. The fact that mentoring was deliberately discussed by most coaches demonstrates the importance of this process. Mentoring in the sport domain merits further investigation because at this point, it is not clear how structured the programs should be in order to be effective, or what criteria master coaches should possess to ensure adequate supervision.

The holistic development of athletes appears to be a genuine concern of several expert Canadian coaches. For example, training regimens were adapted to ensure the physical, mental and academic well-being of athletes. Whether this is a belief of Canadian coaches only remains to be empirically

determined. Given the context of sport in Canada, it is not unusual that they place much emphasis on helping athletes develop a vast repertoire of both sport and life skills.

Another interesting finding was that although expert coaches were involved in mentoring apprentice coaches, there were no formalized procedures to initiate this training. It was often a case of being in the right place at the right time. An important question can be raised: What factors should be considered in determining working relationships between master and novice coaches? How compatible should they be to ensure a successful experience for both? These questions remain to be answered. The present study, as well as previous ones, have demonstrated the potential benefits of developing positive mentoring relationships. Consequently, it appears that the idea of establishing structured mentoring programs should be considered more seriously.

Bloom (1985) and Walton (1992) implicitly demonstrated certain elements of the mentoring process in their research with expert coaches. Specifically, those coaches of individual sports were shown to be involved in all facets of their athletes' lives. It is noteworthy that this type of relationship was not as evident in the present inquiry. Perhaps this can be attributed to the fact that our participants were all coaches of team sports. The dynamics involved in team sports are much different than those in individual sports. The amount of time available for team sport coaches to spend with their athletes on a one-on-one basis is more limited. One can surmise that although mentoring occurs in a more subtler way in team sports, the impact on both athletes and coaches is just as important. Results of this study also suggest that interactions between mentor coaches and their protégés vary depending on whether the latter are athletes or novice coaches. This appears logical because their roles vary considerably. However, the expert coaches' interest in helping individuals grow into mature and knowledgeable human beings remained the same.

### Conclusion

Although mentoring is a noble endeavor in the coaching domain, many road blocks exist. Mentoring programs need to be formalized and made available to a greater number of developing coaches. Our study suggests that many individuals believe in the benefits and success of such programs, thus additional research should be conducted with both mentors and those being mentored. In the meantime, sport governing bodies should recognize

the necessity of providing opportunities for acquiring hands-on experience through more structured educational programs, and begin to implement changes. This way, the quality of learning experiences can only improve and have impending positive repercussions on coaching systems down the road.

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