

Coaching: art or science?

From the under-sevens to the international stage sports coaches use a variety of techniques and draw on various pools of knowledge but is coaching an art or a science? Our universal coaching correspondent, Joe Coach, offers a personal view.

When you put on your tracksuit, lace up your ice skates or pull on your full-body Gore Tex waterproofs to go coaching do you ever consider whether you're an artist, a scientist or just a mug for getting up so early or staying out so late? As a young volleyball coach I was lucky enough to be exposed to the teachings of the then Great Britain coach Ralph Hippolyte whose approach mixed the technical and the mystical delivered in a French accent laced with Americanisms; irresistible. One of his oft-repeated phrases – and he did like to repeat phrases, stories and jokes – went something like: “The training hall is a laboratory; experiment.” Mind you, he also had the GB blockers believing they were fish going up-river to spawn, so make your own judgement. Typically Ralph presented a contradiction and invited you to resolve it. His mantra implied that coaching is a science but as a coach he painted pictures, spoke of rhythm, cadence and tempo and believed “volleyball should be beautiful”.

About the same time I was witness to a heated debate between two England volleyball coaches, one past, one present, in the bar of the Lilleshall national sports centre. One was convinced that coaching was an art. He quoted Sartre, he spoke of the human condition, he invoked William Blake and Bob Dylan. The other would not have it. He challenged his colleague to name one thing that could not be trained. “Will to win?” Use psychology. “Ball flight judgement?” Train players to attend to early cues. “Momentum?” Study match videos, identify turning points, learn to recognise them. It went on for some time and eventually they had to agree to disagree before blows were struck.

Sadly I have long since abandoned God's own sport and now spend my coaching life in rugby union but I was recently reminded of Monsieur Hippolyte and his views on the potential beauty of sport. It was in the middle of a mentoring project meeting in the back room of The Star, an unpretentious meeting venue where for the price of a couple of rounds of drinks six coaches and I found the peace and quiet to deconstruct the line out in preparation for their forthcoming assault on the RFU Level 2 coaching award. The project is a local response to the perceived difficulty of “doing the 2”. The RFU, like other governing bodies, is dead keen to get coaches certificated at Level 1 and its coach educators (and I am one) are very, very supportive of all Level 1 candidates. The national governing body (NGB), probably in common with all other UKCC-friendly NGBs, also believe, quite rightly, that they cannot give out Level 2 awards to people who are not competent. Unfortunately, whether through lack of effective communication, a club's need for qualifications to meet Club Mark and other standards or just plain individual hubris, there always seems to be one or two – or more – Level 2 candidates who arrive at the base camp of the first morning – how can I put this – a country mile away from where they need to be.

Because I'm a nice guy and because someone asked me and because he promised he would buy me a beer (hence The Star) I had agreed to help some local coaches maximise their chances of achieving Level 2 and a stress-free four days on the course. One of them is scared of the line out and he knows he learns best by discussing things he doesn't understand so we convened over a pint with the 1st XV second row and started from first principles. The discussion covered supporting techniques, tactical variations and even ventured into vectors and forces as we discussed how to generate speed to increase the height of the initial jump. Science. But, as we considered the position of the jumper in the air and the timing of the jump in relation to the ball, the second-rower, a young man with an accountancy degree and a straightforward approach that fits well with his position on the field, came over all lyrical. When the thrower hits the throw just right, when the supporters hit the lift and when the jumper has a certainty that he and the ball are going to reach the same point in

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the same moment time stands still. With time stood still, you can decide where to place the ball for the scrum half, you know what move the backs will subsequently run, the sun pauses on its journey across the sky and God smiles down on you. Apparently.

The last person I heard speak in those terms was a volleyball outside hitter who believed that when the set was perfect and his approach was perfectly timed the ball went into an invisible cube high above the net and said, "Hit me." The hitter knew he had all the time in the world to watch the blockers struggle, the back court defenders scramble and for him to pick his spot on the floor to bury the spike. Impossible but he knew it was true. Like hang time in basketball, this phenomenon cannot exist but it does; there is no logical explanation, science can not offer a credible explanation and anyone who has experienced it knows it to be real and beautiful, fulfilling and addictive. Like art.

Forgers can replicate old masters, Bjorn's new band can practice Super Trooper till they are note-perfect and coaches can drill athletes to such an extent that they never get the actions or decisions wrong. But the result is not a Van Dyck, an ABBA classic or Roger Federer In his pomp. For those you need something extra. You need artistry. Can you learn the skills of an artist? I fear not. As a coach, can you train yourself to be artistic? No. Is there no way someone aspiring to coaching success can add artistry to their practice? None. And why? Because to be an artist you have to stop inputting and start allowing. Science is about not getting it wrong; art is about getting it right.

Joe Coach will be commenting on a range of coaching matters in forthcoming editions of *The Leisure Review*. It is not a real name but he is a real coach.

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