

Another Brick in the Wall: the building blocks of coaching excellence

When the first of *The Leisure Review's* spring series of Coaching Insights considered coaching excellence Kay Adkins popped along, delivered a presentation, facilitated a debate and still had the energy to write down what she heard.

On a glorious spring day in Nottingham an enthusiastic audience of coaches gathered in search of that coaching elixir, excellence. What do we need to build good coaches? How can I build my own skills to be better and better at what I do? How can I remain fresh?

The first speaker of the day was highly experienced fencing coach and coach educator, John Holt. John started off by expressing his nervousness that he would not connect with the audience in front of him as we were, on the whole, not fencing coaches. His worries were entirely unfounded, however, as he led the group through an examination of coaching styles to which we all related even if there was not full agreement. Not only did he talk with a clear understanding of his subject but he showed the gathered folk that he had done his homework, supplying the names of those who had researched the theories he was discussing as well as the theories themselves. He reminded us that as athletes develop to a higher level a more "consensual approach was required; they need to take more responsibility and have more input into their goal setting". He also reminded the room that the coaches of higher-level athletes need to understand "effective stress management and an appreciation of other demands to which the athlete is subjected". To this end he feels that athletes should be guided but allowed to practise on their own and he asked the rhetorical question, "Do athletes all need the same style?"

In a packed half hour, John also encouraged "meticulous training plans but with flexibility within both the plan and the coach". He then finished off with a few words of caution: coaches are bad communicators and should be careful of the devastation 'but' can cause; 'but' can be catastrophic when giving feedback, as in, "That first forehand was excellent but...". In the short debate after John had finished his session the room discussed whether both athletes and coaches are interchangeable if they work within the right system. Shades of *The Matrix* were introduced but a healthy discussion took place around the merits or otherwise of working within coaching systems such as those introduced by Clive Woodward with the England rugby union team and, more recently, at British Cycling.

Gordon Fearn, 2008 Children's Coach of the Year, immediately challenged the room arguing that "applying knowledge is what is important". He then had everyone thinking about philosophy: "Do you have a different one when working with elite players or coaching children?" He took us through the pillars of his philosophy when working with these different groups and, not surprisingly, it changed very little with either group. One part of his philosophy is "Winner all the time" but, he explained, this is not a 'win at all costs' approach: "It is about being a winner in life and not always about competition." He then introduced us to the "bean-bag coach". Well, after all, when you work with children you just throw bean bags around don't you? This view is very prevalent (particularly with Gordon's mum) and shows the misunderstanding in society about the work highly skilled children's coaches undertake. He also discussed the confusion that still lurks around multi-skills and multi-sport, and introduced his audience to the use of pieces of equipment, wobble boards to be precise, with different levels of performer. In addition he described the "fun foundations" a coach should adhere to:

create the right environment

'can do' attitude

observe and observe again

be creative and use imagination

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"The system, qualification, tutors, education programmes all need to inspire coaches and provide them with fantastic opportunities to develop but ultimately, the coaches need to take the ultimate responsibility."

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praise attitude

fun/fundamentals.

Not to be outdone by John Holt in the academic stakes, Gordon shared two favourites aphorisms: "The impossible is sometimes the untried", which was attributed to 'Anon', and "Confidence is contagious. So is lack of confidence", a quote from that inveterate deliverer of the sporting bon mot, Vince Lombardi.

Sarah Dale, who tried to convince her audience that she was "not a sporty type", brought the world of life coaching to the party. Her theme was nurturing optimism and she began the task of applying her expertise as an occupational psychologist to sport. Optimism, she explained, is "not a blind mantra about being positive", although optimists do deal with problems like loss, poor form or injury better than others. She then explained how to spot a pessimist: they will answer 'yes' to questions like "Is it my fault?", "Is it part of a pattern of defeat?", "Will it go on for ages?" and "Will this affect everything else in my life?" To round off her presentation Sarah spoke about her journey from her pessimism about PE, and netball in particular, through to her new found optimism about nordic walking. We learned that we can change our mindset but that it is not a quick process and in some cases cognitive behavioural techniques can help.

In the final presentation of the afternoon your correspondent sought to examine what coaches are made of and how well, or otherwise, our coach education system serves them. Starting with the question "Is this country's coach education system turning out the caring and consistent coaches we need?" the room discussed the types of coaches we need. A quick look at the coach education matrix provoked further thought and discussion, notably around how coach education programmes and learning programmes have been and should be developed.

Even with a developing understanding of what we need as coaches, have the national governing bodies of sport (NGB) been able to step up to the mark? It is my view that there have been real improvements since the introduction of the UK Coaching Certificate and it has, at very least, made us all consider what should be in the programmes but (there it is again) there are still plenty of issues:

How do we balance education with meeting qualification requirements?

How do the NGBs balance the need to have qualified coaches with the expense of the UKCC system?

How do we receive the knowledge and practice to develop as coaches in the time allowed us to achieve qualifications?

How do we use new technology in the education programmes? How can we balance improving the communication skills of coaches and having them all learning individually on e-learning programmes?

Many NGBs are taking positive steps; the FA, British Triathlon and British Cycling for example all have excellent programmes but doubtless they would all say that they continue to strive for better. They will also acknowledge the continuing battle they have between cost, the demand to qualify more coaches and the quality of education on offer.

However, whatever the pressures, I still have a strong belief that the onus remains on the coaches who need to become 'learning coaches'. The system, qualification, tutors, education programmes all need to inspire coaches and provide them with fantastic opportunities to develop but ultimately, the coaches need to take the ultimate responsibility. Does that sound familiar to what the athletes need to do?

Coaches must balance a need to be qualified with a quest for relevant knowledge and experience. There is no simple prescription but we need to keep challenging the status quo and make sure that we are not just jumping through hoops to receive certificates. Afternoons like the one spent as guests of Sport Nottinghamshire, which, lest we forget, only occur because people like Simon Starr's team, The Leisure Review and Premier Sport go out on a limb, are fundamental to the development of rounded coaches and very much part of the

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building of coaching excellence.

The Coaching Insight Spring Series is supported by Premier Sport and delivered in partnership with Sport Nottinghamshire, Sport Cheshire (19th April), Herts Sport (26th April) and West Yorkshire Sport (1st May). Full details of the three remaining seminars are available at <http://www.theleisurereview.co.uk/events/events.html>

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