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Master meets apprentice: training coaches the old-fashioned way

Given the massive turnover in coaches, Joe Coach comes over all medieval in the search for a way to increase retention levels.

In my time as a sports coach I have had the joy of working with a number of very good coaches. Sometimes I have been a co-coach, sometimes I have supposedly been in charge and some times I have been the junior partner in the relationship.

I was once used by a governing body development officer as what the Victorian gay community would have called a 'beard'. He provided the strategic, tactical and most of the technical input but he needed me to hold the title 'coach' as his NGB contract expressly forbade him taking that role in any one the local clubs, although as a former under-20 international he was allowed to play, and did. I believe the restriction on being a coach was some kind of anti-favouritism measure and was seen to be needed because the parochialism of British sports clubs that see only competitors when they look at their neighbours rather than sources of mutual support.

As an aside, in one of the bits of former Yugoslavia – and I genuinely can't remember which one – the national sport is water polo and they are fiercely supportive of their national team. So important is national success that the teams in their top league will allow themselves to be used as guinea pigs in tactical and technical experiments. If the innovation works it is then adopted by everybody; and everybody gets better, as does the national team. If any sport in the UK gets even close to that I will eat the funky little water polo hat that makes me look like a little lost alien.

While conniving in the cover-up described above, I was privileged to work with good players (one of whom went on to represent England), a very clever tactician and gifted technical coach, and I was able to test and develop my own pedagogical skills in a performance environment. I also developed as a game coach as, when not being sent off, my colleague was too involved in playing to be objectively analytical. I count my blessings that I was given the opportunity at a time in my coaching career when I could make the most of it but that was pure serendipity. I had found myself in the right place at the right time and seized the day.

How many coaches and potential coaches have been lost to sport by the lack of a formalised mechanism to support and develop them? How many developing coaches have failed to reach their potential because nobody sign-posted the next step for them, took their training needs seriously or offered them feedback on their performance? Does anyone even keep track of 'the churn' of coaches who come to sport and then go. Sportscoach UK reckon there are about half a million people in the UK with some kind of coaching qualification. How many people go through the coach education systems of our national governing bodies of sport in a year? Multiply that number by five and then subtract the number we first thought of – 500,000 – and that gives you the number of trained coaches who are not active.

How do we retain more of these coaches? What spiffing new idea do I have that will revolutionise 21st century coach education? Where can we find innovation that will solve this problem? Simply reverse the digits and go back to the 12th century – and probably before. Go back to when kings were building castles and cathedrals, employing a quarry of masons to realise their lofty ambitions. One master mason would give employment and instruction to any number of lesser, learning craftsmen, including apprentices whose family actually had to buy their son's place in what we would now call 'the programme'.

The 4x4 model of coach development, now accepted throughout the world

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(although not in all of our own NGB coaching offices), has along its top row the word 'master'. There are some (back in those offices) who cavil at master and would rather see 'expert' as it better describes the technically developed animal that inhabits these sunny uplands. I say leave it exactly as it is but change the role descriptors, job descriptions and particularly the training of those coaches who aspire to these levels. Make it part of the job, part of the vocation, that master coaches train the people they work with, from apprentices upwards, in the technical skills of their craft.

To achieve this we would need to amend our coach education programmes so that they include an element of coach-to-coach training and fiddle with Club Mark so that coach development (rather than coach qualification and minimum standard training) is measured.

It is all possible; but is there a will?

Joe Coach is the nom de plume of a highly experienced and impressively qualified sports coach.

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