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It took you how long?

For many people the hard work in a training session is preceded by a far greater challenge. Richard Cheetham offers an appreciation of the 'training journey' as a consideration in choosing coaching behaviour.

Whatever the weather and whatever the hurdles experienced along the way, players, athletes, parents and participants arrive for training. Each of them will arrive with their own stories of the challenge (and sometimes the race) to get there on time. Some have it easier than others so why is this worthy of consideration by the coach? How could the coach's attitude to the athletes' journey help establish harmonious relationships between all involved when 'harmony' has been shown as one of the important qualities for successful coaching identified by youth sport coaches (Choi, Cho & Kim, 2000)?

It was not until I had attended a coaching conference presentation by the director of a hotel chain that I recognised the need to acknowledge and consider this journey and its significance to the coach. The speaker referred to the importance of his staff appreciating the journey of the guests and all that it entailed. This could include delayed flights, bus connections, parking, weather and the total time taken to get there even from a short distance away. These elements should be recognised and, as a result, influence staff to provide a positive and welcoming experience. Putting themselves in the shoes of their guests for that trip, argued the speaker, can only enhance the positive attitudes shown by staff when the guests arrive at the hotel.

As a result of this realisation I decided to conduct some basic research into the players' journey at the rugby club where I coach. I wanted this to be an insight into the levels of effort and commitment from players before they had even 'laced their boots' and hoped the findings could be acknowledged by coaches so there were no more knee-jerk reactions to late arrivals but instead an understanding of those experiences. The effort involved in making these journeys should equate to and be matched by the level of effort and inspiration from the coaching session.

The research profile showed that over half the players came straight from work and therefore had no time to go home and see their family. I measured journeys in terms of distance and time, with the furthest distance travelled being 71 miles each way and the longest journey reported (on a bad day) being 90 minutes. Many players arrived home over five hours after they had finished work. In addition there are the sacrifices presented by long season after long season, the missing of social functions, the leaving work early, the tired limbs and tired minds. And all this so they can pursue their sporting passion. It is important to remember that at many levels this pursuit has more than winning at its heart: it is all about enjoyment. This is an amateur sports club, like so many, and yet I have rarely heard any coach refer to these considerations.

The implication for coaches is that they need to ensure that the players' journey is worthwhile. Eddie Jones, the former Australia Rugby Union coach currently coaching Japan, spoke recently at the University of Winchester regarding his coaching philosophy. He viewed himself as "a servant to the players" and explained that essential to his work is an enthusiasm to match any of theirs and a determination to be the

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“keenest at training and in games”. This is supported by coaches in the previously mentioned research (Choi et al, 2000) who regarded enthusiasm and “fostering that same enthusiasm” as one of the key qualities in successful coaching. Mallet and Hanrahan (2004) remind us that “at all levels of participation, the coach is considered the architect of the motivational climate”, which is the type of phrase one should post on a noticeboard to ensure this is not forgotten. There is an accountability that coaches have to all those involved for the creation of an inspiring and motivating learning environment. The drive (literally) by those striving for enjoyment, competition, fun or development of skills should be met equally at the training ground by the same drive from the coach.

The cold, windy and rain-sodden evenings that too often welcome hardened winter sports enthusiasts are elements out of our hands but the welcome we as coaches give is totally within our control. There is sufficient evidence to show that coach behaviour directly affects the motivational climate and therefore the motivation of the athlete.

So how should we as coaches behave? Primarily we should adapt our behaviour based upon new ways of thinking. Piaget refers to ‘decentring’, where the coach (or teacher) becomes less egocentric and aims to truly understand the circumstances by viewing the situation through the eyes of the child in their group who has arrived late. It aims to reduce the chances of the adult failing to understand the child through a strategy of considering what their (the coach’s) words would mean to them and therefore encourage greater reflection on their considered actions. I suggest no ritual humiliation in front of others for being late, no punishment drills and certainly not any of the growls. I firmly believe players, parents and children do not intend to be late for what could be the highlight of the week. This is their release, their chance to shine when maybe work, school or college are challenging enough.

Take time to consider the journey. Take time to consider why they weighed up those elements en route to your session and did not turn left to home but instead turned right on the road to the club. Find time to talk to them. Conduct your own research and maybe introduce a 15-minute element at the start – a window of time when those who arrive can practise skills, socialise with team-mates and know that there is an in-built allowance for late arrivals. For those who seemingly do choose to arrive late then reasons may lie in the warm-up activities which lack content and therefore have no perceived value. Missing the first few minutes may not be regarded as a loss because it is just viewed as a process before the really important coaching begins. Remember first impressions count so try to develop ‘energisers’ or ‘fire starters’ that engage the group immediately and therefore develop a culture where those warm-ups would not want to be missed. Three 15-minute warm-up activities each week over a 40-week season (matches and training) represents an awful lot of coaching time.

Finally, research indicates that many coaches seek to continue their own learning and development in order to improve their own performance and that of the people they coach. McCrindle (2006) emphasises the need to understand and connect with players and participants to ensure greater awareness of the challenges the emerging generation faces. When coaching children, the ability to de-centre can enhance a coach’s knowledge and prevent a widening gap developing between them and their group. Maybe this could be a part of the coach development process. It is not about slacking on discipline but more about a philosophy of care and understanding alongside the consideration of the coach making it “a worthwhile journey”.

Richard Cheetham is a lecturer at the University of Winchester, a rugby coach and a gifted motivational speaker. He is presenting a

session on inspiration at The Leisure Review's Coaching Insight seminar in Nottingham on 28th February.

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