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Approaches for coaches: individuals and teams

Nottingham Trent University hosted the latest in the ongoing series of Coaching Insight events and encouraged those assembled to consider the special requirements of teams, individuals and teams of individuals. *The Leisure Review* reports.

Gathered in one of Nottingham Trent University's bigger rooms under the auspices of the Coaching Insight series were in excess of thirty sports coaches, all assembled to explore the similarities, tensions and contradictions between team sports and the more individual pursuits.

First to step into the atmosphere of anticipation and expectation was Richard Ramsdale, a British Canoeing coach working on their elite and talent identification programme. He reminded us that canoe slalom had hit the headlines last year with double gold at the Olympics, achievements since enhanced by double world champions. Showing a video of various raging torrents among which brightly coloured canoes occasionally surfaced, Ramsdale explained how he and his national governing body operates. "That's what the top end of our sport looks like," he said. "I'm tasked with creating a team environment so people can go from novice to white water in two years."

Another video demonstrated how this has been achieved, tracing one paddler from his first time in a boat through to competitive outings on what to the inexpert observer looked like a quite impressive – and quite intimidating – water course, all done comfortably inside the two-year target. Ramsdale's approach is based on athlete-focused coaching in teams and he has sustained an output of ten paddlers a year on this development path.

Key principles are applied at the outset. The programme has a performance culture and asks everyone involved in a paddler's participation to buy in to the sport. Key performance indicators are explained and discussed. A multi-sport approach helps to create a robust athlete and, while it may create the odd problem over the summer as young paddlers injure themselves playing other sports, it all adds to the fundamental skills required; and, as Ramsdale noted, "You have to let kids play."

Team ethos is helped by the provision of team kit and the involvement of parents and guardians in the safety responsibilities inherent within the sport. The programme uses the "chimp management" techniques pioneered by Steve Peters at British Cycling and also uses the "1% matters" mantra familiar from British Cycling's marginal gains approach to performance. An athlete and parent handbook is issued at the outset of a paddler's time within the programme outlining the expectations and requirements of everyone concerned. Quarterly reports and discussions are an important part of this process. Spending time away together at competitions helps to build a team organically but Ramsdale is clear that the coach must be aware of the coach's role: "As coach I try to keep the involvement of kids as fun as possible but always with an end point in mind. We're pushing standards at every session."

Further debate was led by questions from the floor and topics included the success rate of keeping youngsters engaged in the programme, the extent to which transport costs might be a barrier to participation, the

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selection process for programme entry (“We look for attitude and grit”), canoeing as a disability sport and the extent to which paddlers from the programme achieved national selection (“Paddlers get picked for England who haven’t been through the programme”).

The next presentation came from Steve Kemp, sports development manager with the Oxfordshire Sports Partnership. “What is team culture?” he asked. “Do you have a team culture? Can you define it and can you explain how you got to it?”

As his audience pondered their own situations, Kemp offered a list of high-profile coaches and asked for observations on their coaching style and their respective attitudes to team environments. Bill Sweetenham brought an Australian culture of success into British Swimming, bringing results but also accusations of bullying; performance dipped after his departure. Rob Baxter at the Exeter Chiefs rugby union side achieved promotion to the Premiership with few top-name players and had kept the team in the top division for the last three years. As England manager Kevin Keegan brought great passion to the role but ultimately and self-confessedly fell short at the highest level of coaching. As head coach of the England cricket team Andy Flower set a target for the team to be world number one and achieved it but then faced the challenges of maintaining success; Kevin Pietersen admirably demonstrated the difficulties presented by talented individuals able and willing to disrupt a team environment. Brian Ashton took England’s team to the 2000 rugby union world cup final but his preference for empowering players and encouraging decision-making among the players themselves created significant discomfort among many of the players and significant discord within the team.

Kemp then offered a case study, a club he refers to as the Old Rubberduckians RFC, where the first team was too good for their division but not quite good enough to stay up in the next level. Asked to work with the team and the coaches, Kemp began to realise that the club did not have a team culture. The coach of the first team assumed that the players’ motivation was to win matches but when prompted to ask them he discovered that there was a diverse range of motivations within the team and within in each individual. Issues such as some players ranking their enjoyment of playing the game above their desire for promotion required a reassessment of goals and values within the team and within the club.

But what makes a good team culture? Kemp suggested that the list might include: a unity of purpose or a shared vision; collaborative working; accountability, including the acceptance of responsibility; a cohesive club atmosphere; a team identity and some underpinning values; and honesty. Working through this process with the Old Rubberduckians brought a new, positive atmosphere to the club and their highest position in the league.

Danny Newcombe, an international hockey coach and a lecturer in sports coaching at Oxford Brookes, took to the floor at speed, intent on deconstructing the concept of player-centred coaching, a subject about which he is avowedly passionate, and determined to deliver a three-year degree course in the next 20 minutes.

Pedagogy, sports-specific knowledge and social theory knowledge were his starting points, explaining how gaps in these three rings of knowledge can be filled. But what is effective coaching? Coaxing the answers from his audience, he arrived at a fundamental principle: coaching is effective if learning has taken place. This, Newcombe emphasised, is fundamental to being athlete-centred. The concept of constructivism suggests that knowledge cannot be given: you have to build it yourself. “The key word here is ‘resonance’,” he said. “It doesn’t mean anything to us if it doesn’t have resonance. If athletes are to construct learning they must be put at the centre of the learning

process. So athlete-centred learning is underpinned by constructivism.”

He explained that dynamical systems theory suggests that your body will try to find a solution to a problem. Therefore, as a coach, if you set a problem for your athletes they are at the centre of the learning process. If we are coaching within constructivism the coach becomes like the buffers alongside the bowling alley, helping to steer performers in the right direction towards the ultimate target. For constructivists non-linear learning is a fundamental truth, a view that would be antithesis to a behaviourist understanding of learning. Here Newcombe was clear that while he understood the concepts of behaviourism he was staking his position very firmly at the constructivist end of the learning spectrum. Consequential learning, the learning that takes place as the result of solving a problem, was at the centre of his approach to coaching. “If learning is not linear we cannot specify the learning outcome,” he explained. “Therefore the solution to the question we’re asking in the coaching session should be the aim of the session.”

The question of how coaches should adapt different sessions to different individuals and teams prompted an exploration of the how coaches can create different learning environments. Creating chaos, even in constrained circumstances, can bring solutions. “My suggestion is that as coaches we step away from being coach-centred,” Newcombe said. “We must allow our athletes to construct the solution in situ. Step away from the how and focus on the when, where and why. If we’re looking to create decision-makers we need to create as many pictures in their minds as we can, so that they have the pictures to draw upon.”

Reeling but also enlivened by their 20-minute degree course, the Coaching Insight audience paused to draw breath and were probably still trying to piece together what they had learned from that afternoon the following day. This, Danny Newcombe might suggest, is how it should be.

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