

The Roots of Success:

From Athletic Leaders To Expert Coaches

Patricia S. Miller, Gordon A. Bloom, and Dr. John H. Salmela of the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa are conducting research on coaching expertise. The present study is part of a larger research project examining the development, knowledge, and beliefs of expert Canadian coaches of team and individual sports.

The three minimal conditions necessary for the existence of leadership are, one, involvement of a group of two or more persons, two, involvement of a common task, and three, existence of a differentiation of responsibility. (Cox 1994, p. 322)

Many athletes who went on in sport to become successful coaches were often exceptional leaders who possessed keen

perspectives and winning styles. Over the years, sport researchers and enthusiasts have speculated on which characteristics facilitate the transition from athlete to successful coach. The purpose of our research was to determine how Canada's top coaches of team sports developed leadership skills during their athletic careers.

There is evidence that athletes who later became leading coaches began to acquire the fundamentals of coaching during their early participation as athletes. Researchers at the University of Ottawa tracked the career progression of six expert Canadian basketball coaches (Schinke et al. 1995). They established seven career stages, beginning with the expert coaches' early participation in sport and ending with their elite coaching positions. The researchers concluded that the acquisition of coaching knowledge follows a fairly consistent developmental process which is rooted in early athletic experiences. They suggested that athletes acquired skills during their early athletic careers that may have prepared them for successful careers in coaching.

In a larger research project, these six expert basketball coaches and 15 others from the sports of volleyball, field hockey, and ice hockey were identified by their respective sport governing bodies as being the top amateur coaches in Canada. All were past or present national team coaches and some were very successful university coaches. All had impressive win/loss records, had produced a number of national and international athletes, and were respected as educators.

In-depth interviews were conducted with each coach, spanning their athletic and coaching careers. The portions of the

interview transcripts dealing with the expert coaches' leadership skills while they were athletes were analysed. Although the interviewer did not probe the coaches about their leadership skills and experiences, 14 of the 21 experts alluded to the development of certain leadership skills during their athletic careers.

Three distinct categories of leadership emerged. As athletes, the coaches developed leadership skills as a result of their unique personal characteristics, their role as team leaders, and their involvement as youth coaches.

Personal characteristics

The expert coaches often had strong personalities marked by a work ethic and intensity in training and competition that directed them into leadership positions. They were committed to excellence in their sport and were enthusiastic in their pursuits, which differentiated them from their teammates.

A coach of the national men's volleyball team reflected on his experiences as an athlete.

In 1974, I went to see an international game of volleyball, and the Japanese were doing these serves. The next day, I went to the gymnasium and said to myself: "I'm going to serve the same way." I applied myself in practice and I was able to do it.

The coach exhibited this drive on a personal level, but also expected commitment and intensity from other teammates and coaches.

Field hockey coach Dru Marshall was one of 21 expert coaches who took part in the University of Ottawa study.

