

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF EXPERT TEAM SPORT COACHES

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Abstract

Although a substantial amount of research has examined expert coaches and teachers, up to this point, the personal characteristics that made these individuals especially effective have not been central or comprehensive to any research. The purpose of the current study was to address this gap in the literature by revealing the characteristics of expert coaches. In-depth open-ended interviews were conducted with 16 expert team sport coaches. The results revealed that the coaches have a persistent quest for personal growth and learning, as well as the ways of acquiring this knowledge. The results also explained the personal or individual aspects of coaching, such as the coaches' feelings about hard work, communicating effectively, empathizing with their players, developing a personal coaching style, having fun during training, and being a good teacher. The information is discussed in relation to research completed in the fields of expertise and coaching psychology.

Introduction

The purpose of the present study is to extend research on expertise by focusing on the importance of the coach's personal characteristics. The data in this paper, the third and final in a series, are a sub-set of a larger piece of work on expert team sport coaches. The other articles have looked at the pre- and postcompetition strategies of expert coaches (Bloom, Durand-Bush, & Salmela, 1997) and the importance of mentoring in the development of coaches and athletes (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998). The current study differs significantly in its focus, by drawing on the conceptual work of researchers in the fields of expertise and coaching psychology to help explain the personal characteristics of expert coaches. In particular, the work of Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1993), Ericsson and associates

(Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993; Ericsson & Lehmann, 1996), and Bloom (1985) will be discussed, with a particular emphasis on the coaches and teachers who helped performers excel in their fields.

Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1993) conducted a longitudinal study that examined the development of talent in five areas -- art, athletics, mathematics, music, and science. This work included several dimensions that were necessary to better understand the development of talent including the importance of coaches and teachers. Over 200 talented high school students were studied over a period of approximately four years. The purpose of this study was to determine which factors contributed to the development of talent in teenagers, and to the eventual lack of success in others. Using a very creative methodology that consisted of both quantitative and qualitative techniques, the researcher's reported that it was essential to have a qualified and experienced master teacher or coach to reach one's full potential.

In particular, Csikszentmihalyi et al. (1993) found three common characteristics of teachers who helped cultivate the talent of their students. For one, teachers were effective because they enjoyed what they were doing and encouraged their students to excel beyond their current level of performance. Second, teachers created optimal learning conditions so that students were not bored or excessively frustrated, enabling them to maximize their level of concentration, self-esteem, potency, and involvement. Finally, a third characteristic of distinguished teachers was their ability to understand the needs of students. They were remembered for their reassuring kindness as well as their genuine concern for the students' overall development, both inside and outside of school. In conclusion, these authors found that students could only learn if they were placed in enjoyable learning environments with individuals who knew how to provide both challenging and gratifying information.

Ericsson and associates (Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993; Ericsson & Lehmann, 1996) also researched the development of talent in various areas. Besides taking the understanding of expertise to new levels, Ericsson's research also had ramifications for expert coaches. Ericsson and colleagues argued that to reach a level of expertise involved more than innate abilities and was the result of activities that were designed to optimize improvement, a process that was labeled "deliberate practice." Ericsson et al.'s (1993) fundamental view is best summarized as follows:

"In contrast to play, deliberate practice is a highly structured activity, the explicit goal of which is to improve performance.