

## Becoming a Good Enough Coach

Jim Denison, Luke Jones, and J. P. Mills

### Proem

'Being perfect.' Should it be a coach's aim? The perfect workout, training program, or practice plan. The perfect set of progressions or cues. It's an enticing goal, one that can clearly be called aspirational—a target for ambition to meet achievement. An aspiration not too dissimilar from a scientist's experimental design—positivism's promise for a perfect world. But just as that promise proved elusive, and with it the rise of knowing and doing (at least to some) as more philosophical and paradoxical than certain and sure, perhaps striving for perfection as a coach can be equally problematic?

### What Coaching 'Normally' Does

As we know from more studies than should have had to have been done, trying to be perfect as a coach can't help but proffer greater practices centered around increased means of surveillance and control. A perfect coach, as logic holds, would only be content with perfect athletes: athletes prescribed by the 'good athlete' script who have internalized what's 'right' to do and what's not.

A perfect coach, moreover, is likely to use his or her force—his or her power and knowledge—in nonorganic ways founded on dominant conceptions of being effective: rationale, masculine, efficient...scientific. As a result, providing the necessary space and time for athletes to develop in ways more appropriate for them can slowly diminish. Even a well-intended coaching mantra directed to athletes such as, 'focus on the process,' has actually come to mean, 'train this particular way,' as opposed to learn and develop according to the unique contexts, 'needs,' and 'realities' that surround *your* life and no-one else's. And so it is that the perfect coach's athletes almost always run the risk of underperforming.

What then if a coach simply aimed to be good enough? To intervene only when necessary; to identify what is and is not important to control; to open up more spaces and possibilities within her or his daily training environment for difference, creativity, critical thinking, learning, independence, and imagination; to develop broader and more forgiving timelines; to question tradition and expectation and the judgments of others. Or put differently, to resist the colonization of science, technology, discipline, and efficiency—

themes born of a modern industrial age—and their all too frequent normalizing, objectifying, and paralyzing effects.

Of course we appreciate that ‘only’ striving to be good enough may not be easy for a coach. Across sport today the push for more control (read science), the rise of dogma, and the ‘need’ for ‘tricks of the trade,’ ‘secrets,’ or ‘rules of thumb’ is ceaseless. The development and promotion of systems, models, certificates, and ‘best practices’ is exponential—academies, earlier and earlier specialization, Twitter, master coaches, websites, the 24-hour athlete. So it is that ‘just’ aiming to be good enough as a coach could come across as negligent, irresponsible, complacent, and unprofessional: an anathema to coaching, anti-coaching almost. And that’s a risk few coaches would likely be willing to take.

The sport sociologists Jason Laurendeau and Mark Konecny (2015 p. 335) argued in the *Sociology of Sport Journal* that, “Risk, or that which might be considered risky or dangerous, constitutes a system of cultural understandings about ourselves, our bodies, and our relationships.” They continued: “risk is produced within, and (re)productive of, patterns of social relations, regulatory schemas, and broader systems of power relations...[that] constructs what is hazardous...and how hazards are understood, and talked and written about.”

It is in this way that prevention, fear, and avoidance dominate so many of our social relations and practices, coaching included. The unknown, or what cannot be evidenced, is dismissed or disregarded as too risky, or worse frivolous, academic, or unimportant. Consequently, different thinking, different practices, different bodies, different cultures, just plain difference is gradually erased; humility as a coach is subsumed by a frenzy to reduce risk. As a result, a coach’s athletes can easily become homogenized and sanitized in order to become risk-free bodies. But surely something very important gets lost in this process? Surely risks are attached with the homogenization and sanitization of people? For example, adopting so-called best practices—aiming to be a risk-free coach—is unlikely to eradicate the many unknowns that can derail an athlete’s performance. In fact, incidences of underperformance have been shown to rise in so-called risk-free training environments due to athletes being ill-equipped to manage the challenges and set-backs they are almost certain to face across their sporting careers.

Sadly, however, much of a coach's education today, as well as athlete development and talent identification procedures, continue to be dominated by procedures and protocols that involve the use of greater and greater techniques designed to mitigate risk and normalize the athletic body. Countless processes of 'checking-in' and oversight determine what coaches learn to do in the name of being effective, cutting-edge, innovative, and of course professional. And the so-called best coaches, the ones everyone listens to, profit as experts in normality. For they are the ones, and they alone, who give talks and clinics, develop curricula, and advise federations and teams. In the process, a coach who is not seen to be putting him or herself under their watch is deemed too risky or unsafe to practice—he or she has quite simply not learned how to be a so-called 'proper' coach.

It is in this way that working towards becoming a perfect coach takes on a moral tone that legitimizes and justifies doing almost anything within a particular sanctioned framework without explanation or the consideration of any possible unintended consequences. Moreover, learning to be 'that coach' who says and does the 'right' things with his or her athletes becomes the responsibility of each and every coach, an expectation that continues to extend its reach as 'lifelong learning,' as an inherently positive and unproblematic neoliberal development, gains momentum across a number of education circles today.

Taken together, therefore, as a coach to believe that you must always have a plan and know the right or best things to do can easily become priority number one. More important, that is, than listening to and learning from one's athletes (truly listening and learning not just paying lip service to these ideals) or problematizing practices that have become accepted as true or correct. As a result, to borrow from the philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, a coach's daily training environment can easily begin to resemble "a machine for learning designed to derive the maximum advantages and to neutralize the inconveniences"; a whole analytical pedagogy and specific set of restraints are brought into play such that the athlete becomes "a fragment of mobile space, before he [or she] is courage and honor" (1995, p. 176). Is it any wonder then that so many athletes' experiences in sport today have become characterized by instances of burnout and dropout, as well as increased feelings of disappointment, resentment, dissatisfaction,

anxiety, and regret? After all, one can only be trained (read programmed) like a machine for so long.

To an extent, it is understandable that a coach would seek to establish a risk-free coaching and athlete development pathway given the many risks coaching now poses even compared with just a decade ago: litigation threats, parental advocacy groups, institutional policies, athlete protests, 'deviant' athlete behaviors. And of course there is the risk of losing and all that could come with that: one's job, funding, or reputation (as a loser). Add to this the increased governmental control (particularly in Canada and the UK) over coaching and coach education. Medal tables, national pride, and status are now at stake, not to mention profits and various institutional reputations ranging from clubs, to schools, to national federations, to all manner of communities. Thus, a preferred and expected way of coaching is produced and it takes a very special person (read brave, very brave) to recognize the risks associated with coaching this way and actually begin to coach differently.

Therefore, given the challenges that any coach would likely face in an effort to coach in less controlling and dominating or so-called 'perfect' ways, he or she will almost certainly need some type of support, some type of education. And it is because of this that we are by no means disappointed with coaches who coach in safe or 'more known' ways; we refuse to label coaches, as some critics have, 'agents of normalization.' This would be to ignore the complex historical formation of sport and the multiple relations of power that circulate within every sporting context and the magnitude of these effects, especially on coaches.

In other words, for us, to increase coaches' effectiveness and enhance athletes' performances there is no enemy or bad guy who must be exposed and deposed. There is no set of new best practices to install. There is no singular problem or ideology we are trying to solve or resist. So where is the threat coming from? What is it that needs to be changed? A humanist or foundationalist coaching scholar might argue that for change to occur sides must be drawn—someone privileged, someone oppressed, someone on top, someone on the bottom, someone to root for, someone to root against. How can a story be told well, or a case made for action, without these dynamics?

Actually, we think a story about increasing coaches' effectiveness and enhancing athletes' performances can be told well without having to draw up sides or prove who or

what is right and who or what is wrong—*my athletes will improve if I follow X and stop doing Y*. And it is the telling of such stories that led the first and second author to propose this special issue with a focus on re-imagining effective coaching.

As Jim and Luke discussed when putting the call for papers for this special issue together, to advance coaching beyond its instrumental and technocratic legacy what's needed are stories from coaching scholars that foreground and star nuance, complexity, ambiguity, luck, history, and the all vagaries of truth and reality. Whereas stories about coaching that seek resolution or argue for installing specific processes of learning, development, and change, that by default eliminate (and denigrate) other perspectives or practices concerning these processes, are most likely to lead to truncated representations of what coaching does—and as we know it does many, many things.

Accordingly, to promote real change within coaching, we agreed that for this special issue a focus on Foucauldian thinking was called for. With such a focus, we believed that how coaches' practices are formed through particular relations of power and moments in history—and the effects this has—could become the central characters of our successful coaching stories in order to show why knowledge and practice need to be continually problematized. For only then can the promise of becoming a good enough coach begin to emerge and transform coaching from a set of practices largely formed in symmetry with society's dominant discourses and logics into an activity that supports and champions thinking, learning, and imagination.

And we believe the papers collected in this special issue go a long way towards telling such stories: stories written from a Foucauldian perspective about becoming an effective coach that refuse to seek closure through their analyses and instead create space for difference and multiplicity. And it is a brief summary of these papers and the promise they hold to promote meaningful, imaginative, and lasting change within coaching through their particular Foucauldian point of view that we would like to turn to now.

#### This Issue

Our first paper is a story about instigating change in the coaching of women's artistic gymnastics. In this paper Roslyn Kerr and her colleagues promoted alternative 'games of truth' to challenge the resident authoritarian women's pixie-style gymnastics model. By employing Foucault's conceptions of games of truth and 'global totalitarian and local

knowledges' this article revealed that in artistic gymnastics, although the pixie-style has dominated coaching approaches over many years, Foucault's logic dictates that other games of truth—or ways of coaching gymnastics—can and should be adopted to avoid the sport's all too common abusive and harmful practices. Although in the course of this research these authors identified significant resistance to letting go of the pixie-style model, they were also able to expose how artistic gymnastics' status quo is indeed being challenged by the strategic playing of an alternative truth game: a game with the aim of fostering international 'gymnastic empowerment'. This paper is significant, therefore, because it shows how through a process of reflection, elite coaches can begin to question their previous coaching practices and recognize the potential of alternative knowledges and practices to improve the sport experience for everyone involved.

Our second paper is a story about the ethical self-creation of an elite tennis coach. In this reflective narrative-of-self, Goran Gerdin and his colleague draw from Foucault to problematize and re-imagine what it means to coach tennis effectively and ethically in the face of the tragic circumstances of player suicide. They outlined how the adoption of Foucault's technologies of the self can help a coach to problematize his or her own relationship with the prevailing logic of sport. And, in doing so, develop the means to decipher the impact that this relationship, and an overreliance upon sports' dominant logic, may be having upon his or her athletes. The significance of this paper lies in its explanation that the sports coach, through a long-term reflection with his or her own coaching methods and relationships, can develop new practices by challenging the insidious effects that technologies of dominance can have on athletes' subjectivities.

Our third paper is a story about athletes and having fun; specifically, how varsity coaches at a Canadian university incorporate (or not) the concept of fun in their everyday coaching practices. In this paper Zoe Avner and her colleagues utilized Foucault's concept of discipline to examine how 'fun', as a psychological construct, informs coaches' practices. Foucault's analysis allowed the authors to identify that instead of operating as a necessarily positive force for athlete engagement, coaches repeatedly use the notion of fun to reinforce their application of a number of dominant disciplinary training practices. The significance of this paper lies in its ability to highlight how what coaches might consider 'normal' (i.e., seemingly innocuous coaching clichés, concepts, or slogans such as 'go out there today,

team, and have fun') can, if used thoughtlessly or left unchecked, act as tools to create docile bodies. As a result, learning how to problematize all that one does as a coach (especially taken-for-granted practices derived from the idea of making sport fun) needs to become a critical coaching competence in order for coaches to become more effective *and* ethical.

Our fourth story is about the experiences of mentee coaches in prescribed coach mentoring programs. In this paper, Jennifer McMahon and her colleagues use narrative ethnography to explore the experiences of six beginner coaches' experiences of decision-making, learning, and self-development within a coach education pathway. In this paper, the authors use a Foucauldian perspective, and particularly his concept of panopticism, to demonstrate how within the mentor-mentee coach relationship the subordination of beginner coaches can so easily occur. The significance of this paper lies in revealing how beginner coaches can be rendered docile and, thus, subtly disciplined and controlled so that their coaching practices and ideas align with the expected norms of the coaching pathway they are being developed to follow.

Our final paper is a story about former elite athletes moving into academy coaching roles. In this paper Alexander Blackett and his colleagues considered the reasons why directors of elite sports academies in the UK preferred to recruit current and/or former athletes as academy coaches in order to determine how the disciplinary conditions of high-performance sport influence coach recruitment practices. In this paper, the authors used Foucault's notions of discipline and docility and analyzed how a sports club's philosophy acted as a 'regime of truth' that influenced future coach recruitment. The significance of this paper lies in its adoption of Foucault's tools to demonstrate that an arrangement of dominant coaching regimes of truth exists that is producing linear and potentially one-dimensional problematic coaching identities. In doing so, these authors have also articulated how a heretofore perceived strength within many sporting institutions, developing former players into coaches, may instead be acting as a significant hindrance to change or progress.

#### Coda

In closing, we believe that the time has come to take seriously the potential that Foucauldian research holds to expand, enlarge, and enrich coaches' effectiveness through

problematizing and re-imagining various historical/entrenched, contemporary, and current understandings and practices associated with what it means to coach effectively and/or to be an effective coach—coaching’s dominant modernist logic. Towards this end, we would like thank the contributors to this special issue who bravely risked convention to write critically about practices and traditions that so often go unchallenged and can stand in the way of coaches becoming good enough.

#### References

- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). New York, NY: Vintage.
- Laurendeau, J., & Konecny, M. (2015). Where is childhood? In conversation with Messner and Musto. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 32, 332-344.