Epilogue

A commentary and reflection on sport psychology in the discipline of sports coaching

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Abstract

In this epilogue to the special issue of *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* on the psychology of sports coaching, we provide a brief commentary on the field of sports coaching and some reflections on three key themes emerging from the research presented within the issue. In drawing our reflections together, we offer recommendations for the future directions of both research and practice in the area, namely: (a) coach effectiveness; (b) relationships within coaching; and (c) wider coach psychology research considerations.
A Commentary and Reflection on Sport Psychology in the Discipline of Sports Coaching

Whilst we appreciate that the field of sport psychology has considered the coach and the role that they play in athletic development for some time, we are also very aware that the exploration of the psychological principles associated with sports coaching and the individuals who operate in this role has not received the attention it deserves. Perhaps not surprisingly, research has primarily focused on coaches’ influence on athletes’ physical and psychological development (cf. Thelwell, Harwood, & Greenlees, 2017). However, as highlighted by Zakrajsek and colleagues in this issue, “This emphasis on a particular aspect of coaching likely limits the overall understanding of the profession and neglects the wide-ranging impact that coaches truly have in the sport environment.” Further, based on the increasingly accepted view that the coach should be considered as a performer, research has only recently begun to explore more critically and explicitly the psychology of the coach.

There has been a recent growth in media reports that highlight, at all levels of sport, the significant demands that are placed on coaches, which tend to get magnified as the stakes increase. For example, Nick Pedrazzini, an Australian Olympic swim coach, recently spoke openly about his spiral into depression, the break-up of his family, and the sacrifices made to support athletes as a result of the all-consuming nature of coaching. The emphasis that has been placed on exploring the act of coaching at the expense of gaining a better understanding of the person doing the coaching is, therefore, remiss (cf. Allen & Shaw, 2009; McCarthy & Giges, 2017). This contention is further strengthened by the research presented in this issue that has highlighted (amongst other factors): the contextual, cultural and situationally-laden nature of coaching knowledge and effectiveness (e.g., Alexander et al.; Fransen et al.; Gould et al.; Villalon & Martin); the evolving role, and associated expectations, of the coach (e.g., Fransen et al.; Gould et al.; Zakrajsek et al.); the contested nature of sport that requires coaches to balance seemingly conflicting agendas (e.g., Hamilton & LaVoii); and the influence of individual differences on coaching practice (e.g., Alexander et al.; Fransen et al.; Villalon &
Martin). It would appear, therefore, that in order to better understand the psychological health, well-being, and functioning of sports coaches, and thus the wider contexts and environments in which coaches operate, researchers and practitioners alike have to place the coach at the center of their work.

A further development, also highlighted in this issue (see Hamilton & LaVoi), that should be considered by sport psychology researchers and applied practitioners, is that the field of sport coaching is evolving into a profession. Indeed, the field of sports coaching meets a range of criteria required to achieve this classification, such as: the formation of governing bodies of coaching; distinct educational and vocational certification routes; employment pathways; a specific underpinning evidence-base; and codes of conduct/ethics (cf. North, Piggot, Lara-Bercial, Abrahams, & Muir, 2019). In spite of such progression, however, the majority of the coaching labor-force remain volunteers or part-time employees who simultaneously hold other job roles (Lyle & Cushion, 2017). This renders the profession of coaching a special case in that coaches are being asked to act professionally (e.g., uphold codes of conduct, engage in evidence-based practice, engage in professional development, address the effectiveness of their work) without necessarily holding the position as a professional coach. The rapid development of the status of the field, and the resulting gap in the professional training and employment of a qualified workforce, has brought with it a range of personal (e.g., work-life balance; engagement in professional development) and interpersonal (e.g., coaches ill-equipped to manage the micro-politics associated with coaching) issues for coaches that further influence their ability to function (personally, socially, and professionally) and thus effectively fulfil the multitude of tasks aligned to the job.

Given the circumstances surrounding the emergence of coaching as a profession (e.g., nature of the workforce), as well as the types of knowledge/evidence traditionally valued within the field (e.g., professional and experiential knowledge of the act of coaching; Cassidy & Rossi, 2006; Cropley, Miles, & Knowles, 2018), there appears to be a lag between the
production of empirical sport psychology research and the translation of the emergent 
evidence-base into better and more informed action at the coalface of the coaching profession. 
The dissemination of research that focuses on the psychological elements of the coach is, 
therefore, a concern. Certainly, the consideration of the psychology of the coach has been 
largely overlooked in coach education programs (as highlighted in this issue by Hamilton & 
LaVoi, and Villalon & Martin), which tend to focus instead on briefly introducing coaches to 
the psychological principles associated with athletic performance. Further, the growth of social 
media, and the resources available within, as well as the expansion of the grey literature (e.g., 
literature that is unpublished or published in non-commercial form, such as blogs, policy 
statements, lectures, and audio-visual media), appears to have taken precedent as the resources 
of choice amongst many coaches seeking to develop their knowledge. Whilst these resources 
undoubtedly have the potential to enhance the dissemination of good evidence (e.g., 
knowledge, understanding and application generated from rigorous, scientific research), they 
also pose a threat to the propagation of an appropriately informed evidence-base for practice. 
Consequently, sport psychology researchers and applied practitioners must carefully consider 
how their work reaches and impacts the desired end-user to ensure that good evidence filters 
quickly into coaching practice.

**Special Issue: Emergent Themes and Future Directions**

The articles published in this special issue all make a significant contribution to 
extending knowledge within their respective lines of enquiry. Together, they offer a key 
reference point for future research and practice within the field. Offering a full commentary on 
each of the published articles goes beyond the scope of our intentions of this epilogue. Instead, 
we have drawn on three key themes pertinent to the studies in this issue and provide some 
discussion on the theoretical and practical implications of each. The themes cover: (a) coach 
effectiveness; (b) relationships within coaching; and (c) wider coach psychology research 
considerations.
Coach Effectiveness

Within the literature focusing on sports coaching, much attention has been given to coach effectiveness and its associated components, such as: coach leadership (e.g., Arthur, Woodman, Ong, Hardy, & Ntoumanis, 2011); developing motivational climates and learning environments (e.g., Keegan, Spray, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2010); coach-athlete relationships (e.g., Jowett & Nezlek, 2012); and coach efficacy (e.g., Feltz, Chase, Moritz, & Sullivan, 1999). However, as the research in this issue has identified, coach effectiveness is contextually dependent, meaning that frameworks of effective behaviors, actions and/or relationships are unlikely to support effective practice across different situations and across time (see Alexander et al.; Gould et al.; Villalon & Martin). For example, Gould et al.’s research, published in this issue, highlights the importance of coaches individualizing their practices based on the characteristics and needs of their athletes. They attempted to make sense of the attention, motivation, and communication characteristics of Generation Z athletes, with findings revealing a range of strengths (e.g., being open to learning, visual learning skills) and limitations (e.g., communication skill deficits, short-term outcome goal focus) of the Generation Z athlete. This research offers insights into the specific foci (e.g., creating task-orientated motivational climates; adopting varied digital communication techniques) required for coaches and applied sport psychologists in their quest to engage in effective practice when working with this specific population. In support of this theme, Villalon and Martin’s research, presented in this issue, identified that coaching efficacy (particularly motivational efficacy – the confidence a coach has in their ability to foster their athletes’ motivation) might decrease for coaches who do not understand the motivational preferences of Generation Z, which are likely to differ from other generations. Lower levels of coaching efficacy, born out of a lack of understanding of the context in which the coach is working, is likely to subsequently decrease the effectiveness of coaching practice. Similarly, building on Côté and Gilbert’s (2009) conceptualization of coach effectiveness as the consistent application of coaches’ knowledge to
improve athlete outcomes dependent on particular coaching contexts, Alexander and colleagues explored the effective practices of coaches working in female parasport. This research is particularly timely, given the lack of available coaching resources and context specific insights into coaching Paralympic athletes (cf. Taylor, Werthner, Culver, & Callary, 2015). Having identified the importance of coaches in this context being open-minded, creative, adaptable, and valuing the development of both sport- and person-related (e.g., transferrable life skills) skills, Alexander et al. proposed that coaches working in parasport must ensure that they seek educational and developmental opportunities to gain a better understanding of effective coaching practices specifically related to female athletes with physical disabilities. Collectively, this research highlights: (a) the need for coaches to gain a holistic and critical understanding of the context in which they are working and shape their practices accordingly; (b) the importance of focusing of process elements (e.g., coach attitudes, behaviors and philosophy) associated with effective practice, rather than on specific outcomes (which will be contextually specific); and (c) the need for researchers and coach education providers to be more inclusive and consider the different contexts in which coaching takes place (e.g., athlete/coach gender) to ensure that knowledge specific to the reality of coaches’ practice can be developed.

In consideration of the amount of attention that continues to be afforded to the concept of effective coaching, we propose, in line with our argument regarding the need to place a spotlight on the individual actually doing the coaching, that work in this area changes direction. Specifically, we call for researchers and applied sport psychology practitioners (who might be tasked with supporting the development of effective coaching practice) to explore coach effectiveness through the lens of coach well-being. Increasingly, researchers are advocating the significance of a coach’s ability to cope with stress in determining successful outcomes (e.g., Olusoga & Thelwell, 2017; Thelwell, Wagstaff, Chapman, & Kenttä, 2016). Research has also recently indicated that a coach’s ability to cope is linked to the level of their
well-being, which is also associated with improved health (physical, mental, and social),
productivity and performance (cf. Norris, Didymus, & Kaiseler, 2017). Further, well-being is
widely related to happiness, life satisfaction, individual growth, and self-acceptance and refers
to an individual’s ability to function (cf. Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012). Exploring
how levels of coach well-being might be augmented appears, therefore, to offer an efficacious
approach to understanding how coaches might be better positioned to engage in effective
behaviors and practices and subsequently add a different dimension to the coach effectiveness
literature. In addition, placing more attention on the concept of coach well-being provides
timely opportunities for research into: (a) substantiating links between stress, coping, well-
being, and ill-being (e.g., negative processes and outcomes associated with being ill - a state
where an individual experiences grief, anxiety, and potentially anger); and (b) the wider
investigation of the mental health of sports coaches (NB – whilst mental health and well-being
are two separate constructs, it is likely that they are linked. Chronic experiences of ill-being,
for example, potentially increase the risk of the onset of mental illness, although research is
needed to corroborate such relationships, cf. Huppert, 2009; Weich et al., 2011).

Relationships within Coaching

The quality of the coach-athlete relationship has been reported as a key factor of
successful outcomes in sports coaching (Jowett, 2017). It is thought that the unique dyadic
relationship is required for both the athlete and coach to achieve their individual and combined
goals (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016). It is no surprise then, given that the coach-athlete
relationship is constantly shaped by interpersonal thoughts, feelings and behaviors, that it has
received growing research interest in the field of sport psychology.

Jowett (2017) detailed that the coach-athlete relationship holds significant power in that
the coach and athlete are mutually and causally interdependent. Indeed, in Alexander et al.’s
research, published in this issue, the participating female Paralympians acknowledged the vital
role their coaches played in their success. Perhaps as a result of this, however, the athletes also
defended the negative behaviors (e.g., inappropriate physical contact; lack of empathy)
demonstrated by their coaches, even when their coach’s actions bordered on harassment. This
raises a serious issue concerning the way in which coaches exert and manage the power that
their position affords them. For example, whilst the athlete has considerable power in the
relationship (i.e., if athletes remove themselves from the coach-athlete relationship the coach
ceases to be), ultimately coaches are given legitimate power, which is derived from their
formal position (cf. French & Raven, 1959). Without careful management of such power
within a relationship, coaches and athletes can start to ratify inappropriate and/or unethical
coach behaviors. Coaches must consequently develop a range of personal (e.g., self-awareness;
emotional regulation; emotional intelligence) and interpersonal (e.g., empathy, genuineness)
skills required for the creation and management of relationships that are productive yet ethical
(Jowett & Nezlek, 2012). This can be difficult when working in competitive sport where
coaches have to manage the competing agendas of athlete welfare and winning. In this issue,
Hamilton and LaVoi’s research offers a unique insight into these matters by exploring how
coaches maintain integrity and effective relationships built on solid moral foundations in the
context of highly competitive sport. This research provides insights into moral exemplar
coaches who placed significant importance of building relationships on the principles of having
the best interest of athletes at heart and working with athletes as people. As Hamilton and
LaVoi’s research is relatively exploratory in nature, future research and practice should seek to
understand how congruence between a coach’s morals, values, and behaviors is established and
maintained, whilst exploring the wider impact of this on the quality of the coach-athlete-
performance relationship.

The notion of building the quality of the coach-athlete relationship by placing the
athlete at the center of the coaching process was also addressed in Fransen et al.’s research in
this issue. This work considered the impact of adopting a shared leadership approach on
athletes’ perceptions of coach leadership quality, with the researchers finding that if leadership
is shared amongst multiple leaders in the team, the better the leadership of the coach is perceived to be. It would appear, therefore, that the act of sharing responsibility for significant aspects of team processes (e.g., leadership) helps to empower athletes and in turn demonstrates (and builds) trust between the coach and athlete. Fransen et al.’s research offers a much needed insight into the concept of shared leadership and its potential impact on the relational dynamics between coach and athlete. Indeed, many researchers have extolled the benefits of a shared leadership approach in sports coaching without offering critical insights into the potential barriers associated with its application (e.g., Bucci, Bloom, Loughead, & Caron, 2012; Jones, 2006). Perhaps as a result, coaches have been a little reluctant to fully embrace shared leadership due to the lack of supporting evidence base and subsequently overlooked a potentially valuable mechanism for facilitating more positive coach-athlete relationships.

Finally, the work of Zakrajsek and colleagues in this issue, provides us with an important reminder that “a comprehensive understanding of the coaching profession necessitates an exploration not only of the interactions between coaches and athletes but also of all other dyads that exist within the athletic environment.” Whilst Zakrajsek et al.’s research focused on the role that head coaches play in satisfying or thwarting their assistant coaches’ basic psychological needs, we have to consider that coaching teams have grown considerably, particularly at the elite end of sport. Coaches now have to form effective working relationships with a host of support staff (e.g., physiotherapists; sport scientists; doctors; assistant coaches) and other stakeholders (e.g., sponsors; managers; performance directors), the quality of which will undoubtedly impact on the level of coach functioning. Relationships that are low in quality, for example, are likely to be characterized by a lack of trust and the absence of four core components of effective relationships: *closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation* (see Jowett, 2017). In line with Zakrajsek et al.’s findings, relationships that are high in quality have the potential of supporting coaches’ need fulfillment, which can result in a
greater sense of self-actualization and more effective levels of functioning (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011).

**Wider Coach Psychology Research Considerations**

To bring this epilogue to a close, we would like to draw your attention to a number of considerations relating to the ongoing study of the psychology of the sport coach. First, we urge researchers to consider adopting a wide range of paradigmatic approaches to addressing the pressing research questions in the field. We do this for two reasons: (1) we need to consider the constraints associated with conducting research with coaching as a population; and (2) it is imperative that we begin to build a more diverse and robust evidence-base that incorporates different forms of knowledge. Certainly, building connections between quantitatively identified relationships and qualitative explorations of the mechanisms that underpin those relationships will only help to construct a more complete picture of the psychology of the coach and, in doing so, offer greater support for both coaches and applied practitioners who work with coaches. In agreement with Olusoga and Thelwell (2017), we therefore advocate the wider use of idiographic, case-study, action research, and single-subject designs. Second, the field would benefit from further intervention studies with the coach as the primary participant. Certainly, applied and/or empirical intervention research that focused on stress management, improving psychological well-being, managing the psychological needs of the coach, supporting coach-athlete relationships, and improving self-care strategies (amongst other topics) would be a welcome addition to the literature. In line with this, research that facilitates a deeper understanding of the coach as a person and relatedly how coach self-awareness can be augmented should become a key focus of our work. Finally, given the cultural and context specific nature of coaching, the field would benefit from research that investigates comparisons of demographically, geographically, and culturally diverse coaching populations. Again, such research can offer varied and rich insights, allowing for a more representative understanding of the field to be gleaned.
References


