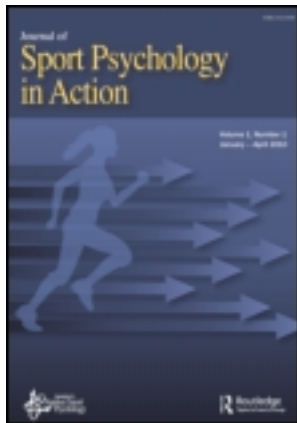


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Strategies for Helping Coaches Facilitate Positive Youth Development Through Sport

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Coaches are arguably the most important actors in the youth sport context and play an influential role in facilitating or hindering the development of youth. Despite the great impact they can have on youth development, most coaches have limited training or knowledge on how to structure suitable environments to facilitate youth development. Over the last several years, our research group has conducted a number of studies with exceptional youth sport coaches. In this article, we present some of the strategies these coaches implemented in their coaching practice to promote positive development along with examples of challenges they confronted.

KEYWORDS *life skills, transfer, philosophy, relationship*

In the context of sport, the adult with whom youth most often interact is the coach. Even though most youth sport coaches generally want to and believe they are able to promote positive developmental outcomes in youth, the current reality is that the majority of coaches do not have formal coach education and therefore may not have extensive knowledge on how to foster suitable environments for development (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2007; McCallister, Blinde, & Weiss, 2000). Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, and Jones (2005) stated that: “Without trained leadership, it is doubtful that life skills and other positive characteristics are taught in a systematic way” (p. 65). Given that mere participation does not guarantee development (Danish, Forneris, Hodge, & Heke, 2004), initiatives must be undertaken to help coaches more effectively facilitate positive youth development in the context of youth sport.

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Positive youth development (PYD) is a broad concept used to define the promotion of desirable competencies that lead to positive developmental outcomes for youth (Gould & Carson, 2008). Rather than focus on reducing or eliminating undesirable behaviors, such as violence and drug/alcohol consumption, coaches using a positive youth development approach emphasize the promotion of various competencies (Larson, 2000). These competencies include life skills, which can be behavioral, cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal, that enable youth to succeed in the different environments in which they live (Danish & Nellen, 1997). Examples of life skills include communicating effectively, making good decisions, problem solving, goal setting, leadership, and time management (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993). In order for a skill to be characterized as a life skill, it must not only be used in sport but must also transfer and help youth succeed in non-sport settings (Danish et al., 2004). Furthermore, in order for life skills to be learned, they must be intentionally taught in an effective manner by competent coaches (Danish et al., 2004; Petitpas et al., 2005).

Over the last several years, our research group has conducted a number of studies with exceptional high school coaches working in various settings (e.g., private schools, public schools, vocational schools) with adolescent-aged youth (13–19 years of age; e.g., Camiré, Trudel, & Bernard, 2011; Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2011; Camiré, Trudel, & Lemyre, 2011). In this article, we offer a summary of major findings. The coaches selected to participate in these studies were deemed exceptional given that they had either won high school coaching awards recognizing their work with youth or had been identified by key informants (regional school sport directors) as model coaches who promoted the global (i.e., physical, psychological, social) development of their athletes. Five general strategies to facilitate positive youth development through sport are explained along with concrete examples of activities these coaches implemented in their coaching practice. In addition, some of the challenges coaches confronted when implementing activities are presented. Although the strategies described were implemented by high school coaches, they can be applied by sport coaches working with adolescent-aged youth in a variety of settings.

STRATEGIES FOR FACILITATING POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Carefully Develop Your Coaching Philosophy

A crucial first step for coaches in establishing an effective coaching practice consisted of developing a well thought-out philosophy that prioritizes the physical, psychological, and social development of athletes. When developing their philosophy, coaches considered the context in which they operate (e.g., What is the mission of the school?), the performance demands of their sport (e.g., What type of commitment is needed from athletes?), and the

developmental level of their athletes (e.g., Are my athletes freshmen new to the sport or experienced seniors?). Many coaches used reflection as a preferred strategy to refine their philosophy and reflection proved essential in helping them define the fundamental principles guiding their coaching practice. Coaches asked themselves important questions such as (a) Am I teaching what I want my athletes to learn through sport? (b) Are my athletes having positive experiences in sport? and (c) Am I appropriately balancing winning with athlete development?

An important activity some coaches undertook at the beginning of the season was to present their coaching philosophy to athletes and parents. Specifically, coaches described to athletes and parents how their philosophy was going to be practically implemented in their annual coaching plan. For example, one coach described how self-awareness was important to him and explained to parents how he had activities planned during the season that were designed to help athletes define their core set of values. Presenting their coaching philosophy proved to be a beneficial activity for coaches as it allowed athletes and parents to be exposed from the onset to their approach to coaching.

Although useful, some coaches acknowledged that both reflecting on their philosophy and presenting it to athletes and parents were time-consuming endeavors. Furthermore, sharing their philosophy sometimes created tensions as some coaches realized that parents' values were not always in line with their own values. Finally, some coaches explained how it was sometimes a challenge to have their assistant coaches share and put in practice their philosophy at a level that satisfied them. For more information on coaching philosophies in the youth sport context, see Collins, Gould, Lauer, and Chung (2009).

Develop Meaningful Relationships with Your Athletes

Many coaches quickly realized that in order to gain athletes' respect and make the coach-athlete relationship work, they first had to demonstrate a certain level of credibility. This meant demonstrating to their athletes that they had the knowledge and skills necessary to coach effectively. Another important aspect coaches considered when developing relationships was their athletes' internal and external assets (Gould & Carson, 2008). Internal assets include the life skills athletes already possess, their personal attributes, and their physical abilities and external assets represent athletes' experiences with previous coaches, their family background, and their socio-economic status. In order to learn more about their athletes' internal and external assets, some coaches held comprehensive selection camps which included fitness testing, practices, and even an interview. This process was crucial to the development of relationships because it helped coaches realize that their athletes did not enter the sporting context as blank slates. In addition, it

provided coaches with valuable information when planning developmental strategies for their team.

A practical and effective activity used by many coaches to strengthen the coach-athlete relationship was the organization of team activities outside of the sporting context. For example, after their teams were selected, some coaches organized a dinner as a team-bonding activity. To ensure that the dinner was productive, coaches purposely planned discussions on specific themes (e.g., having athletes discuss where they are from and what their goals are for the upcoming season) and provided all their athletes an opportunity to share. Coaches also actively participated in these discussions by sharing information about themselves and by informing their athletes that they could be approached in any situation, on and off the playing surface, if athletes had questions, comments, or if they simply wanted to talk.

During the season, to nurture the coach-athlete relationship, some coaches held individual meetings with their athletes. These meetings were beneficial to both parties as they allowed coaches to give their athletes constructive feedback and provided athletes with an opportunity to discuss issues and/or concerns. During the meetings, coaches worked to create a climate in which athletes felt comfortable sharing and discussing ideas without the fear of being reprimanded. Coaches created an inviting climate by acknowledging athletes' ideas in a positive manner and by telling their athletes that they welcome and appreciate their feedback. As a preventative measure, coaches should make efforts to meet their athletes in a public location given concerns about sexual abuse in sport today.

Another activity used by coaches to foster relationships consisted of having athletes keep a journal. One coach had his athletes write weekly journal entries that focused on having athletes discuss, analyze, and evaluate personal events related to sport and/or life. In addition to fostering introspection, reflection, and problem-solving, this type of activity allowed this particular coach to gather information, perceptions, and feelings from his athletes as it relates to what is happening in their everyday lives. The journal was also an excellent tool to better understand his athletes' internal and external assets.

Coaches reported a few challenges associated with performing these activities. First, it was sometimes difficult to organize activities outside of the sporting context and have all team members participate. Second, individual meetings were feasible for coaches in sports with a smaller number of athletes (e.g., basketball) but proved more difficult in sports with a larger number of athletes (e.g., football). Finally, some coaches acknowledged how athletes sometimes viewed the journal entries more as a hassle than a learning opportunity and perhaps did not take it as seriously as they should have. For more information on the coach-athlete relationship, see Rhind and Jowett (2010).

Intentionally Plan Developmental Strategies in Your Coaching Practice

Although a sound philosophy and positive coach-athlete relationships are necessary requirements, they are not sufficient for positive youth development to occur. Coaches understood that life skills had to be taught in a systematic manner in order to be learned. Coaches considered the coaching of life skills and sport as inclusive pursuits and had a number of strategies designed to facilitate positive youth development.

Coaches made efforts to educate their athletes on basic fundamental concepts such as (a) What is a life skill? (b) What are examples of life skills? and (c) Why are life skills important? Once these basic concepts were acquired, coaches had activities organized for athletes to further develop various life skills. For example, as it relates to goal setting, some coaches taught their athletes how to create SMART goals (i.e., specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely) and had them elaborate short and long-term goals following these principles. These coaches sat their athletes in a classroom and asked them to come up with short and long-term goals that can be realistically attained and that would help them reach their potential not just in sport, but also at school and in life. To encourage effective communication, some coaches held team debriefing sessions following games and practices and encouraged their athletes to share their opinions regarding what went well and what needed to improve. The goal of these debriefing sessions was to have athletes negotiate and reach a consensus on the progress the team had to make for the upcoming game or practice. In order to foster responsibility, some coaches developed learning contracts with each of their athletes. More specifically, both coach and athlete took time to evaluate the different elements on which they believe the athlete needed to improve. Then, during coach-athlete meetings, both parties shared their thoughts, negotiated, and reached a consensus on the course of action that had to be taken in order for the athlete to improve. Coaches mentioned how such learning contracts were valuable because they fostered athlete empowerment and helped athletes assume responsibility for their own development.

A few challenges presented themselves when coaches implemented these types of activities in their coaching practice. Some mentioned simply not having the human resources necessary (e.g., assistant coaches) to put in place the activities in an efficient manner on a consistent basis. Others explained how they had too many administrative tasks (e.g., booking tournaments, reserving buses, attending league meetings) and lacked the time necessary to plan and improve their developmental activities. For more information on how to plan developmental activities in the context of youth sport, see Gould and Carson (2008).

Do Not Just Talk About Life Skills, Make Your Athletes Practice Life Skills

A number of coaches understood that life skills must be experienced in order to be effectively learned. To facilitate the experiential learning of decision-making, some coaches encouraged their athletes to participate in some of the decisions that affect team activities. For example, a few coaches negotiated with their athletes practice drills and had them decide on one goal they wanted to achieve by the end of practice. Another activity used by coaches to practice the life skill of leadership consisted of providing team captains with greater responsibilities on and off the playing surface. Finally, some coaches had their athletes practice a wide range of life skills by having them perform volunteer work. For example, rather than organize a traditional practice, one afternoon, an ice hockey coach took his players to a community centre and had them donate their time to teach children how to skate. To ensure the success of this activity, this coach monitored his athletes and helped them carefully plan their interventions by having them detail the skills they wanted to teach and the specific approach they were going to take in order to do so. Volunteerism is highly advantageous as it allows for development at two levels. Athletes learn organizational skills when planning their volunteer activity and also learn initiative, empathy, and compassion when performing volunteer work.

Coaches mentioned how negotiating the content of practices and giving captains more responsibilities were activities that were relatively easy to implement. The main challenge that confronted coaches was designing, organizing, and putting in place volunteer activities. Although highly valuable, planning volunteer activities requires a significant amount of time and effort from coaches. For more information on strategies that allow athletes to practice life skills, see Voelker, Gould, and Crawford (2011).

Teach your Athletes How Life Skills Transfer to Non-sport Settings

Most coaches understood the fact that transfer is not an automatic process and that it is something that must be reinforced continuously in an explicit manner. Whenever teachable moments presented themselves, coaches took advantage of them to talk to their athletes about the transferability of life skills and provided athletes concrete examples of situations and contexts in which life skills can be transferred. For example, some coaches discussed how learning to work with teammates is important because the ability to work in a team environment is a valuable skill to have in the workforce. Other coaches encouraged their athletes to set goals in sport and told them how this skill would be useful when and if they decide to pursue post-secondary education. In sum, coaches strived to identify transferable skills and provided

encouragement to help their athletes gain the confidence necessary to use their skills in a wide range of situations.

Many coaches believed their athletes had difficulty understanding how the skills learned in sport can be used in other areas of life and mentioned how it was sometimes a challenge to continuously have to identify specific situations of transfer. These coaches indicated that some athletes were simply not mature enough to make the connection and would only understand the transferability of life skills in later stages of their lives. To learn more about the transfer of life skills, see Martinek, Schilling, and Johnson (2001).

CONCLUSION

Youth sport coaches play an important role in our society as they provide millions of children an opportunity to be physically fit and learn sport skills. However, for coaches who wish to go beyond sport itself, it is important to recognize that facilitating positive youth development through sport is not an easy endeavor, nor is it automatic. The strategies presented in this paper were meant to increase coaching effectiveness and teaching success. By using sport as a tool for development, all youth sport coaches can nurture the qualities, skills, and attributes necessary for youth to become productive and contributing members of society. As Gould and Carson (2008) stated, sport is a highly desirable setting in which to facilitate positive youth development because it is a valued social activity that attracts a large number of participants. Coaches are in a preferred position to use the power of sport to positively influence the lives of their athletes in a lasting manner.

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