

# sports coach UK Research Summary 14

## Communication Preferences and Styles



Communication is more than just what is said. It is a mixture of verbal and non-verbal messages that can change depending on individual preferences or the circumstances. As a coach, understanding your own style and the preferences of your athletes can make a real difference to your coaching effectiveness. This summary looks at new research with coaches and athletes to show how communication can vary by coach, gender of athlete and type of sport.



## Communication and coaching

Previous research has found that the ability to communicate effectively is one of the distinguishing factors of an expert coach. It has been described as a skill that separates the novice coach from the great one. While novice coaches will focus on finding ways to help players understand instruction from the coach's perspective, the expert will try to communicate more effectively based on their understanding of the player's perspective. Therefore, finding what appeals to your athletes or players is central to developing as a coach.

Good communication doesn't just increase coaching skills but also impacts directly on the player. If someone is to learn, then they need to understand what they are being told.

Research has shown that how coaches communicate directly influences how players perform and behave.

Everything a person does or says can be considered communication. For that reason, it is important to look at both verbal and non-verbal (visual) communication. In addition to this, different people are likely to look for, and respond to, different forms of communication. This all increases the repertoire of skills a coach must have to communicate well, and explains why good communication is linked to expertise.

It is for this reason that some researchers have speculated that communication skills are the most important skills for a coach to possess.

## Methods

New research conducted by Ezzeldin Aly at the Graceland University in America examined both verbal and visual communication, and the similarities and differences between coaches, players and types of sport.

He surveyed over 200 athletic students and 14 coaches about the development of communication, communication styles and timing. Those surveyed were a mix of male and female students who took part in both team and individual sports. This provided results for a number of different contexts that would be interesting for coaches in different situations.

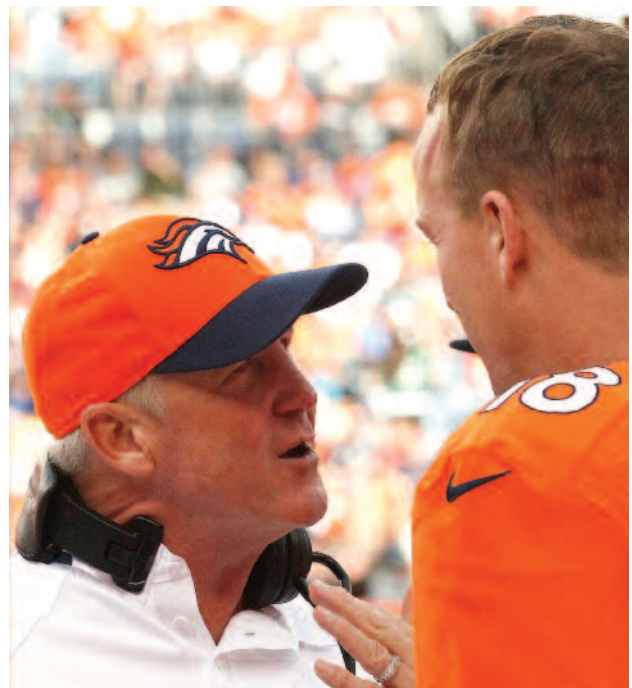
## Communication styles and preferences of coaches

All the coaches in the study agreed they used both verbal and non-verbal/visual communication methods, and all were aware that their communication differed depending on whether they were calm or nervous. They also tended to believe that they were more focused in their communication before and after events than their athletes.

However, in other regards, communication styles and preferences varied, especially between coaches of team sports and individual sports. Team coaches were much more likely to agree that communication enhances performance while those in individual sports were less convinced. This is likely to be due to the level of interaction coaches in team sports have during a competition compared to individual sports.

During games, coaches felt that they preferred to communicate with one athlete, rather than the whole team. All coaches agreed that they increased communication when winning, but when they were losing, coaches of individual sports felt they did not increase communication. Again, the type of sport may be playing a part here. Aly speculates that communication between athlete and coach happens before the event in individual sports, with little chance for change later, whereas, in team sports, the coach can change plans in the midst of the game. In other words, a coach's willingness to communicate during competition is directly linked to how much impact it is likely to have.

One of the interesting mismatches to emerge from the study was with male coaches. They felt their style of communication was more verbal and they did not use non-verbal communication, whereas their players felt their style was much more non-verbal. Perhaps players are seeing things in their coach that the coach is not even aware of.



## Male and female athlete communication preferences

The biggest differences between male and female athletes were concerned with communication during a game and, in particular, the fastest way to get the message across. For male athletes, this could be either verbal or visual communication, but female athletes showed a preference for visual communication. The research suggests that increasing the use of special signs and gestures would be a good communication strategy for coaches of female athletes. Conversely, increasing the use of such signs will have less impact on male players.



## Team and individual sport communication preferences

When athletes were asked who they communicate with most frequently, those in team sports said their coach, but those in individual sports said their teammates. These results are again probably influenced by the nature of the sport, with athletes in individual sports (such as swimming) unable to communicate with their coach during a race.

It is interesting that there was no difference between team and individual sports in terms of communication styles. Preferences for verbal or visual communication do not vary by type of sport as they do by gender.

## Learning from the research

Putting all this information together, what advice can a coach take away to improve their communication? Regardless of whether you are talking about male or female athletes, the key is to understand yourself and talk to your athletes about their preferences. Not surprisingly, the key to coach-athlete communication is good communication!

Some questions to ask yourself:

- Do you know your own communication style and preferences? When you communicate, are you using verbal or visual styles, or a combination of both? Why not ask another coach to observe you? If you want to help your players to understand how you communicate, you need to know yourself first.
- Does your communication style change when the pressure is on? If so, are your players aware, and do they know to look for different messages at different times?
- Have you discussed with your athletes what the fastest form of communication is during a game? You may be giving verbal signals while they are looking for visual clues.
- Who are you going to communicate with? Have you identified one person on the pitch you are going to communicate with? This may be especially useful if different team members have different preferences for verbal or visual styles. Identify the player you want to communicate with and agree the style in advance.

With individual sports, you may also want to work on contingencies for what to do if the situation changes and you can't communicate there and then.

## References

If you are interested in finding out more about this area, this summary is based on the article below:

Aly, E. (2014) 'Communication management among athletes and coaches', *European Scientific Journal*, 3: 1857–1881.

Other interesting articles on communication are suggested below:

Bloom, G.A. (1996). 'Life at the top', in Salmela, J.H. (ed) *Great Job, Coach!*. Ottawa, ON: Potentium. ISBN: 978-0-968093-50-4. pp. 139–178.

Culver, D. and Trudel, P. (2000) 'Coach-athlete communication within an elite alpine ski team zone of excellence', [www.zoneofexcellence.ca](http://www.zoneofexcellence.ca)

Lyle, J. and Cushion, C. (eds) (2010) *Sports Coaching*. London: Elsevier. ISBN: 978-0-702030-54-3.

