

Applied Coaching Research Journal



Transforming Lives Through Coaching

Theory into Practice

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The opinions expressed in these articles are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the views of UK Coaching, its management or staff.

Throughout these articles, the pronouns he, she, him, her and so on are interchangeable and intended to be inclusive of both males and females. It is important in sport, as elsewhere, that both genders have equal status and opportunities.

The term parent includes carers, guardians and other next of kin categories.

UK Coaching will ensure that it has professional and ethical values and that all its practices are inclusive and equitable.

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Welcome

I would like to extend a warm welcome to the latest edition of *the Applied Coaching Research Journal*, especially given the way our world has changed in 2020.

We've seen the incredible creativity, passion and resilience of coaches as they have continued to stay connected to their participants and provide engaging ways to keep active when they couldn't coach face to face. Not only that, the range of online learning available has been fantastic, if not a little overwhelming at times, and I am sure it could lead to some compelling research articles in the future.

Despite the inevitable impact on coaching delivery we are delighted to be able to bring you another journal of interesting articles, opinion pieces and top tips in the field of applied coaching research.

I am very pleased to welcome Dr Amy Whitehead from Liverpool John Moores University as guest editor. Amy has written the editorial for us as well as sharing her latest research with football coaches using 'Think Aloud' protocols during competition.

The Research Team at UK Coaching is always happy to advise on article submissions if you have a piece you are considering. They are particularly keen to understand how Covid-19 experiences during lockdown, the initial return and the 'new normal' have and will continue to influence the coaching landscape. If you have a research idea, please do get in touch!

The Research Team can be contacted via researchteam@ukcoaching.org

We hope you will enjoy the journal and we welcome your feedback.

On behalf of the editorial team,
Louisa Arnold, Kent Sport

Contents

4

The Editorial Team

Meet our editors: Beth Thompson, Louisa Arnold, Professor Ben Oakley and Dr Amy Whitehead.

6

Peer Reviewers

Meet our team of independent peer reviewers who have helped shape the content of this journal.

10

Editorial

Our guest editor, Dr Amy Whitehead from Liverpool John Moores University, introduces this edition of the journal.

12

Evaluation of the Coaching the Person in Front of You Workshop

Dr Ollie Holt, UK Coaching

20

Assessing Football Coaches' Stressors and Coping Mechanisms During Competition Using a Think Aloud Protocol

Ethan Horan and Dr Amy Whitehead, Liverpool John Moores University

32

British Canoeing Canoe Slalom Challenge Cards: A Pilot Study into their Potential for Coach and Athlete Development

Craig Morris, British Canoeing and Richard Cheetham MBE, University of Winchester

38

A Journey Towards Self-belief

Marius Barnard

44

Athletes as 'Learners': Characteristics of High-quality Learning and Development Environments

Beth Thompson, UK Coaching

56

Book Review: What Does this Look Like in the Classroom? Bridging the Gap Between Research and Practice

Reviewed by Mark Scott, UK Coaching

58

The Curious Coaches' Club

Paul Thompson, UK Coaching



The Editorial Team



Beth Thompson

Head of Insight and Learning, UK Coaching

Beth is Head of Insight and Learning at UK Coaching and has 20 years of research experience in client and agency roles. She joined UK Coaching in July 2016 and is responsible for managing the Research team, as well as a newly established Learning and Development team. She previously worked in government social research for NHS England and the Department for Work and Pensions. Prior to this, Beth worked in the private sector as a Management Consultant, conducting research studies for a range of public and private sector organisations. She also worked as a Research Fellow and Lecturer at the Applied Criminology and Policing Centre at the University of Huddersfield. Outside of UK Coaching, Beth is a dance teacher and group exercise instructor.



Louisa Arnold

Coaching Lead, Kent Sport

Louisa is the Coaching Lead for Kent Sport, an Active Partnership in the South East. Prior to starting the role in 2010 she worked in a variety of sports development environments including school sport and local authorities, developing coaching and participation initiatives. As the Regional Lead for a female coaching project (Project 500: More Women, Better Coaching), Louisa has seen how research can not only demonstrate impact but also inform future work and support funding applications. In both roles as a sports development professional and a volunteer netball coach, Louisa finds research most valuable when it is clear, concise and practical.



Professor Ben Oakley

Professor, The Open University

Ben is a Professor at The Open University where he established their online and distance learning sport and coaching programmes in 2007. His role is primarily as an academic writer and creator of online films, audio and study material that explains sport, coaching, practice and theory in ways which engage diverse audiences. He has edited and written a number of books, articles and free online material. Before working in higher education he was Olympic coach for the then new sport of windsurfing, employed by the national governing body to develop athletes, coaches and club competition.



Dr Amy Whitehead

Reader in Sport Psychology and Coaching, Liverpool John Moores University

Amy is a Reader (Associate Prof) in Sport Psychology and Coaching at Liverpool John Moores University. Her research focuses on the use of Think Aloud to understand athlete and coach cognition and how Think Aloud can be used as a reflective practice tool for coaches. Amy is also a BPS (HCPC) registered Sport and Exercise Psychologist and BASES SEPAR Supervisor and works as a consultant with a variety of athletes and clubs. She has been working with UK Coaching to develop Think Aloud resources and CPD for coaches and coach developers.

Peer Reviewers

The Applied Coaching Research Journal is a peer-reviewed journal. We would like to thank all of the following colleagues for volunteering their time to support this journal.



Dr Beth Clarkson

University of Portsmouth

Beth is a Senior Lecturer in Sport Management and Development. Her broad research specialisms are in leadership and emotion, gender and leadership, and women and football. Beth is also a UEFA/FAW B Licence (Level 3) football coach and has 13 years' experience coaching in adult and elite youth football in the UK, Europe and America.



Jenny Coady

UK Coaching

Jenny is a Coach Developer at UK Coaching. She has over 20 years of coaching experience from the playground to international level and has played and coached around the world. She is accredited by the Irish Institute of Sport in Performance Analysis and has a Masters in Sport and Exercise Psychology. Jenny also works as a Performance Coach with West Ham United women's team.



Victoria Hunter

Zayed University

Victoria is currently working at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi as a Sports Coordinator. She is currently studying for a Masters in Sporting Directorship. Prior to moving to the United Arab Emirates, Victoria worked in the UK and USA within multiple sports development and coaching environments. As a UEFA B licence holder and within a Post Graduate Certificate in education, Victoria's passion is football coaching and coach education.



Adam Kelly

Birmingham City University

Adam Kelly is a Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Science at Birmingham City University, while also acting as the Department for Sport and Exercise Research Coordinator and Work Based Learning Coordinator. He is the former Head of Academy Sport Science at Exeter City FC. He has recently submitted his PhD thesis at the University of Exeter.



Carol Long

University of Warwick

Carol has practised business and management coaching for more than 25 years. As a Visiting Fellow, she coaches senior managers in their educational and professional development. Carol also works as an independent consultant supporting business transformation and project portfolio management professionals. In her spare time, she supports the coaching team of her local wheelchair rugby squad.



Dr Luke Norris

University of Exeter

Luke is a UEFA B Licence qualified football coach who has predominantly coached in women's football. Alongside coaching, Luke is a Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Psychology and conducts research exploring social support and stressors with sports coaches, as well as women's experiences of coaching.

Peer Reviewers



Paul Thompson MBE

Paul is an international Rowing Coach and author. He has personally coached medal winning crews at six Olympic Games. As Chief Coach, his squad contributed to GB topping the Olympic medal table in Beijing, London and Rio. Paul has twice been inducted into UK Coaching's Hall of Fame and into UK Sport's Coaching Fellowship. He has also received the International Rowing Federation's Coach of the Year award.



Dr Graham Turner

Australian Institute of Sport

Graham is a Performance Pathway Coaching Consultant and his role is to support sports to establish contemporary and sport-relevant performance pathways that identify, develop, support and progress talented athletes to achieve medal winning performances. Graham's PhD is in Talent Development and his experience includes research and design of a National Strategy for Talent Development in Australia and the UK.



Dr Alex Twitchen

Open University

Alex is a Senior Lecturer in Sport Coaching Practice and Learning at the Open University. He has over 25 years of experience as a football coach, coach developer, teacher and lecturer working with players, coaches and students in many different contexts.



Dr Julia West

University of Worcester

Julia is a Senior Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Science at the University of Worcester. Her passion is goalkeeper coaching and she has over 25 years' experience coaching and developing both outfield players and goalkeepers. Her research interests include women coaches, women's football and, of course, goalkeeping.



Dr Lisa Whitaker

UK Coaching

Lisa is the Research Manager at UK Coaching and joined the organisation in January 2018. She has over 10 years of experience undertaking qualitative and quantitative research within sport. Prior to joining UK Coaching, Lisa worked as a Research Officer at Leeds Beckett University working on multiple social science research projects linked to doping in sport. She completed her PhD in 2013, which focused on understanding athletes' willingness to dope. Lisa has also previously worked as a grass-roots badminton coach.



Editorial

Dr Amy Whitehead

Reader in Sport Psychology and Coaching, Liverpool John Moores University

Welcome to Volume 6 of *the Applied Coaching Research Journal*. It is a pleasure to share with you an excellent range of peer-reviewed articles that centre on how research can be directly applied to coaching practice and development. As an academic, applied practitioner and researcher, it is great to be able to receive contributions from a wide range of coaches, academics and coach developers in this month's edition.

In this volume, we have a range of research papers which consider learning designs to practise; evaluations of current coach education; life lessons through sport; and how coaches can understand their own stressors and coping strategies during competition.

Dr Ollie Holt provides an evaluation of UK Coaching's Coaching the Person in Front of You workshop, designed to help coaches foster a stronger connection with participants and players. Through a pre-workshop and post-workshop survey and interviews, learners reported that they had developed feelings of confidence towards providing person-centred coaching. The data from this study also provides recommendations for improvement, such as connecting learners online, providing a virtual peer network and cross-sport sharing. As a result of this research, UK Coaching is now offering a range of online classrooms to provide more coaches with person-centred CPD.

Next, we have a study by Ethan Horan and myself, which examines the stressors and coping mechanisms of football coaches, utilising Think Aloud as a novel method of data collection. Think Aloud requires coaches to verbalise their thought processes as they occur during a real-life coaching situation. The study identified key stressors experienced by coaches and subsequent coping mechanisms, and provides practical implications for future coaches. Coaches may consider employing the use of Think Aloud within their coaching practice as a reflection tool, to gain a deeper understanding around their own coaching behaviours. This in turn may help the coach recognise less favourable behaviours and improve their own coaching practice.

Craig Morris and Richard Cheetham MBE examine the impact of challenge cards used within canoe slalom. The rationale behind the creation and introduction of this resource was to consider how a non-linear approach to coaching could enhance practice design and the learning environment. This article offers practical applications for coaches through the use of challenge cards. Coaches within this study reported how the use of the challenge cards allowed for 'co-creation' of ideas with the athletes, which in turn provided a greater perceived empowerment for those being coached. Further findings linked to improved communication and decision making.

Marius Barnard provides a first-hand account of his experiences of coaching tennis. More specifically, he discusses what broader life lessons young players can learn through their participation in sport and the vital role and responsibility coaches have in helping them learn these lessons. This article provides an informative and thought-provoking case study around the development of self-belief and how it can be embedded into the coaching process. Finally, Marius suggests that coaches, parents, supporters and players should be as much concerned with building rounded human beings as with tournament winners.

Beth Thompson presents the characteristics of a high-quality learning and development environment in the context of a UK Coaching study that was conducted to understand how best to maximise the potential of people in sport. The study identified eight common characteristics of a high-quality learning and development environment: a culture of learning and improvement; a balance of challenge and support; a person-centred approach; a focus on holistic development; open, accessible and inclusive; adaptive to individual needs; alignment and coherence across the pathway; and a focus on long-term development. These findings provide research informed practical applications for future coach development.

Again, it is my pleasure to be able to present to you an excellent range of thought-provoking and informative research papers, which I hope you enjoy reading and can utilise in your own coaching or coach development journey.



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Evaluation of the Coaching the Person in Front of You Workshop

Dr Ollie Holt
UK Coaching

Acknowledgements

This evaluation was conducted by Llŷr Roberts, Becca Mattingley and Mark Beynon from BlwBo Ltd on behalf of UK Coaching. This paper is based on their final evaluation report and we would like to thank BlwBo Ltd for their support throughout this project.

Abstract

The importance of a strong relationship between coaches and the people they support is well documented (eg Grey-Thompson, 2019 and Jowett, 2017), and is highlighted in strategic publications such as Sporting Future (HM Government, 2015) and Coaching in an Active Nation (Sport England, 2016). UK Coaching has developed a CPD workshop called

Coaching the Person in Front of You (UK Coaching, 2018a) to help coaches foster a stronger connection with participants and players, and ultimately improve their relationships.

This article presents the findings from an independent evaluation of the Coaching the Person workshop, including how the CPD has benefitted learners to date.

Keywords

Person-centred, relationships, soft skills, understand, connect, thrive.

Background

High quality coaching in sport and physical activity requires expertise in technical skills, soft skills and self-management (Cote and Gilbert, 2009). Effective soft skills (or 'interpersonal' skills) include the ability of coaches to communicate, inspire and build relationships with participants and athletes (UK Coaching, 2019). In particular, there is a large body of work that highlights how important it is for coaches to foster positive and genuine relationships with the people they coach (eg Activity Alliance, 2014; Jowett, 2017).

The most recent sector strategies also call for more to be done to help coaches improve their soft skills and build better relationships (HM Government, 2015 and Sport England, 2016). The principles of 'Great Coaching' developed by UK Coaching strongly emphasise the importance of relationships and person-centred coaching (UK Coaching, 2018b).

Coaching the Person in Front of You

In 2018, UK Coaching developed Coaching the Person in Front of You, a three-hour interactive CPD workshop, designed to help anyone involved in coaching (coaches, trainers, leaders, activators) hone their soft skills to have the greatest possible impact with their participants. The workshop included:

- how coaches can develop and model a person-centred philosophy
- strategies and tactics to help coaches identify a person's individual needs, motivations and goals (using the understand + connect = thrive framework)
- how coaches can provide the most engaging experiences for all of their participants.

Independent evaluation

Coaching the Person in Front of You workshops

were delivered throughout 2019 and into early 2020. In order to understand how effective the workshop was at nurturing soft skills, and to identify any feedback that could improve delivery, an independent evaluation was commissioned. This was conducted by the research agency BlwBo Ltd. The evaluation had the following aims:

- To understand the impact of the workshop on the coaching workforce, including any reported changes to practice or behaviour.
- To understand *how* the workshop had helped, and specifically, which elements of the content were the most beneficial.
- To provide recommendations for improvement.

Methods

Feedback was gathered using surveys and semi-structured interviews*. In particular:

- A pre-workshop survey was completed by 18 workshop participants (who all attended workshops in January and February 2020).
- A post-workshop survey was completed by 28 workshop participants (of which three attended workshops in 2020 and the remainder attended workshops during 2019).
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 individuals including 14 workshop delegates, workshop tutors, as well as staff from UK Coaching and partner bodies.

**The number of learners providing feedback was lower than anticipated because several workshops were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Results

New skills and approaches

Workshop participants identified a range of new soft skills which the Coaching the Person in Front of You workshop had helped them to develop (Figure 1). Just over 60% of learners reported they had developed skills and approaches that helped them create positive first impressions and helped them to understand what motivates different participants. Over 50% felt they had developed better relationships, were delivering more tailored effective coaching, and had greater understanding of people's needs.



Figure 1: Percentage of learners who identified newly developed soft skills.

During the interviews, workshop participants spoke about the positive impact of the workshop. As a result of the workshop they said they spent more time talking to their participants to build relationships, such as asking questions about their weekends; they made more effort to connect with people before and during sessions; and they developed soft skills that helped them in various situations, such as meeting people for the first time.

One particular participant reflected on how he had attempted to improve his sessions for the youngsters involved:

“Putting emphasis on the participants, and making them feel that you are interested in them as people, and that you are there to support them. It is easy for coaches to just crack on and focus on skills and drills, when actually they’d benefit from taking a step back and concentrating on connecting with people.”

Louise’s story

Louise* is a female netball coach and runs walking netball sessions, generally for older participants. She decided that she wanted to attend the course, as it was something that seemed interesting and supported her own development.

Speaking about the workshop tutor, Louise was very complimentary.

“He was brilliant, and I haven’t enjoyed a session that much in a long time. The way he engaged the whole group was excellent and his style allowed you to remember things more clearly than if you’d just been given a standard presentation. He engaged me from start to finish.”

Since attending the workshop, Louise has been making a point of:

- observing how others run their sessions, and how they relate to the people in front of them
- thinking a lot about the motivations of the people she coaches and why they are there
- adapting the way she interacts with participants, especially as many of her participants are more interested in the softer benefits of participation, such as companionship, overcoming loneliness and isolation.





As a result, Louise is making an effort to arrive earlier to her sessions, so that she can chat with participants and get to know them a bit better. She's now realised how early some of the earlier participants turn up – perhaps because they are lonely and have nothing else on – so that has been quite enlightening. She has also set up a Twitter and Facebook account to allow participants to communicate more and feel like they are part of something.

*Name changed to ensure anonymity.

Feelings of confidence and competence

Learners were asked to reflect on their level of confidence and competence to achieve the three learning objectives for the workshop (adopt a person-centred approach; use the understand, connect and thrive framework; and provide engaging experiences for all).

For all three learning objectives, the self-reported confidence scores were higher post-workshop, compared to pre-workshop (Table 1).

Table 1: Confidence scores pre- and post-workshop

	Confidence pre-workshop		Confidence post-workshop	
	Average score	Range	Average score	Range
Adopt a person-centred approach	6.61	5-8	8.39	6-10
Use strategies and tactics to identify people's individual needs, motivations and goals using the understand + connect = thrive framework	6.62	2-10	8.43	6-10
Provide engaging experiences for all	7.33	4-9	8.46	6-10

While it is not possible to determine individual changes within the survey data, or assign causality, the comparison of combined data between the pre-workshop sample and the post-workshop sample provide a positive indication that learners feel more confident in using soft skills to improve the experience they provide to players and participants.

Workshop participants were also asked to consider how confident and competent they felt when delivering sport or physical activity sessions, and if they could coach to a standard they were pleased with. Again, while it is not possible to determine a direct causal effect, comparing the scores pre- and post-workshop indicates a positive trend (Figure 2).

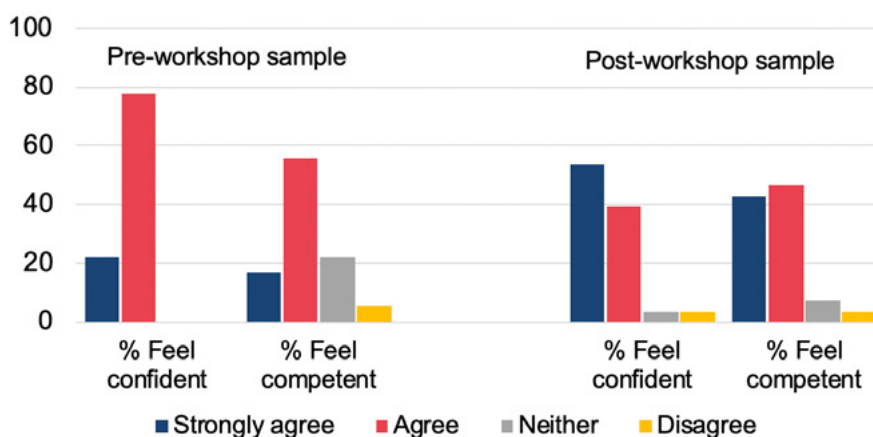


Figure 2: Levels of confidence and competence to deliver sport or physical activity sessions

Post-workshop, participants were more likely to 'agree strongly' that they felt confident and competent (Table 2).

As one participant noted in an interview: *"It's very easy to doubt yourself as a coach, so courses like this give you confidence and the tools you need to do a better job and feel better about your own coaching."*

Table 2: Percentage of learners who strongly agree with feelings of confidence or competence.

	Pre-workshop sample	Post-workshop sample
% who strongly agree they feel confident	22	54
% who strongly agree they feel competent	17	43

Have coaches changed their practice?

Workshop participants were also asked if they had changed their practice as a result of attending the workshop, and if they had observed any benefits for players and participants (or other roles where relationships were important) as a result of changing their practice. A number of themes were shared by coaches (Figure 3).



Figure 3: How the workshop helped coaches change their practice, and improved outcomes for others

Specific quotes from coaches help to bring these findings to life:

"By working with players and determining their goals and ambitions at the start of the season, I was able to support them in achieving them. Through introducing one-to-one communication at the beginning of the process, I was better able to understand how to support and motivate the players in the team."

“Ensuring participants and volunteers have the best experience in my coaching to develop their skill set. We have had new players join the team and ensuring that players are introduced and feel included in all ways.”

“Helped develop relationships with parents who usually sit on the side and do not engage in the session.”

Supporting sector objectives

Organisations across the sport and physical activity sector have a range of different outcomes they hope to achieve. These would typically fall into one or more of the following categories:

- Engaging the least active people in sport and physical activity
- Sustaining membership
- Creating a love of activity in children and young people
- Helping performers to strive for their best.

Coaching the Person in Front of You was designed as a piece of CPD with the belief it would help coaches to support these higher-level objectives. Consistent with this, many learners agreed that the workshop had supported them, or was likely to support them, to help achieve these outcomes (Table 3).

Table 3: Number of learners (out of 28) indicating that the workshop has already helped, or will help, the four outcomes

Statement	Has already helped me to	Will help me to	Not applicable
Get people active for the first time	11	11	6
Recruit new members and/or better support our current members	10	13	6
Create a love of activity in children and young people	14	11	4
Help performers strive for their best	14	13	2

A quote from one national governing body of sport coach educator, who has responsibility for preparing coach education courses on behalf of the sport, sums up the perceived value of Coaching the Person in Front of You: *“The content and the way it was delivered was absolutely spot on.”*

Learning experience recommendations

Workshop participants provided very positive feedback about the experience of attending the Coaching the Person in Front of You workshop, but some felt there was scope to improve the overall learner journey. An ideal learner journey for the workshop was suggested and is illustrated below (Figure 4). Workforce participants suggested that both face-to-face and online versions of the workshop could be offered to meet a range of preferences.

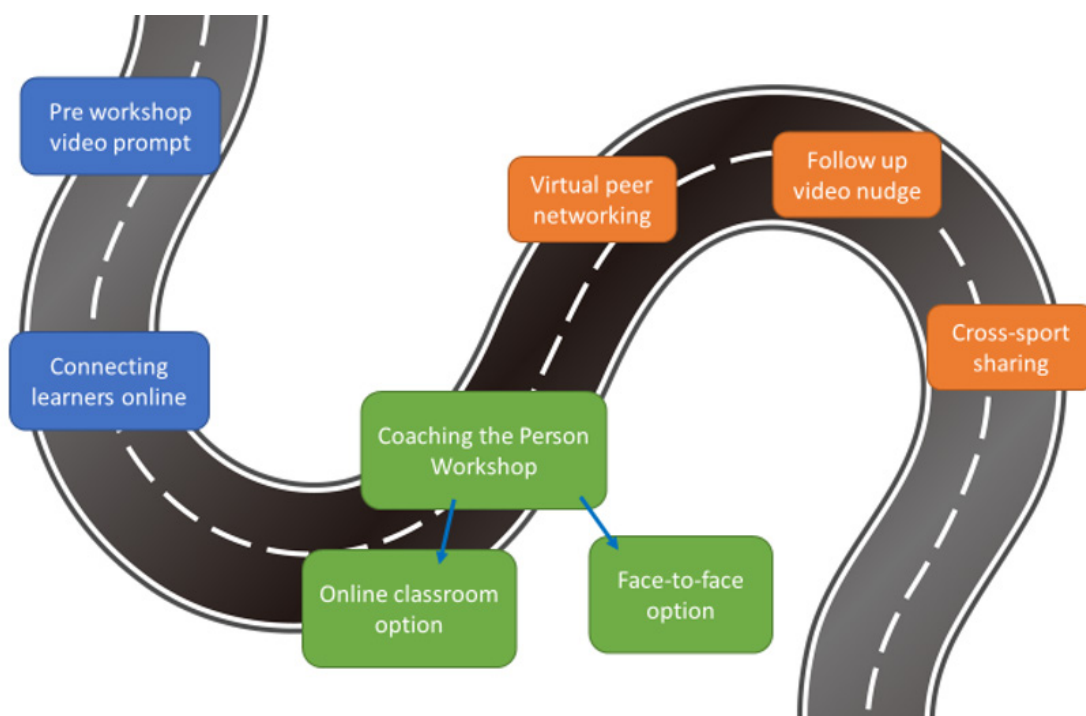


Figure 4: Illustration of the learner journey concept using specific improvements suggested by learners

Most suggestions from workshop participants focused on peer networking and cross-sport sharing opportunities. Participants repeatedly highlighted how useful they found the cross-sport sharing within the workshop and that they would like to learn more often with coaches from other sports and different settings.

“It was nice to hear that coaches from different backgrounds and sports encounter the same challenges as I do. That’s the beauty of this course – it makes you realise that all coaches go through the same things.”

“It was great. He [the tutor] delivered it really well. There was great interaction with all the coaches involved.”

The finding that participants rated cross-sport learning as a key element of the success of the workshop provides an exciting opportunity to

not only enhance the learner journey, but also to improve the marketing of the workshop as well. UK Coaching is already exploring new messaging to engage learners more directly with the highly valued opportunities for cross-sport learning.

A new blend of learning

Based on learner feedback, UK Coaching has launched a range of [online classroom workshops](#), designed to facilitate CPD and peer networking in a digital environment. These online classrooms include the new online version of Coaching the Person in Front of You, named ‘[Understand, Connect, Thrive: Knowing Your People](#)’. This online classroom includes the same ‘understand, connect and thrive’ model that features in the face-to-face workshop, and provides the complementary digital route, which the evaluation identified. By growing the blend of learning options available, more coaches can benefit from person-centred CPD.

Conclusion

A large body of work makes the case that person-centred coaching, through effective relationships, is key to providing great coaching. Coaching the Person in Front of You CPD has been shown to help coaches develop softer skills and strengthen coach-participant relationships.

The workshop was viewed positively by participants who valued the engaging and knowledgeable tutors, relevant content and a vibrant cross-sport learning environment. Participants developed or reinforced soft skills, helping them provide a person-centred experience within their delivery. Coaches described how they had changed their practice and observed improved outcomes for participants and players (and even improved relationships with parents). In particular, the workshop was effective at helping coaches feel more confident and competent in their roles.

'Online classroom' CPD sessions are now available, providing a live, engaging, digital learning route for coaches to enhance their soft skills and improve relationships. There is opportunity to improve the learner journey further by incorporating additional peer networking, and through updated marketing to emphasise the value of cross-sport learning.

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Assessing Football Coaches' Stressors and Coping Mechanisms During Competition Using a Think Aloud Protocol

Ethan Horan and Dr Amy Whitehead
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Abstract

The aim of the study was to examine the stressors and coping mechanisms of football coaches of underage teams (under 18s or below) during competition, utilising Think Aloud. Six coaches (age: $M=27.17$, $SD=8.82$) participated, all of whom held some form of coaching accreditation and coached

for at least six hours per week ($M=8.17$ hours, $SD=1.57$). All participants were trained to use Think Aloud and all verbalisations were recorded. Data was transcribed and analysed for potential stressors or coping mechanisms. Stressors experienced during competition for football coaches were related back to player performance, opposition, officiating, coach

performance, player welfare and organisation. Coping mechanisms used included problem, emotion and avoidance-focused strategies. This study displayed that Think Aloud can be used as a measure of stressors and coping mechanisms in coaches. It provides practical implications for coaches, in that they may consider the use of Think Aloud to gain an understanding of their current stress and coping responses and, in turn, improve their coping responses during competition-specific situations.

Keywords

Coaching, Think Aloud, stress, coping, football, competition.

Introduction

Stressors and how they are consequently coped with depict a key area of applied sport and coaching research (Whitehead et al., 2016; Thelwell et al., 2007). More specifically within coaching, it is important that we gain knowledge and understanding of what stressors occur and the subsequent coping mechanisms that are in place. Stress in both the athlete and coach can have a significant impact on performance (Lazarus, 2000). According to Norris et al. (2017), coach stress can have a negative impact on an athlete, highlighting the need for stressors to be further researched within a coaching setting.

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (TMSC) (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) was used to underpin this research. The model depicts stress and coping instances occurring in a number of stages, the first of which is the primary appraisal. The primary appraisal represents a stage where threat, harm or a challenge must be dealt with (Swettenham et al., 2020; Quine and Pahl, 1991). Following this is the secondary appraisal, where there is an analysis of obtainable resources for coping (Quine and Pahl, 1991). Within athlete research, Swettenham et al. (2020) illustrate positive coping as seeing situations more as challenges rather than threats. The most widely used coping dimensions are problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidance coping (Nicholls and Polman, 2008; Compas et al., 2001).

The primary appraisal of the TMSC has been examined in sport and coaching. Such research has provided evidence for the negative psychological effects of coaching, such as self-doubt and anger (Olusoga et al., 2010). These are indicative of the stressors coaching can bring. Research has evidenced how a football coach's stress originated from bad performances, inappropriate training

conditions and officiating (Thelwell, et al., 2010), in addition to competition environment and athlete behaviours (Rees, 2011). Other research indicates that coaches experience a range of different stressors within a football environment, such as poor officiating and contract violation (Surujilal and Nguyen, 2011).

As stress and coping is a transactional process and does not occur in isolation (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), it is important to consider the coping mechanisms that are employed by coaches when experiencing stressors. Potts et al. (2019) found that the most salient coping mechanisms within coaching involved problem solving, information seeking, self-reliance and seeking support in coaches. Olusoga et al., (2010) also found that elite coaches prioritised psychological skills, planning and the coach-athlete relationship in their coping. Other coping mechanisms that have been reported involved mindfulness training (Longshore and Sachs, 2015).

A common theme throughout the majority of these previous studies is a reliance on retrospective methods of data collection (Potts et al., 2019; Olusoga et al., 2010). Capturing stress and coping data from a participant at a later date may be distorted by memory decay or knowledge about the success of the task, which may lead to biased reports (Ericsson and Simon, 1980; Whitehead et al., 2015).

Think Aloud offers an alternative method that eradicates such disadvantages (Ericsson and Simon, 1993). Think Aloud represents a form of verbal reporting that involves a person verbalising his or her thoughts throughout the duration of a task (Eccles and Arsal, 2017). This permits information within the short-term memory to be captured in real time. Such thoughts and feelings may be forgotten if asked to recall at a later time. Consequently, Think Aloud offers a potential solution to retrospective memory decay or potential bias in reports. Ericsson and Simon (1980) propose three different levels of Think Aloud:

- Level 1 - the expression of inner speech
- Level 2 - the articulation of thoughts that are not in a direct focus but must be said aloud
- Level 3 - explanation surrounding certain cognitions and reasons for actions.

Nicholls and Polman (2008) demonstrated this method to be effective for data collection within sport in a study with golfers. They used Think Aloud to identify stressors and coping strategies in high performance golfers. Since this study, further research has implemented the use of Think Aloud in sport. For example, Whitehead, et al. (2016) has used Think Aloud to identify cognitive differences between higher and lower skilled golfers. In addition, Samson et al. (2017) utilised Think Aloud to assess the in-event cognitions of long-distance runners, which also collected stressors within the study. Whitehead et al. (2018) assessed the cognitions of cyclists over a track of 16.1 kilometres using Think Aloud.

However, the technique does not come without flaws. According to Eccles (2012), descriptions/explanations can occur that are not part of the actual thought process. Also, an occurrence called verbal overshadowing can happen. This means that during Think Aloud, the participant can become distracted from actually verbalising their thoughts (Lee et al., 2019; Chin and Schooler, 2008). Stephenson et al. (2020) adds to this, displaying that the coach within this study experienced feelings of anxiety whilst using Think Aloud.

Despite these disadvantages, Think Aloud is a solid method of gathering data concurrently during the completion of a task and to capture data such as stressors and coping mechanisms.

Therefore, this study aims to adopt the use of Think Aloud to capture the stressors and coping mechanisms of male football coaches during a competition environment.

Methods

Participants

Six male participants took part in the study, all of whom coached underage schoolboys' football league teams and participated in at least six hours of coaching per week ($M=8.17$ hours, $SD=1.57$). Of the six coaches (age: $M=27.17$, $SD=8.82$), three were licensed (UEFA B licence or above) and three were non-licensed (below UEFA B licence). All six coaches had a Football Association of Ireland (FAI) coaching accreditation. Additionally, all coaches coached on a part-time or voluntary basis. Ethical consent was granted from the authors' institutions and all participants signed a consent form prior to data collection.

Materials

The study took place on the side of football pitches around the Leinster region of Ireland. The coaches would perform normal duties with their own team. The Olympus DM-650 digital recorders gathered real-time verbal data from participants during matches. These were placed in the participants' pocket, whilst the microphone was attached to their shirt collar.

Procedure

Approximately 45 minutes before the protocol, participants met with the author and executed a number of specific Think Aloud practice tasks (see Birch and Whitehead, 2020). This familiarised the participants with the Think Aloud process. Participants were instructed to verbalise their thoughts and were given the following instructions: "Please Think Aloud as much as possible; only say what you are thinking at the time; do not try to explain your thoughts." During the initial Think Aloud training tasks, participants were encouraged to ask questions and then clarify their understanding of the use of Think Aloud. All Think Aloud training was conducted within 30-40 minutes of the match situation.

Data analysis

From each audio recording the first 40 minutes of the football match were used from each participant. Only the first 40 minutes were used as two participants were only willing to participate for this length of time, so this approach provided some consistency. After the data collection process, all audio files were transcribed. NVivo, a qualitative analysis software, was used to analyse the data. The study was informed by a constructivist epistemology. Although the authors believe that new knowledge is socially constructed, some of the themes have been generated from the previous knowledge of stress and coping known to the authors (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Kaiseler et al. 2012). Therefore, both a deductive and inductive approach was taken during data analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) and Clarke and Braun's (2013) approach.

To identify stressor and coping strategies, a similar process to Kaiseler et al., (2012) was taken. This involved verbalisations that the first author

perceived had caused the participant's adverse concern or worry, or had the potential to do so, being coded as stressors. Verbalisations, whereby participants attempted to manage a stressor, were coded as coping strategies. The analysis then followed an inductive process where the first author read all transcripts of Think Aloud in the NVivo software (step 1). Once complete, the first author developed a list of codes from the first two transcripts. At this stage, the initial codes were reviewed and considered by the second author (step 2). This collaborative coding approach is supported by Saldana (2013) as it allows a 'dialogic exchange of ideas' that support interrogation and discussion from multiple perspectives. From the initial inductive process, codes were grouped into stressors and coping, and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coding of emotion, problem and avoidance-focused coping was used in a deductive way to allocate the initial inductive 'coping responses' into these 'umbrella' coping categories. This inclusion of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coping responses was a result of the second author's involvement in the analysis process, where they linked previous theory to initial generated themes.

These deductive codes were then used as a starting point to analyse the remaining transcripts. However, as the first author identified new codes, they were also included in the analysis, and again they were considered and reviewed by the second author. Once all transcripts were analysed, a further review was conducted by the authors (step 4). Once complete and consistent with the potential limitations of inter-rater reliability as highlighted by Smith and McGannon (2018), a different researcher (outside the author team) acted as a critical friend to ensure data collection and analysis were plausible and defensible (step 5; Smith and McGannon, 2018). Following this refining and naming of themes, the findings were produced (step 6) and are presented in the results section. It is important to note that this was a process of critical dialogue between authors. Rather than to agree or disagree to achieve consensus, the critical friend encouraged reflexivity by challenging the first author's construction of knowledge (Cowan and Taylor, 2016).



Results

Table 1: Stressors experienced by football coaches during competition

Higher-order Theme	Lower-order Theme	Score at time	Opponent	Quotation
Performance	Performance tactics	1 - 1	Above in table	'We haven't had a good phase of play at all'.
	Technical performance	1 - 1	Above in table	'Poor decision making is such a freaker. Particularly from set-pieces when you have a chance to keep the f*****g football'.
	Team holding onto winning position	1 - 1	Above in table	'They still have a mental battle I suppose, in the case of not conceding, not winning games, chasing games. So they can go away thinking we played well and won rather than we played well and didn't win'.
	Conceding goals	1 - 4	Above in table	'It's not good conceding 3 goals from set plays and crosses'.
Opposition	Opposition players	0 - 0	Below in table	'So the panic there was, our centre half and right back keep stepping in front, every time they're stepping in front they're being turned by more physical boys and that's what's going to cause us trouble'.
	Opposition tactics	1 - 0	Below in table	'How're we in the middle? They've an extra man in the middle, the 8, the 16 and the 10 and the 17 is coming in as well'.
	Opposition actions	1 - 3	Below in table	'So the ref blew up for an injury and we had possession of the ball and the other team were pressing us. A big thing I hate is when players don't give the ball back to the keeper and instead kick it out of play, really frustrating'.
Officiating	Referee decision-making	1 - 4	Above in table	"Why would you wait that long to blow? I hate refs. Ref is frustrating me anyway...do your job right!"
	Referee interference with play	1 - 0	Below in table	"So the noise there was the ref been in the way of the play. Third time he's been in the way of the play. Two seconds later he was in the way. Josh fouled again because you can see the frustration in him from trying to make key passes and the referee is constantly in the way. We're constantly trying to play central balls but he keeps on being in the centre too much."
	Referee living location	0 - 0	Below in table	"Home referee. They are literally just going to wind us up until the last."

Coach Performance	Attaining perfection	0 - 0	Above in table	'I think, I'm not a psychologist, but definitely in football you like to be in control and the fact we couldn't set up our dressing room, warm up properly, get the kit out on time, I feel like I'm out of control and get stressed'.
	Own coaching methods	0 - 0	Above in table	'Throws have been freaking me out lately. Been trying to coach it but the details and decisions. It's funny how sometimes when its off the cuff it's a lot better'.
	Sharing information	0 - 0	Above in table	As the game is getting more and more away from us, its gets frustrating you know? Quite tough to impact it as well from this position'.

Player Welfare	Player injury	1 - 0	Below in table	'Player just pulled out of a challenge and I'm concerned because that's where you could pull a hamstring'.
	Player safety	2 - 0	Below in table	"This is the same craic as the **** game with this lad, people milling people. So the referee has let a few decisions go and were probably 15, 16 minutes in and the issue is at this time of the game if nobody has been dealt with due to a decision, he's given a yellow to our left sided midfielder ****, so there's been a few tackles now and the referee should've pulled them up but it looks like people think they've a license now to make a few tackles and in my opinion that's how somebody gets hurt'.

Organisational Stressors	Coach performing officiating duties	2 - 0	Below in table	'The coach shouldn't do the linesman job'.
	Dishonesty from other coaches	2 - 0	Below in table	"He goes 'do you want a copy of it?', I says you can't copy it, he says yea you can, ***** told me you couldn't, snakes aren't they?'
	Organisation disorganisation	0 - 0	Below in table	'Maybe we put too much pressure on ourselves as coaches to do everything perfect when really with facilities and everything here is difficult to have 100%'.

Table 2: Coping Mechanisms used by football coaches during competition

Higher-order Theme	Lower-order Theme	Score at time	Opponent	Quotation
Problem-focused Coping	Concentration	1 - 0	Below in table	'***** *****don't be caught, now look, better. Now you have it'.
	Planning	1 - 0	Below in table	'So the info I put onto the pitch was there we tried to press the ball 60 -40 to pass the ball onto their weakest centre half so our right sided forward is going to press their other centre back so the ball goes to the other one so were going to angle our run and hopefully the ball goes to the other centre half and try nick it in their half'.
	Technical correction	2 - 0	Below in table	'***** , tell **** to stop trying to beat men, tell him now. Were losing possession every time he does it'.
Emotion-focused Coping	Positive talk	0 - 0	Above in table	'Find straight away kids make a mistake, heads go down. Be more positive and actually give them some positive encouragement'.
	Venting emotion	2 - 0	Below in table	'***** bleeding kicked the ball away (t2a). Crying like a baby in front of ref, he deserves it'.
	Acceptance	1 - 1	Above in table	'Just realised we scored a goal just there, obviously morale goes up straight away, start playing better. Relieves the pressure. But it was the style of goal and the reaction was 2 minutes in'.
	Relaxation	0 - 0	Above in table	'Okay straight away it's a bit calmer from me. Once I hear the whistle kind of gets me in the mindset'.
Avoidance Coping	Humour	0 - 0	Below in table	'Pick him up boys, don't be complicating it (mocking other manager)'.

Discussion

Findings

This study aimed to discover the different stressors and coping mechanisms experienced by male football coaches during competition using Think Aloud. The main stressors experienced during competition related to performance, opposition, officiating, coach performance, player welfare and organisational stressors. The coping mechanisms exhibited fit into the three coping responses of problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidance-based.

Performance-related stressors appear to be salient with the coaches within this study. Two primary themes, technical performance and performance tactics (where coaches stressed over tactical decisions or individual player errors), are in accordance with previous findings by Thelwell et al. (2010), who found that a football coach's main stressor was linked to poor performances. The description of this stressor included performances with errors made by players, relating to technical performance. Similarly, Chroni et al. (2013) found that during competition player/athlete performance was one of the most prominent stressors. The implication of these results is that the player performance aspect of sport is a prominent stressor for coaches.

Another noticeable stressor was the **opposition**. This stressor related mainly to the opposition players, however, opposition actions and tactics also provided stress. The **officiating** of matches was a common finding both in the literature and this study (Chroni et al., 2013; Surujilal and Nguyen, 2011; Thelwell et al., 2010). The decision-making of the referee played a critical role in formulating this stress. Surujilal and Nguyen (2011) describe this stressor as being a common occurrence and also having a high capacity to manipulate coaching outcomes, which can affect the coach's position, giving reason to its sustained appearance in stress-related studies on sport coaches.

The **coach's performance** was a key stressor with lower-order themes such as attaining perfection, own coaching methods and sharing information. Chroni et al. (2013) and Potts et al. (2019) both unearthed comparable outcomes to these findings. What can be concluded from this is that the coach may consistently stress over their own performance both in and out of competition. Player

welfare was an additional higher-order theme, which is supported by the literature (Potts et al., 2019; Chroni et al. 2013). Potts et al., (2019) displayed this primary theme in their study, where full-time paid coaches stressed over player injury. What this demonstrates is that player injuries can be labelled as a consistent stressor for coaches whether it is in or out of competition.

The final main stressor was **organisational-related**. Three lower-order themes came about, including dishonesty from other coaches, organisation/disorganisation and the coach performing officiating duties. Potts et al. (2019) provides support for the first two lower-order themes, conversely, the last finding has not been documented in previous studies, to the author's knowledge. This adds to the literature in the area as the coach's stressors come about from the demand to do other duties. This stressor could appear due to the coach's concentration being taken away from the match.

How the coaches managed these stressors is displayed in a variety of coping mechanisms, which were separated into problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidance coping categories. Problem-focused coping was a key strategy of coping, with planning being its main form. This supported findings by Olusoga et al. (2010). This would regularly be carried out by consulting with another colleague/coach. This also matched the findings of Surujilal and Nguyen (2011), who suggested that talking with colleagues assisted with coping. Technical correction was also displayed to be a reoccurring coping mechanism. This was achieved usually in the form of direct instruction. As far as the author is aware, this last finding has not been cited previously, adding to the literature. In more simple terms, coaches shout onto the pitch to tell players what to do technically, in order to cope with stressors brought about from competition.

Emotion-focused coping was employed regularly, with positive talk being a prominent form of managing stress. The coach would give positive words to other coaches or players. Venting emotions was also key in coping throughout the study. Thelwell et al. (2010) found that emotion-focused coping was applied in relation to performances. The coach would show frustration by shouting at players. However, the literature also suggests that psychological skills are often used as a means to control emotions (Olusoga et al., 2014; Levy et al., 2009; Thelwell et al.,

2008). Additionally, Longshore and Sachs (2015) displayed, in an intervention-based investigation, that mindfulness is advantageous to calming coaches. No apparent psychological skill (other than Think Aloud) was used. The indication this gives is that coaches neglect, or are not aware, of psychological skills to assist them with their own coping/performance.

Avoidance coping was used by the sample (mainly humour). This was also the case in another Think Aloud study, however, this was non-related to coaching (Swettenham et al., 2020). Additionally, avoidance coping is a method used in previous coaching literature. Olusoga, et al. (2010) accounted for it being used seven times by coaches. Surujilal and Nguyen (2011) displayed it coming up twice within soccer coaches, however, this was in the form of ignoring the issue. This differs from its use in the form of humour, in this study. In alignment with the literature, avoidance coping was utilised but not to a great extent. This could mean it is not a beneficial coping mechanism as its use throughout the literature is minimal.

Limitations

The current study is not without limitations. Coaching may not always be a conscious process and Think Aloud cannot assess what happens to decision-making and coaching processes outside of awareness (Bowers et al., 1990; Jacoby et al., 1992). Therefore, future research may consider adopting both Think Aloud and video observations, where coaches can engage in stimulated recall to supplement the additional Think Aloud data.

Furthermore, Think Aloud could have had an impact on the coaches' verbalisations of stress. Despite there being no noticeable evidence in the audio recordings, coaches may have felt self-conscious (Stephenson et al., 2020) and as a result reactivity may have occurred, where the coaches think more about their thinking (Double and Birney, 2019). This may in turn have had an impact on what the coaches may have verbalised.

The sample size used in the study was only six. This depicts a relatively small sample size in comparison to previous research in Think Aloud literature. Swettenham et al. (2020) and Whitehead et al. (2016) used 16 participants, Welsh et al. (2018) employed seven and Samson et al. (2017) used 10. Although the study differed slightly from these above in the sense that it took a qualitative constructivist approach, a larger sample could have provided additional stress and coping themes or further strengthened the current findings. Future

research should aim to match or go beyond what is expected in terms of sample size in current Think Aloud studies.

Additionally, the use of a single-gender sample limits the results to males. The study only offers results from the male perspective, meaning results cannot be applied to both genders. Future studies should aim to include a mixed gender sample or a female-specific sample.

Conclusion and practical implications

The purpose of this study was to analyse male football coaches' stressors and coping mechanisms, during competition, utilising Think Aloud. The findings of the study demonstrate six main stressors (performance, opposition, officiating, coach performance, player welfare and organisational) during competition and a range of coping mechanisms (all allocated into problem, emotion or avoidance-focused categories). These results provide readers with real-time stressors and coping mechanism experience by football coaches, using a novel method of data collection (Think Aloud).

From a practical perspective, coaches may want to adopt the use of Think Aloud in their future coaching to gain an insight into their own stress and coping responses, which in turn can help support their development in managing this stress and incorporating more successful coping responses. Consequently, this could lead to an improved performance within the team or athlete being coached. This is something that we also recommend for future researchers who wish to adopt the use of Think Aloud as a coach development tool.

Key points

- Think Aloud is an effective measure of stress and coping for football coaches.
- Football coaches' stressors, during competition, span over performance, opposition, officiating, coaching performance, player welfare and organisational-related stressors.
- Football coaches cope with such stressors by mainly dealing with the problem itself directly (concentration, planning, technical correction) or through focusing on the emotional aspect of the situation (positive talk, venting emotion, acceptance and relaxation).
- Football coaches may benefit from adopting certain psychological techniques to cope with stress during competitive match coaching.



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British Canoeing Canoe Slalom Challenge Cards: A Pilot Study into Their Potential for Coach and Athlete Development

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Abstract

The aim of this pilot study was to examine the impact of challenge cards used within canoe slalom. The rationale behind the creation and introduction of this resource was to consider how a non-linear approach to coaching could enhance practice design and the learning environment. The sample comprised five experienced coaches, employed full-time in either a coaching or coach developer role with a broad responsibility spanning paddlers and coaches working with beginners to those working with Olympic athletes. Findings indicated the cards showed the potential to enhance creativity, communication, empowerment and learning.

Keywords

Creativity, empowerment, learning, reflection.

Introduction

The evolution of practice design is often at the heart of coaching, with new ideas and innovations ever present in the pursuit of enhancing coaches' skill development. Lara-Bercial and Mallett (2016) acknowledged the vision of experienced coaches included the "need to constantly innovate, to stay ahead of the pack" (p.225). The Canoe Slalom Challenge Cards (CSCC) innovation sought to provide additional stimulus in coach education and coaching

practice. The use of CSCC seeks to provide a range of additional ideas and approaches for coaches to trial. The purpose of this article is to explain what they are, the rationale behind their design and use, and to highlight the findings of a pilot study into their impact and future potential.

The cards were designed to promote a collaboration between coach and learner in the practice settings that enhance skill development. Different cards provide a series of session activities which range from decision-making options and constraints to foci for reflective practice. The activities outlined on each card include ideas to provide an appropriately challenging and engaging environment specific to the unique demands of the sport. The concept of this intervention is aligned to the approach taken by the Magic Academy Challenge Cards which also provide a non-linear approach to skill development (The Magic Academy, 2018). Both card systems provide exposure to different environmental situations over time with a variety of opportunities to modify and enhance the learning experience.

The resource has been designed for use across the pathway, spanning paddlers from beginner to elite, and for coaches at all levels of performance as well as coach developers within the Olympic sport of canoe slalom.

Part of the rationale for the introduction of the cards is that resources which seek to continuously

improve the coach and coaching should positively influence learning and development for all involved, including athletes.

The cards

The CSCC pack contains over 130 cards across four categories. A sample card from each is described below:

1. Guidance cards

Coach hints: What did you notice when...? What happens if...? Tell me...

2. Paddler challenge

On the back foot: Start each course from a challenging position.

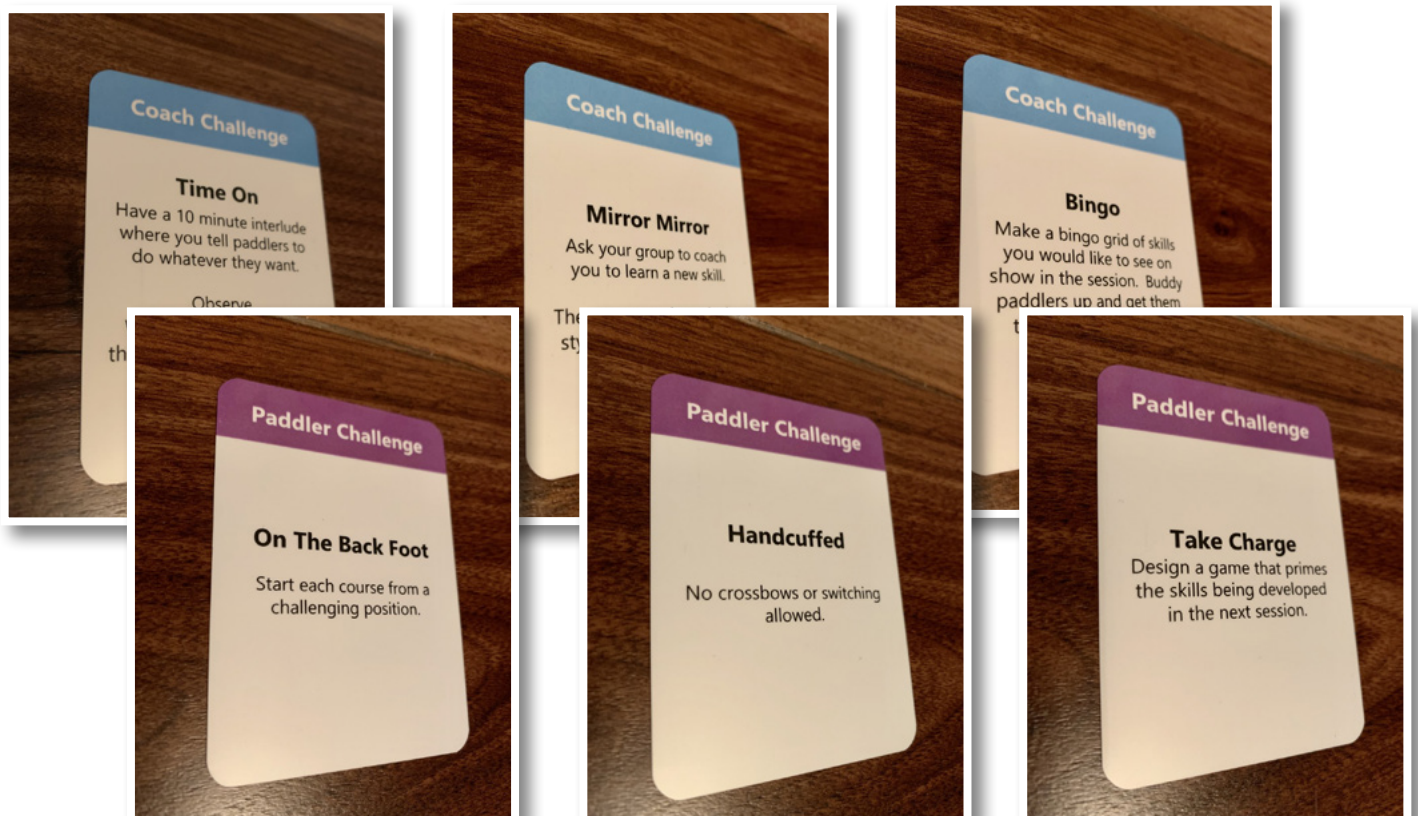
3. Coach challenge

Mirror, mirror: Ask your group to coach you to learn a new skill. They must coach you in the style they think you coach them. (see figure below in which this cards look and feel is evident)

4. Connect challenge

All ears: Ask a colleague to observe a meeting through listening only. Discuss what they noticed.

Further examples of the CSCC activity suggestions are highlighted within the research methodology and discussion.



Previous research and initiatives

Previous research from a similar intervention was Hughes, Lee and Chesterfield's (2009) use of 'r-cards' for coaches, where the aim was to support learning through reflective practice. They too were also intended as a coach education and coach development tool and decision-making competencies both in-action and on-action. Emergent themes from the research included the enhancement of "[coaching] craft knowledge" (p.367) which may be interpreted as the skills and knowledge acquired through learning by doing (Gibbs, 1988). In this case, recognising coaching as a 'craft' aligns it closely to other professional disciplines such as teaching.

In the design of the CSCC it was felt that in order to ensure greater effectiveness of such an intervention, a collaboration of all parties was crucial in order to maximise the opportunity for both coaches and athletes to co-create coaching knowledge. Knowles et al. (2006) cited in Hughes et al (2009) "placed an importance on how knowledge is generated and developed through practice" (p.368). Reflection upon such processes offers the opportunity to "enlighten coaches of their successes...the positives and the negatives" (p.368).

The provision of supporting resources for coaches for their applied practice may allow them to "take responsibility for their own development" (Hughes et al., 2009). Such informal learning opportunities (outside the parameters of an organised, structured and planned educational setting) allows them to reflect upon their own experiences of new situations. For example, through prompts such as 'how has the new perspective influenced your approach, shaped practice design and what has been the impact?'.

The CSCC sought to develop the resource aligned with the unique context and setting of the sport of canoe slalom. A key part of implementing any new learning approach is the ability to open-mindedly reflect on any claimed impacts. Such a process was adopted in the CSCC research. The reflective process underpinned the research and aimed to evaluate coaches' experiences and bridged the gap between the intended effect (of a challenge card) and the actual outcome.

Methodology

The pilot study was approached using a qualitative research methodology. This was selected as it enables the generation of rich data and one which helps explain the significance of an experience. This approach used semi-structured interviews which allowed for thoughts, feelings and observations to be expressed and, where appropriate, explored further (Gratton and Jones, 2005).

Sample research group

Individual semi-structured interviews were undertaken with five male coaches (referred to as C1, C2, C3, C4 and C5) who were chosen based on the "specific knowledge (and experience) that they possess" (Gratton and Jones, 2005, p.104). These interviews were recorded and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

Participants were selected against the following criteria:

1. Minimum of three years' experience in coaching and or coach development
2. Accessibility to participants of a particular or broad range of age, gender and ability to fulfill a diverse range of settings and athletes
3. Ability to utilise the CSCC resource significantly over summer 2019.

Coaches spanned an age range of 23-35 years and experience range of 4-12 years. The cards were used with athletes coached from ages 11-35 years, across an ability level covering beginner to Olympic. As such, coaching practice spanned a similar breadth including club level, talent identification, talent development to Olympic programme.

Each of the participating coaches were given a pack of CSCC alongside a video guide for their use. In addition, they received regular one-to-one telephone consultations with the card designer and formed part of a 'closed group' community on social media. Interactions on the closed group were considerable (25+ messages), directly reflecting upon the use of the cards. The study lasted eight weeks spanning the summer of 2019 and such activities included daily training within talent programmes, to being embedded in international training camps preparing for major senior championships.

Data analysis and discussion

Thematic analysis was applied to the transcripts which seeks to establish patterns and emerging themes as a result of the questions used. As a result of this approach, participants identified impact in the areas of creativity, communication, empowerment, decision-making, clarity of purpose and reflective practice.

Creativity

Coaches in this study reported being very surprised by the way in which athletes faced the challenges generated by the cards. This was both in terms of perception/action and in the subsequent dialogue that proceeded the activity. Athletes felt better able to express their creativity toward solutions within the practice design (ie free thinking without constraints). This contrasted to 'normal' training which they regarded as a space where they were trying to achieve what they perceived the coach wanted them to. There was evidence of 'co-creation' of ideas, where the cards acted as a stimulus to provoke thought and influence change.

C2 reflected on the use of the 'Use your head' card: Complete a course without the paddle crossing any gateline. Canoe slalom rules still apply.

They're trying so hard to do exactly what you've said, rather than as soon as you play (use) a card like that and give them a bit more ownership: 1) Some more creativity comes out of them and 2) When you direct that creativity to where you want it, I think they feel more relaxed about it.

This resonates with Becker's (2009) research into athlete experiences of great coaching, which identified that the strength of the professional coach-athlete relationship was one which allowed the athlete to have ownership and to be "integrated into the decision-making process" (p.107).

The message this offers to coaches and coach developers responsible for creating and influencing learning environments may be to further acknowledge the benefits of allowing greater 'voice' and empowerment for those who are coached. As De Souza and Oslin (2008) found, an athlete-centred approach which involves them in the decision-making and problem-solving process leads to

increased engagement and a heightened ownership of performance. They claimed these factors help foster conditions to enhance creative thinking.

Learning through purposeful practice

One of the key principles to consider when designing any coaching practice is to ensure that the task and environment are closely representative of competition aspects (Brunswick, 1956, cited in Pinder, Davids, Renshaw and Araujo, 2011). A further consideration is that practice settings are related to a shared coach-athlete vision and goals. The application of these principles contributed to the perceived success of the cards.

The following example is from the 'Playtime' coach card: *Work on a technical skill through the use of a game and give no technical feedback (eg one point for one stroke upstream, two for sweep, three for back blade sweep).*

The card provoked thought around the question, 'If I [the coach] only have one moment with learners, where is my impact at its most effective?' C1 remarks, "it forces them to really think about what they're trying to achieve in the session" thus ensuring greater focus on the clarity of purpose for the coaches' actions.

This card proved very powerful in giving the coach time and space to allow clarity of thought and the ability to observe things more clearly without feeling the need to fill the space with feedback. As C1 elaborated further: "You have to really think, okay, what exactly is it I want them to get better at here?" and incorporate that skilfully into the session design. Further reflection from the coaches in this study also demonstrated that specific cards had created enhanced space for thinking and allowed greater focus, thus enabling more transformational interactions.

The opportunity to create a 'shared meaning' between coach and participant is arguably critical to enhancing learning. This collective understanding by both of 'what are we trying to achieve, how shall we develop a suitable approach and how we will reflect', are powerful for athlete and coach motivation. This reflects Pritchard's (2015) thoughts that learning is enhanced when it is situated in a familiar context and therefore has greater authenticity.

Communication: coach-athlete dialogue

Participants in the study highlighted improved quality and richness of communication through the use of three specific CSCC, which led to the following reflections.

The 'Hero Worship card': Present your coach with a video of your paddling hero. Describe three characteristics you aspire to develop. This was commented on by C3: "I think it prompted a lot of discussion with me and between themselves that I don't think we'd normally have." With the same card, C2 commented: "It puts you on the same page straight away."

C4 noted the use of the 'Synergy' card: Set up a communication group with parents and ask a weekly question to encourage positive discussion with the paddlers (eg What do you need from me on race day?) "sparked a lot of discussion with a load of really good feedback".

Whilst a third card also enhanced communication. C5 gave specific detail and context to the 'Imitation game' card: Imitate a nation's style of paddling and have the group guess which country.

"I know they are a very high-level paddler, but I was surprised how quickly a) She picked it up and b) How it changed our language in the debrief, especially when it came to planning competitive sessions."

With positive changes in dialogue between those in the practice setting, it is likely the process of skill development will be accelerated. This is because they are more concisely and effectively creating a shared meaning around tasks set, by 'talking the same language', which is guided by the coach and led by the participant.

An increasing understanding of the coach-athlete relationship suggests communication to be a critical factor in how people and performance develop. As Rhind and Jowett (2009) indicate, coach and athlete "open lines of communication...are (subsequently) more able to share relevant information" (p.236). The essence of effective communication can be emphasised not only through the creation of dialogue, where coach and athlete are able to discuss the approach to and reflection of learning, but one that also demonstrates the level of trust between both parties. In summary, it is the ability

to have an open and honest dialogue emerging from a trusting relationship where thoughts and opinions are valued.

Improved decision-making

Coaches also found that certain challenges created empowerment opportunities to the learner, providing the feeling that they were integral in the enhancement of their own learning. This aligns with Cassidy et al.'s (2009) conclusions that an "empowered" athlete is actively stimulated to participate in directing and shaping their athletic life, including tactical strategising and the content and approach to training sessions.

Empowerment in the context of the coach-athlete dynamic has been described by Kidman (2001) as an athlete-centred approach which promotes a 'sense of belonging, as well as giving athletes a role in decision-making and a shared approach to learning'. Two cards used in the pilot study provided some evidence of this.

With the use of the card 'Play Time', C1 observed development and improvement over time: "From what I saw last time...yeah, we're further down that road, it's that independent learner."

C4 found that the 'Double Jeopardy' card "allow(ed) them [the athlete] to develop a finer understanding because they're not looking for feedback through you". This card focused on the doubling of the number of seconds given for hitting a gate in a canoe slalom race course. Through overloading the consequence attached to this facet of performance, coaches found that feedback was provided to athletes experientially from the performance itself. This enabled coaches to observe how athletes reflected upon this feedback and applied it into seeking solutions on subsequent efforts.

Overall, the research findings highlighted that athletes often felt empowered to co-create their practice environments through the CSCC stimulus. C4's comments reflected this with evaluation of the CSCC and the practices the resource generated:

They (the athletes) become autonomous, they develop that skill in itself, just to be, you know to be comfortable making mistakes..... because they almost create that situation, and it allows for greater learning

Concluding thoughts

Canoe Slalom Challenge Cards were created to offer an accessible insight into how a non-linear pedagogy may be applied within canoe slalom. The pilot study research found that they showed potential to have a positive impact upon coaching in canoe slalom. From the interviews, participants were supportive of their value across all levels of the athlete development pathway. Their learning through experience was not simply “spending time in the field” (Gilbert and Trudel, 2006, p.111) but their ability to make sense of those experiences as illustrated in the findings.

Whilst many coaches reported having employed similar coaching interventions in the past, they found that the cards provoked wider discussion, more positive feedback and greater engagement. The engagement came from a sense of ‘curiosity’ around the challenges, with athletes driving the learning process both as individuals and groups.

Additionally, it was found that if this resource was to be introduced with maximum impact, as C1 states “(then) they are not to be used on their own in isolation as a session, they are to be used in addition to your coaching practice” to augment learning. Therefore, it can be deemed that whilst the pilot study identified evidence of a positive impact of the use of CSCC, it should be recognised that they are an additional coaching resource to be used alongside existing practices.

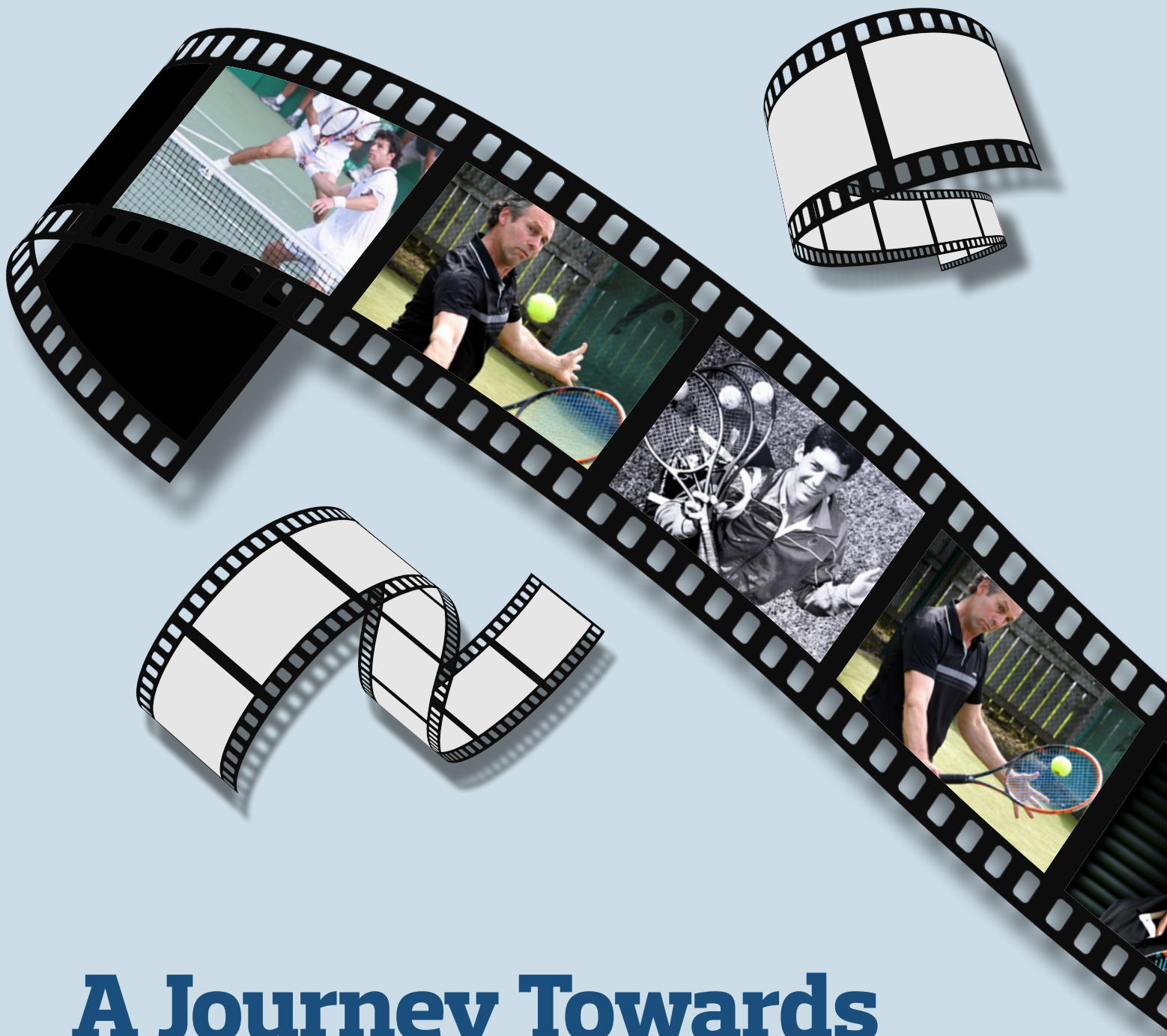
With a short-term study, it was not possible to measure impact upon performance. Therefore, whilst it is difficult to quantify overall impact upon coach and athlete development, initial findings from the pilot study indicate the potential the Canoe Slalom Challenge Cards have to ‘add value’ within the practice setting.

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A Journey Towards Self-belief

Marius Barnard

Abstract

Coaches, parents and players often overlook character building and individual development when assessing the benefits of sport and what it can teach us. We are so focused on winning (destination or outcome) that we miss the learning (journey or process). This article discusses what broader life lessons young players can learn through their participation in sport and the vital role and responsibility coaches have in helping them learn these lessons. Tennis teaches much about the social and psychological skills any young person will need for the challenges they will face, both on and off the court. I have closely studied the behaviour of aspiring and young professional tennis players for nearly 40 years and I would like to share some of the things I have learned about how playing the game can help prepare them for life. I will illustrate with examples from my own journey and, in particular, will highlight the importance of developing self-belief as the key to facing the challenges of sport and life with clear purpose and confidence. I demonstrate through my Clear Links Model of Self-belief how a heightened self-awareness can help to build the self-belief we all need.

Keywords

Coach, self-belief, visualisation, memories, behaviour, narratives.

Introduction

'Do you think this junior is going to make it as a professional?'

If you coach talented children, this question is asked regularly. A coach recently commented to me that we don't look for fruits on a recently planted sapling, but we are asked this question of young players when their tennis careers will probably mature a decade later. We also know that only a handful of those thousands of children who started tennis a decade ago in the UK, are now in the top 200 in the world.

When returning from a tournament, do we ask players what they have learned or do we ask, did you win? Are we focusing on the lessons learnt along the journey or purely on the outcome? To do so may encourage parents to sign their children up to the sport, enjoy the experience more, rather than trying to constantly push them to become future stars. The role of an ideal tennis or sporting parent is indeed a balancing act. You have to sacrifice a lot of time, effort and money whilst being an unconditional, non-judgemental observer who provides social and parenting support. Actually, the reality is that most successful youngsters achieving at the highest level are very self-driven.

It is so important for youngsters not to tie their own self-worth to the amount of trophies they have in their cabinet at home. A few of my highly competitive juniors get so demoralised if they don't win a particular tournament. We need to emphasise the value of character development, improved self-discipline, goal setting and other important skills these young people have to master at a relatively early age.



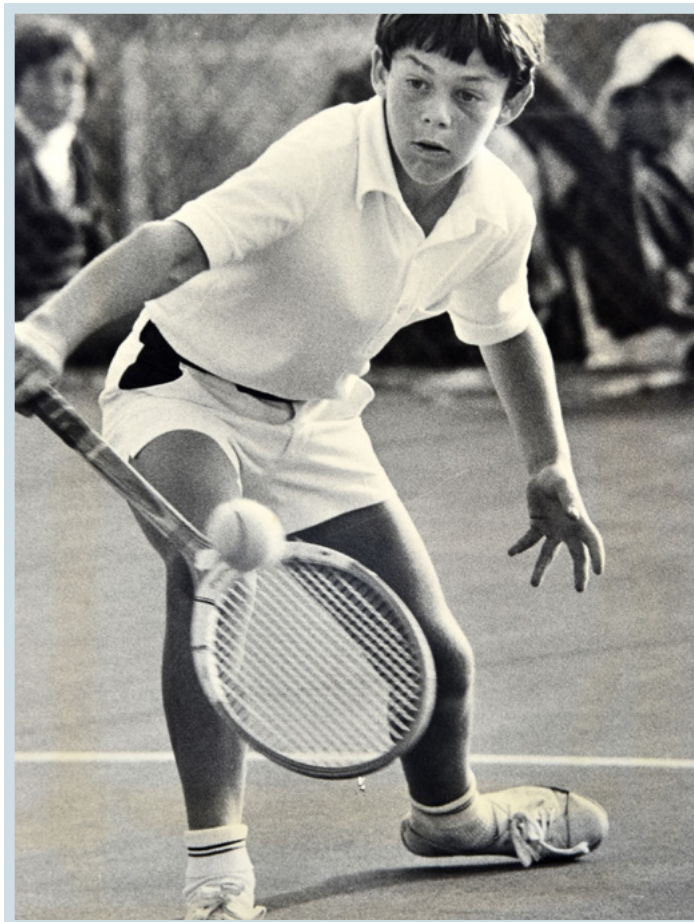
The following is a short list of some of the skills youngsters gain on the tennis court and can benefit from in all spheres of life. They learn how to:

- behave appropriately when meeting other players, parents, coaches and officials
- control their emotions and behaviour when the anxiety of a big match or moment sets in or when they encounter bad behaviour from others
- make fair and honest line calls under pressure
- negotiate towards a fair outcome when there is a dispute
- think clearly on their feet
- assess behaviour and body language of other players
- compete with a 100% effort even though winning is not guaranteed
- develop teamwork and communicate with a doubles partner
- build self-belief to deliver confident future performances in a range of circumstances.

My journey towards self-belief

My competitive tennis journey included a battle against the fear of losing or letting a lead slip following early successes as a 10 year old. Following a very disappointing loss when I squandered countless match points (17 in total) as a 16 year old, I realised I had to change my thought patterns, habits and mindset. I read the *Inner Game of Tennis* (Gallwey, 1974) and started altering my mental approach.

- I improved my focus (present moment awareness, breathing and relaxation exercises) with emphasis on strategy and playing the very next point.
- I forgot mistakes immediately unless a lesson was to be learnt.
- I reframed my self-talk to positive.
- I vividly visualised optimistic performances.



I worked hard on this new approach to my game. In an amazing reverse of fortunes, I won the South African Junior Grass Court Championships two weeks later. The prize was an air ticket to London, Junior Wimbledon and a realisation that I could be a professional tennis player.

During my early years on the ATP Tour I had to convince myself (with focused effort and visualisation techniques) that I had the ability to beat any opponent. Six years later in the third set tie-breaker at the Kremlin Cup in Moscow, I was very focused on my strategy and the very next point. I hit a winning forehand, I pumped my fist and said "come on, next point" to my partner. He ran and jumped into my arms, shouting "we've won!" I was so engrossed in my strategy and the moment that I did not realise it was championship point! This transformation taught me the valuable lesson of what you can achieve when you develop your self-awareness, focus and mindset. It also gave me the self-belief to eventually beat players like Goran Ivanisevic, Andy Roddick and even Roger Federer on a given day.

How do you build self-belief?

I have been asked this question many times.

Through observation, interviews, gathering of information and years of playing experience, I have developed a model to illustrate how an individual can build self-belief over a sustained period of time. I call it the Clear Links Model of Self-belief.

I conducted surveys with 65 tennis players from a range of levels (average to top juniors, club and recreational players) from 2018 to 2020. I found that more than 90% of those people who rated higher on the scale of self-belief were able to learn and move on from their mistakes. Whereas 85% of players who rated lower on self-belief were not able to move on from mistakes. Unsurprisingly, out of those who ranked lower on self-belief, 63% often question their abilities after one or two errors, and 29% always question their abilities after one or two errors.

Bradberry (2009) describes the habit of setting small attainable goals and then recording small victories as a brilliant way to build confidence and self-belief. People with self-belief often focus on their strengths and think about their goals and values, rather than revisiting their mistakes.

Self-belief in action

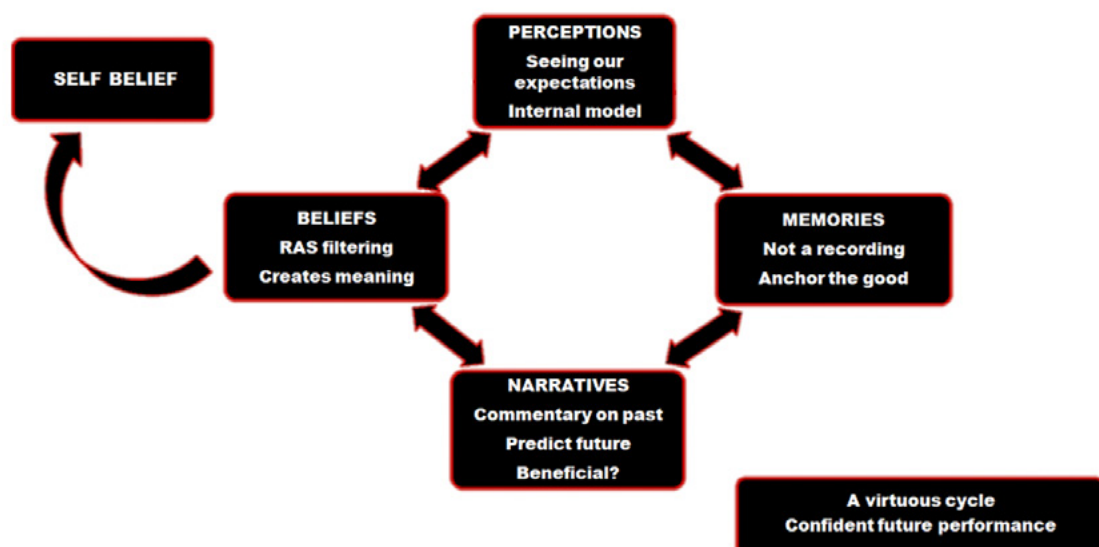
Piet Norval, one of my doubles partners, childhood friend and practice partner (Olympic silver medallist, ATP Finals Doubles Champion) provides a compelling example of the power of self-belief.

At first his highly optimistic beliefs and behaviour intrigued me. His ultra-optimistic mindset, high expectations and self-efficacy helped him to achieve performances beyond his talent level. But when questioning performers who exceeded their level of talent, I realised most had a very good recall of their own good moments, which contrasted with the general tendency to dwell on memories of their own mistakes (survival instinct – focusing on moments of anxiety or threat).

Piet's memories would focus on different moments of the match as well as the ability to see things through a different, more optimistic lens. In doing this he was able to build a sustained high level of expectation about his future performances. I must stress that an optimistic mindset can facilitate an improvement in performance but only when in combination with a strong foundation of practice, preparation and a history of match success.

The Clear Links Model of Self-belief

Let me now illustrate how the Clear Links Model of Self-Belief can be used by individuals to consciously build their self-belief. Self-belief provides the necessary foundation for confident and sustained performance when facing the challenges of sport and, indeed, life in all its aspects.



Perceptions

This continuous interdependent cycle starts with our perception of reality. Every detail of information matters. It is affected by our own biases and the brain's internal model which is the way our brain conserves energy by approximating or predicting what we might experience. For further information, see Eagleman (2015).

Memories

Secondly, our memories are not recordings of our lives. We can decide what to remember, good or bad. Following Piet's example and the way in which Jack Nicklaus (former number one golfer in the world) anchored his good performances and deleted all the day's bad shots will boost your memory bank of optimism.

Narratives

The narrative, which is the story we constantly tell about ourselves and what others believe about us, is then shaped. The importance of the narrative is not only giving commentary on the past but also in helping to predict the future and the level of our expectations.

Beliefs

Finally, our narratives shape our beliefs. We consciously and subconsciously filter information to shape our beliefs and these add meaning to our experiences. The Reticular Activating System (RAS) that operates in our brainstem filters all the information we are exposed to. The RAS will emphasise important information and dismiss those of less importance or not in line with our beliefs. This means that our already held beliefs will continually be re-enforced. If we use this flow of information to our benefit and approach life with optimism, we can really build a strong sustained self-belief.

This continuous interdependent flow of information can be controlled through our optimistic lens of interpretations, but it requires a heightened sense of self-awareness. The end result or aim is a virtuous cycle of confident future performance. It is vital for coaches to understand the sensitivity of information flow and how the cycle will greatly influence their player's level of expectation in relation to future performance. The way we build confidence and narratives around our players can be pivotal in their future lives.



Case study – using the Clear Links Model in practice

Last year, a highly competitive 14-year-old player with high aspirations told me he hated tie-breakers, after a string of tie-break losses. We discussed his goals and that he will probably have to play lots more in the future. We decided to change his perceptions, narrative and terminology regarding tie-breakers. He planned to use visualisation techniques, adapt his language and narrative to enjoy the battle of close tie-breakers.

Initially, he encountered two problems. He could hardly remember any good points from all his previous victories. We had to look back through his earlier results to remind him of significant wins. Secondly, he lost the points when he tried to vividly visualise significant match-winning moments. He said the opponent kept returning his best shots. He agreed to persevere until he could vividly see himself finishing the match with his strength – the forehand. It took several weeks of practising his new habits and perceptions but within a six-month period he won six out of seven tie-breakers. He is now convinced that he actually enjoys playing tie-breakers, hence a more optimistic expectation of the future. Importantly, this process of transformation enabled him to change his perceptions on the importance of winning and he also adopted a healthier perspective on his own self-worth in relation to competition.

Summary

This virtuous cycle of performance is strongly related to the enhancement of player self-belief and to the achievement of concrete results in the sporting arena. But that is not all. Self-belief builds strong characters that are able to face all life's challenges with purpose and confidence. Coaches, parents, supporters and players should be as much concerned with building rounded human beings as with tournament winners.

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Athletes as ‘Learners’: Characteristics of High-quality Learning and Development Environments

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Abstract

This paper presents the key characteristics of a high-quality learning and development environment in the context of a UK Coaching study that was conducted to understand how best to maximise the potential of people in sport. The research involved 13 focus groups with 67 subject matter experts from across 12 different sports, from participation through to high performance. The study identified eight common characteristics of a high-quality learning and development environment: a culture of learning and improvement; a balance of challenge

and support; a person-centred approach; a focus on holistic development; open, accessible and inclusive; adaptive to individual needs; alignment and coherence across the pathway; and a focus on long-term development. These findings will prove useful in informing coach development programmes moving forward.

Keywords

Athlete, talent, identification, development, learning, environment, holistic.

Introduction

In 2018/2019, UK Coaching conducted a qualitative research study to understand how best to maximise the potential of people in sport. The study builds on previous research conducted in the field of talent development environments in sport, in order to understand the current UK context.

The aims of the research were:

- To identify the characteristics of high-quality development environments.
- To understand the individual needs of coaches and athletes.
- To explore the issues / challenges across the pathway.

The research captured insights from over 12 different sports and explored the entire pathway, from entry level through to high performance.

In this study, environments refer to the diverse range of physical settings, spaces, contexts, and cultures in which athletes learn and develop in sport. Throughout the main body of this paper environments are referred to as learning and development environments and athletes are referred to as learners, to emphasise this point.

This paper presents a summary of the key research findings, with a specific focus on the characteristics of high-quality learning and development environments.

Context

Every year, millions of children and young people take part in organised sport. A small number will transition to senior, elite levels of performance, but most will not. For decades, sport scientists have endeavoured to understand the unique characteristics of elite athletes, and how some young athletes make the successful transition to the senior elite level. Within professional sport, talent identification and development has become big business (Wolstencroft, 2002; Martindale, Collins and Abraham, 2007). As such, identifying and developing young people with world-class potential has become an imperative goal for many sports organisations (Coutinho, Mesquita and Fonseca 2016).

While the terms talent identification and talent development are often used interchangeably, they are different constructs, as defined in Box 1.

Box 1

Talent identification (or talent selection) describes the process of recognising and selecting players who show potential to excel at a more advanced level of competition (Cobley, Schorer and Baker, 2012).

Talent development refers to the provision of the most appropriate (i.e., facilitative) environments for athletes to accelerate their learning and performance (Abbott and Collins, 2004).

Many professional sports bodies have adopted schemes to identify and develop athletic talent, and pathways have become increasingly systematised in recent years. Yet, concerns have been raised over the impact of these systems on athletes' health and wellbeing, with questions raised about their overall effectiveness (Ford et al, 2011; Güllich and Emrich, 2012; Vaeyens et al, 2009). Bailey et al (2010) argue that with regards to talent development, current performance is a poor indicator of ability, since individual development is the result of an interaction between inherited abilities, and a host of other influences, such as training, support, parental investment and societal values.

Although extensive amounts of research have been conducted into the identification and development of athletic talent, the research has largely focused on individual characteristics (physical attributes, psychological traits) and external influences (role of coaches, parents, peers). Recent research has highlighted the importance of the broader context or talent development environment in which athletes develop (eg Mathorne, Henriksen and Stambulova, 2020; Martindale and Mortimer, 2011; Mills et al, 2014). Research suggests that athletes need more conducive development environments to maximise their full potential (Abbott and Collins, 2004; Williams and Reilly, 2000) and thus more focus should be placed on identifying and enhancing environmental factors (Bailey et al, 2011).

Various environmental, ecological or holistic models have been proposed (eg Henriksen 2010; Henriksen, Stambulova, and Roessler 2010; Henriksen and Stambulova, 2017; Martindale, Collins and Daubney, 2005) and a wide range of potential factors that affect talent development have been identified



(eg Henriksen 2010; Henriksen, Stambulova, and Roessler 2010, Henriksen and Stambulova, 2017; Martindale, Collins, and Abraham, 2007).

Henriksen et al (2010, 2010, 2017) created the Athletic Talent Development Environment (see Box 2 for a definition) as a framework for studying sport environments from a holistic, ecological perspective. The model focuses on the holistic environment and suggests that some environments are superior to others in their capacity to guide talented young athletes to the senior elite level. Henriksen (2010) argues that successful talent development environments are characterised by training groups with supportive relationships; proximal role models; support of sporting goals by the wider environment; support for the development of psycho-social skills; training that allows for diversification; focus on long term development; and a strong and coherent organisational culture. This holistic approach encourages practitioners to broaden their focus beyond the individual in order to facilitate the successful transition of young athletes to the elite senior level.

Box 2

'An athletic talent development environment (ATDE) is a dynamic system comprising a) an athlete's immediate surroundings at the micro-level where athletic and personal development take place, b) the interrelations between these surroundings, c) at the macro-level, the larger context in which these surroundings are embedded, and d) the organizational culture of the sports club or team, which is an integrative factor of the ADTE's effectiveness in helping young talented athletes to develop into senior elite athletes'.

Henriksen (2010, p.160)

Martindale, Collins, and Abraham (2007) argue that the talent development environment is the most consistent and immediately controllable factor in the life of a developing elite athlete. They identified five key generic characteristics of effective talent development environments: a focus on long-term aims and methods; wide-ranging coherent messages and support; an emphasis on appropriate development, and not early success; individualised and ongoing development; and integrated, holistic and systematic development. They also highlight the key challenges of organisations implementing these strategies successfully, including lack of coherent

aims between levels of development and clear long-term pathways; poor communication; lack of funding; and cultural issues.

The research demonstrates the complex and multidimensional nature of talent development environments and suggests that further investigation is required to understand the characteristics of successful environments.

Method

The research involved 13 focus groups and interviews with 67 diverse subject matter experts from across the UK and beyond. The interviews and focus groups were organised thematically, around six subject themes of investigation: talent development, physical development, sports psychology, relationships and well-being, skill acquisition, and nutrition. Within each focus group, research participants were drawn from similar fields.

The sessions were semi-structured in nature, organised and conducted in relation to exploration across these themes, in order to focus the discussions. The sessions were audio recorded and transcribed, and thematic analysis was undertaken of around thirty hours of discussion.

Key findings

At the start of the discussions, research participants were asked to describe a high-quality learning and development environment. Key words used to describe a high-quality learning and development environment are presented in the word cloud and the eight most common themes are summarised below.



1. A culture of learning and improvement

A key feature of a high-quality development environment is a shared culture of learning and improvement, where everyone – coaches, athletes, managers and support staff – work collaboratively to ‘get better together’. Within this shared culture of learning and improvement, all key stakeholders understand the value of learning with, and from, each other.

“We’re going to get each other better, because the better you get, the better we get’. That was the philosophy.”

“The environment had created a space where they [the athletes] were all about trying to improve the others and I have vivid memories of those years where players would stop training and be like ‘no, you’ve got to be better here’. And this is someone they’re going to be competing with for a starting place on Saturday. It still stands out as one of the most exceptional environments I’ve been involved in.”

To highlight the importance of establishing a learning and improvement culture, research participants commonly referred to talent development environments as ‘learning and development environments’, athletes as ‘learners’ and coaches as ‘learning designers’ throughout the focus group conversations.

“I say to coaches ‘you’re not a coach, you’re not a teacher, you’re a learning designer’, which means that their job is to design an environment that is conducive to the athlete learning. That really is quite a subtle nuance, and it is certainly quite powerful, because you’re empowering the athlete.”

“We need to position the athlete as a learner and adopt learning design principles.”

“Ultimately everyone involved in these systems and environments are learners and it’s a network of learning that potentially takes you to a decent place.”

The role of the coach in setting the tone and creating an environment that embeds learning, was highlighted. The coach was seen as the key catalyst for learning, through supporting, guiding and motivating athletes – or learners – on their learning journey. Helping them to ‘learn how to learn’ and understand the ideas and practices associated with the learning process itself, was seen as a fundamental part of the coaching role.

“If we get them to learn to learn, they then learn to adapt and self-organise and problem-solve when they’re not with us or when they’re in the next environment, rather than learning only taking place when the coach is there, helping or instructing.”

A key theme to emerge from the conversations was the importance of developing independent, self-regulated learners, and empowering learners to take responsibility for their own learning and development.

“In order to succeed in high performance, athletes need to become independent learners who take responsibility for their development.”

“I take that notion of the athlete taking ownership of their own development and tapping into the coaches and anyone else that appears in the environment and using them for the expertise they have, but it’s the athlete driving it.”

To optimise learning, and to foster learning and improvement cultures, the importance of developing coaches who are independent and can self-regulate was also highlighted.

2. A balance of challenge and support

Another key feature of a high-quality learning and development environment is that it provides the right balance of challenge and support. There was a recognition that simply winning games or matches does not stretch the learner and introducing challenge helps to prepare learners for the different scenarios they might experience as they progress through the pathway.

“You are not developing people when you’re winning every game. We tried to introduce bigger challenges to actually lose some games. We had to explain to the parents and to the players that it’s useful, as you’re not going to win that many games when you’re a senior player.”

“We would work with coaches a lot, in terms of periodising challenge on the pathway for the highflyer. If things are going in a nice linear path, we know that’s not great for future success, so we would purposely put in bumps along the road, to help them.”

Discussions highlighted the importance of taking learners out of their comfort zone, for example by playing them up a level, and the resulting impact on them having to deal with bigger, or more powerful players. The point was made that it is not

necessarily the challenge that is important, but the learning from that experience, and the skills that would be developed as a result of that experience.

“First, it’s not the challenge, but it’s what they learn from the challenge. So now you’re going to come up against more physical people, more tactically aware people, it’s going to be much tougher. So, you have this and now we’re going to make it like this, but we’ve given you some of the skills to cope with it.”

Recognised within many of the discussions was the need for challenge to be introduced earlier in the pathway, while ensuring that it is appropriate to the individual’s age and stage of development.

“The real problem is that we wait for those challenges too late, rather than put some of them in early, and the support around them. The best players look back on their career and talk about challenges as the thing that makes them.”

Research participants discussed the importance of competition, both internal and external, and the need to ensure a clear and concise pathway that exposes and challenges the learner at the right time. This was particularly highlighted in the transition from the first selective environment into performance environments, where there was some concern over whether the right competition opportunities were available.

Where there are high levels of challenge, there also needs to be an appropriate support structure in place.

“My emphasis would be on balance I think, balance on support and challenge in line with the growth of the athlete, in line with an outcome, but also the individual because I think that’s absolutely crucial.”

The challenge – and a person’s response to it – was seen as a positive, but there needs to be an effective support network and a supportive environment in place to manage that process.

3. A person-centred approach

A key defining feature of a high-quality learning and development environment is that it is person-centred and responsive to the needs of the individual learner – centred on them and tailored to their specific needs.

“The notion of developing the person and not the player approach – for me, there’s more success in that.”

“I think it’s important to understand that what makes a rich environment in terms of that development of talent is the coach needs to understand that it’s about the players. If the coaches aren’t of that mindset then you can see a danger sometimes where it becomes about the coaches and actually the spotlight really should be on the development of the players.”

High quality environments recognise individual differences and are able to differentiate. They recognise that there is not a standard ‘one size fits all’ model, but different types of learners, at different stages of development, requiring different levels of support and challenge.

“Because it’s differentiated it’s therefore personalised to the unique needs of the individual... it therefore becomes strength-based because it’s working from the perspective of what the individual brings to the environment rather than the environment trying to squeeze the individual into it.”

The importance of developing individualised learning plans was highlighted – where the development expectations are clearly set out, and all stakeholders, including the learner, are engaged in the planning process.

“The other one I think is incredibly healthy is clearly articulated expectations. The athlete will get x, y and z, and in return a, b and c is expected. And our expectation is that you will join [the pathway] because it’s fair, because it’s open, because it’s transparent, because you benefit from it, therefore we expect you to be part of it. So, those are clearly articulated expectations.”

“I think in our culture, everybody is an individual and they should have an individualised program and they should be allowed to be their own person. So, we don’t have a set, this is the ‘our way’. Behave in whatever way is natural to you to behave.”

Within this context there was also a warning about the potential pressure that could be placed on learners in environments that are too focussed on the individual per se.

“I’ve seen environments where you overdo that, where people are trying to be completely athlete-centred about it. And what the athlete’s doing is sitting there thinking, actually, there’s enough pressure on me, but now it’s all about me and it’s all about how to deliver and, you know,



all the guys behind the scenes, and if I don't do it I'm letting them down."

Achieving the right balance is key.

"It's about the individual, and they are clear that it's about them. But that's done in such a way that they don't feel pressured that everyone else is depending on them, or their performance, but they know they have resources around them."

The challenge of adopting person-centred approaches in large group settings was also highlighted.

4. A focus on holistic development

A core theme to emerge throughout the focus groups was the importance of developing the whole person beyond the athlete. Success being defined as producing healthy and rounded individuals, some of whom will continue into high performance sport, but most will not.

"I think it's about developing people. They're a person first before they become a sprinter, a rugby player or a golfer. It's not just about the player. It's that whole person approach and the holistic view of their development as a player."

"I guess it builds on this idea of holistic players. From a player perspective, holistically feeling supported and understood by all the parts of the system, so seeing them as people as much as they are athletes and being recognised as that."

"We're really looking at the fullness of the individual. That is all our jobs to make sure we don't lose sight of the person and actually, we should be trying to make them a better person as well."

As such, there was recognition around not only developing the physical and psychological attributes of individuals along their respective pathways, but also paying attention to the wider social contexts of their lives and preparing them for a life beyond of sport, whenever that may occur.

"We need to spend at least some time trying to work on the personal attributes, if not the academic attributes, so they are prepared for when they leave the sport and to manage them through the sport. I know full well the players I work with aren't going

to be able to do A-levels, but you can definitely develop their psycho-social skills as well as their life skills."

The importance of allowing and encouraging learners to engage in other sports and other opportunities outside of sport (eg education, work) was highlighted.

"Some sports do it well, they have good educational development alongside the pathway, social development alongside the pathway, and allow people other opportunities. So, they can do some other good things on their journey rather than just being the cyclist or the rugby player, or the football player."

"There was really value-based off the pitch stuff, like they did philosophy and still, I think, run a philosophy club and are getting players into doing degrees and doing further education. They started up a crèche so that actually the players could bring their kids into work. The crèche was then provided onsite at the training venue. Loads of stuff like that which I think takes into account that sense of it being about the whole person. It's not just about the player."

"So, especially when they're competing at international levels, we're supporting them if they want to learn a language, take a class, learn other skills and providing the resources for them to do that."

Providing a healthy balance of opportunities is key. This will help to ensure that learners have an identity beyond sport and are equipped for life outside of the development pathway.

5. Open, accessible and inclusive

Creating and maintaining an open, accessible and inclusive learning and development environment was regarded a key priority for a number of people. The importance of casting the net wide open, and for as long as possible, in order to ensure a wider and open pool of potential talent higher up the pathway was also highlighted. This affords the time and space to nurture and develop learners holistically, and also reduces the pressure to identify talent early.

“It is very much a case of trying to give as much opportunity as possible to all those with potential, and so keeping the pathways as open as possible.”

“Where I saw it working well is where an Academy Manager had very good relationships with key schools, lots of clubs and the way they talent spotted if you like, was over a number of years people would just ring up and go, 'by the way, we've got this good player, come and have a look'. He said, if he heard that three times over a year or a couple of years, then he'd go and have a look. It's just being well-connected and it naturally creates this big net where players just develop over time and they're not lost.”

Discussions also centred on the need to create inclusive environments, where diversity is valued and where every learner feels safe, secure and a sense of belonging. The importance of learners being able to express themselves and being accepted for who they are was also highlighted.

“They have to be innovative, have to be caring, have to be supportive... you've got to create an environment where players want to be.”

“That's where the term psychological safety comes from - 'I feel supported and I feel like I belong here' and it's that belonging bit for me, it's massive.”

“The foundation of it is one where you feel secure, one where you feel safe, one where you feel there's mutual respect.”

Fundamentally, creating an environment where people want to go, and where they feel welcome and included, is key.

6. Adaptive to individual needs

A similar theme to emerge from discussions was a recognition that learning and development is unpredictable and rarely linear: people progress at different rates, at different times.

“I think a big problem is the motivation to have things nice and tidy and neat, in that here is the participation bit and here is the performance bit and here is the talent bit and here is where coaches work and here is what they do. Development is non-linear, so it doesn't necessarily fit into something like that. In fact, there are lots of roundabouts and

side alleys that the best players should be able to take to get there. If we make things very linear on the pathway or within the model, then we lose some of the potential diamonds, because they don't fit in. And actually, the best ones rarely fit in, so we're bound to lose them if our pathway is like that.”

Discussions centred around the need for development pathways to have some degree of flexibility in order to respond to the changing needs of the individual. The point was made that development systems need to avoid being too rigid, and more malleable and sensitive to individual learning and development.

“The idea that the environment is going to change based on how the learner and individual is changing, I think that is a critical one. If we can get that right, then a lot of other problems solve themselves.”

While it was recognised that the development pathway needs some structure, and pathway opportunities should be clear, visible and planned-out, individuals should be able to move in, out and through the system with ease.

“Once an athlete is in the system and they might drop out of the system, there may be something going on in their lives or something has happened, that they've always got this view that the door is open for them to be brought back in again, so it's not an all or nothing thing.”

“There are always examples of players leaving the system, talented and high ability performers leaving the system, because the system is not flexible enough to cater for their needs.”

“If you're on a pathway and you're cut, you will not return to that sport. In other words, you're out of sport. You lose all interest because you've invested so much... then you are suddenly crushed.”

As such, providing alternative options and multiple entry, exit and re-entry points, was regarded a key priority for a number of research participants. This helps to sustain engagement and a love of sport, even if people drop out of the pathway temporarily.

7. Alignment and coherence across the pathway

Another key theme to emerge throughout the focus groups was one of alignment and coherence across

the pathway, and consistent messaging amongst all stakeholders, whereby everyone involved is aware of – and signed up to – a common vision about what was being sought to be achieved, or the ultimate end goal.

“There is a lack of coherence in the pathway, in relation to what happens above and below where you’re working and a lack of understanding between key stakeholders – parents, players, coaches, governance.”

There is a need for this alignment across all stages of the pathway – from entry level through to high performance – and clarity of understanding of how each stage of the pathway connects and contributes to other stages. Understanding a learners’ trajectory and their (non-linear) journey along that pathway is key, but also awareness of what to do to prepare learners at each stage of the pathway.

“For me it’s around having a clear [shared] mission and purpose, and real clear understanding of what is typical at this stage of development and what do we need to embed here so that they can then progress to the next stage.”

“If you want to have someone that’s going to be capable of managing that super resource-intensive system, then we can’t just wait for them at 17 to enter the high-performance system without having exposure to those kinds of resources throughout the pathway.”

Improved alignment, coherence and consistent messaging will help prepare people through transitions, both in terms of training load and managing expectations. However, some commentators were wary of placing too much emphasis on transition, emphasising that it was just a natural part of any stage in life, and as long as people were sufficiently prepared, it might not be such a difficult process.

8. A focus on long-term development

There was a great deal of discussion about the importance of ensuring a focus on long-term development. There was recognition of the short-term (largely financial) pressures that exist within some environments, and the competing demands of developing and nurturing learners over the long term, versus the need to focus on the technical and tactical skills to perform in the next game or at the next competition.

“A focus on long term development (rather than short term development, that places a focus on winning), where the focus is on development, and inclusion along the pathway.”

“Having a long-term philosophy is just that they’re trying to make that person or whatever the goals are, become a professional sports person, be a good person, whatever it might be.”

Research participants acknowledged the challenge of adopting a long-term philosophy, recognising that people tend to operate within their own environment and therefore find it difficult to build in an appreciation of deferred rewards, or longer-term aims.

“Quite often the focus is to get their athletes selected and to win as many games as they can at under 15’s and 16’s and 18’s, not thinking about performance later, thinking about performance now as opposed to development. That’s a real challenge.”

Some of the ways this could be achieved is through closer, more collaborative working between different environments and through redefining the measure of success. Rather than measuring success on winning or losing, success is defined over a longer period in terms of maintaining participation in the sport, and enabling learners to maximise their potential and ‘be the best that they can be’.

Summary

The aim of this paper was to develop and inform our understanding of high-quality learning and development environments. Recognising that no two contexts are the same, the interviews and focus groups have provided a rich source of data and identified eight common themes that characterise high quality learning and improvement environments: a culture of learning and improvement; a balance of challenge and support; a person-centred approach; a focus on holistic development; open, accessible and inclusive; adaptive to individual needs; alignment and coherence across the pathway; and a focus on long-term development.

While the data from this research is still being interrogated, the findings resonate with existing research in this field. At the broadest, systemic level, the issue of a complete, coherent development pathway was key. In many of the conversations,

the pathway felt like a series of distinct stages, rather than a coherent whole. Issues around competing definitions of success and the pressure to 'win' notwithstanding, much of the discussions revolved around redefining what success means and developing a whole-pathway view of a learners' journey.

The contemporary change in pedagogy to one which is more person-centred was noted and welcomed almost universally, and awareness of the 'whole person' beyond sport was a key theme of discussion. The duty to care and supporting learners to ensure they have a wide set of transferable attributes, skills and qualifications, was seen as a moral imperative.

This paper has drawn out the key characteristics of high-quality learning and development environments. While the focus groups and interviews were wide-ranging and discussions, in places, detailed and encompassing, it is acknowledged that not all issues have been identified or discussed. Further analysis is being undertaken and will be shared in due course, but it is hoped that these findings will prove useful in informing coach development programmes moving forward.

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Book Review: What Does this Look Like in the Classroom? Bridging the Gap Between Research and Practice

Book by: Carl Hendrick and Robin Macpherson

Reviewed by: Mark Scott

Although this is an education book, it asks questions that I often find myself pondering about coaching. Overall, the book tries to get teachers to engage with research in a meaningful way. As someone who recognises the value of research on coaching practice, I would argue there should be a responsibility on coaches to adopt a more research-informed approach. I also wonder how we can get coaches to engage with research to inform their practice?

The idea for the book came about through the authors asking the very question in the title – ‘What does this research actually look like in the classroom?’ Or, more specifically, ‘Will this work with a group of eight year olds on a cold November morning in Liverpool?’ The reality of this second statement strikes me when I think about coaches and their attitudes to research – they want to know what works when they are out there actually coaching, with the people they are coaching, in the conditions they are coaching in.

Back to the book. Carl and Robin seem to agree with this as they say for education research to have an impact where it matters most, it should be accessible, relevant and above all practicable. On this matter, they argue a key problem has been successful implementation of good quality research – how can we ensure the practical application matches what the research says?

Historically, this has been an issue due to what the authors call an ‘outside-in’ model of research into effective teaching, as they claim teachers have been ‘objects of study’ in the research for what constitutes good practice. Indeed, that ‘teachers have been given answers to questions they didn’t

ask and given solutions to problems that never existed’. This is another interesting point for me related to coaching – how well do we really seek out coaches’ real problems or questions for starting points for coaching research and education?

This brings us to the idea: linking up real teachers who have questions related to their existing practice with people who know the research in a given area. So that’s what they did – ask teachers to send in their questions, then put these questions into topic themes and ask two experts in that field to answer the questions with knowledge and practical examples. Each topic area makes up a chapter, which is introduced by either Carl or Robin, to set the scene with the key issues and debate.

I like a lot of the method employed. The author chapter introductions are great and are a 3-4 page mini-chapter worth reading alone as a summary of the topic, whether as an introduction to the material or a scene-setter. Two experts for each topic is also a masterstroke, as this allows a slightly different answer or opinion for each question. Being careful not to cause confusion, these different slants and views build on each other and give the reader chance to consider different sides to an argument. This is a good way to get readers to avoid the search for the ‘silver bullet’ and instead consider more reflectively on practices that have been shown to work and how they might be relevant in their context.

The book works really well as a tool that can be used as an ongoing learning resource. The bite-sized chapter introductions mentioned above, and question and answer set-up, mean you can pick it up any time and dip in and out of one chapter or even



one question at a time. When I first got the book, I initially read the chapters of topics I was most interested in, or needed to learn about at the time. Since then, I have found myself picking it up on a regular basis to refer to a particular question, or just skimming through, reading what takes my attention.

As for the content, we are treated to an insight into the minds of some of education's best thinkers. It really is a who's who of education's foremost researchers and practitioners. Again, the brilliance comes in the format, as we get to hear from so many renowned people about the topic they are considered an expert. Dylan Wiliam and Daisy Christodoulou on assessment; Paul Kirschner and Yana Weinstein on memory; Doug Lemov on questioning; the list goes on.

This is another point the book made me consider about the world of coaching; we have so many researchers and experts in so many specialist areas, such as physiology, psychology, skill acquisition and sociology, yet lots of learning in coach education tends to be delivered by people who are more generic or technical in their expertise. I wonder how we can tap into specialist experts more in some of these fields in coach learning and development?

The experts get to discuss some of what research is finding to be the 'best bets' of teaching practice, such as spaced learning and retrieval practice, but more importantly, they give many hints, tips and examples about how the research findings can be applied in the classroom. It's great that most of the experts are current teachers or have taught in the past, so they can draw upon real examples and ideas they have actually used. Applying this to coaching, it is good to see lots of coaching

researchers purposely getting out and coaching more and I would suggest we can learn from the book's approach by encouraging even more coach-researchers and researcher-coaches to collaborate and work together to shape research and practice in the future.

Another lesson from this book is one about professional learning. The authors make the point about the millions of pounds being spent on professional development every year and the frightening reality of the quality of that development being at best mixed. It is devastating to think of the amount of time teachers have spent preparing resources, lessons and curriculum based on fads or dubious initiatives and not evidence from research. On the other hand, this book, and others like it, as well as blogs and quality online learning and development can provide low-cost and ongoing professional learning that actually has a positive impact on practice. In fact, the authors argue that reading as a form of professional learning is the way forward! As I write this review for this Applied Coaching Research Journal, I wonder if this is another lesson we can transfer into our world of coaching?

Not only is this book a great read and reference guide that can be picked off the shelf time and again, the method it uses to bridge the gap between research and practice is a genius one. For me, the challenge has been laid down here for research and practice in coaching to come together more and in the ways this book shows. I will certainly be taking the idea of gathering coaches' questions to ask experts to answer for content in the future.

How could you help bridge the gap?

The Curious Coaches' Club

Paul Thompson

UK Coaching

What is the Curious Coaches' Club?

During the coronavirus outbreak, many coaches reached out to us to say that they 'felt helpless' because of the pandemic, and that the lockdown was having a real impact on them and their coaching role.

We felt like we needed to take action quickly to keep people together and to help the coaching workforce maintain a sense of identity and belonging during this period of uncertainty. As such, we established the Curious Coaches' Club – a series of free webinars which give coaches an opportunity to connect with each other in a virtual environment. The Club is a place where coaches can come together to continue their learning and have conversations on topics that they feel are important to them. But as much as anything, it's a place where coaches can interact with one another, and to feel a sense of belonging as a coach, when physically they may not be able to get on the pitch or the court. We wanted to give coaches a means of getting together virtually, to help minimise the impact of the lockdown, whilst providing a safe space to be a coach.

We also used the ConnectedCoaches forum <https://community.ukcoaching.org/> – our free online coaching community, where any questions raised during the webinar can be further discussed.

Who is the Curious Coaches' Club aimed at?

Whatever your role – coach, facilitator, instructor, leader, helper, teacher or trainer – if you're helping people to be active and improve, the Curious Coaches' Club is here for you. The sessions aim to support coaches operating at every level, from playground to podium, with the knowledge and skills to operate confidently and competently so that they can meet the wants, needs and dreams of the people they coach.

When does the Curious Coaches' Club take place?

How do the sessions work?

The Curious Coaches' Club has three parts to it:

1. Attend a webinar, which is usually 'A conversation about...' between coaches and experts live on a Monday, or watch on-demand via ukcoaching.org
2. Engage and take part in a more in-depth conversation about the topic on the following Wednesday, via smaller informal gatherings of coaches, hosted by a member of the UK Coaching team. To attend a session, you must have attended the live webinar or watched it 'on demand' via ukcoaching.org
3. Continue the conversation via ConnectedCoaches – our free online community for coaches of all sports and activities.

What is discussed?

We have tried to facilitate discussions that help solve real-world problems. So, the first session we delivered was 'Coaching from your home to their garden' to support coaches to continue to deliver remotely. It has been great to look at social media and see all the creativity on show – parents with kids creating their own games, coaches posting ideas of different practices, and kids designing sessions themselves. We wanted to underpin this with some coaching principles about how to get the best out of these moments.

The webinars give coaches the opportunity to listen to experts talk about particular topics, as well as having further in-depth discussions in a community of practice of 10 or 12 people, where they can share and bounce ideas off one another.

Some of the common themes across all sessions have been:

- Understanding self
- Understanding people
- Coaching practice
- Coaching environments.



Great coaching goes beyond just the technical and tactical elements of sport. It's about the person-centred experience.

What are the best bits to date?

There are too many to mention, but a few that have stood out for me so far are:

Feedback from coaches – this has been the best bit! Ultimately, we're here to help the coach be the best they can be. We're here to help them connect with the people in front of them and to put their dreams, feelings, needs and well-being at the heart of coaching.

So, it has been great hearing some of the feedback and the difference it has made to coaches:

- 'It was ace! So helpful! Really keeps me uplifted!'
- 'It's an excellent way of keeping connected. Learning loads from listening to talks by other coaches.'
- 'Great to connect. I have been feeling quite lethargic about work and exercise, but it has helped give me a bit of inspiration to do something.'
- 'Brilliant getting the opportunity to talk with coaches from different disciplines and sports. I really enjoyed that and looking forward to joining webinars in the future.'

Player's special – at UK Coaching we believe that it is people that change people – and to leverage the full potential of participants, coaching should first and foremost be person-centred.

It was great to have a session looking at coaching from a player's perspective. The players' messages were used to celebrate coaches and create belief and trust in the coaching workforce. This goes to show that the benefits of coaching go far beyond helping people become better athletes. Coaching positively and profoundly impacts on all aspects of people's lives.

Athlete A – the session on the latest Netflix documentary, which focused on the gymnasts who survived USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar's abuse and the reporters who exposed USAG's toxic culture, was a big moment for me. Now more than ever before we need to look after the people we work with, regardless of where they are on their sport and physical activity journey. So, discussing the Athlete A documentary, and the implications for coaches linked to Duty to Care, was such an important topic to cover.

What do you have in the pipeline for future Curious Coaches' Clubs?

We are keen to evolve and shape the Curious Coaches' Club. We are committed to ensure that coaches stay connected and have the opportunity to develop and improve during this time.

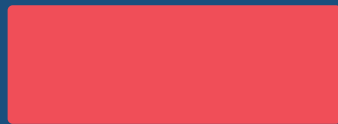
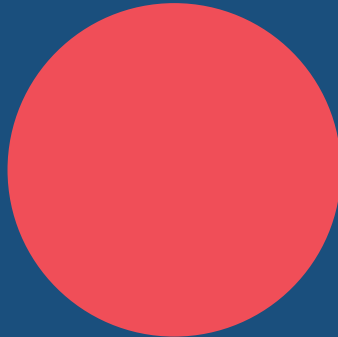
We would like people to shape the future of the Club, so if you have any feedback or comments, please do not hesitate to get in contact via the email below. Feedback is extremely important to us and will be used to improve future sessions and assess the value and impact of those sessions on the coaching workforce.

How do I get involved?

Find out more about the Curious Coaches' Club by heading to ukcoaching.org

I'm interested in delivering a Curious Coaches' Club session, who should I contact?

If you would like to get involved, please get in touch with a member of the UK Coaching team via: coachingsupport@ukcoaching.org



UK Coaching Research Conference 2021

–Coaching for All–

UK Coaching will be hosting its first virtual research conference on Wednesday 17 March 2021.




Now in its fourth year, the conference provides an opportunity for individuals interested in research – whether they're coaching system professionals and policymakers; coaches and coach developers; learning designers, students, researchers and academics – to share findings from **ongoing research** projects; learn about the **latest developments** in coaching; and **discover new and innovative ways** to conduct research.

Further information, please visit the UK Coaching website:
<https://www.ukcoaching.org/events/our-research-conference>



We would love your feedback!

This is the sixth *Applied Coaching Research Journal*, and it would be great to hear your thoughts on the journal so far.

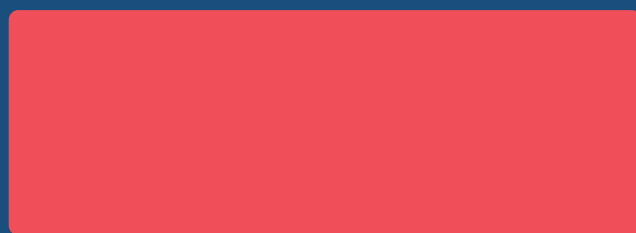
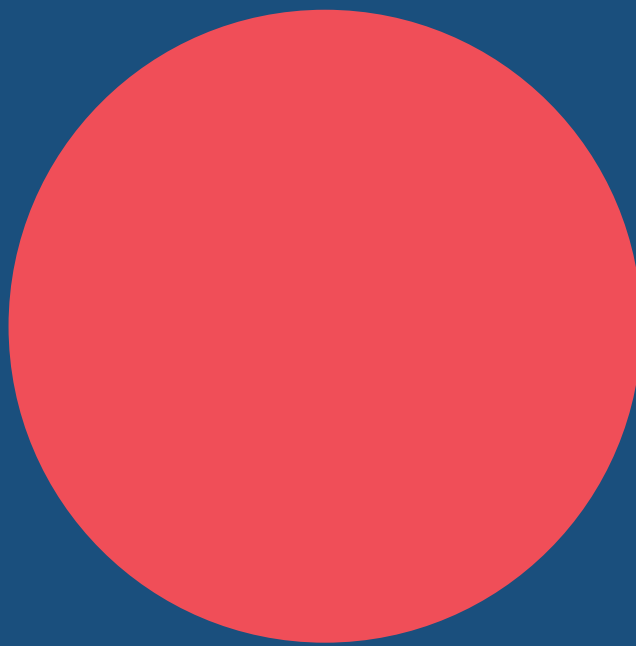
-  What do you like about the journal?
-  Is there anything you would do differently?
-  What content would you like to see?

If you would like to provide feedback on the journal, please complete this short survey:

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/UKCresearchjournal2020>

Alternatively, please email researchteam@ukcoaching.org

All feedback is welcome.



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