



# **Perceptions of Coaches and Coaching**

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## **Introduction**

Earlier this year we commissioned Know Research to conduct research to understand how the general public perceive coaches and coaching.

We want to better understand public perceptions in order to help us raise the profile of coaching, improve recruitment practices into coaching and examine how attitudes towards coaching can affect sports participation.

Within these aims we also wanted to examine whether there are different perceptions across different groups – for example, by gender, age or social background – and within different sporting environments – using Sport England’s four environments model as a basis for enquiry.

In this report we present the key strategic findings from the research and discuss how we might want to consider taking the learning forward in our future work.

## **Methodology**

Know Research implemented a mixed-methodological approach to conduct this research. Initially, 12 individuals were recruited to take part in an in-depth face-to-face interview. They were also asked to complete a sporting history prior to the interview, documenting their sporting life from the age of 14 to present day.

The in-depth interviews examined how their sporting history contributed to their perceptions of coaches and coaching. The interviewees were split into three groups – currently play sport and coached, currently play sport and not coached and not currently playing any sport.

With the data gathered Know Research developed a range of perceptions which were tested for accuracy with a sample of 2,000 people in a national omnibus survey. The survey helps us understand which groups hold which perceptions, how the perceptions differ across the groups and how they affect the different groups’ sports participation and attitudes to sport.

## 1. How do the public perceive coaches and coaching?

The research found that while there is not one single perception of sports coaches, the traditional stereotype of a white man in a tracksuit bellowing instructions and bossing people around is not a commonly held view.

Through word association the research identified overwhelmingly positive perceptions of coaches categorised into six key groups:

- Competent
- Honest
- Friendly yet tough
- Respected
- Good communicators
- Passionate

And, in a small minority of cases where coaches were placed in an additional group called Insincere, this was most often used to describe personal trainers/instructors in gym/health club/leisure centre settings. In this context the 'coach' was sometimes seen as a sycophant who is likely to tell participants what they want to hear in order to ensure they keep coming back (see Section 2).

There was also one mention of coaches as Pushy, however this perception was formed from an individual's personal experience of a coach who pushed them too hard and ultimately put them off sport.

Statistically, aggressive (16%), sycophantic (10%), glamorous (2%) and inexperienced (2%) were the words least commonly associated with sports coaches. The most commonly associated words were patient (44%), passionate (37%) and friendly (36%).

Unsurprisingly where negative views were identified these were most common amongst people who do not currently play any sport, and least common amongst those who are currently coached.

There are also some differences in perceptions by demographic groups:

- Men are more likely than women to view coaches as:
  - Technical
- Women are more likely than men to view coaches as:
  - Patient
  - Tough
  - Strict
- Older people are more likely than younger people to view coaches as:
  - Patient
  - Friendly

- Reliable
- Sincere
- Younger people are more likely than older people to view coaches as:
  - Passionate
  - Tough
  - Strict
  - Aggressive
- People from middle-class backgrounds are more likely than people from working-class backgrounds to view coaches as:
  - Patient
  - Technical

## **1.2 How can we use this insight?**

### **1.2.1 Mythbusting**

The research shows that stereotypical views of coaches are not particularly common in the wider public consciousness. It gives us the evidence base to drive this message home and raise the profile of coaching in a positive way, further reducing the visibility of these stereotypes.

Whether this is via a marketing campaign or other dissemination methods, we can now show that the public are more likely to think of coaches positively (i.e. as competent, friendly, respected, passionate individuals who can have a positive impact on sports participation - see Section 3).

We also know from the research that where negativity does exist, it often comes from individuals who have had a negative past experience with a coach (and potentially one they have carried with them for many years). This could also be used to frame any outgoing messages around coaching, for example, to ensure people understand coaching – and sport in general – is likely a very different environment to the one they remember from years ago.

## **2. What about the four Sport England environments?**

We provided Know Research with the four Sport England environments diagram detailing where people play sport. This was included in the initial qualitative interviews to try and understand whether there are different perceptions of coaches/coaching in the different environments.

In truth, the data collected provide us with more questions than answers. There is clarity around two of the environments and how coaches are perceived within them.

In Sports Clubs, coaches are typically seen as:

- Experienced in their sport
- Likely to be volunteers
- Organisers & administrators
- Tacticians

In contrast, in Gyms/Health Clubs/Leisure Centres coaches are typically seen as:

- Expected to be fit themselves
- Likely to be professionals
- Knowledgeable about physiology, nutrition, etc.

The role of coaches in the self-organised and pay and play environments is far less clear. Know Research feedback that interviewees found these two environments confusing and difficult to understand, often identifying sports which they believed fit into the environments before changing their minds and placing them in sports club or gyms, health clubs or leisure centres.

Perhaps most interestingly they did not see a role for coaches in either environment (and therefore could not provide their perceptions of what a coach is/does in each). This contradicts the data gathered in our Participant Survey 2014, where 7% of coached adults say they play in a self-organised setting and 2% play in pay and play.

As detailed in an additional Participant Survey report focusing on the four Sport England environments this raises a number of important points for consideration.

### **2.1 How can we use this insight?**

#### **2.1.1 Points to consider**

The insight gathered around the four Sport England environments is very limited therefore it is difficult to identify any possible uses at this stage. However, what we do have provides us with some points for consideration.

The first of these, which has already received plenty of discussion recently, relates to the question of what is a coach/coaching?

As we might have expected club coaches appear to be perceived as coaches, activators and administrators all rolled into one.

Secondly, whether we agree with it or not, some people perceive instructors and personal trainers in Gyms, Health Clubs and Leisure Centres to be coaches.

Messages around these roles may need to be tailored given they fulfil very different, fitness orientated roles to traditional sports coaches and have more negative perceptions associated with them (i.e. as detailed in Section 1, the sycophant/pushy coach).

In terms of the self-organised and pay and play environments, the only real clarity is how unclear we are on the role of coaching. The questions raised in the four environments Participant Survey report are still relevant – if participants say they are being coached in these environments, what does the coaching look like and how often does it take place?

### 3. Do perceptions of coaches/coaching link to participation?

The short answer is yes. The research shows that the positive perceptions identified lead to positive attitudes towards sports participation.

The results give us very useful evidence to support our belief that coaching has a positive impact on participation.

The data are particularly useful when considering the different participant groups. The people who currently play sport and are coached display attitudes towards participation that we might expect.

They are most likely to say they would currently like to receive coaching and generally hold the most positive perceptions of sports coaches.

However the people who currently play sport but are not coached and the people who do not play any sport at all provide arguably the most powerful findings.

These include:

- One in four (26%) people who play sport but are not currently coached say they would like to receive coaching
- Over a third (38%) say a coach would encourage them to play sport more often
- Within the non-coached group, the potential for a coach to increase participation is strongest amongst women – 43% said a coach would encourage them to play more often, compared with 32% of men
- The potential for coaches to increase participation is also strongest amongst younger non-coached participants – one in two (56%) non-coached 18 to 24 year olds say a coach would encourage them to play more often
- In the group of people who do not play any sport at all one in five (19%) say they would like to receive coaching
- And almost a third (31%) say a coach would encourage them to play sport more often, in other words encourage them to start playing sport
- Again this view is stronger amongst women – 35% who do not currently play sport say a coach would encourage them to start playing, compared with 27% of men
- The potential for coaches to increase the participation of people who do not currently play sport is much stronger amongst those aged 44 or younger

## **3.1 How can we use this insight?**

### **3.1.1 Headline statistics**

The statistics above provide a number of 'soundbytes' which can be used to promote the positive link between coaching and participation. These add further weight to the headline statistics taken from the Participant Survey 2014 report, which mainly focus on the positive impact coaching has on people who play coached sport (for example on their enjoyment, passion and commitment and time spent playing).

These new statistics add a further dimension by showing the positive impact coaching could have on the participation of two different groups - non-coached participants and people who do not currently play sport at all.

### **3.1.2 Coaches as role models**

Role model is a term we hear a lot but one which we probably do not fully understand yet. We have not yet conducted any specific research to understand what a role model in coaching is/does, what behaviours/characteristics they exhibit and what impact they have on the people who perceive them.

While research like this is high on our agenda, some of the results in this study suggest coaches may be role models for encouraging sports participation, particularly for women and younger participants.

For example 43% of non-coached women and 35% of women who currently play no sport at all say a coach would encourage them to play more sport (for the latter group, start playing sport). This potentially starts to build a picture of coaches as role models for enhancing female participation.

A specific research project focusing on role models has been discussed for 2015/16. If taken forward these results will be used to test the coaches as role models theory with different participant groups.

In the meantime we may look to use the most positive results – such as those for women above – as soundbytes (see section 3.1.1).

### **3.1.3 Testing the idea**

The data suggest there is potential for coaching to increase the participation of people who play sport but are not currently coached and kick-start the participation of people who currently play no sport at all. The statistics for the latter group in particular (19% would like to receive coaching, 31% say a coach would encourage them to start playing sport) may be higher than what we expected to see and can therefore be considered very positive.

In the context of other research such as Sport England's recent Youth Insights Pack, these data provide some evidence to suggest coaching can respond to the challenge of increasing participation.

The question is, how do we get these groups into coached sport? One suggestion raised in the research is to hold a sports fair type event, where prospective new participants can meet coaches from various sports and clubs, as well as some of their existing participants, ask questions and decide whether they are people they can get along with and whether the environment is one they would like to play sport in.

This idea could potentially be piloted on a smaller scale, for example by holding a sports fair involving a small number of clubs in a specific region/location.

The Coach Quiz will gather data from coaches as to whether they think sports fairs are a viable idea. This will be reviewed before any decision is made on any future pilot work.

### **3.1.4 Helping coaches tailor their offer**

The research shows that one of the main reasons why non-coached participants choose not to be coached is because they feel they are good enough as they are.

To address this issue we may need to think about how coaching is offered to these participants in order to increase the likelihood of them taking part in coached sport.

We know from the Participant Survey 2014 that 21% of non-coached participants play sport to improve their health and fitness and 19% play sport for fun. In both cases these motivations are stronger for non-coached participants than for those who are currently coached.

However, we do not know whether coaches/clubs offer their coaching to non-coached participants with this information in mind. For example, do they explain the enhanced social/fun and fitness related benefits of coaching when trying to recruit new participants?

Providing coaches with this insight via NGBs/CSPs will improve their ability to recruit new participants from the non-coached group, thereby helping to achieve our key Framework objective of a better supported workforce and also potentially helping expand the main recruitment pathway into coaching (i.e. coached participation, see section 4 below).

#### 4. How do perceptions impact on coach recruitment?

The research also provides some interesting new data on coach recruitment. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement:

*I would consider becoming a coach in future*

Those who play coached sport are most likely to consider becoming coaches in future (31%). This confirms what we already know – coached sport is the main recruitment pathway into coaching.

Conversely, only 6% of people who play non-coached sport said they would consider becoming a coach in future. Interestingly, this is the same proportion as those who currently play no sport (6%).

We may have initially expected those who are currently playing sport without a coach to be more likely to move into coaching positions than those who play no sport at all, but these results suggest that is not the case.

The tables below show the proportions of each group who agreed with the statement, as well as breakdowns by age and gender. Noteworthy results include:

- Men are roughly twice as likely as women to consider becoming coaches, whether they are coached, play non-coached sport or do not play sport at all
- However, the likelihood of recruiting men or women from non-coached or non-sport backgrounds is very low – only around one in ten men (8%-9%) would consider becoming a coach, compared with around one in twenty women (3%-5%)
- Young people aged 18-24 are by far the most likely to consider coaching in future – 57% say they would consider becoming a coach, more than one in two

## Statistics for agreement with 'I would consider becoming a coach in future'

### Overall

<i>Coached</i>	<i>Non-coached</i>	<i>Currently play no sport at all</i>
31%	6%	6%

<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>18-24</i>	<i>25-34</i>	<i>35-44</i>	<i>45-54</i>	<i>55-64</i>	<i>65-74</i>	<i>75+</i>
12%	6%	19%	9%	14%	7%	3%	4%	5%

### Coached

<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>18-24</i>	<i>25-34</i>	<i>35-44</i>	<i>45-54</i>	<i>55-64</i>	<i>65-74</i>	<i>75+</i>
42%	22%	57%	35%	36%	22%	9%	18%	13%

### Non-coached

<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>18-24</i>	<i>25-34</i>	<i>35-44</i>	<i>45-54</i>	<i>55-64</i>	<i>65-74</i>	<i>75+</i>
9%	5%	21%	2%	12%	6%	3%	3%	3%

### Currently play no sport at all

<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>18-24</i>	<i>25-34</i>	<i>35-44</i>	<i>45-54</i>	<i>55-64</i>	<i>65-74</i>	<i>75+</i>
8%	3%	9%	9%	9%	4%	2%	3%	5%

## 4.1 How can we use this insight?

### 4.1.1 Enhancing our understanding of coach recruitment

At first glance the data appear to confirm what we already know:

- Coached participation is the main pathway into coaching
- Recruiting coaches from outside this pathway is extremely difficult
- Men are more likely to coach than women and young people are more likely to coach than their older peers.

However, it also tells us that people are no more likely to move into coaching from playing non-coached sport than from playing no sport at all. We may have previously thought recruitment into coaching followed a logical progression from no participation to non-coached participation to coached participation. However, these data suggest this is not the case.

So, if we want to recruit more coaches, we may need to get more people playing coached sport. The data above show that people who play non-coached sport and no sport at all are not really interested in becoming coaches. However, the data in Section 3 show that they are relatively interested in taking part in coached sport.

If we can move people from these two groups into playing coached sport, we will enhance the size of the main recruitment pathway and therefore increase the likelihood of recruiting more coaches.

This could be very useful insight for projects like the upcoming Women into Coaching project, which aims to recruit 3,000 new female coaches. The recruitment of these coaches will be much easier if the women targeted are currently playing coached sport.