



20 YEARS LATER—WHAT HAS CHANGED IN AMERICA’S ELITE COACHES?

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Even though there is a considerable amount of literature on coaches and the coaching process, there is no single framework or empirical model of effective and successful coaching that has achieved consensus (Lyle, 2002). Given that there is a wide variance in athletes’ needs between sports and competitive levels, gaining consensus may not necessarily be crucial. Nevertheless, there may be some coaching behaviours and approaches that make a particular contribution to effective coaching.

In 1988, a special committee on Coaches Education was formed by the USOC with a mission to develop a coherent plan for improving the education of amateur coaches in the United States. One of the first tasks that the committee attack was trying to answer some basic questions such as: Who are America’s elite National team coaches? What are the coaching education backgrounds of these individuals? Do these coaches desire additional learning experiences and, if so, what type of coaching educational experiences are desired by these individuals?

In the last quarter of 2007, the USOC once again surveyed America’s elite National team coaches. The survey of 2007 closely mirrored many of the questions posed to coaches in 1988. We wanted to understand the demographic background of our coaches to see how the landscape has changed in 20 years.

The technological changes have been immense. In 1988, the survey was conducted in meetings where the coaches were present. The total sampling in 1988 was 130 coaches and or team leaders. For 2007, Survey Monkey and email were used to collect data for the follow-up study, of which 47 coaches (only coaches) responded. The first three tables below show a comparison of the demographic data from 1988 and 2007

Table 1 - Demographics —Who are these coaches?			
Question	1988	2007	Outcome
Age	Age 40.85 Range: 26-75	Avg. 44.8 Range: 31-77	<i>Avg. Age and Range has increased</i>
Gender	78% Males 22% Females	76.6 % Males 23.4% Female	<i>Slight increase in the female coaches</i>
Coaching Status	57.6% Head Coaches 30% Asst. Coaches 12.4% Did not answer	66.7% Head Coaches 33.3% Asst. Coaches	<i>Larger % of Head Coaches responded</i>
Coaching Appt.	38.4% Olympic Coaches 46.1% Pan-American	77.3% Olympic Coaches 34.1% Pan-American 15.9% Paralympic	<i>Larger % of Olympic Coaches</i>

Table 2 - Experience

Question	1988	2007	Outcome
<i>Experience at Olympic or Pan-Am Games</i>		75.6% have previous experience 2.13 Avg. for Olympic experience 1.60 Avg. for Pan-American experience Range: 1-9 Games (Olympic and/or Pan Am)	<i>Just over 1/2 of our Olympic Coach will have 1 prior Game experience (Mode: 17 out of 32)</i>
<i>Make a living as a Coach</i>	61% made a living coaching	80.9% make a living coaching	<i>Huge increase in the number of professional coaches</i>
<i>Do you coach at the University level?</i>	Yes - 36% No - 64%	Yes - 17% No - 83%	<i>More coaches outside the University setting</i>
<i>Are you a full-time paid National Coach for your NGB?</i>	Yes - 23% No - 77%	Yes - 58.7% No - 41.3%	<i>Huge increase in professional coaches at the NGB level</i>
<i>Years of coaching experience in the sport</i>	15 years on Avg. Range: 2-38	19.87 years of Avg. Range: 4-51	<i>Significant increase in coaching experience</i>
<i>Age Groups that you have coached?</i>	76.9% (14 and Under) 90% H.S. 99.2% Post Collegiate 33.1% have not coached developing athletes	70.2% (14 and under) 87.2% H.S. 93.2% Collegiate 100% Post Collegiate 42.6% have not coached developing athletes	<i>Significant decrease in coaches exposed to teaching/coaching developing athletes</i>
<i>What level did you compete at?</i>	37.2% 14 and under 60.5% H.S. 59.7% Collegiate 60.0% Post Collegiate National 47.7% Post Collegiate International 21% Olympic Games	6.4% Did not compete 38.3% 14 and under 55.3% H.S 51.1% Collegiate 57.5% Post Collegiate National 51.1% Post Collegiate International 14.9% Pan-Am Games 34% Olympic Games	<i>Significant increase in elite level athletes going into coaching</i>
<i>Olympic Medalist?</i>	5% - Yes	17.4% - Yes	

Table 3 - Education			
Question	1988	2007	Outcome
<i>What is the highest degree earned?</i>	15% HS diploma 6% Junior College 32% Bachelor degree 38% Masters degree 8% Post Masters	14.8% HS diploma 2.1% Junior College 42.5% Bachelor 36.1% Masters 6.3% Post Masters	<i>Significant increase in the number of coaches with Bachelor degrees</i>
<i>Physical Education/ Recreation or Kinesiology Degree?</i>	36.5% - Yes	51.9% - Yes	<i>Significant increase in Physical Education backgrounds</i>
<i>Coaching Minor?</i>	17.6% - Yes	14.0% - Yes	
<i>College Course in Coaching?</i>	43.0% - Yes	42.6% - Yes	
<i>How do you contribute to your knowledge of coaching?</i>	97% Clinics, lectures or Seminars 95% Books or Coaching Journals 82% Film	70.5% Clinics, lectures or seminars 15.9% Books or Coaching Journals 13.6% Films/DVD	<i>Most coaches learn additional information on Coaching from attending clinics, lectures or seminars. 07 questions allowed only one selection</i>

FIVE KEY FINDINGS FROM THE DEMOGRAPHICS SECTION

When comparing the 1988 survey to the 2007 survey, there are five key differences:

1. The elite coaches are older and have more experience (an increase of almost five years of experience).
2. They have been and remain a highly educated group of individuals- 78% in 1988 with College degrees and 84.9% in 2007.
3. More coaches are paid professionals with fewer coaches earning a living in a University Setting (20% more are professional with a 19% reduction of those who are involved at the University level).
4. More elite level athletes (college experience and above) are entering the profession (11% increase).
5. Most coaches increase their coaching knowledge by attending clinics, lectures and seminars.

DEVELOPMENT OF COACHES

The next series of questions were conducted in two different methods: Likert scales and open-ended questions. The questions were asked to find out how coaches learn, what they study and what they feel is important for an elite level coach to know.

Developing Coaching Style

The number along with the Mean Rating Avg. will be the 1988 survey results while the underlined results (Percentages/Mean Rating Avg.) will be from 2007.

The question was posed to rank the order of the major ways you developed your coaching style- (1= Most important). Table 4 provides the coaches responses:

Table 4 - Rank order of the developing coaching style					
Question	Most Important	2nd Most Important	3rd Most Important	4th Most Important	5th Most Important
Model or observed successful coaches	25.0%	#2 - 1.99 <u>62.5%</u> <u>#1 - 1.83</u>	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%
Experience	#1- 1.58 <u>62.5%</u> <u>#2- 1.53</u>	25.0%	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%
Thought my style out before I coached	12.5%	12.5%	#3- 3.33 <u>37.5%</u> <u>#3- 3.17</u>	12.5%	12.5%
Based it on coaching classes	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	#4- 3.75 <u>50.0%</u> <u>#4- 4.38</u>	#5- 4.17 <u>50.0%</u>
Based it on coaching books and journals	0.0%	0.0%	37.5%	37.5%	#4- 3.75 <u>37.5%</u> <u>#5- 4.09</u>

As you can see, experience overwhelmingly remains the major way that coaches develop a coaching style, followed by modeling or observing successful coaches. Those two methods alone account for over 87% of a coach develops their coaching style.

If this is a tendency for young coaches as well, it raises an important issue for future coach development. Can we only hope that the young coach has a good coach to learn from or had a good coach as an athlete? The old adage of “you coach how you have been coached” is an area that coaching education may need to address.

The next question-- Please indicates your understanding of the body of knowledge in regard to:

Table 5 - Understanding of bodies of knowledge					
Question	Not Knowledgeable	Somewhat Knowledgeable	Moderately Knowledgeable	Very Knowledgeable	Highly Knowledgeable
1. Skills of your Sport	0.0%	2.25	0.0%	21.7%	#1- 4.66 76.1% #1- 4.61
2. Strategies of your Sport	0.0%	0.0%	2.2%	30.4%	#2- 4.55 67.4% #2- 4.55
3. Teaching of Sport Skills	0.0%	4.3%	10.9%	#3- 3.75 43.5% #3-4.21	41.3%
4. Sport Psychology	0.0%	6.4%	#4- 3.63 38.3% #4- 3.65	38.3%	17.0%
Sport Biomechanics	0.0%	20.0%	#7- 3.09 35.6% #5- 3.4	28.9%	15.6%
Sport Physiology	0.0%	19.6%	#5- 3.3 41.3% #6- 3.34	23.9%	15.2%
Sports Medicine	2.2%	22.2%	#6- 3.21 51.1% #7- 2.91	17.8%	6.7%
Sport Law	22.2%	#8- 2.54/5 48.9% #8- 2.02	26.7%	0.0%	2.2%

The most knowledgeable areas in rank order have not changed much in the past twenty years. The top three have remained very stable, which is not to surprising, considering they are the three fundamentals of coaching sport:

1. Skills of your sport
2. Strategies of your sport
3. Teaching of Sport Skills

Sport Psychology remains stable at number 4, but we saw a lot of change of interest with numbers five, six and seven. It is interesting to note the changes in Biomechanics which moved from a seventh most studied in 1988 to fifth in 2007.

The coaches were then asked out of the areas in Table 4, which they most actively study. The response has remained consistent for the top two knowledge areas over the past twenty years: Skills of your sport and Sport Psychology. Sport Pedagogy (science of teaching skills) was third in 1988 followed by strategies. In the 2007 survey, Strategies, Biomechanics and Physiology are all tied for the third slot. However, the response to this question did not allow a distinction to whether the coach was referring to teaching of Sport skills or Skills of your sport.

In the 2007 survey, the coaches were given the opportunity to provide five open ended answer the question of what they most actively studied. The combined results for all five answers were:

1. Skills- 34 responses;

2. Sport Psychology- 29 responses;
3. Strategies- 22 responses;
4. Biomechanics – 17 responses;
5. Physiology- 15 responses.

2007 Survey

The 2007 Survey ask some other key questions of our Elite Level Coaches that were not in the 1988 Survey.

Coaching Problems

When faced with a coaching problem, how do you find an answer?

- Talk to the athlete or athletes- 73.9%
- Talk to my assistants- 58.7%
- Talk to the High Performance Director- 39.1%
- Call another elite coach- 76.1%
- Call a sport scientist- 32.6%
- Think about it on my own- 63.0%

The Elite Coaches could select any or all of the choices above. The ability to contact and talk with another elite level coach is very impressive. The reliance on those who “have been there and done that” is very useful. It is interesting to note where Assistant coaches were in the order of who they would get involved in a problem. Not all of the elite programs have assistant coaches; we do not have a number to confirm how it affects this ranking. It is surprising however, to see that Head Coaches do not rely on their assistants. The hiring practices and experience of assistant coaches may need to be investigated.

Traits or qualities of a successful elite coach

The Elite Coaches were asked to provide in a rank order five traits or qualities that personify a successful coach. The results for the number one response are below:

1. Communication (9)
2. Knowledge (7)
3. Commitment/Dedication (4)

When viewing this question with all five answers, we get a more complete idea of the traits of an Elite level coach.

1. Knowledge becomes number one (22 responses)
2. Communication moves to second (19 responses)
3. Listening (12 responses)
4. Commitment, Dedication, Perseverance drops to fourth (11 responses),
5. Leadership (8 responses)
6. Passion and Open-mindedness/Flexibility/Creativity, Patience and Drive all tied at sixth
7. Respect being seventh.

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

The following are twenty insights made by some of the coaches in answer to this question:

1. Ability to instill belief/trust/confidence in athletes
2. Big Vision, balanced by ability to set and adjust goals
3. Care about others more than self
4. Perseverance and a sense of humor

5. Attention to skills development of athletes; tailored to athlete needs
6. Precise training techniques and coaching on a daily basis
7. Ability to filter
8. Problem solving orientation
9. Ability to observe without judgment
10. Desire to improve through knowledge
11. Quality Decision makers under pressure
12. High level of integrity and fairness
13. Ability to multi-task with equal amounts of high energy
14. Knowledgeable and with an ability to transfer knowledge simplistically
15. Focused on the process
16. Creative, open minded to new ideas and approaches
17. Having thick skin
18. Flexible, but decisive
19. Excellent instructional skills, ability to deliver messages
20. Understands critical zone training

This also provides us with insight into writing job descriptions for elite level coaches. Who better, than the coach themselves, to tell us what skills that the job needs.

TAKE-AWAYS

1. The greatest influences on the coaching style of future coaches are the current coaches. It is important to have and be good role models.
2. A background of Physical Education is a stronger today than twenty years previous. What will the effects of the reduction in physical education teacher preparation be on the coaching profession? How do we counteract that change for our future coaches?
3. Coaching education needs to focus on the three fundamentals of coaching- Skills of the sport, strategies of the sport and teaching the skills of that sport. It is important that our elite level coaches feel comfortable and highly knowledgeable in teaching sport skills of their sport to their athletes.
4. What are the qualities of an assistant coach? How can we teach the aspects of how to be a good assistant coach?