

# Coaching philosophy: "Why do we do things the way we do?"

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## ABSTRACT

Coaching philosophy has become the subject of much attention amongst sports researchers and practitioners alike. Rather than formal coach qualifications, it is now believed that many factors influence the philosophy and behaviours of sports coaches. Firstly, this article examines some of the current research related to forming personal coaching philosophy. Secondly, the article intends to encourage tennis coaches to reflect on personal philosophy to gain a greater insight into the belief and values systems that underpin their coaching practice.

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## INTRODUCTION

World-renowned tennis coach Nick Bollettieri once described how he constructed the Academy philosophy primarily based on lessons learned from "my years as a paratrooper". More specifically, he defined how "if you put the best together (like paratroopers), you have a chance of raising the level of anything that you did, whether it be in sports or anything in life" (Barlett, 2012). His philosophy was built around early specialisation and work ethic. In this example, the simplistic philosophical belief (influenced by his years in the military) led to many grand slam tournament tennis champions. While the Bollettieri example may sound unsophisticated, the topic of coaching philosophy may be a little more complex.

Without understanding philosophical principles, coaches fail to question how their beliefs and values influence their daily practice. As a direct result, behaviour can become too situation-specific, too reactive (Cassidy, Jones and Potrac, 2015). Some authors suggest that a coach's 'philosophy' underpins their coaching practice and is crucial to understanding their behaviour (Cassidy et al., 2015; Jenkins, 2010; Lyle, 2002). Indeed, if determining personal philosophy can benefit coaching practice, as coaches, we need to consider options to facilitate this discovery. However, practically, the role of a tennis coach is usually hands-on, and coaches often see little value in assessing philosophy as they attempt to cope with more tangible aspects of coaching practice, such as session content and organisation (Nash, Sproule, and Horton, 2008).

Against this background, this article's objective is to first provide coaches with a greater understanding of the theoretical foundations of coaching philosophy. Secondly, this article aims to provide tennis coaches with a practical reflection process to facilitate the discovery of this philosophy.



## Coaching philosophy

There have been several attempts to define coaching philosophy. For example, Jenkins (2010) describes coaching philosophy as those beliefs, principles, and values that guide behaviour and characterise one's coaching practice. Similarly, Hogg (1995) describes coaching philosophy as a set of fundamental principles or a values framework that guides a coach in decision-making and behaviour. Based on these descriptions, it appears that philosophy is a personal attribute built on one's individual beliefs or values system. Secondly, this belief and values system influences one's coaching behaviours and decisions. Put simply; philosophical beliefs influence why we do things the way we do on the tennis court.

Furthermore, despite these descriptions, it is worth noting that one's coaching philosophy is not a stable state of thinking. In other words, one's philosophy can change over time. For

example, as tennis coaches, our beliefs and behaviours can regularly adapt during our coaching careers. It is implausible that coaches will teach the same from their first on-court lesson until retirement. For instance, according to Barlett (2012), Bollettieri's teaching philosophy changed dramatically from 1978 to today: more specifically, from initially favouring the traditional all court approach to the modern power game in recent times. Thus, despite the definitions outlined above, philosophy can be an ever-changing personal journey.

Similarly, most coaching philosophy definitions describe the general underpinnings and the influence of one's philosophy on behaviour. However, it appears plausible that coaches require a greater understanding of how this philosophy is initially established from a practical perspective. Interestingly, the establishment and adaptation of personal philosophy have a deep-rooted underpinning from a broad milieu of sources, notably not just the traditional formal coach education route.

### Gaining coaching knowledge

Over the past decade, many authors have studied high-performance coaches' epistemological chain to gain greater insight into where they have acquired their coaching knowledge. Epistemology is an individual's stance on learning and knowledge; the Epistemological Chain (EC) is essentially the link amongst an individual's philosophy, beliefs about learning, and the resulting behaviour (Grecic & Collins, 2013). Interestingly, the findings suggest that coaches obtain their knowledge from numerous sources rather than relying entirely on traditional formal coaching courses (Stoszkowski and Collins, 2014; Mallett, Rossi and Tinning, 2007). As a result of an in-depth literature review by Cushion et al. (2010) highlighted that coaches acquire knowledge from three primary sources: specifically (a) Informal (experience, mentoring, reflective practice); (b) non-formal (coach behaviour interventions); and (c) formal (thought programs). Therefore, as tennis coaches, we are learning from various sources, but many of our perceptions and behaviours happen automatically.

Notably, our experience can significantly influence how we do or see things within our coaching practice, even if many of these perceptions and behaviours are tacit by nature and based on personal belief, perspective, and value system (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995, p.7). A recent tennis-specific study by Anderson et al. (2021) study explored performance tennis coach philosophies and approaches to practice design. Their findings suggest that coaches may interact with consistent social and cultural constraints that create a tennis 'form of life. Coach beliefs and, in turn, practice design may therefore reflect the social, cultural, and historical constraints that exist within tennis both internationally and nationally. Cushion et al. (2003) have a similar opinion and claims that coaches have established deep-rooted habitus due to past experiences. These past experiences can range from instilled values from childhood, social interactions, and experience as coaches and athletes ourselves.

In line with Cushion's research, some authors believe that our developmental experience moulds us as coaches. For example, a study by Williams and MacNamara (2020) described how development experience influenced the philosophy underpinning the practice of talent pathway coaches. Also, the purpose of their practice was orientated to impact youth development far and beyond sport. This research may perhaps explain why it is common in tennis to see players with similar playing styles to their coach. Playing experience may also positively influence our coaching decision-making as we have the added advantage of a player's perspective (Jones, Armour and Potrac 2003). In summary, our own developmental experience can potentially influence our thinking and more importantly, our coaching behaviours.

### Matching behaviours to philosophy

While considering coaching behaviours, it is critical to consider Adler's (1956) work, in which he hypothesised that internal states such as values could not be observed apart from the action. Thus, what people do is all that can be known about their values. Considering this point from a practical tennis perspective and relating it to everyday practice, values are meaningless unless we display them daily through behaviour as coaches. Nowadays, entering high-performance sports training centres in Europe, coaching values are often emblazoned in large letters, but rarely are they matched with intentional daily behaviours. For example, because words like "discipline" are plastered all over the wall does not mean that players will automatically become more disciplined. Furthermore, words themselves can be perceived in many different ways and therefore understood differently from person to person. The challenge for us as coaches is first to step back from the intense demands of our daily practice to reflect and establish our philosophical beliefs.

Some researchers, such as Lyle (2002), claim that coaches do not have sufficient philosophical understanding to articulate the real values underpinning their thoughts and behaviours. Reflecting on our philosophy can generate increased clarity around these underlying values and behaviours. Even if it is not part of formal coach training, simply taking the time to write a personal philosophy allows coaches to identify and clarify what is important to them personally (Cassidy, Jones and Potrac, 2015).

### PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

The following is a brief personal example of some fundamental principles that underpin my coaching philosophy. To help identify these principles, considering the questions below may be helpful. Also, it is helpful from a practical sense to match these principles with the expected training behaviours.

#### Possible reflection questions

- "What do I believe as a coach and why?"
- "How can my beliefs influence my athletes?"
- "What behavioural change should I see?"

**Table 1**

Example of coaching principles.

Coaching Principles	How
<b>"Gradually take the stabiliser off"</b> (Autonomy)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Say less, ask more</li> <li>2. Listen to my players</li> <li>3. Encourage players to have input into their training</li> </ol>
<b>"Tasks first winning later"</b> (Performance-based)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Set match objectives based on tasks</li> <li>2. Training structures, goals are task-based, group selection is task-based</li> <li>3. Regularly show improvement in tasks</li> </ol>
<b>"Each player is an individual project within a team"</b> (Individual approach)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Each player has an individual goal profile</li> <li>2. Make an effort to know each person both on and off the court</li> <li>3. Provide personal feedback to each player during sessions</li> </ol>
<b>"Tennis is a way of life"</b> (Social side of sport)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Organise regular events for both players and parents outside the training centre</li> <li>2. Match players to train regularly outside of the training program</li> <li>3. Training always has a fun element, especially at the early stages of the pathway</li> </ol>
<b>"Training sessions relate to game philosophy"</b> (Game-based)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Relate content as close as possible to the game</li> <li>2. Technical blocks never more than 20mins</li> <li>3. Re-create pressure as much as is possible during a training session</li> </ol>

## CONCLUSION

Understanding our coaching philosophy provides a roadmap to base our training structures around. Without understanding why we do things the way we do, we risk becoming reactive and lacking a clear structure. Learning is constant and is influenced by a broad milieu of sources. However, reflection is the glue that ultimately makes this learning stick. Finally, as coaches, we can never forget the quote from Julius Caesar that "experience is the teacher of all things."

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