Principles of modern coaching methodology: An evolution.

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ABSTRACT

Coaches have access to multiple methods however their coaching methodology is a much larger framework that can be used to connect everything they know as a coach. This article explores some key principles on which many of the coaching methodologies of the world are evolving towards.

INTRODUCTION

The older and more experienced I get as a coach, the more 'big picture' concepts have become important to me. As I young coach, it was all about the new drill or the latest technique. Now, it is more about my coaching philosophy, my methodology, the values and principles I have as a coach. These provide a foundation on which all of my coaching rests. Every coach will use multiple methods when they coach. However, their overall methodology is a constructive framework of connected elements. It is about the principles of coaching you use as opposed to the multiple processes (methods) employed.

"As to methods there may be a million and then some, but principles are few. The man who grasps principles can successfully select his own methods. The man who tries methods, ignoring principles, is sure to have trouble"

Ralph Waldo Emerson

THE ANALOGY

Imagine you are leader of a race team and have a garage to build your winning car. In this analogy, the car represents tennis technique. For many coaches, their methodology is like a messy garage. Some of the tools needed may be missing or, even if they are there, they may not be found very easily because of the disorganization.

The advantage of a structured methodology is that everything is easy to find. All your coaching information is at your fingertips. You can take the right information out easily and at

the right time. You can also see how everything relates to everything else, and be more systematic. It also typically provides a terminology framework as well. If multiple coaches use the same methodology, they tend to speak the same 'coaching language'. I have found that, in most cases, a coach with a defined methodology is a more effective coach (Lyle, 2002).

In Canada, we have a defined methodology that was pioneered by top international coach, Louis Cayer. It was called the, "Actions Method" and has evolved continuously since its inception in 1988 (Cayer, 1987).

PRINCIPLES OF MODERN COACHING

We have identified four principles that we feel are the "pillars" which hold the methodology up. Even though these are listed separately, there is plenty of synergy and overlap between them as well. I believe that coaching in every country is evolving towards these principles.

Learner-centred

In our analogy, what do you think is the most important element about your car needed to win the race? It is the driver. To have the best chance of winning, the car needs to be adapted to the driver. One wouldn't expect your 182 cm tall driver to have to deal with a car made for only a 152cm tall person. The driver is the 'brain' of the car (technique) we build.

The typical coach comes into a lesson asking the question, "What do I need to teach?" If the question is re-framed to,

"What do they need to learn?" it takes the coach on a completely different path. So often, we impose a lesson onto a player as opposed to drawing out their lesson, one that is centred on their needs. In other words, we squeeze the driver into a pre-set car. Almost 100% of coaches I talk to world-wide believe they should individualize for the needs of their players yet, they have a methodology that basically stamps out molds. They teach everyone the same forehand technique or serve style, etc.

Self-reflection Question: Do I focus on what I need to teach or, do I identify what they need to learn and apply my tools accordingly?

Game-based

Imagine the car you need to win a race. Picture in your mind the body, the wheels, etc. Now, if I told you that the race will be a cross-country off-road race, would the car you imagined have won? Was it the right car for the race?

The Game-based approach (GBA) is a relatively 'new' evolution in tennis coaching. The concept is simple, get players to play tennis and help them to learn to play better (Elderton, 2001). This is in contrast to the traditional approach of teaching strokes first and then having players try to apply the strokes to play. The typical criticism is that the approach poorly handles technique. In a GBA, technique is second (after tactics) but never secondary. Coaches who allow students to use ineffective and inefficient technique don't understand the full picture of the approach. The Game-based Approach is really an alternative way to impart technique not a method that ignores technique. GBA is simply about putting what you are trying to do before how you do it. It is based around the principle that tactics drive technique.

For example, it is not effective to teach a player a 'one size fits all' forehand when the tactics they are trying to perform change. A forcing topspin angled forehand has very different technique than a neutral deep arc down-the-line which in turn is different from a shoulder height ¾ court attacking forehand. In a GBA, the task you are trying to achieve dictates the technique you use. Rather than teaching a 'model' forehand, and trying to apply it to different situations, players are exposed to the situations and the technique is shaped accordingly. The technique used also has to allow future improvement and success at higher levels.

Self-reflection Question: Do I determine the task (tactic) that needs to be performed before teaching technique or, do I just launch into technique to fix how players 'look'?

Open skill

Different races will place different demands on our car. For example, what decisions need to be made by the driver in a drag race? In contrast, formula 1 racing requires the driver to be aware of where the other cars are, when to make the right moves, etc. The nature of the race determines the skills required to properly use the car.

In a closed skill sport, the demands of perception (e.g. seeing what is going on with the opponent and the ball, etc.) are minimal. In tennis, they are huge. Even if a player performs technique in the right way, a shot doesn't work if it is not done at the right time, and in the right place. This impacts coaching as players are not being fully equipped if they are being taught tennis like it was a closed skill sport (decision- less technical repetition). Teaching tennis as an open skill means improving a player's perception (being able to read the ball and opponent's location) and decision-making.

Self-reflection Question: Do I include perception and decision-mak- ing with all the shots I teach? Do my players know the right time to perform the technique I help them learn?

INTEGRATED PERFORMANCE FACTORS

What is the relationship between the parts of the car? Is the engine useful if the tires are flat? The 4 key factors needed for successful tennis performance are:

• Psychological

• Tactical

• Technical

• Physical

None of the factors are new; the key in our modern methodology however is the integration of the factors. For most coaches, the factors live in separate 'silos'. The trend now is to harmonize them. For example, in 'complex' training, a player does physical work and then immediately applies the muscle movements directly to shots. When a coach does integrated training for a shot, (e.g. return of serve), it should start tactical and include, perceptual training, decision-making, technical work, the psychological mind-set required, and the physical capacities required for successful execution. They ALL should be combined in a training session to really learn a shot.

Understanding the whole mix of factors allows a coach to really see where a player's performance can improve (Vickers et al., 1999). For example, traditional training tended to be technically focused and included physical work (the coach made them run a lot).

The 'technical' approach was also reinforced in the coach's mind when watching players compete because, every mistake is technical (e.g. the ball went wide because the racquet angle at impact was incorrect).

The trap however is to think that technical errors are just technical. Their root can be any of the other factors. E.g. the missed down-the-line may have been rooted in a poor tactical choice (they shouldn't have even tried a high risk down-the-line in that situation). It may have been physical (they were tired and were not able to maintain good relationship to the ball).

It may have been psychological (they were over-anxious and tightened up). It is the root that the coach should work on.

Self-reflection Question: Do I tend to gravitate towards technical only solutions or, do I integrate all the factors when coaching shots?

CONCLUSION

When we build the car (technique) it needs to be suited for the player, built for the appropriate race and have all the parts working together. In my role as Head of Coaching Development & Certification for BC, I have trained hundreds and hundreds of coaches. I have constantly asked the question, "What has made the biggest impact on you as a coach?" Interestingly enough, these 4 principles keep on being listed as things that have totally transformed their coaching. It is a great exercise to reflect on your coaching and see how it relates to these 4 principles? You may find that by employing these principles, your coaching becomes more effective than you ever realized.

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