



The role of the coach in the early stages of development.

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ABSTRACT

The initial stages of player development are challenging for coaches as they must teach a player to quickly learn technique, stroke production and the fundamental skills of the game. The role of a coach is to create an optimal environment that encourages player engagement and enjoyment. The coach must adopt a behaviour that contributes to the success of the player and allows for the player to development at a rapid rate. This paper explored the ways that this can be obtained.

Key words: Progression, Player development, Environment.

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INTRODUCTION

It is now recognised that 'talent', provided the individual possesses basic skills, is the result of intense practice extended for a minimum of 10 years, known as 'deliberate practice', which involves three types of constraints (resource, motivational and effort constraints) that the child/parent/coach triad will have to deal with all along the path to high-level development (Ericsson, 1993). Elite athlete development is a process that can be broken down in three stages, as identified by Côté (1999), i.e. the sampling phase (6-12 years), the specializing phase (13-15 years) and the investment phase (16+ years). One variable in the sampling years that is particularly important is the enhancement of the child's self-esteem and confidence in his abilities. Equally important is the successful acquisition of fundamentals, which is the cornerstone of continued technical, physical and mental development as the player moves through the developmental stages (Lubbers, 2003). Thus, the coach will have to both adopt a behaviour that contributes to the quality of his relationship with his student in order to facilitate his learning (Jowett and Poczwardowski, 2007), but also propose efficient content because it is always easier to create a solid foundation from the start rather than having to plan for technical corrections that always result in bad experiences and are costly in energy.

Quality of the coach athlete relationship

According to Baker (2003), coach behaviours have an impact on the athlete's satisfaction level, commitment to goals, drive to succeed and self-esteem.

Jackson (2010) assessed the impact of Lent and Lopez' (2002) "tripartite" model of efficacy beliefs (self-efficacy, other-efficacy and relation-inferred self-efficacy) on Jowett's own model (2007) which describes three relational constructs that characterize mutually beneficial coach/athlete relationships, i.e. closeness, commitment and complementarity. It was found that a high degree of confidence in the other person's capabilities (i.e. other-efficacy) predicted enhance commitment for both dyad members. It was also suggested that having confidence in the other person's ability was more strongly related to intra-individual outcomes for athletes than for coaches, probably because young athletes occupy a subordinate position within the dyad (at elite levels, athletes may not occupy such a subordinate position). Moreover, relation-inferred self-efficacy appraisals were found to exert positive effects on athlete and coach commitment. This suggests a potential chain of events where committed coaches display verbal and non-verbal behaviours (e.g. praise, emotional support, and long-term planning) that, when detected by athletes, foster enhanced athlete commitment. The main goal of the tennis coach will therefore be to create an optimal cooperative setting by being able to:

Express verbal and non-verbal emotions (especially for female tennis players) and show empathy (Haselwood et al. 2005).

- Give more options to players during coaching sessions by explaining the objectives, provide support and encouragement such that players' self-esteem develops (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2007).

Efficient content

The use of progressive technique, designed to take advantage of as many tactical situations as possible, can result in conflict because the repetitive tasks required to stabilise and enhance the skills will not be perceived as fun. Improvement of accuracy and speed of cognitive, perceptual and motor performances could be achieved through:

- Drive to succeed (Unierzyski, 2003): a player's commitment to perform a given task and give his best to improve through repetitive practice of the task (Ericsson et al. 1993).
- Immediate and appropriate feedback (coach skill) and knowledge of one's results (Ericsson et al. 1993).
- Relevant use of "self-talk" to emphasise the efficiency of the work done (Hardy, 2006).

In order to combine the primary goal of "deliberate practice", i.e. learning, with the necessary search for fun in the early stages of development (often game-based), use of the "Play to Learn" concept (Genevois, 2011) appears to be the most appropriate answer when working with younger players.

Principles of the "Play to Learn" concept

- A tennis match is played between the coach and the student or between several students: wins/losses, ranking, etc.
- The point is awarded provided that the proposed exercise is successfully performed. For example, hitting a combination of groundstroke, approach shot and volley in predetermined zones: the point is awarded to the player if the play sequence is successfully performed; otherwise, the point is awarded to the coach. First to 10 points wins.
- The player picks an exercise among several options available, all in line with the objective of the session.
- The proposed exercise comes with a variety of parameters available to the player (stroke precision, number of strokes, etc.), which demand optimal concentration from the player in all cases.

This concept results in:

- Better ability to concentrate ("otherwise I lose" attitude) and enhanced intrinsic motivation
- Development of feelings of being competent and in control of the situation and building of self-esteem because of a constant challenge to either acquire new skills or stabilise learned skills

- Better coach-player relational quality (especially when the coach loses).

To assess the impact of his teaching on the acquisition of technical fundamentals, the coach can use the various tools and resources offered by his National Association as well as video to carry out a longitudinal follow-up and increase the player's awareness of the progress made. The coach will need to be attentive to changes in the player's behaviour during the session to pick up cues on his satisfaction level, i.e. facial expression (smile or no expression), body language (dynamism or lack of dynamism). Similarly, it is essential for the coach to pay particular attention to the recovery periods between exercises as these can provide opportunities for verbal interaction related to the session or other subjects, making it possible to adapt the session if the coach or the player feels a need for it (for example, to rekindle motivation or change the session objective).

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the challenge for any coach involved in the initial stages of a player's development is to put himself in a position where he can help the player quickly acquire the fundamentals specific to progressive technical development in a fun and enjoyable environment thanks to the "Play to Learn" concept.

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