



Accepting the pressures of coaching: Insights into what experienced coaches learn with over 10 years-experience working with elite junior tennis players

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ABSTRACT

Despite a growing body of research into sports coaching there is little understanding of what it is like to coach elite junior tennis players. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of 8 UK, experienced tennis coaches and describe what it is like to coach elite junior tennis players. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of 8 experienced tennis coaches (over 10 years-experience) shows their insights into elite junior tennis coaching and provides avenues of comparison with the experiences of younger tennis coaches (Gowling, 2019). This study found that (a) experienced tennis coaches described a panoramic view of coaching, (b) experienced coaches were confident in their coaching effectiveness, and (c) acceptance of challenges in coaching helped experienced coaches develop effective coping mechanisms to sustain their emotional well-being and motivation to coach for long careers. The findings of this research contribute to an evolving, problematic epistemology of sports coaching and confirms that the experiences of existing coaches could contribute to more effective training of coaches. The findings present governing bodies opportunities to inform coach education literature and help tennis coaches to sustain themselves in an emotionally challenging role.

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INTRODUCTION

Coaches serve an apprenticeship of observation during their coaching careers (Lortie, 1975). Prolonged periods of observation act as a primary source of learning for coaches and much of what they learn is through interaction with knowledgeable peers and “ongoing interaction in the practical coaching context” (Cushion et al., 2006, p. 217).

Research into young tennis coaches shows that building relationships, striving to prove oneself to others, interpersonal conflict, and competition between coaches are defining characteristics of elite junior coaching (Gowling, 2019). Furthermore, the challenging nature of elite junior tennis coaching has the potential to reduce coaches’ motivation to coach (Bandura, 1997; Lundkvist et al., 2012; Bleach 2019; Gowling, 2019). A logical next step for tennis coaching research was to speak to practitioners with over 10 years-experience of the elite junior tennis coaching environment. The purpose of this study was to examine experienced tennis coaches’ understanding of elite junior tennis coaching culture and illustrate how they were able to

sustain their well-being and motivation to coach in the face of challenges in coaching.

This article looks at the experiences of eight LTA level 5, UK tennis coaches, with over 10 years coaching experience and shows how they adapt to cope with the challenges of coaching. For example, research shows young coaches describe self-employment making coaching competitive, and interpersonal conflict with parents or coaches reduced motivation to coach. This report shows that experienced tennis coaches were more *accepting* of the challenges they faced and understood that the challenges would remain constant throughout their careers. The evidence suggests that accepting challenges was associated with experienced coaches developing confidence and effective coping strategies to sustain their well-being and motivation for long careers.

METHOD

This study was an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of 8 experienced tennis coaches who worked with elite junior tennis players in the UK. The participants included 6

males and 2 females aged between 29 and 56 years old. The participants worked in the following areas; Northern England (3), Midlands (1), Southern England (3), and Wales (1). Experienced coaches had over 10 years coaching experience with elite juniors (Flett et al., 2012). Participants worked with elite junior tennis players and held level 5, LTA coaching qualifications. Junior tennis players were aged between 11 – 18 years old, corresponding with the LTA yellow ball competition system. *Junior elite* is competing at national level competition and above (Rees et al., 2016). Interviews in this study were semi-structured and the aim was to understand what it was like for participants to coach elite junior tennis players. Interviews lasted between 1.5 and 3.5 hours and were audio recorded. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, printed out, and analysed by following the procedure for IPA.

RESULTS

The results show (a) experienced tennis coaches described a panoramic view of coaching, (b) experienced coaches were confident in their coaching effectiveness, and (c) **acceptance** of challenges in coaching helped experienced coaches develop effective coping mechanisms to sustain their emotional well-being and motivation to coach for long careers.

Experienced coaches described a panoramic view of coaching

Experienced coaches understood that coaching was more than a transfer of information process and the role of coach included many different aspects away from the tennis court. Harry opened his discussion by saying: “There are so many different elements to coaching. The technical side plays such a small part in what I do these days. You’re constantly educating and then re-educating yourself”. Even with over 20 years coaching experience, Harry alluded to learning on the job. Coaches regularly referred to the human interaction inherent within coaching making their role far more than delivery of technical information. Gabby described managing expectations as part of her role and this made coaching more complicated:

You’re constantly managing expectations. Constantly managing other issues, whether it be school issues, family issues, problems away from the court. Life. Managing all that and making sure players tennis experience is fulfilling is tough to stay on top of.

Experienced coaches considered many factors that could affect player performance for example, work ethic, school, social, family issues, expectations, maturity. Experienced coaches embraced the multifaceted nature of coaching and incorporated off court issues into their role. David described a holistic view of his coaching: “Tennis coaching is so much about psychology. You’re developing people not just players. Once these kids are 15 / 16 it is so much more than forehands and backhands”.

Experienced coaches had evolved into more than knowledge experts and method appliers. The participants generally agreed that due to the amount of time they spent with players due to training requirements, they felt responsible for a

holistic approach to coaching (e.g. helping players mature, improve personal discipline, self-sufficiency, and other life skills).

Experienced coaches were confident in their coaching effectiveness

Experienced coaches understood that public scrutiny was part of coaching. When describing periods of unsatisfactory results with players, the participants maintained belief in their methods despite negative judgements about their coaching from players, their parents, or other coaches. Thomas explained: “I trust what I am doing is the best I can do, and I’m good at what I do. There is always someone dying to say they can do a better job. Younger coaches probably question themselves more and think “what am I doing wrong?”

Participants consistently expressed confidence in their methods. Questioning of the self can erode self-belief if it produces negative self-evaluations. Years of experience had taught the participants that coaching wasn’t straight forward. Sarah discussed her confidence: “I have a clear picture in my mind of what I’m trying to achieve. That has taken time, but I’m very clear and confident in that. If things are going wrong, don’t dart around looking for solutions, stick with your picture and believe in it”.

The participants generally agreed that experience helped them gain confidence in their coaching. Simon stated: “There is no substitute for experience. You’ve been there and done it. I do look back at what I taught 10 years ago and now I just know more. I’ve read the books, and I’ve done the years. It’s taken me a while to really become confident”. Previous studies have described an “experience threshold” for coaches to become confident (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). The respondents in this study agreed that experience helped with confidence.

Acceptance of challenges in coaching helped experienced coaches develop effective coping mechanisms to sustain their emotional well-being and motivation to coach.

Experienced coaches adapted cognitively and emotionally to accept the challenges in elite junior tennis coaching. Bauman (2012) says that problems associated with human interaction “cannot be regulated out of existence” (p. 98). Tennis coaches work is dependant upon human interaction between player, their parents, and coaches (Gowling, 2019). Therefore, interpersonal conflict is inevitable. Gabby said:

There are always those questions. “Why is my son or daughter not being picked for this or that?” There is no outright blame but it’s a leading question. You know what’s coming next... “What are you going to do about it?” There is so much pressure for kids and parents to feel like they are keeping up with whoever they have set their sights on. As a coach you’re always going to be up against that and there will be conflict along the way.

Alex said: “There are really tough parts to the job, like getting lambasted by parents. But what job doesn’t have issues? Conflicts are common, it’s fine”.

Finally, David said: "Oh yeah, I fall out with national coaches all the time. It's the nature of the job".

Accepting conflicts would continue to occur enabled coaches to develop ways to cope with professional / interpersonal conflicts. For example, coaches use social support as a coping strategy when conflict occurs (Thelwell et al., 2010). David coped with conflict by talking to other coaches: "It's good to unload sometimes. You need to unload with someone who gets it (another coach)". There was agreement amongst the participants that social support helped them to cope with the stress of conflicts. Sarah said: "You need coaches you can trust and chat to about all the things you commit. It's a tough job and you need support when you're feeling got at".

In addition to social support, coaches also described a hardening effect that years of coaching had on them. Harry discussed becoming more resilient: "Criticism always hurts, but when you've been through it so often, you become tougher and it affects you less". Coaches agreed that a thick skin was necessary to coach, and emotional stamina was a fundamental coping mechanism. Alex said: "I'm so weatherworn to it now. You can't please everyone. You can't stop people being critical when players lose matches. Once you accept that, you develop a thicker skin". Experienced coaches accepted they could not manage conflict out of coaching, and they developed support networks and emotional stamina to cope.

DISCUSSION

The data in this study highlights several ways that coaches adapt to their environment with over 10 years-experience:

First, the findings of this study support arguments that coaches serve apprenticeships of observation (Lortie, 1975). New experiences continually influence their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours (Stodter & Cushion, 2017). Years of practice and observation help coaches to consider their role from a holistic perspective and position their coaching philosophy, so it is conducive to elite junior tennis culture.

Second, the findings confirm our understanding that coaches develop confidence as they become more experienced. Furthermore, confidence can be associated with developing a coaching philosophy (Camiere, Trudel, & Forners, 2014). Confidence reduced self-doubt during difficult periods with players, helped experienced coaches to maintain belief in their methods, and sustain motivation.

Third, the findings contribute to an existing understanding that coaching is emotionally challenging work irrespective of the experience coaches have (Thelwell et al., 2010; Purdy et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2018). Experienced coaches develop cognitively (broader understanding of coaching) and emotionally (coping mechanisms) over 10 years. The participants in this study were accepting that coaching would remain stressful throughout their career, and they constructed ways of *coping* with elite junior coaching culture.

CONCLUSION

The evidence contributes to an existing understanding that coaching is emotionally challenging work irrespective of the level of experience coaches may have (Thelwell et al., 2010; Purdy et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2018). The findings support assertions that coach education could use insights of experienced coaches more effectively to support active coaches in their roles (Cushion, Jones, & Armour, 2003; Gowling, 2019).

Educating coaches about the coping mechanisms used by experienced practitioners would help to (a) raise awareness that coaches will experience emotional challenges in their careers, (b) enable new coaches to select coping strategies that have worked for other coaches, and (c) reassure existing coaches that the struggles they may face are not unique to them.

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