Chapter 5: Coaching processes

by Brian Douge

Athletes acquire the ability to compete through their exposure to a variety of learning experiences. They learn by doing an activity at a more challenging level, by observing more accomplished athletes, by being guided through a well-structured development program, and by acquiring and applying knowledge about how to compete.

Coaches are responsible for delivering a program that best facilitates their athlete's ability to be competitive. How well this is achieved by the coach is greatly determined by the coach's command of the coaching process. Just as a chef produces a quality meal by cleverly contriving and integrating the ingredients of a recipe, a coach produces a quality athlete by cleverly contriving and integrating athlete learning experiences. This is the coaching process.

This chapter provides information about tried and true coaching processes that, if adopted, enhance the competitiveness of athletes.

Direct instruction

Types of direct instruction

Succinct and easy-to-follow written instructions are most useful when athletes have routines to follow and coaches want to avoid continually having to tell athletes what to do. This allows the coach to focus on other important duties. Some examples of written instructions in sport include the swimmers' training session written on a whiteboard beside the pool; exercise cards on the walls in weight-training facilities; written schedules for training camps; and team travel arrangements that include travel, meal and accommodation arrangements.

Case study

Aaron coaches an under-14 beginner rowing crew. Every rowing season he is frustrated by the amount of time wasted having to continually tell the rowers how to set up in the boat, which way the gate faces, who gets into the boat first, how to adjust the foot stretchers, which is the stroke side and which is the bow side of the boat, etc. One Saturday morning he purchased a wall unit kit from a furniture warehouse. He was amazed at how well the instructions guided him, a novice at manual skills, through the assembly process. Aaron decided to adopt the 'furniture kit' approach to guiding the crew through the process of setting up their boat. This involved

numbering and colour coding the oars and boat, and developing a set of instructions for the designated team leader to follow. This relieved Aaron of the need to continually remind the athletes about how to set up their boat and left him free to attend to other important tasks prior to training and competition.

Oral direct instruction is the most common form of coach communication. It is used to give direction and impart knowledge. Quality oral instructions improve a coach's effectiveness. It is important to mentally prepare each instruction, limit the information to two or three key points, be succinct, and use voice and body language that ensures the delivery of an instruction is interesting and has high impact.

Once athletes become familiar with the detail of their coach's instructions, the coach can replace slabs of oral information with cues, for example, 'Okay team, let's warm up'. The 'warm-up' cue results in athletes performing a series of unprompted activities. Coaches can improve athlete self-management by including key words or cues in their communications.

Case study

The senior hockey team often lost possession of the ball when individual players tried to rush the ball from defence to offense. Geoff, their coach, devoted training sessions to practising a more controlled transfer of play from defence to offense, which encouraged players to set up the offense and provide support for each other prior to moving the ball downfield. Geoff used the oral cue 'Settle!' during games to mean 'Be controlled and set up the offensive play'. The players responded immediately when the coach or team-mates called out 'Settle!'

Direct instructions are a one-way form of communication, typically from the coach to the athlete. However, one of the most powerful forms of direct instruction is demonstration.

Content

The focus of oral instructions and demonstrations should be limited to two or three key pieces of information. Written instructions can have several pieces of information, provided the athlete is continually able to refer to them. All direct instructions must be succinct, worded to suit the audience, stated clearly and not overly repetitive.

The content of an instruction will at times need to include an explanation or brief rationale. This is usually when teaching a new skill, strategy or training routine, or when coaching a team that does not yet have complete confidence or belief in the coach.

Case study

Ian was bemused by his cricket team's excessive number of run-outs in each innings at the crease He noticed that the striker of the ball was taking full responsibility for initiating the first and subsequent runs after the ball was hit. He instructed the players that from now on the strike batsman would make the 'run' call for balls hit in front of the batting crease, and the non-striking batsman would make the 'run' call for balls hit behind the crease. From then on, whichever batsman was facing the ball in the field would call for the next run. He explained that by doing this neither batsman would hesitate to run and both batsmen would be able to see and hear each other and the ball at all times. It took some time before the more dominant batsmen were able to relinquish total control of the running between wickets. Ian persisted with specific training drills and coach directions until the entire team became committed to the new running between wickets strategy. The number of run-outs was dramatically reduced over time.

Checking for understanding

One of the quickest ways to check that athletes have understood a coach's directions is to watch what happens. However, considerable time can be saved if coaches revise their instructions by asking athletes to either repeat them or predict what might be the outcome if they implement the instructions. For example, to check for understanding after explaining the new running between wickets strategy, the coach could ask the players, 'What is the benefit of the new calling strategy for the batsman at the striker's end of the wicket if the ball is hit behind the crease?' If the athletes answer this question correctly, the coach can be confident that they know what to do and why they are doing it.

Timing

Direct instruction can occur at any time in the athlete program; however, it should be immediately followed by an opportunity for the athlete to act on the instructions.

Facilitation

Rather than forcing athletes to be competitive and/or become more competitive, quality coaches create situations that facilitate an athlete's desire to be competitive. Ways to facilitate athlete learning include providing opportunities to respond, setting realistic expectations, giving athletes

time to adjust to changing situations, building step-by-step progressions into the athlete program, and ensuring athletes experience the ‘thrill of the skill’.

Opportunities to respond

Athletes acquire skills by ‘doing’. It is essential that coaches organise training sessions and game structures so that athletes repeatedly practise new skills and/or modify previously learnt skills.

Realistic expectations

Setting standards and goals that the athlete can achieve not only encourages a better performance but also increases self-confidence and intrinsic motivation. For a team of seven netball players it is difficult to set challenging goals that each player can achieve, given the varying abilities of the players. However, effective coaches are able to impart flexible, individual expectations to each player in relation to a team goal.

Case study

One of the goals for Margaret’s team of judo players was to increase their level of aerobic (endurance) fitness. Margaret did not set a goal for every player to score above ten on the beep test, rather she conducted a pre-test then asked every player to try to improve their score by a nominated percentage over a two-month training period. Margaret discussed and agreed with each player on a challenging and achievable per cent improvement target for the player. For some players the agreed target was 10 per cent, while for others it was 20 per cent.

Time to adjust

The amount of time an athlete takes to adjust to new competitive situations varies greatly depending on the type of activity, experience and ability of the athlete, the experience and ability of opposition players, and environmental conditions. Coaches should assume that their athletes are trying their hardest to adapt to new situations, and allow them several attempts at a new skill, strategy or playing position before deciding to intervene. This is an acceptable approach for coaches to take with all athletes.

Step-by-step progressions

The endurance pre-test of Margaret’s judo team revealed that the team was lacking in fitness compared to opposition teams. Margaret decided to build the fitness of the team by integrating

step-by-step endurance progressions with skills and strategy training. Gradually reducing the number of players in a drill, increasing the distances covered in strategy work, reducing the time expected to complete tasks, and increasing the presence of opposition in drills were step-by-step approaches that Margaret used to improve the fitness of her players.

‘Thrill of the skill’

Coaches have the opportunity to provide every athlete with movement experiences that satisfy the sensory aspirations of the athlete — ‘the thrill of the skill’. There are countless examples of movement thrills in sport — downhill skiing, forehand drive in squash, a perfectly timed deflection in football, forward one-and-a-half with full twist in diving, and a spiralling two-handed pass in rugby union. On the way to experiencing these more dynamic sporting thrills, coaches need to progressively provide opportunities for athletes to experience more easily attainable thrills. Careful planning and repetitive practice can allow athletes to experience the ‘thrill of the skill’ in their chosen sport.

Games-based approach

The major difference between a skills-based approach to athlete learning and a games-based approach is that the skills approach focuses on accelerating the ability to efficiently perform an essential component of a specific movement within the performance regime, and the games approach focuses on efficiently performing essential components of the performance regime under conditions that are typically experienced in the game.

Case study

Matthew enrolled his daughter Casey in a ’learn to play golf’ program. Casey had a mild intellectual disability, enjoyed sports and was an admirer of Karrie Webb. Matthew hoped that Casey would enjoy playing golf and at the same time work to overcome her inability to concentrate and be patient.

Casey’s golf coach, Lynda, was quick to recognise that Casey was not able to cope with the level of concentration and patience required in the skill training session devoted to correcting the grip, stance and swing of players as they hit 50 balls using a pitching wedge on the driving range. However, Casey coped very well if Lynda coached her using a games-based approach. Lynda asked Casey to chip eight balls onto the practice green from ten metres off the edge of the green and then try to putt the balls into any of the holes on the putting surface in three putts or less for each ball. If she could get all of the balls in the holes for less than four shots for each

ball then she won the game, if not then the balls won the game. Lynda regularly checked on Casey to see if she was using the two 'Karrie Webb' grips of the club that she had taught her for chipping and putting.

Types of games

There are many variations of the games-based approach. Players could be exposed to the following situations:

. Competing against self — the softball coach set up a target resembling the strike zone with a point score allocated to various areas on the zone. A player was given 20 pitches to score as many points as possible. The coach then instructed the player to focus on trying to beat their score.

. Competing against a standard — the football coach asked his young players to complete a complex team drill involving a dribble through markers, passes to team-mates and a shot at goal from a designated area. The players were asked to aim to complete the drill with less than four errors. Errors included touching a marker when dribbling, not passing the ball to the advantage position for a team-mate, and missing the shot on goal.

. Competing against an opponent — the football coach in the previous example then introduced an opposition player, who was instructed to try to intercept and/or steal the ball at any time during the drill. When the players demonstrated composure and control, more and more opposing players were added to the drill to increase the competitive pressure.

. Cross training — activities and sports can often complement each other in fitness, skills and psychological areas. An obvious example of one sport complementing another would be touch football and rugby league. Rugby league players could cross train using touch football to finetune offensive passing skills and improve fitness. Track and field running programs for sprinters and middle distance runners are used by coaches of many sports as a cross training method for improving specific aspects of running fitness. Cross training can be used to add variety to an arduous program and/or to provide an intense focus on a particular aspect of athlete development. The Australian cricket team has employed the services of a US baseball fielding coach to enhance their cricket skills by adopting baseball fielding and throwing training methods.

. Simulation — repeating game situations at training enables players to correct errors in game play and develop new strategies. Tennis and cricket coaches have ball machines

that deliver balls to the athlete as they are likely to receive them in a game. Being able to simulate a game situation over and over again with minimal time between trials greatly improves athlete performance. On occasions, coaches will simulate game situations at a higher intensity than would occur in a game. This approach is used by coaches to take the athlete to a higher level, thus making the real game situation relatively easier to manage.

Case study

Water polo coach Ben was frustrated by the team's lack of support play when moving from defence to offense. He set up a simulated game using a larger goal with no goalie and the rule that all players on the attacking team must be in the offensive half and have contacted the ball before a goal could be scored.

Purpose of the games-based approach

A games-based approach to training enables the coach to recreate game situations and focus on aspects of physical skills and mental skills, fitness, strategy development and opponent experience. Using small-sided games at training and rotating opponents can give a young player exposure to a range of opponents and accelerate their ability to cope with more-experienced athletes in real situations.

Problem-solving approach

Defining a problem

Requiring players to participate in solving problems they are having with their performance and/or the performance of the team, entrusts them with taking ownership of aspects of their program. Some athletes appreciate being responsible for their development, while others would rather be guided entirely by the coach.

There are simple and complex problems that confront coaches in all sports. A simple problem could be identifying the order in which sprinters run in a 4 x 400-metre relay race. The coach has two runners who run fastest when in front and two who run best when there is someone to chase. Three of the runners finish hard, while one tires quickly at the finish of the 400 metres. The coach arranges a meeting with the athletes and asks them to choose the running order based on their knowledge of each other's ability and their knowledge of the opposition runners.

A complex problem would be a team's lack of confidence in each other and themselves. This situation requires each team member to identify, in private meetings with the coach, personal areas of concern with their performance as well as concerns they have with the performance of other members of the team. The coach then collates the views of the players and, as well as asking each player to develop a plan to confront their own lack of confidence, a leadership team is given responsibility to find a solution to team confidence issues.

Plan of attack

Once a problem has been recognised by the athlete/s it is essential that they work with the coach to develop an action plan. The plan should include a target outcome, the training activities to be undertaken, a time frame for completing the task, and who is responsible for implementing the program. Simple problems will often not require a sophisticated plan; however, a complex problem can place extensive demands on the planning process.

Problem situations

There are many elements of a competition that pose problems for coaches and athletes. Some examples include:

. environment — unusual weather conditions, different playing surfaces, poor preparation areas, extensive travel demands

. mental — poor motivation, lack of concentration, lack of confidence, misdirected aggression, excessively high or low anxiety

. strategic — lacking strategies to avoid exposing weaknesses, coping with fatigue, overcoming the loss of a quality player in the team, lack of variety in defensive and offensive plays

. technique — lack of skill routines to suit critical situations, lack of automation of basic skills, high skill error rate caused by poor technique, vulnerable performance areas caused by poor technique which limit skill options

. opposition — contending with high-quality players, coping with aggressive opponents, contending with inflated opposition reputations, overcoming physical differences (speed, size, endurance).

Problem situations are often managed effectively if the athlete is involved in the process of developing a solution.

Questioning

Asking athletes questions about their performance and training program is an effective method of encouraging them to become skilled at identifying and solving their own problems.

Case study

Tennis coach Brian was keen to encourage a young player, Erin, to make the connection between where the ball went, how hitting in different directions felt different, and what adjustments are made to the hitting action to hit in different directions. He asked Erin to serve to the left and right corners of the service box. Brian then asked Erin, 'What felt different between the two serves?' Erin was able to analyse the two serves, then compare these actions with her previous experiences in both tennis and other sports.

The questions that Brian was asking of Erin were higher-order questions requiring considerable thought. Lower-order questions are used by coaches to encourage athletes to remember concepts and ideas. A concept in Australian football would be the use of a zone defence when the opposition is kicking the ball into play. Players could be asked to remember their individual roles in the zone defence. In this situation, the coach would speak to individuals and ask them to describe their role and then observe their ability to remember it role while playing the game.

Assessing athlete needs and capabilities

Formal assessment

Methods for assessing elite and professional athlete performance have become highly sophisticated and labour intensive. Often these methods are not viable for typical sporting teams and individuals. Most coaches do not have the time, equipment or specialist expertise to conduct laboratory-type assessments. There are, however, several more modest approaches to athlete assessment that can provide useful information for improving the competitiveness of athletes.

. Video analysis — video is a tool that is readily accessible to most coaches. It can be a powerful method for coaches to analyse athlete performance, as well as to show athletes specific aspects of their technique or tactical performance.

Case study

Michael was having difficulty explaining to Ian, a backstroke swimmer, that his hand entry was too far across his body. Ian's action was causing his body to sway from side to side and reduced the required lateral pressure early in the stroke. After several discussions, constant feedback and having a third party observe Ian, there was minimal change. Michael decided to video Ian and was amazed that after only one video analysis session Ian corrected the fault.

. Observation — an astute coach is capable of assessing a range of athlete abilities by watching, listening to and, in some sports, feeling the performance of their athlete. This is the most common form of ongoing assessment. It is important when using this technique to provide immediate feedback to the athlete and to keep a mental or written note of significant observations and assessments.

. Testing — the advantages of conducting standard tests are that athletes can make comparisons with their previous performance and with other athletes and team performances. 'Field' tests that are specific to the sport and easy to administer are often the most effective testing protocols. The beep test, an easy to administer fitness test, is used in the field by a number of sports to assess running endurance.

Player self-assessment

Using player self-assessment can increase a coach's understanding of each athlete.

One of the most intrinsically motivating experiences is when an athlete achieves a personal goal. Team players will often be disappointed after a competition even though their team has won the game. One reason for this is that, individually, they have not played according to their expectations. On the other hand, athletes who believe they played well can appear buoyant after a competition despite their team losing.

Athletes will say, 'That felt good', as a way of expressing the positive intrinsic sensations derived from their performance.

Team-mate assessment

A more difficult assessment tool to manage is team-mate assessment. Team-mate assessment is not holding a stop watch and recording the times of other athletes, but is an assessment of:

. a player’s affect on other players

. what role in the team is most suited to a player’s current abilities

. how well the player performs in pressure situations.

On the field, a player is able to assess the relative contribution of their team-mates in congested situations that are often remote from the coach.

It is important to respect the sensitivity of team-mate assessments. These assessments should be managed using either confidential written reports or private confidential meetings with the coach.

The types of areas to assess include physical strengths and weaknesses, technique, decision-making ability, and ability to work as part of a team. Just as a good scientist would use the most reliable and valid instruments to test a theory, coaches should use the most reliable and knowledgeable team-mates to provide assessments of players and the team.

Assessment process

The assessment process has three essential steps:

1 Establish the criteria for assessment (for example, a volleyball coach establishes a team criteria of less than five unforced errors in each set of play).

2 Collect data that is specific to the behaviour being assessed. The data must be accurate (for example, the volleyball coach counts the number of unforced errors and uses a list of pre-determined examples of unforced errors as the basis for scoring the behaviour).

3 Analyse the data by comparing them to other teams, comparing them to the team’s previous performance, and by assessing whether there are more unforced errors by specific players or in specific game situations.

Coaching methods to suit learning styles

In most groups of athletes there will be different learning styles. Some athletes learn best by seeing someone else or themselves perform (visual learners). Others learn best by listening to an instruction or receiving feedback comments (auditory learners) and others learn best by feeling the sensations of a movement and making adjustments until the movement ‘feels right’ (bodily–kinesthetic learners).

When a coach has yet to determine the preferred learning style of an athlete, it is advisable to provide the opportunity for each learning style to be engaged.

Case study

Simon was about to teach his under-9 football team the 'inside of the foot' pass. He decided to show the team a brief video (visual learner) of a few 'inside of the foot' passes used by top international players from the football World Cup. By slowing down and pausing the video, the players could see the exact point of contact between the ball and the foot. Simon then took the players outside and explained (auditory learner) the three key elements of the pass:

. turn your kicking foot side on to the target

. pretend that your leg and foot are a broom and 'sweep' the foot at the ball

. hit the ball with your foot as if you were trying to knock over the pins at a tenpin bowling alley with a broom.

Finally, Simon placed the players into pairs and let them practise kicking with the inside of the foot for 10–15 minutes and said, 'See if you can feel the nice flat and solid contact between the ball and the inside of your foot, like it feels when you hit a balloon with the palm of your hand' (bodily–kinesthetic learner).

Various thinkers

People think in different ways. According to Gregoric (1982) there are four types of thinkers. Those who process information:

. in an ordered, sequential, linear (A–Z) way — a coach of this individual would provide highly structured programs and reality-based activities

. using trial and error — these individuals have a strong need to find alternatives and do things their own way. A coach of this individual would provide the athlete with a target and allow them to work out how to achieve the target through trial and error

. by absorbing ideas, information and impressions, and organising these through reflection — a coach of this individual would relate concepts to past experience and personalise the content using anecdotes. More personal anecdotes will be more effective

. by generating ideas and concepts then researching and analysing the ideas — a coach of this individual should provide data about performance and encourage the athlete to analyse the data and generate ideas for improvement.

Developing athlete independence and self-responsibility

Athlete independence and self-responsibility are nurtured when coaches allow the athletes to independently take responsibility for aspects of the competition program. Athletes are encouraged to develop a plan for an aspect of individual and/or team performance. They then implement the plan, self-evaluate and review the plan.

Case study

David is the tallest player in the basketball team, but is having problems penetrating the opposition's zone defence. His coach suggested he speak with his team-mates and devise ways to overcome the problem. After a lengthy discussion the players put in place a three-week training program. The program involved four different strategies for getting the ball to David and other players inside the 'key' (defence zone). David also devised a plan to develop his own shooting skills so that he had three or four avenues to the basket when he received the ball in the 'key'.

After each game the players evaluated their penetration strategies and David evaluated his choice of shooting options. Adjustments were made to the plans each week at training. At the end of the third week there was a significant improvement in both penetrating the opposition's zone defence and also in David's ability to score.

It is possible for highly talented and experienced athletes to take full responsibility for their performance; however, it is advisable in most situations, particularly in team sports, for athletes and coaches to share the responsibility for performance.

Observe, analyse and provide feedback to athletes

During practice and games, a coach should direct observations and feedback at the specific focus of the activity.

Case study

At rugby training, Grant devoted considerable time to practising hooker lineout calls with lineout lifting from in front and behind the lineout jumper. He then set up a competition drill combining hooker throws and calls with lineout jumping and lifting. Grant observed a range of errors, from players not bending their knees before lifting, to poor timing of the 'grip and lift' with the jumper

take off. He gave immediate feedback using a mixture of positive comments such as, ‘Nice quick turn around and grab on the hooker call!’, negative comments such as, ‘It is disappointing that most players remember to concentrate on the hooker calls, but one or two forget and make it difficult for everyone else’ and neutral feedback such as, ‘Lifters need to maintain a strong grip and upward pressure on the shorts of the jumper for as long as possible’.

What was effective about Grant’s feedback was that it was immediate and he gave at least three positive or neutral feedbacks for every negative feedback.

During the drill Grant also noticed that the designated jumper was not positioning his thumbs behind the ball when catching, and some of the hooker passes were slipping through his hands or deflecting to the opposition. Rather than comment during the drill focusing on lifting, Grant delayed his feedback until after the training session. He then worked with the jumper, one on one, practising catching technique while being lifted.

Coaches who provide feedback (extrinsic feedback) facilitate an athlete’s ability to generate their own feedback (intrinsic feedback) about their performance. Athletes do this by relating the outcome of a movement to technique criteria.

Case study

Squash player Julie knows that when her backhand drive loses power, falls short of rebounding the ball to the back corner of the court, and the ball hits high on the front wall, there is a strong possibility that she has forgotten to adjust to the backhand grip from the previous forehand stroke.

How to observe

As previously discussed, there are many ways to observe performance to be able to provide legitimate feedback. Coaches can watch a video of performance, refer to a score, or refer to the outcome of skill application or team strategy. No matter which method or combinations of observation techniques are used, it is advisable to conduct several observations of the focus behaviour before confirming that feedback is required or that there is a problem. Players who can intrinsically analyse performance may be capable of self-managing and overcoming a skill or team-play problem before the coach needs to intervene.

What to observe

The observation of athletes should be congruent with the task. Effective coaches avoid being distracted by aspects of performance that are not the behaviour being coached at the time.

More-experienced coaches develop the ability to observe a range of relevant associated performance areas at the same time. Athlete safety, mental attitude, physical abilities, and behaviours before and after a performance, are all important components of being able to accurately analyse the performance of athletes using the observation method.

Case study

Peter instructed his squad of four vision-impaired distance runners and their guide runners that he would be basing their entry into the national cross country championships on their overall performance in the local community Bay to Bridge run. On the day of the Bay to Bridge run, Peter informed the athletes that their finishing time would be only one of the many factors that he would consider in assessing their ability to compete in the nationals in six months time. The other factors Peter would observe and assess would be:

. attention to safety issues, such as regular hydration, communication with the support runner about the terrain, levels of physical comfort, and appropriate footwear

. pre-performance warm-up and briefing of the support runner as well as a post-competition cool-down and debriefing

. the ability to develop a positive and focused attitude with unwavering commitment throughout the race

. the ability to run efficiently and according to the race plan.

Peter was able to record each runner's performance profile on the basis of observing the above performance criteria.

Amount of practice

The amount of practice an athlete needs to facilitate learning depends on the complexity of the task, and the natural ability and experience of the athlete. It is essential that:

. there is minimal delay between successive trials of a skill, strategy or team play

. the athlete is able to successfully complete the task for the majority of trials

. fatigue does not interfere with the ability to concentrate on the task, unless learning to cope with fatigue and frustration is the focus of the practice.

Communication skills and techniques

Presenting information

When presenting information to athletes, coaches will maintain interest and attention if their communications are:

. positive

. clear

. articulate

. precise

. relaxed

. confident

. based on familiar language.

Posture

The body language of a coach needs to depict the sincerity and importance of communications. This can be achieved by:

. maintaining an open stance

. leaning or tending towards the listener

. maintaining eye contact.

Interest

To be able to effectively use familiar and relevant language, a coach should have a grasp of the terminology of the sport. To be able to heighten athlete interest in what could become at times bland and repetitive communications, a coach should include related anecdotes and specific examples in the presentation of information.

Athletes do not require coaches to be formidable public speakers or highly entertaining orators. Most athletes are involved in sport to experience the thrill of participation. However, to facilitate

learning and participation it is advisable that coaches include the communication skills and techniques outlined above when presenting information to athletes.

Listening skills

There are many situations where athletes may need to speak to their coach. Apart from formal interviews or debriefing sessions, athletes may speak to a coach to seek clarification in relation to an instruction or to increase their understanding about an aspect of competition. Basic listening skills such as eye contact, nodding the head when appropriate, keeping silent while the athlete is speaking, maintaining calm even if the athlete is testing your patience, and keeping relatively still, will encourage the athlete to be open and relaxed.

Other non-verbal coach behaviours that determine the impact a coach has on athletes include:

. facial expressions — smiling and concerned looks

. voice characteristics — change of volume

. mannerisms — forceful tone of voice

. touching — encouraging pats on the back

. relative position — up close and personal

. movement — bold hand gestures, pacing up and down.

Clever combinations of non-verbal coach behaviours are usually the domain of experienced coaches. Some coaches are highly skilled at depicting the mood of a situation and deploying the best combination of non-verbal behaviours to suit the situation and embellish a message.

Special needs

Athletes with a disability

For athletes with special needs, the facilitation of learning requires coaches to adopt specific methods to assist these athletes to cope with their particular limitations.

Special equipment and rules can assist amputees and athletes using a wheelchair. Touch, audio tapes, Braille instructions and meaningful sounds can assist athletes with vision impairments. Diagrams, video segments, manipulation and modelling can assist athletes with a hearing impairment, autism, cerebral palsy and/or other neurological impairments.

Effective coaches seek out the appropriate support methods for their athletes with special needs.

Case study

Fourteen-year-old Raymond had atrophying muscles caused by a neural disorder in his spine. Raymond's prognosis was not good, and because of his increasing inactivity he became obese and his enthusiasm towards his favourite pastime, sport, was waning. Raymond's parents took him to the local swimming club. The club had an indoor heated pool and a range of swimming programs from learn to swim, to high performance competition, to veterans' water aerobics.

Raymond was not a swimmer, but had always wanted to learn to swim. His coach, Elizabeth, recognised his lack of muscle tone, anxiety in the water and social maturity. It would not be appropriate to put 'floaties' on Raymond. Through Elizabeth, the swim club approached a buoyancy manufacturing company who made a special suit for Raymond. The buoyancy suit covered Raymond's torso, looked like a diver's wetsuit, provided excellent buoyancy, and in no way hindered movement. This, combined with modified activities and Elizabeth being able to discuss the program with Raymond, resulted in a highly successful relationship between the coach and athlete. Not only did Raymond lose excess weight and become a swimmer, but he also significantly delayed the progress of his muscle atrophy.

Language barriers

A combination of a multicultural society and a more mobile global population has resulted in many athletes with English as their second language. Coaching strategies for facilitating communication with these athletes include:

. Verbal instructions should use plain English and not be embellished using local slang or phrases and terminology that are unfamiliar to the athlete's dominant language.

. Use demonstrations more often and, if possible, have the English-speaking athletes demonstrate drills and techniques to those for whom English is a second or third language.

. Encourage athletes to learn to communicate in English by occasionally taking the time to communicate with them in their language, even if it is only in the form of a greeting.

. Become familiar with what motivates athletes from other cultures and develop empathy for their varying expectations.

Summary

Coaches play a vital role in helping athletes to learn. They can establish a positive environment for athletes to develop by using coaching methods and communication approaches that facilitate learning. Coaches need to ensure that they structure the training environment so that athletes can learn to think for themselves, and play a proactive role in their own development.

The skilled coach is not just a teacher, they are a facilitator of the learning process. Observation and effective feedback are important tools for the coach and play an important role in the coaching process. Coaches should also be able to mould the learning environment to suit athletes from a broad range of backgrounds and abilities. Through effective use of these skills, coaches can give athletes the best possible chance to develop and improve.

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