

## **Opening Call for Discourse**

### **Athlete Centered Coaching: A time for reflection on meanings, values, and practice.**

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The launch of the Journal of Athlete Centered Coaching prompts both coaches and academics to reflect upon their understanding and application of the term 'Athlete Centered Coaching'. We contend that such reflection is a critical prerequisite to advancements in coaching research and professional practice. Drawing on research insights, we present a case for rethinking, or certainly extending, the meanings of 'athlete centered coaching' and seek to prompt academic and professional discussions about the ways in which the term is interpreted and enacted.

The call for papers for the journal identified Athlete Centered Coaching with a "change in coaching focus that empowers athletes towards discovery based learning", adding that this includes strategies that provide the athlete an opportunity to have a voice and dignity in their participation experience. By providing opportunities for critical thinking and decision making by the athletes themselves, the athlete centered coach lives out the core values for which they entered the coaching profession in the first place. (Journal of Athlete Centered Coaching, 2014)

In this short paper we call into question what a commitment to the notion of 'athletes' voice and dignity in their participation experience' may encompass, and similarly, the sort of critical thinking and decision making that athletes are encouraged to engage with. Our stance is informed by recent and ongoing research that has revealed the impact that coaching practices and performance environments can have on athletes' long--term health and wellbeing, and acknowledges the influential role that coaches play in establishing and legitimating practices that come to define sporting cultures (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; McMahon & Penney, 2013; Stirling & Kerr, 2008). We accept that the stance presented is not one that all coaches or academics may agree with and do not expect consensus on the issues we raise. Difference in viewpoints is entirely legitimate in this arena. They reflect that the 'core values' that underpin coaches' entry to the profession and their ongoing professional practice will vary.

Our emphasis, however, is that there is a need for greater discussion of different viewpoints and values, and in particular, about the implications that these differences have for what happens in the name of 'Athlete Centered Coaching'.

Amidst the progressive development of any approach or philosophy of coaching, it is understandable that variations will emerge in what comes to be understood as core or 'defining' principles and characteristics. Who an individual coach talks with and comes to regard as 'an authority' in the area, what they read, how they have seen any approach enacted, and the way in which a coach then aligns conversations, observations and what they read with their own personal values, will all shape thinking about what it means to coach in a certain way. Hence various coaches and academics will come to have different understandings and visions of something such as Athlete Centered Coaching. In many respects, this can be seen as both inevitable and appropriate, as an approach is adapted and contextualized to suit specific coaching environments. Are we then justified in seeing varied understandings and applications of Athlete Centered Coaching as in any way problematic? Perhaps.

In our view, there are dangers that the significance of underpinning values may become lost amidst somewhat functional ways of thinking about Athlete Centered Coaching. An emphasis, for example, of the need to understand the different ways individual athletes learn, their individual learning/performance goals and needs, and adjust coaching techniques to match, may be the way in which some coaches think about and seek to apply Athlete Centered Coaching. Yet, this may only partially connect with the holistic orientation to the notion of 'understanding the athlete and their individual needs that we see as necessary to foreground. From this perspective, Athlete Centered Coaching needs to be about far more than matters such as greater use of questioning, or greater differentiation of learning; 'knowing the athlete' about far more than knowing their learning preferences and the ways in which they typically respond to various approaches. Athlete Centered Coaching is complex-it isn't an approach with a magic formula, it is an approach which requires a coach to understand him/herself and then understanding the athlete. It is about embracing a social constructivist approach, knowing that the athlete has a history -- psychologically, cognitively and physically, and being committed not only to trying to find out what that is but also come to understand it and with that understanding, explore with the athlete how to best enable them to become self--aware and independent, responsible for their own learning and performance. In an athlete centered environment, the athlete owns the direction, is accountable for that direction and

thus takes responsibility for their actions and performance (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010).

But how far should conversations about direction and responsibility go? The term humanistic is often used as a discourse for athlete centred, which makes sense in that, it is about being human, it is about accepting others as human and each in their own unique social construction. The essence of athlete centred is awareness, it is about athletes becoming aware of themselves, and coaches becoming aware of themselves so they can help athletes. 'Athlete Centered' suggests that this understanding of the athlete requires and understanding of self. Our emphasis is that coach--athlete understandings and conversations that are directed towards such understanding need to go beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of any specific coaching setting and beyond matters of what it will take to maximize individual performance. We suggest that a commitment to Athlete Centered Coaching should mean that a coach is concerned with the athlete as a person not just performer (Lombardo, 2001), their life within sport and outside of it, their long--term health and wellbeing as well as their short term performance. Phil Jackson is known for enabling players to grow as individuals through the nurturing of the group effort. He suggests it is about "listening without judgment", by being "truly present with impartial, open awareness." (Jackson & Delahanty, 1995, as cited in Humm, 2010, p. 259). That impartiality and openness arguably needs to extend beyond strategic thinking, and reflect a commitment to conversations that consider in a holistic sense what at any time may be best for the athlete from their perspective. Developing this sort of openness requires incredible empathy (Goleman, 1998) to understand what the athletes understand, how they view their own performance, what sport means to them, and how they look at the world. An orientation such as this, is arguably at the heart of what it means to be a truly Athlete Centered Coach.

As indicated in our opening, we do not expect everyone to agree that such an orientation is either necessary or appropriate. We accept that in some respects coaches (and particularly coaches working with young athletes) may feel notable pressures to draw distinct boundaries in relation to the aspects of an athlete's life that they know about and/or seek to connect with.

We also recognize that a deeper commitment to a holistic interpretation and enactment of Athlete Centered Coaching is destined to give rise to dilemmas and tensions, as coaches grapple for example, with the fine line between a training programme that may enable an athlete to attain a peak performance and a concern to protect an athlete's physical, social and emotional long term well

being. Both coach and athlete arguably need to engage with understanding of the potential longer term impact of particular coaching approaches and practices. In saying this we fully acknowledge that such impact is destined to be highly individual. This reaffirms the central importance of knowing the individual athlete in the fullest sense while at the same time, being incredibly self--aware as a coach. We will welcome others' views on the issues we have raised and look forward to further perspectives and research insights being put forward through the Journal of Athlete Centered Coaching.

## References

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