

An Example of Coach Mentoring

In recent years I have been expounding the virtues of helping coaches in their workspace. Courses and workshops have their place as does the informal sharing on social media but my coaching always improved when the person supporting me was there, at the sharp end, where the rubber meets the road – at the coach/athlete interface.

It all started when I was training to be a PE teacher in the mid-1960s. The three years went like this – I would attend a practical lecture and be taken through the teaching stages of a certain activity. Later that session I would be asked to teach the same activity to a small group of my peers. During and after I would receive comments and ideas on how I could have improved what I did. It was interesting to remember that the feedback I received from my peers was a simple regurgitation of the lecture content whereas the lecturer, with his extensive experience, guided me to better things. This was a daily occurrence. Later in the year, I would then spend time at a local school doing some individual and 'team' teaching with the same guidance occurring during and after each teaching stint. The 'How' I was teaching was always rehearsed back at College during lectures as we were continually exposed to the principles of pedagogy. The teaching practice in schools saw us all being left on our own with classes more frequently with fewer interventions from our lecturers and the staff at the school. Once I started my first full-time PE teaching job I still had a brilliant Head of Department who supported me through my first year of teaching. All the time in those first 4 years of my teaching journey I was in a peer group that shared their experiences. I had been put through a 'slow release', quality control process of being mentored. This was also the start of my Athletics coaching journey which meant that I made sure that I was always in the presence of or in contact with experienced coaches to observe and learn from.

As coaching organisations develop, so should the ability of their 'education' arm to offer 'coach development' processes as illustrated above. I am one such 'coach mentor' nowadays in a very informal setting. I get invited to coaching environments to see if I can help the coach 'do things better and do better things'. As with all that I have done in the last 50+ years I am learning on the job. My mentoring of 25 years ago resembles little of my mentoring now as I have embraced my own learning and 'change'. To be invited to help is a great honour and deserves the very best I can give. It has always been more successful when the 'coal-face' (helping in the session) element has been preceded by the courses I have that support all these ideas. The courses deal with the 'Why' and the 'What', while the session support deals with the 'What' and the 'How'.

People often publish a video of their athletes online and ask for help on the technique on display. While this is better than nothing and may solicit some cue or clue that is helpful, it is also fraught with dangers. Not only will the placement on

social media attract some valid support but it will also attract those who simply want to enter a contest of egos or, even worse, coaches from the lunatic fringe.

The onsite mentoring experience is not a quick-fix or fast-track episode. I cannot even begin to make sense of a technical model until I have witnessed the full context of its existence. That is why my mentoring is a fairly long-term element. I learned a long time ago that the technique I just witnessed is but one frame of a very long movie and I need to know the plot, sub-plots and the destination.

One recent example was with a coach of a late-teenage track sprinter (100m and 200m). I was sent a video of some races which triggered the first chance to organise my thoughts. Yes, the technique of start, acceleration and maximum velocity sectors of the race were there to see. I have my own interpretation of running mechanics and what I see as the central pillars of the gait movement and so I had an immediate comparison with what I know and understand. Herein lies the first problem – how can I trust or how can the coach trust that I am contextualising the technical model appropriately? This is where it helped by having the coach attend a workshop or two beforehand so that she could see examples of my ‘Why’, ‘What’, ‘How’ and ‘When’. By attending the workshops she had put herself in a decent position to choose who she would turn to for this mentoring. Now you can see why it is an honour for someone to trust you in this matter.

So, here I stood at a training session praying that I didn’t stuff things up. To help me reduce the chance of me making a mistake it was clear that the movement pattern I was seeing had to be viewed in the context of other matters. The technical model I was observing was a result of many inputs over time. What movement efficiency and consistency levels were available to this learning? What movement resilience (robustness) existed as the running patterns were being learned? Here it was vital to try to find out what was causing the movement limitations that existed in the high-speed environment. Also what had been the central focus of the learning experiences? What feedback had been used in the learning process?

Before making any observations to the coach and athlete I then asked to see the athlete carry out some of the associated movement patterns to see if some clues could be found there. Watching the athlete squat, lunge, jump, land, brace and also watching him skip for height, skip for distance, lunge-walk, walk and run with a broomstick overhead gave me illustrations of what might be causing the movement limitations at high speed.

In nearly every case of technical appraisal, the athlete is ‘here’ in the event-specific model because of the influences of those things ‘over there’ in the movement vocabulary/learning toolbox. To elicit change, therefore, will demand not simply trying to change the model itself but to change those elements that are contributing to the limitations on view. The technical flaws I witnessed were not simply solved by telling the athlete not to do the error. The specific movement flaw needed to be (a) understood by the athlete (b) linked to all the related components. His ability to

remain stable at foot contact was extraordinarily poor. The whole chain from 'toenails to fingernails' was full of major energy leaks and compensatory movements that compounded the 'contact' and 'heel to hamstring' pattern that was sought.

The solution was to create a series of movement patterns/activities that stabilised the chain. The journey would be one of introducing 'general' movements, earning the right to move on to 'related' ones and always cycling these new movements back into the 'specific' pattern. These new movements had to, first, be learned, then progressed through amplitude, speed and force and continually fed back into the running gait pattern. The process was to be one of months, not minutes.

One positive that came of this was that both coach and athlete were met with lots of new challenges, always a stimulus to learning. The coach started their journey in creating new layers of their toolbox and the athlete was met with the challenges of variety and variability.

The exercise of walking the coach through this jigsaw is probably the most valuable element of mentoring. The presence of loyalty and trust allowed the exercise to develop into an ongoing relationship. The other great thing for me is to watch the creativity of the coach come to the fore. While I think that I now have a decent 'toolbox' I learn from the creativity of each coach I work with.

Even if there is no national mentorship strategy (still can't accept that there is no semblance of one) then there can be created a coach-driven, sharing process where an experienced coach with the appropriate character, personality and humility can support the local coaching community. Of course, there could be nationally accredited coach mentors ('Coach Developers' is the latest manifestation being considered) but there can be nothing better than a family of coaches choosing their own mentors from their own ranks.

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October 2021