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## Simple Methods to Double the Impact of Your Sports Coaching



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Innovative Sports Coaching Report:

# Simple Methods to **DOUBLE** The **IMPACT** Of Your Sports Coaching

## PREVIEW

If you are a sports coach or mentor with an interest in self-development, then this report is for you.

Research into sports coaching, and coach education, has traditionally focused on the behaviours of coaches at a descriptive, superficial level. The innovative approaches to pedagogy described in this document provide a vehicle for answering the worthier question of how sports coaches do what they do.

Learning sits at the heart of the discussion. If one person is to influence another's behaviour, some learning must take place. Expert sports coaches and mentors will create optimum learning conditions to give themselves the greatest chance of success.

A variety of strategies exist to help coaches succeed. Perhaps the true skill for coaches and mentors is in selecting the right strategy at the right time, but a deeper knowledge of the available options can only help mentors to be more effective.

Player & athlete surveys have indicated that coaches who adopt innovative coaching behaviours are considered to be twice as effective as those who do not (Entwistle & Francis, 2008).

## INTRODUCTION: PEDAGOGY & PRACTICE

'Pedagogy' is the study of being a teacher. The term generally refers to strategies, or style, of instruction. The term is highly relevant for sports coaches because it synthesises their behaviours into a *modus operandi*. Pedagogy is the 'how' of sports coaching; 'the way you are with the players / athletes'. An expert sports coach, or mentor, has an implicit understanding of pedagogy and in particular, what behaviours, strategies and personality traits to deploy when seeking to extract maximum performance from his or her players or athletes. Whether conscious or subconscious, an understanding of pedagogy is equally important for grassroots & elite performance coaches & mentors, regardless of sport.

In this e-book, we will analyse pedagogy, by considering Mark Jordan. Mark is a UEFA A licence soccer coach from the UK. In a series of interviews with Sporting Mentors, he shares his thoughts on how pedagogy impacts on his coaching in his daily practice over one particular season.

Mark will discuss..

- His preferred learning style

- His coaching philosophy

- An analysis of his 'coaching role'

- Support & evidence from appropriate sources

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## 1 Context

Mark works with elite soccer players at a professional club in the UK. The salient features of his job description are as follows:

- Plan, co-ordinate and deliver a Performance Soccer programme
- Deliver technical/tactical training
- Oversee delivery of Strength & Conditioning training
- Identify and recruit talented players
- Attend all matches & scout opponents

Mark's performance squad contains 18 players. The soccer club employ a Strength & Conditioning coach to deliver up to 5 hours physiological training per week.

Mark is accountable to a Management Board for delivery of the Performance programme, developing players that can graduate into the club's first team, and ultimately the results of the squad. Although not operating at the sharp end of professional sport, there is an implicit expectation that the performance outcomes will not fall below a certain competence threshold given the performance environment and the resources attached to the programme.

This document is a critical analysis of the extent to which Mark is deploying innovative pedagogical practices in his coaching.

## 2 Mark Jordan Coaching Philosophy

"I am an experienced coach, having started coaching in 1995. Despite this, my coaching philosophy remains an evolutionary work in progress. I use my experiences to shape, refine and specify my beliefs about coaching. Notwithstanding some flexibility at the periphery of my philosophy, certain core values pervade my coaching practice. It is pertinent to consider these before examining the detail of my coaching practice".

Mark articulated his coaching philosophy throughout the series of interviews with Sporting Mentors. The reoccurring themes that emerged were:

- o Mark prioritises the safety & welfare of the people for whom he is responsible above all else
- o Mark models honest, respectful, open, listening behaviour wherever possible and hopes that others reciprocate
- o Mark is keen to improve his effectiveness through learning, and in order to do so he is reflective at every available opportunity
- o Mark wants to win, but not at all costs
- o Mark values the personal relationships that he develops through sport
- o Establishing and maintaining trust and loyalty is extremely important to Mark
- o Mark prefers to empower the players and adopts this approach wherever possible
- o Mark wants the players to improve as a result of coming into contact with him and therefore he attempts to create conditions that are conducive to player learning

Virtually all of Mark's prior coaching experience took place in professional soccer club academies with youth (12-16 yrs) players. In these scenarios, the content was largely prescribed by a syllabus determined by the philosophy and culture of the club. Very little attention was afforded to the nature of coaching and in particular how the content would be delivered. Mark was therefore left to develop his own understanding of how to coach and what he should prioritise for the players in his approach.

John Wooden's Pyramid of success resonates with Mark as a means of articulating the many facets that coaches must consider (Wooden, 1958\*). The Wooden Pyramid has huge visual impact: it allows Mark to very quickly identify the holes in his coaching practice. Furthermore, it is exhaustive; in Mark's view there are no significant omissions from the pyramid.

Wooden's suggestion that competitive greatness can only be achieved when all of the other building blocks of success are in place certainly fits with Mark's coaching experience to date. He concurs wholeheartedly with the selection of poise and

confidence at the gateway to competitive greatness. Poise is the ability to steady oneself when all around are losing their heads. Confidence is the most elusive yet explosive commodity for any athlete. For Wooden, competitive greatness is:

"A real love for the hard battle, knowing it offers the opportunity to be at your best when your best is required". (Wooden, 1956\*)

This sentiment is aligned closely with Mark's own thinking. His life background from outside sport gives him a sense of good fortune to be 'the man in the arena', even when he suffers disappointment from a sporting perspective.

Clive Woodward used different language but essentially his 'Winning' model is similar (Woodward, 2005). It refers to a heightened, elite, physical and mental state where everything flows towards success. Put simply, Mark's coaching philosophy is to do whatever is necessary to bring his players to this moment!

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF COACHING ROLE

### 3.1 Importance of Learning

If the coaching relationship that exists between the players and Mark is functioning well, there should be multiple strands of learning taking place on both sides of the process. The players learn from him about the components of successful play. Simultaneously, Mark deepens his knowledge about the components of successful play as he coaches the players. Moreover, he learns how to coach more effectively, and all that involves.

### 3.2 Mark Jordan Learning Style

There exists a large amount of research into how people learn. Arguably the most popular theory groups people into three kinds of learners: visual learners, auditory learners, and kinaesthetic learners. In reality most people are hybrids. Mark knows from experience, and from completing a VAK questionnaire, that he is predominantly a visual and kinaesthetic learner. To some extent, his learning is characterised by observation and experimentation, taking place in a cyclical manner. This resonates with a hypothesis proposed by Kolb (1981), who identified observation and experimentation as pillars of learning. However, a simple cycle such as that proposed by Kolb does not fully reflect the complexity of Mark's learning. The process is also characterised by curiosity, a need to progress professionally, feedback and assessment from stakeholders, and action (doing), which lend credence to the learning principles proposed by Race (2005). Race's 'cornerstones of learning' provide coaches with a framework for fully understanding and accelerating their own learning. More significantly, it guides coaches towards creating conditions conducive to learning. Mark understands that in order to shape and influence his players' actions they must learn from the coaching process (whether directly from me or not). Creating a learning culture is at the centre of Mark's coaching practice with the squad.

### 3.3 Athletes' Learning Style

Mark conducted a simple questionnaire to establish each of the players' learning styles. The results enabled him to customise the behaviours that he deploys with each of the different players. In addition he asked the players what they wanted from a coach, and received some great feedback. Mark stated that in his own experience of working with coaches as a player, very few ask the players what it is they want! The inference was that many coaches needed reminding that coaches exist only to serve the players/athletes and other stakeholders.

Mark uses a variety of tools to reach out to the different learners that exists within the squad.



For visual learners:

- o Uses prompts such as a tactics board, video analysis, hand gestures, coaching demonstrations, and cones positioned on the ground.

For auditory learners:

- o Uses his voice in a variety of ways, and a whistle, and silence, as tools in his coaching arsenal.
- o Mark is very careful to use appropriate language when speaking to the players. The squad even have their own particular language: Mark asks the players to think of particular words that can be used as a cue for a certain thought or action.

For kinaesthetic learners:

- o Training is structured to put the players in similar problem solving situations that they face in competition, and they are required to 'experience' the solution (by doing it). Repeating this process exposes the players to a variety of scenarios within a particular aspect of play, such that they experience a variety of solutions and get a feel for the correct actions. This approach is often referred to as 'guided discovery', and links to the concept of empowerment, discussed below.

The 18 players in the squad all display different kinds of intelligence, and different levels of resistance or reception to coaching. Observing the players in training and competition would lead to the conclusion that some clearly lack spatial-visual intelligence, or linguistic intelligence, or logical intelligence. However, each player demonstrates a different type of intelligence. Some are highly kinaesthetically intelligent or demonstrate intelligence at an interpersonal level with the coach and their teammates. They all bring something to the group.

The situation as described lends weight to Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory (Gardner, 1983). Gardner believes there are seven kinds of intelligence. Rather than dismiss as unintelligent a person who appears to lack the traditional traits associated with intelligence, Gardner suggests that people may lack intelligence in one area but be highly intelligent in another.

The last of Gardner's types of intelligence is 'intrapersonal', or self-awareness. Mark has encouraged the players to self-assess. This issue, and the extent to which Mark was successful, is discussed below in the context of empowerment.

### 3.4 Action Towards Creating a Learning Environment

The research on learning indicates that for most people, learning involves practice, repetition, evaluation, mental rehearsal, and experimentation. Criticism is often cited as a hindrance to learning, alongside a lack of desire, the absence of a challenge, and poor teaching or coaching. Learning is far more likely to occur when a person learning gains enjoyment and satisfaction from the experience. Furthermore, making a logical, relevant connection to their real life, and experiencing a sense of pride in having learnt something perceived to be worthwhile are considered important (Race, 2005). Lionel Messi is noted to have commented on FC Barcelona Coach Pep Guardiola that

'Everything we do in training relates directly to the game. No time is wasted'

Mark has therefore attempted to make all of his practices close relations of the real game (Thorpe, 1983).

At the outset of training, Mark instigates some dialogue with the players in which they jointly explore the purpose of the training. Mark also previews the content, and highlights the intended learning outcomes as he sees them. This is an attempt on Mark's part to get the players to ask, "What's in it for me?" When working with specific positions, other player's attention has often drifted. Mark has attempted to address this by using Q&A but this only engages players at a superficial level in his experience. Mark says he would like to reach a scenario where all the players are concerned about all of the positions/sessions, and question the purpose of every activity. Moreover, he would like the players to take ownership to the extent that they ask why is a particular strategy working or not working, and suggest alternative solutions. Mark has had some moderate success in getting the players to 'buy into' this shared learning environment, but have fallen some way short of this perfect scenario.

In Mark's own experience, coaches tend to focus on deficiencies or mistakes. Yet international players make mistakes, let alone grassroots or non-elite players. Mark therefore adopts a constructivist approach wherever possible. He seeks to 'be positive' and offer encouragement at every opportunity. Mistakes are referred to in generic and 'soft' terms, usually via a question. In some rare instances, Mark takes the view that he must quickly take some direct action over a mistake, in order to help the team over the short term and retain a sense of credibility from the players. That is, sometimes the players need reassurance that Mark has identified a problem and is addressing it directly.

Furthermore, in Mark's experience, coaches try to get players to conform, often to a perceived technically correct style, yet some of the most successful sports people in history have been highly unorthodox in their approach (e.g. Diego Maradona, Dick Fosberry, Tiger Woods). Indeed, it has been this creative edge and

willingness to take an intuitive leap outside the conventional boundaries that has defined their uniqueness. Mark has thus attempted to encourage creativity from individuals by adopting an athlete centred approach (see below). He has sought to engage the players within the coaching process and utilise their strengths, knowledge and innovation through effective questioning and listening.

#### 4.1 Athlete-Centred Coaching

Kidman (2005) argues that an empowered athlete is more likely to be effective than a disempowered athlete. Kidman suggests that players will be happier, more motivated, and more likely to train and play well in an athlete-centred environment. There exists a public perception, perpetuated by the media, that players fall into a comfort zone when empowered, and often need to experience some sort of 'fear factor' to perform at their best. Certainly athlete-centred coaching is contrary to most people's experience of coaching and does not sit well with cultural norms or indeed the expectations of most athletes. Empowerment can be viewed as 'not coaching' or simply not being tough enough. An extensive discussion of the merits of athlete-centred coaching is beyond the scope of this paper.

There is no escaping this issue as a coach! Every coach has a decision to make regarding the extent to which he/she empowers the players. If a sliding scale exists between prescription, consultation, participation, and delegation, then every coach must decide where he/she is positioned. Even a coach operating at the polar extreme of pure athlete-centred coaching still retains some 'power' simply by virtue of the fact that the decision to empower rests with the coach.

Additionally, Gladwell (2006) suggests that human beings form lasting impressions of one another within miniscule periods of time. Restated: first impressions last. With that in mind, Mark was keen to very quickly establish the parameters within which the players and the coach would interact, and more specifically, a positive, empowering, environment within which we would operate. Mark was sure to dress smartly and speak with simplicity and clarity at his very first meeting with players, in order to set down an early marker about his behaviour, authority & character.

#### 4.2 Action Towards Creating an Athlete-Centred Environment

Mark recalled having several negative experiences as a player when faced with controlling, dictatorial, coach-centred coaches. He was unable to refer to a positive or negative experience with an athlete-centred coach because, as a player, such a person never coached Mark! This set of experiences encouraged him to coach in an athlete-centred manner. Mark's thinking is essentially constructivist and he believes that, by deliberately conceding some control, he can exert greater influence over his players.

Even though this approach appeared highly counter-intuitive, from the outset of his coaching Mark operated in a highly empowering manner. His first meeting with the players was used as a shared goal setting exercise. The players were also asked what they wanted/expected/needed from their coach. At a second meeting, the players were asked to provide their own standards, or acceptable behaviours. Mark encouraged the players to 'police' one another and ensure that these standards

were maintained, and asked the group to identify leaders who could act as a conduit between the squad and the coach.

However, during the course of one particular season, the players' standards and behaviours dropped, and Mark struggled with the decision over whether to take back the autonomy that he had handed to the group. It occurred to me that I wanted to create the illusion of empowerment but still wanted to retain control because of my accountability for results of the squad. The empowerment process very likely did not succeed because of my failure to commit to it fully. Mark admits he did not trust the players to follow through with their initial good intentions in the way that the coach knew that he could and would. To use another of Gladwell's terms, Mark did not reach the tipping point (Gladwell, 2006). He did not influence enough key individuals to stimulate the rest of the group to follow.

By doing so he prevented the group from reaching a state of 'flow': the optimum scenario in which confidence spills over not into arrogance but an air of virtual inevitability (see Wooden, Woodward). By his own admission, Mark's squad has certainly fallen some way short if this state to date. Further, by failing to fully commit to an athlete-centred approach, Mark failed to build leaders within the team as effectively as possible. In key moments during the campaign the team demonstrated mental weakness that could have resulted from these events.

Mark wanted the players to self-assess. By doing so they would reflect on their own performance in a critical and unemotional manner, some time after the competitive event. Yet Mark made self-assessment optional, and the uptake on it was disappointing; just over half of the players completed the tick box sheets that had been created for them to assess their own performance.

Self-assessment provided Mark with some useful feedback and gave him insights that simply talking to the players could not, yet he failed to follow through and prioritise this with the players. Further, there existed a perception that self-assessment was an unnecessary addition to the players busy schedules, even though Mark consciously made the forms concise (could be completed in 5-10 minutes). The beginning of the season was a period when the team was winning most of its games and therefore some of the feedback was banal, as the players did not look beyond the outcome of the match. (i.e. "if we won, we played well"). Mark did not do enough to educate the players to critically analyse their own performance, and self-assessment was dropped from our routine after only 4 or 5 weeks. It is something that Mark plans to instigate again at the beginning of the next season and he recognises that he must commit to following through with it.

Similarly, with the issue of self-policing, when players fell below the required standards on, say, time keeping, the player at fault was unwilling to accept the consequences as defined by the teamship rules (the standards that the squad had set themselves). Therefore the group merely paid lip service to the concept of

empowerment and never really 'bought in' in a way that would have made the approach deeply effective. Mark ended up becoming more and more the disciplinarian; the maker and enforcer of rules. As a result of this experience Mark is undecided on the optimum level of player empowerment. He feels that coaches need to make an assessment of the type of players being coached. If it is a squad blessed with a tranche of experienced senior players, then empowerment is important. If it is a grassroots soccer teams with predominantly young players aged, then there is evidence to suggest any empowering may create incoherence and inconsistency. In hindsight, Mark says he deploy a less athlete-centred at the outset, and migrate towards a more athlete centred approach. Arguably this is the approach adopted by Sir Alex Ferguson during his long tenure at Manchester United FC.

## 5 Mentoring and Community of Practice

Mark's Manager and the Director of Soccer Performance is an experienced soccer coach in his own right and someone who commands respect from both players and staff. He has acted as Mark's informal mentor. Mark has sought to harness the power of his greater experience via a series of informal discussions, which occur almost daily. He approaches these encounters in an open minded, honest, challenging, motivated way. Mark is extremely keen to improve his coaching practice and therefore he takes ownership for his own development. Mark identified the Director of Soccer as a suitable mentor because he is non threatening and non judgmental. He possesses 'emotional intelligence' (Woodward, 2005). Furthermore, Mark finds him to be knowledgeable, respectful, thought provoking, logical, articulate, trustworthy and positive. Together they set realistic and appropriate interim goals for me, and the squad, to run alongside the goals set by the athletes themselves.

Mark is also part of an informal Community of Practice (Wenger, 2002) within the wider coaching community. He seeks to draw on the experiences of others, coaches not just from his own sport but a wide variety, and even other performance areas such as business. The purpose and value of this Community is considered below.

## 6 Orchestrating the Coaching Process

An examination of the extent to which coaches systematically control the coaching process is beyond the scope of this paper. The metaphor of orchestration has been proposed to describe one strategy that coaches use for managing the complexity of coaching (Jones & Wallace, 2006: p61).

Mark is responsible for managing the players, but also the support staff that help to deliver the programme. At the outset of the programme, the club committed to employing a specialist Strength and Conditioning coach for 5 hours per week. The times for these sessions were fixed, subject to the constraints of player, coach and facility availability.

Mark adopted a laissez-faire approach to managing the S&C component of the programme. This was borne out of his inadequate knowledge of S&C, certainly compared to the S&C coach. Initially attendance and interest from the players was high. However, after a period of time, the following issues developed:

- The players did not see a connection between S&C attendance/performance and team selection
- The players were complaining of fatigue on the day of a game having done a heavy S&C session the previous day (or 2 sessions within 48 hours)
- The players complained that the content of the S&C sessions was not closely enough related to soccer specific requirements
- The S&C coach felt disillusioned because his component of the programme was perceived as independent and undervalued by the Head Coach and the players

Mark did not have enough knowledge, and certainly not enough control, over what or how was being delivered in those S&C sessions. In the latter part of the season, Mark addressed this issue by having a weekly meeting with the S&C coach to plan the itinerary and loadings for the week. He also integrated the S&C coach into his soccer sessions wherever possible (warm up/down), and attended the S&C sessions myself wherever possible.

There is no escaping the fact that synthesising the S&C component of the programme was a glaring omission from Mark's coaching during the season. He fell into the trap of thinking a support session was outside his domain, yet as a Head Coach your domain is everything! By failing to produce a joint, integrated training plan at the outset Mark was setting himself up for failure. Furthermore, the players did not receive the full benefit from this component of training as a result of Mark's failure to integrate it appropriately.



## 7.1 Coach Behaviour and Strategies

Prior to gaining some experience of coaching, Mark had misguided belief that professional elite sports coaches had some 'black box' knowledge; some secret or magic way of operating, that other coaches could only aspire to. He now understands that there is no black box; the strategies adopted by good coaches are simply rational mechanisms for effective delivery of their message. Strategies that Mark used to coach the players included:

- Planning
- Effective decision-making
- Feedback
- Assessment
- Training
- Interventions
- Empowerment
- Performance analysis
- Interpersonal relationships
- Self-assessment

Without appreciating in these terms, Mark has been providing 'scaffolding' for the players to help them bridge gaps in their knowledge and so develop.

Vygotsky developed a set of theories for learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978). He viewed development as a non-linear social construct, based on 'interactions between people'. Vygotsky also developed the theory of the 'zone of proximal development'. This refers to the gap that exists between what the learner can achieve alone versus that which can be achieved with assistance (from a variety of sources). 'A capable other', very likely a coach, can adopt strategies to help learners bridge the gaps, or provide 'scaffolding' which will help athlete development (Potrac and Cassidy, 2006).

Experience has provided Mark with good knowledge of the sport. My knowledge is only information to the players unless they are able to utilize it. Mark worked with the players repeatedly on a particular aspect of defensive play during the first half of the season. The players did not show evidence in games of having learnt the aspect, yet in training they were highly competent. After Christmas, Mark coached the defensive aspect less frequently, yet the players showed a far better understanding in competitive scenarios. I concluded that their learning had taken place over a period of time. Mark's pre Christmas frustration was therefore misplaced because it was not that they did not understand, but that they were not yet ready to show that learning. Before Christmas their learning had taken place at a superficial level; they were able to simply repeat back to me what I had said. Post Christmas, deeper learning had taken place: they knew and understood the concepts and interpreted them themselves.

Bloom's Taxonomy provides an explanation for this situation. It divides educational objectives into three "domains:" affective, psychomotor, and cognitive. Bloom's taxonomy is hierarchical; meaning that learning at the higher levels is dependent on having attained prerequisite knowledge and skills at lower levels (Orlich, et al. 2004). The cognitive domain is characterized sequentially by knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and finally evaluation. Pre Christmas the players were still at knowledge and comprehension; now they were somewhere between synthesis and evaluation.

Intervention strategies represent a key area for coaches. Thomas Dowens, Scottish Director of Volleyball, referred to these as 'craft skills' (Dowens, 2009). The timing and nature of feedback is critical, because it can impact on many other aspects of the coaching process. Happily, Mark's background of coaching younger players has developed an internal mechanism that limits my use of criticism. Even then, there are some players in the group who will interpret any kind of constructive feedback as a personal attack on them. Mark has identified these individuals and treats them in a wholly positive manner.

With respect to the practices, all of the sessions follow a similar structure. The players have a routine at the start and end of training sessions that they now follow diligently. Mark deploys some repetitive practices that do not require thought from the players, but they can focus on grooving their technique. The middle and latter parts of the sessions provide decision-making and problem solving situations. The players also have a pre game routine that they follow religiously before every match.

Fair play, sportsmanship, and respect for officials are all closely aligned with Mark's philosophy on coaching. Therefore he attempts to model good behaviour at all times; Mark never calls out to officials or opponents and he seeks to encourage the same from his players. Not only does Mark regard this as the right thing to do, he views it is an effective use of his finite resources.

Expert coaches are thought to possess the following traits:

- Extensive knowledge
- Sharp analytical skills
- Finely tuned perception
- A manner engrained by routines and rituals
- The ability to be reflective
- Thirst for knowledge

Mark seeks to model these attributes. Furthermore, Mark target smalls, symmetrical emotional responses to events. He does not get over excited when the squad wins, & he does not get carried away when the squad loses. Mark tries to

remain emotionally calm and stable. This, he believes, places him in the optimum state of mind to behave as an expert coach, and make effective, rational decisions.

## 7.2 Decision Making

Coach decision-making is an under researched area. Most of the research on decision-making that does exist is based on military or medical scenarios. The work on naturalistic decision-making suggests that experts will observe and recognise a pattern of events, and can accurately project 5/6/n steps ahead. Furthermore, expert coaches know when and more importantly how to intervene. Coaches therefore make decisions now to influence those subsequent events.

In Mark's view, the most important aspect of decision-making is not the decision taken by the coach, but the conversion of that decision into action by the players. Some decisions are easily converted; for example substitutions. Tactical nuances are far more difficult to change when the players have the cognitive demands of the game to deal with.

As a coach, Mark is perpetually making decisions. This has particular relevance during matches. There is a continual internal dialogue being played out between decisions to act versus decisions not to act. Frequently the most difficult thing is to do nothing, as perceptions are that you are incompetent or doing nothing!

One strategy I have deployed to help the players make their own informed decisions is scenario analysis during training. I give the players a scenario, for example they are one goal ahead with 8 minutes remaining against a difficult opponent, and ask them to show me what they would do if that situation came up.

Clive Woodward used this approach successfully with the England rugby team in 2003. Mark's observations of elite coaches are that they are not afraid of taking creative or unorthodox decisions. He seeks to think 'outside the box' wherever possible for ways of surprising opponents.

Mark's decision-making is also characterised by a heuristic; this is a choice that the coach always makes. Mark always makes the permitted three substitutions in every game. He does this to keep all of the players involved and motivated. It has the added benefit that players who are substituted see it less as a reflection of their performance, because of the heuristic nature of the decision.

## 8 Being a Reflective Practitioner

Mark's recent experience of coach education stressed the need for me to evaluate my coaching behaviour. Happily his nature is to be highly analytical (of self and others) and strive for improvement. The significance of being reflective is brought into focus by the seminal work of Schon (1983). Schon highlights the significance of holding up a mirror to oneself and posing the following fundamental questions:

- Where have I been?
- Where am I now?
- Where am I going?

Schon drew the distinction between reflection before action, reflection in action and reflection on action. This resonates with Mark's coaching experience. Mark knows that he reflects deeply before action, and post action. Reflection in action is a skill he is still acquiring through experience but has not yet mastered. It amounts to 'thinking on one's feet', and correlates with Wooden's concept of 'poise' in his pyramid of success. Without poise, reflection in action would be near impossible.

Mark tends to perpetually or at least daily self assess, but this process seems to take on particular significance after competitive matches. His natural tendency is to undertake more extensive self-assessment after defeats than victories, yet Woodward would suggest it is far more important to analyse success! (Woodward, 2005) In truth, Schon's work suggests that coaches should assess the process, not the product, and thus Mark could improve his reflection by reacting dispassionately and symmetrically to competitive outcomes. It is Mark's intention to develop a routine for post match behaviour and try to stick to it regardless of winning or losing. Systematic planning is a vital tool in the armoury of a reflective practitioner. In order to be truly reflective, deviations from the plan, and the coach's role within that, must be recorded as evidence.

After one particularly painful defeat, Mark opened the floor to the players to give their views on the coaching process. They came up with the following:

- Training had become monotonous and a chore
- All the players were highly sensitive to criticism, particularly if others were party to that criticism
- Players responded well and liked praise
- Players appreciate simplicity and like to know exactly what the coach wants from them
- Some players will bottle up their thoughts/emotions until virtual breaking point
- First impressions last: one player referred to something that was said 9 months earlier by the coach

- o The best way to motivate someone is to avoid demotivating him or her. One player referred to a match months before during which he had not been allocated a shirt number by mistake on the team sheet. Although Mark was not directly responsible for this task, the player interpreted it as the coach not valuing his contribution or efforts.
- o Many of the players enjoyed training and felt that they were improving as a result.
- o Many of the players were happy with the way in which they were being coached.

It is one thing to reflect at a superficial level ('we lost, or even 'we lost because...'). The true reflective practitioner strives for deep reflection: a critical analysis of the role that he/she played in the events. Moreover, he/she will be defined by the ability to articulate that experience into learning. Reflections should be professional, not confessional. All emotion should be removed from the analysis, and thus timing is critical. Far enough away to negate emotion yet close enough to accurately assess events.

A further, highly powerful coaching tool that Mark is yet to fully deploy is the concept of 'knowing in action'. Essentially it refers to making accurate predictions about future events. If your players believe you know what will happen, then they will have incredible confidence in you, particularly when you tell them that they are going to win. Mark has been reluctant to overuse knowing in action for obvious reasons, but he is aware of it and will use it at an appropriate time.

Although Mark has sought to be a reflective practitioner to date, there are some straightforward steps that he can take to intensify this process. Performing some video analysis of himself coaching would be a very powerful way of analysing his coaching behaviour. Asking a colleague – ideally and independent coach or mentor - to undertake an impartial study of Mark coaching would be another fantastic method for analysis.

Research into coaching, and coach education, have traditionally focused on the behaviours of coaches at a descriptive, superficial level. The innovative approaches to pedagogy described above provide a vehicle for answering the worthier question of how coaches do what they do.

Learning sits at the heart of this discussion. If one person is to influence another's behaviour, some learning must take place. Expert sports coaches and mentors will create optimum learning conditions to give themselves the best chance of success.

A variety of strategies exist to help coaches succeed. Perhaps the true skill is selecting the right strategy at the right time, but a deeper knowledge of the available options can only help coaches to be more effective.

If you are a sports coach or mentor, then apply these concepts to your own practice and undertake the exercise below:

## EXERCISE FOR COACHES &amp; MENTORS

- 1 Summarise your own Coaching Philosophy
- 2 How frequently do you update your philosophy?
- 3 Who's learning do you consider when planning your coaching/mentoring?
  - A The players/athletes
  - B Your own
  - C Both
  - D Neither
- 4 Do you know how you best learn new information?
- 5 Do you know how your players/athletes best learn new information?  
(if not, what could you do to find out?)
- 6 What steps do you take towards creating a learning environment?
- 7 Do you consider yourself to be an athlete (or player) centred coach?  
If so, what attributes define you as such?
- 8 What steps do you take to empower your players and athletes?
- 9 Do you have someone, or several people, who mentor you?  
What value do they add to your coaching & development?  
How can you maximise the impact of that mentoring relationship?
- 10 Are you a member of a Community of Practice that shares ideas & experience? If not why not!!  
(The answer to this is yes because you are now a member of the Sporting Mentors Community of Practice!)
- 11 To what extent do you delegate or outsource to specialists, like a conductor with his orchestra? Could you become more effective by letting go of some of the minutiae that you deal with daily?
- 12 Do you have an acute awareness of the behaviours and strategies deployed by elite sports coaches and mentors?  
How many of these do you frequently use?
- 13 Where does your decision making emerge from? Head or heart?  
Do you have any heuristics? (and if so for what reason?)

- 14 How much do you reflect: before action, in action, and post action? What do you gain from this reflection, and could you gain more from taking the time for deeper or more frequent reflection?

By applying these innovative concepts, you have the opportunity to double the effectiveness of your coaching in the eyes of the people who really matter: your players & athletes...

Hope you enjoyed the report, & happy mentoring!

You can discuss these and other innovative sports coaching concepts with like-minded sports professionals at [http: www.sportingmentors.com](http://www.sportingmentors.com)

Or you can attend a LIVE, INTERACTIVE WEBCAST with Premium Sporting Mentors where they share the secrets of their success.. Register for your next event now at [http:www.sportingmentors.com/events](http://www.sportingmentors.com/events)



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