

## **Primary factors identified in sport science students' coaching philosophies**

LIANDI VAN DEN BERG

*Faculty of Economic Sciences and Information Technology, North-West University,  
P.O. Box 1174, Vanderbijlpark 1900, South Africa. E-mail:  
liandi.vandenberg@nwu.ac.za*

### **Abstract**

Youth sport coaches have a great influence on the experiences and development of children who participate in organized sport. Given this influence of coaches on children and the huge participation numbers of children in sports, coach education programmes received increasing research attention over the past 30 years. Numerous important facets of coach educational programmes have been identified, of which the first key developmental domain as indicated by the President's Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition, refers to the philosophy and ethics of the coach. This important aspect needs to be incorporated into coach education programmes and the effectiveness has to be evaluated on a continuous basis. Novice coaches lack knowledge and insight in setting up effective coaching philosophies even after completion of an applicable educational course. The evaluation of factors identified within novice coaches' philosophies could give insight to the effectiveness of the coach education programme intended to teach them aspects regarding the philosophy of sport. This study was qualitative in nature and conducted with 23 students enrolled in a third-year practical coaching module who made electronic submissions of their coaching philosophies. Data analysis was done inductively using the qualitative techniques proposed by Côté, Salmela and Russell (1993) which rendered 143 meaning units, grouped together into nine categories and established as five primary factors namely: Fun, Relationships, Coaching Behaviour, Development and Values. Student coaches were able to freely articulate these primary factors of importance to pursue within their coaching environment effectively, but lacked in-depth knowledge regarding strategies of implementation of their coaching philosophy factors. Insights gained from such exploration could assist coach education programmes to effectively teach novice coaches in the development and application of their coaching philosophies.

**Keywords:** Coaching philosophy, coach education programmes, student coaches and factors.

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### **Introduction**

Youth sport coaches have a great influence on the experiences and development of children who participate in organized sport (Horn, 2008). Given this influence of coaches on children and the huge number of youth sport participants, coach education programmes have received increasing attention over the past 30 years (President's Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition: PCFSN, 2013). Numerous

countries have invested substantial amounts of funding in the establishment of suitable coach education programmes and research on the effectiveness of these programmes followed. Researchers primarily focused to determine the systematic enhancement and the effectiveness of youth sport coaches development through coach educational programmes. Correspondingly, researchers recognized key principles for effective youth coach development within specific coach education programmes (PCFSN, 2013). The first developmental key domain as defined by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) refers to the Philosophy and Ethics that should be taught to coaches (NASPE, 2006). This key domain refers to a number of aspects which should be incorporated into the coach educational programmes and includes the following: the development and implementation of athlete-centred coaching philosophies, the identification, modelling and teaching of positive values, the reinforcement of personal, social and ethical behaviour and the demonstration of ethical conduct in all facets of the sport programme (PCFSN, 2013).

In conjunction with research on coach educational programmes, recent research also focused on identifying the coaching needs and motives of youth sport coaches (Busser & Carruthers, 2010; PCFSN, 2013). Among these, coaches indicated that they were motivated to help children develop physically, psychologically and socially, followed by instilling the aspect of having fun (Busser & Carruthers, 2010). Likewise, in a study by Gould, Carson and Blanton (2013), well over 90% of the coaches specified that they want to instil positive values in the young athletes they coach. Gould and colleagues however indicated that for character development to take place through sports coaching, coaches need to intentionally focus on fostering such values and that it is not developed through mere participation in sport (Gould et al., 2013). For values and life skills to be cultured through sport, coaches need to make a conscious effort to incorporate specific aspects into their coaching strategies, in demonstrating and modelling it (Gould & Carson, 2008). In this regard, Martens (2004) posited that the development of a good coaching philosophy is the key factor for coaches in creating a positive sporting environment, which according to Gould and Carson (2008) promotes the development of young sport participants. Coach educational programmes need to incorporate the correct training to satisfy the motivation and needs of the coaches and this is achieved through coach education programmes focussed on different key domains, the first of which refers to the philosophy and ethics of the coach (PCFSN, 2013).

### *Coaching philosophy*

Carless and Douglas (2011:2) defined coaching philosophy as: “A general set of statements that have the potential to apply to the wide range of context and scenarios in which a coach might work”. The main objective of a coaching

philosophy is to explore general principles or ideas which can be applied within the sporting environment (Carless & Douglas, 2011). A coaching philosophy intends to clarify and define various aspects of the coach strategy and delivery in presenting their core values (Reynolds, 2005). Coaching philosophies describe the foundation that directs a person's coaching practice (Karpel, 2006, in Bennie & O'Connor, 2010) and is mainly based on personal beliefs, attitudes and values (Parkin, 2009 in Bennie & O'Connor, 2010). Coaches' beliefs, values and approaches to sport performance show tremendous differences from person to person, influencing the development of a unique coaching philosophy and ultimately their coaching strategies and behaviour (Martens, 2004).

Sport psychology researchers such as Martens and Vealey have identified and described the contribution of coaching philosophies to sporting success (Collins, Barber, Moore & Laws, 2011). Martens (2004) proposed three central elements necessary in a sound coaching philosophy which include: the relative role of winning, development and fun. Additionally, Côté and Gilbert (2009) commented that effective coaching requires coaches to have a philosophy based on the objective of athlete development. A study by Gould, Collins, Lauer and Chung (2007) on award winning high school football coaches identified specific aspects and strategies which the coaches incorporated into their coaching plan and philosophy. These aspects include coaching life skills and values such as holding the athlete accountable, promoting discipline and emphasizing academic progress. Coaches demonstrated beliefs that sport should build confidence, teach athletes to work as a team and to learn the importance of effort (Gould et al., 2007). The study also revealed that highly successful football coaches emphasised physical, psychological, social and academic development of their athletes as a top priority and kept the winning aspect in perspective. Studies regarding successful coaching philosophies implemented by coaches rendered important factors such as fun, values, total development of athletes on social, personal and athletic levels as well as a balanced view on winning (Gould et al., 2007; Côté & Gilbert, 2009).

Vallée and Bloom (2005) posited that the coaches' philosophy and goals to achieve success is a strong determinant in creating a successful sporting programme. The success of the expert university coaches in their study culminated in the holistic development of their athletes with individual growth as main purpose behind the philosophy. According to Gilbert and Trudel (2005), most expert and veteran coaches develop their philosophies over time through experience since most of their coaching knowledge is learnt through actual coaching situations. Likewise Wilcox and Trudel (1998) posited that very few veteran coaches spend significant time early in their careers to develop and refine a coaching philosophy, and consequently research on novice coaches' philosophies are scarce (Collins et al., 2011).

In view of limited studies regarding novice coaches' philosophies, coach education programmes can greatly benefit from research findings in this field (Collins et al., 2011). Research on this matter could provide new insights for coach education programmes resulting in improved teaching for the development and implementation of coaching philosophies. According to Collins et al. (2011), it is imperative to gain a greater understanding of the beliefs and subsequently coaching philosophy of novice coaches prior to their first engagement in coaching, since coaches play an important part in the youth sport experience. Supplementary research by Collins et al. (2011) on coaching success demonstrated that with the absence of a sound philosophy, coaches regularly experienced inconsistencies in their coaching, with inappropriate behaviour and communication, and with a strong emphasis on winning. Insights gained from the exploration of novice coach philosophies could aid coach education programmes to effectively teach and help prepare novice coaches in the development of their coaching philosophies. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the coaching philosophies of sport science students prior to their initial coaching exposure. The identification of coaching philosophy factors deemed of importance incorporated into first time coach experiences, will in part assess the effectiveness of the specific coach education programme aspect linked to the first key domain of philosophy and ethics (PCFSN, 2013). Such information could also facilitate the teaching and transfer of core aspects in the development of sound coaching philosophies.

## **Methodology**

### *Participants*

A total of 23 students (male = 11; female = 12) enrolled in a third-year sport science practical module at a university in the Gauteng Province participated in the research. Students ranged between the ages of 20 to 30 years with a mean age of 22.5 years. It was determined that 11 of the students had no previous coaching experience and the remaining 12 had limited coaching exposure mainly in an informal, amateur setting. All students completed a coaching science module that comprised content specific knowledge, guidelines and theories on coaching philosophy and its development thereof. Students were asked to voluntarily and anonymously participate in the study by developing and submitting their coaching philosophies.

### *Study design and procedure*

Due to the exploratory nature of the study a qualitative method was employed. Students were requested to develop their coaching philosophies and submit it to the researcher via an electronic drop box. This was conducted at the start of a third-year module which requires students to engage in practical coaching of

beginner athletes in the sporting community. Students were instructed to refine their coaching philosophy to statements and values that would be incorporated into their upcoming practical coaching situation. A total number of 32 students were enrolled for the third-year sport science programme, of which 23 completed the task voluntarily, indicating a response rate of 72%.

The data were analysed inductively using the qualitative techniques proposed by Côté, Salmela and Russell (1993), which requires two steps: firstly creating tags and secondly, creating categories. The first step of creating tags entails identifying meaning units of information regarding the coaching philosophy dimensions and factors as viewed by the student coaches. These meaning units contain specific ideas or views, which are able to stand on their own (Côté et al., 1993). In the second step, the meaning units with similar tags identified in the first step were grouped together into a broader category and then named separately. The individual categories could then be labelled as primary factors. In the debriefing sessions a research colleague acted as a de-briefer and judge in comparing tags and category results with that of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and through deliberation and reflection a consensus was reached. Trustworthiness of data was ensured by referring back to original statements of the individual students and through consensual validation of the meaning units and categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **Results**

One hundred and forty three meaning units were tagged and grouped together into nine categories which established five primary factors namely: *Fun*, *Relationships*, *Coaching Behaviour*, *Development* and *Values*. Aspects emerging from the categories representing the overall views of the student coaches are presented as follows:

### *Fun*

Student coaches indicated the importance of fun in sports and the multiple meaning units grouped together in this category revealed that they viewed their role in emphasising and attaining the fun element as very important. For example, student coaches wrote: “*use a games based approach to make sport fun*” (student 3) and “*help them enjoy and learn to love the sport*” (student 16). In addition, other statements are noteworthy such as “*it is crucial for athletes to have fun*” (student 10) and “*help them enjoy sport by all means*” (student 18).

### *Relationships*

Categories which emerged from the meaning units are a) Coach-Athlete relationship and b) Coach-Parent relationship which culminated into the primary factor of Relationships.

#### a) Coach-Athlete relationship

The coach-athlete relationship was an important factor in many student coaching philosophies and is illustrated by the following statements: *“Having a good relationship with my athletes is of utmost importance, helped by good communication and to be approachable with their personal problems and through one-on-one sessions”* (student 22) and *“As a coach I form close relationships with the players so that we can all work as a team”* (student 17). Emerging from the meaning units were sub-dimensions that the student coaches’ viewed important in building good coach–athlete relationships and is illustrated by the following quotes: *“Each player needs to know that you care for him as an individual and that you believe he is an important part of the team. Take time to talk to all players individually. Try to take interest in what is going on in their life outside of the sport”* (student 4), *“listening to players”* (student 19) and *“show interest in players”* (student 1). Additional statements such as *“you need to know how to cope with everything and have good relationships with your players. Relationships are built out of trust, respect and loyalty towards one another”* (student 12) as well as *“Communication is a vital aspect in coach/athlete relationships. It is very important to talk to your athletes individually to determine what their values and beliefs are, what their goals are and why they are participating”* (student 19) all support the notion of relationship importance to the student coaches.

#### b) Coach-Parent relationships

Coach-Parent relationships were identified as an additional category by the student coaches to manage and address. This was evident through statements such as: *“I will often hold meetings with the player’s parents so that parents can be involved in their children’s sport”* (student 1), *“dealing with parents might be the most difficult part of being a coach”* (student 4) and *“parents must know about what their children do so that they also help with the training at home and as a coach I will host workshops to help parents in this regard”* (student 5).

### *Coaching Behaviour*

The general factor of Coaching Behaviour consisted of three categories: a) Coaching style, b) Communication, and c) Creating a positive environment, each with identifiable unique meaning units.

a) Coaching style

Fourteen out of the 23 student coaches directly reported on the specific coaching style they intended to follow with the majority indicating a co-operative coaching style as preference. This view was expressed through statements such as: “*As a coach I will follow a co-operative and participative coaching style*” (student 5), “*my idea of my philosophy is to be co-operative with my players*” (student 13) and “*I will always use the co-operative leadership or coaching style*” (student 14). A few student coaches indicated that they would use a “*combination of autocratic and democratic coaching styles*” (student 18) and “*both co-operative and commanding styles*” (student 17). It is clear that student coaches value aspects such as “*an open-door policy*” (student 9) and “*in being approachable and having an openness*” (student 22).

b) Communication

Communication was another category identified through the meaning units. Student coaches expressed that communication was influential in attaining success and that it is important for the coach to communicate effectively. Student 22 reported: “*individual communication is important*” and student 18: “*as a coach, you need to be a good communicator*”. Half of the student coaches elaborated on this category, with dimensions of communication identified by students such as: “*give positive feedback*” (student 17), “*communication enhances learning*” (student 18), “*communication is vital in relationships*” (student 19) and “*a coach needs to manage information in the team*” (student 1).

c) Creating a positive environment

Student coaches identified the role of the coach in creating a “*safe and positive environment*” (student 1; student 11). According to student 18, the coach has to create “*a relaxed atmosphere that provides opportunities for development*” and student 16 commented that “*the environment must be enjoyable and conducive to learning*”. Student coaches indicated their understanding of the “*structure*” that the coach needs to implement in order to achieve results of “*development and opportunities of growth*” (student 18).

*Development*

Categories relevant to the development of a) Mental skills and b) General sport skills were identified and cited under the main factor of Development.

a) Mental skills

Student coaches also addressed the aspects of improving their athletes' mental skills as portrayed by the following excerpt: *"to improve the athlete's maturity in understanding the psychological aspects that needs to be applied in order to use mental strength in the field of play or outside"* (student 23). It was evident that the majority of student coaches believed in *"the use and development of mental skills"* and frequently mentioned aspects such as *"goal setting"*, *"visualization"* and *"relaxation"*. In the opinion of student 16 in particular, his personal philosophy was described to *"focus more on psychological aspects than the technical"*. Another student's individual view reflected the *"long-term development approach of the mental aspects"* (student 20), which demonstrated sincere intention of development of the psychological aspect of sport, collectively with the numerous related meaning units.

b) General sport skills

The category of general sport skills development comprised meaning units such as: *"instruction to help players execute skills better and to improve their performance"* (student 18). In this regard, 34 meaning units were identified relating to the student coaches' views on the importance of skill development as a factor in their general coaching. Student coaches designated aspects such as *"teaching new skills or enhancing existing skills"* (student 20), *"help athletes develop skills"* (student 9), *"improve and refine skills"* (student 5) and *"grow in the sport aspects"* (student 12), as very important.

Values

Two categories regarding *values* emerged through the meaning units: a) Personal values and b) Team culture.

a) Personal values

A strong sense of responsibility in instilling values such as *"hard work"*, *"discipline and respect"*, *"loyalty, fair play, teamwork and dedication"*, together with *"trust, integrity and honesty"* was displayed through the reporting of 35 meaning units on this aspect. Depicting the advancement of aspects such as *"love, respect, transparency, accountability, punctuality, dedication, responsibility and perseverance"* (student 16), indicated the intention of helping athletes *"become responsible individuals in society"* (student 23) and to *"aid them in tackling challenges in their lives as a whole"* (student 13). Within this category, student coaches clearly indicated their realisation of setting and instilling morals and values and the subsequent positive role that it plays within sport.

## b) Team culture

Derived from the individual meaning units, a category of team culture was named and since the word “*culture*” relates to principles and beliefs, it was cited under the factor of Values. Student coaches continuously reinforced their statements on “*establishing a team culture*” (student 5), “*work together as a team*” and “*together we can do more*” (student 10), as an important aspect of their coaching philosophy. The role of the coach in “*teaching them to work as a team*” (student 14) and “*teaching the importance of teamwork*” (student 22) attracted special mention since these student coaches showed a deeper comprehension of the implications of instilling team values and subsequently a team culture.

## **Discussion**

### *Fun*

Enjoyment has been identified as a key factor of motivation in sustained involvement in sport (Scanlan et al., 1993) and coaches need to be aware of this motive. Similarly, enjoyment acts as a key component of sport commitment with the purpose of decreasing the possibility of withdrawal from sport (Weiss, Kimmel & Smith, 2001). All athletes, whether at beginner, youth, school or university level value the importance of fun in their sporting activities and coaches should be educated to include this factor in their coaching beliefs (Collins et al., 2011). Enjoyment is a valuable factor that augments the creation of a positive sport experience which is a fundamental part of the coaching role. The identification of fun as a factor in the coaching philosophies of student coaches correlates with previous studies (Collins et al., 2011). However, it is noticeable that this was not the primary factor with only 11 meaning units identified. The student coaches also showed a limited understanding of strategies that they will use to incorporate this significant factor into their coaching programme.

### *Relationships*

Coaches fulfil diverse roles and need to guide, teach, instruct, develop and mentor athletes on a continuous basis, which according to Jowett and Cockerill (2003) can only be achieved through a positive coach-athlete relationship. Côté and Salmela (1995) advanced the positive and negative impact of coach-athlete relationships on sport experience while Gilbert and Trudel (2004) deemed relationships as a critical part of sport. The student coaches demonstrated a well-developed understanding of the importance of the coach-athlete relationship in the pursuit of sporting success, but with their limited experience in the complex activities and roles that they need to fulfil (Vallée & Bloom, 2005) they lacked

the depth in expressing sub-components necessary to foster positive coach-athlete relationships.

The second category namely, coach-parent relationships, which the student coaches acknowledged in their philosophies is positive, but their inclusion of this aspect also required more attention regarding specific behaviour towards and strategies on how to involve parents in a constructive manner. The lack of inclusion such as the reinforcement of personal, social and ethical behaviour within relationships are also evident within the student coaches philosophies and according to the President's Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition (2013) a very important part of a successful philosophy.

### *Coaching behaviour*

Coaching styles are regarded as imperative to athletic performance and success (Vallerand & Losier, 1999). The majority of student coaches in this study indicated in their philosophies they intend to pursue a co-operative coaching style that is consistent with the literature which states that coaching style is influenced by coaching philosophies (Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2002). Conversely, different coaching styles should be applied within different situations and may even vary between sessions conducted by the same coach. Furthermore, aspects such as the type of sport, gender and age of athletes are influential in determining which coaching style preferably should be incorporated (Jones, Housner & Kornspan, 1995; Massey et al., 2002). Reflecting on the above mentioned findings the interpretation from student coaches in using one coaching style is limiting and not inclusive of environmental aspects. Only two students (students 17 and 18) demonstrated a deeper understanding of the implementation of diverse coaching styles in this regard.

Coaching feedback behaviour and communication is of great significance since it functions to directly transmit information about the athlete's competence and skill performance, which possibly underlines the most important aspect that a coach strives to directly and positively influence and develop (Horn, Glenn & Wentzell, 1993). Communication is also utilised in the development of relationships and should mainly be encouraging and supportive in nature (McArdle & Duda, 2002). In addition, Stein, Bloom and Sabiston (2012) posit that the quality of the coaches' communication is of much higher importance than the frequency or amount. Student coaches showed an understanding of the role that communication plays in building relationships, providing feedback and in conveying their coaching strategies and instructions. Essentially, the student coaches added insufficient facets to communication or aspects that influence effectiveness and demonstrated a superficial understanding of the intricate mechanisms of communication.

Coaching involves a wide range of behaviours, interactions, functions, activities and processes (Lyle, 2002) and the development of youths in sport mainly depends on the ability of coaches to create a suitable environment conducive to learning and growth (Gould & Carson, 2008). In addition, Collins et al. (2011) advocated that coaches are the providers and interpreters of sport experience and that their philosophical beliefs are central to the climate they create. Student coaches in the study took ownership in the role they need to play in creating a developmental and enjoyable environment. They made reference to the “structure” needed to be implemented by the coach to achieve this, but they lacked the knowledge about the specifics of their intended structure or organization of such an enjoyable and developmental environment, which indicated an area that requires further development. In light of the recommendations made by the President’s Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition (2013), student coaches’ philosophies also needed additional information in the demonstration of ethical conduct in all facets of the sport programme.

### *Development*

Literature has indicated the development and implementation of mental skills in sports to be beneficial for performance (Swain & Jones, 1995; Patrick & Hrycaiko, 1998) and studies have investigated and reported on the positive effects of the implementation of mental skills intervention programmes (Thelwell & Maynard, 2001). With 18 meaning units identified by the student coaches regarding this aspect of mental skills coaching, it is evident that they value its importance and the positive effect it has on athlete development. The student coaches indicated their beliefs regarding the development of aspects such as mental strength and toughness through the implementation of intervention programmes related to goal setting, relaxation and imagery. These three aspects of mental toughness are however, only a part of the complete mental toughness aspects and facets such as mental preparation, self-confidence, anxiety and worry management, concentration ability, and motivation (Edwards & Steyn, 2011) were not mentioned in relation to mental toughness development by the student coaches. A very limited understanding of intent and implementation therefore exists among the student coaches and they need further education regarding the intent and method of mental skills development.

McCallister, Blinde and Weiss (2000) specified the inclusion of “learning skills” in youth basketball and softball coaches’ philosophies and so too did the student coaches in this study. The identification of 34 meaning units regarding this aspect indicates the level of responsibility attached to these 3 categories by the student coaches. Considering that most of the student coaches were to engage in entry level or beginner player coaching, they all focussed more on the skill development and subsequent role that they had to play as coach in this regard.

Gould and Carsons' (2008) model indicated that coaching consists of more than just teaching technical and tactical skills and since most student coaches have minimal knowledge and exposure to the coaching situation (Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte & Jones, 2005) together with the subsequent additional coaching demands, it is understandable that they have a limited view on their core roles and responsibilities. With the intention of teaching and developing youths' skills, student coaches are in accordance to the PCFSN (2013) guidelines for the development and implementation of athlete-centred coaching philosophies.

### *Values*

The second most prevalent focus of the student coaches in this study pointed towards the personal development of their athletes relating to aspects such as hard work, discipline, loyalty, respect, accountability and punctuality to name a few. Gould et al. (2007) reported similar findings which advance the notion that the development of values or life skills through sport is an increasing practice applied and pursued by successful coaches. Student coaches mainly indicated the intention to implement this belief system through setting an example (Collins et al. 2011).

Consistent with the literature, student coaches established philosophies including aspects relating to the enhancement of team cohesion (Smith & Smoll, 1997). They were able to articulate their beliefs regarding the importance of team culture and similar values as well as the role that effective communication plays in this regard, but were unable to express their role as a coach and how they could systematically cultivate good and positive team values and culture.

### **Conclusion**

The development of a coaching philosophy prior to coaching engagement is essential and therefore should be included in coach education programmes. This exploratory study indicated that student coaches' exposure to a first year module in coaching science, equipped them with basic knowledge required in setting up a coaching philosophy prior to the engagement of practical coaching. Student coaches were able to articulate their primary beliefs relating to factors important to effectively pursue their coaching activities. They rightfully included factors such as Fun, Relationships, Coaching Behaviour, Development and Values as priorities in their coaching philosophies but unfortunately indicated a lack of depth regarding strategies on how to implement their coaching philosophy dimensions. Consequently, their coaching philosophies lack flexibility and credibility to be truly functional. The three primary elements of a successful coaching philosophy related to the role of winning, development and fun, which are lacking as main factors in the students' philosophies, casts a shadow of doubt on their developed philosophies. Regarding the role of winning, the student

coaches scarcely mentioned their beliefs in this regard and the role that winning plays in the practical coaching set-up and as part of a coaching philosophy.

## **Recommendations**

The present study focused on the beliefs and factors incorporated into a coaching philosophy prior to coaching engagement which highlighted the need for the design of coach education programmes in teaching specific aspects related to the development of a coaching philosophy. The student coaches were able to articulate their beliefs into their philosophies, but fell short of the strategies necessary to implement such beliefs. This may indicate that necessary changes have to be incorporated into the coach education programme that these students are part of. This study could be extended to novice coaches in their first and second year of coaching.

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