

Part 2

The sports coach meets the executive coach: what can we learn from sports coaching?

In this second part of their two-part series, **Erik de Haan** and **Pat McCarry** turn their attention to the areas in which elite sports coaching can learn and apply lessons from the fields of executive coaching and coaching psychology.





Successful sports coaches have always appreciated the importance of the psychological essence of performance, even before the professional era. Generally, sports coaches have had limited training in psychology but would be keen to work on a sound, healthy, intuitive and experiential level. Since the advent of professionalism, however, there has been more pressure to consider all possible avenues for achieving success, hence, psychology is now a core interest in this field. Dominance in sport is increasingly determined by the smallest of margins under extremes of pressure. For example, an Olympic 100m sprint can be won by less than 0.01 seconds and a World Cup final can be won by a single penalty kick. The ability of players and coaches/managers to handle the extremes of pressure is determined by their mindset and their regulation of emotions.

Psychological input is now an integral part of most complex training and can be incorporated by the coach and/or a sports psychologist. In addition, as we have seen in the first article in

this series,¹ increasing importance is placed on the one-to-one relationship between players/athletes and their coaches/sports psychologists. Increasingly, sports coaches also work with executive coaches and during that process become more effective in their one-to-one interactions with players. Sports coaching can typically be divided into three main areas:

1. Sport-specific coaching (technical/physical)
2. Game-day or event-related coaching (tactical/strategic)
3. Individual or team coaching (emotional resilience/mindset)

Psychology is integral to each of the areas above; however, our main interest in this article is the third element and in individual coaching. This can refer to formal or informal conversations and can be carried out by the coach or even by a dedicated mental skill coach/sports psychologist, whose sole function is to optimise the mental wellbeing and mindset of the players.

Individual coaching

Most of the excited and heated conversations and debates in the field of sports coaching, particularly in team coaching, are still centred around coaching philosophy, science, methodology and tactics. Coaches at every level are seeking the 'holy grail' of systems and strategies that will elevate their teams to unparalleled heights. Within most sports it is generally accepted that attention needs to be paid to the components of technique, tactics, physical conditioning and mindset. However, in a fearlessly competitive and stressful environment, individual contact with players and athletes is now more essential than ever, and the importance of the coach-athlete *relationship* is increasingly established in this context. Dr Sophia Jowett, who has been researching coach-athlete relationships for 20 years, states that it (hidden potential) can be released when coaches and athletes start to form a *genuine* working relationship, where they trust, respect, believe, commit and work together towards one goal.² This interpersonal connection →



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between the coach and each athlete in the team or squad, often referred to as 'relational coaching', is hypothesised as being at the heart of effective and successful coaching, following conclusions from therapy and executive coaching:³

*'Now that the coach-athlete relationship is recognized as the foundation of coaching and a major force in promoting the development of athletes' physical psychosocial skills, the coaches' ability to create perfect working partnerships with their athletes becomes paramount.'*²

This appears to be a more obvious phenomenon in individual sports, where an individual such as Andy Murray (tennis) or Jessica Ennis (athletics) works daily with a coach in an intense training environment. Although there will be nutritionists and trainers involved, it is the main coach (eg Ivan Lendl for Murray) who takes overall responsibility for the performance and wellbeing of the athlete. They might address elements of the technical/tactical game, but the influence is far more complex, nuanced and relational; and yet the coach is rarely trained in this area and rarely receives support themselves. Support for sports coaches is often left to chance, and that is difficult to understand when success is so critical, with such small margins.

When asked about his philosophy on coaching, one of the great football coaches, Pep Guardiola (now of Manchester City) referenced three elements: core concepts, language and people. He estimated spending one to two hours a day in one-to-one conversations with his players. One of his players, Pierre Højbjerg, speaks for many colleagues when he says of Guardiola, 'He's my coach of course, but he's so much more than that. He's been like a second father to me. He's a great guy who spends his days showing us how we can play even better.'⁴

We would argue that the limited psychological preparation of sports coaches probably leaves room for further improvement. Firstly, there is ever more evidence, from both psychotherapy and executive coaching outcome research, that it is not actually the 'bond' or the feel-good factor that is the most effective aspect of helping relationships.⁵ There is mounting evidence that in fact it is the quality of *contracting* in the relationship that is more important for outcome, ie the mutual understanding of, and agreement about, tasks and goals. Overall goals in sports coaching may be straightforward; day-to-day coaching goals and tasks have to be agreed upon by players and their coaches. The quality of agreement and the player's role in arriving at the agreement seem to be more important than previously thought.



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Secondly, the term 'relational' can take on many meanings and is not always fully understood. In sports coaching, it seems to mean a 'good relationship', or again, what psychologists would call the 'bond' in the working alliance. The original meaning of the term, in psychoanalysis, was, however, more subtle. In psychotherapy and coaching, a relational intervention is usually taken as a moment in conversation where the current relationship itself is the topic of conversation, ie relational coaching means a here-and-now (meta-)reflection on the emerging relationship.⁶ Relational interventions serve to review and improve other relationships of the coachee (through the phenomenon of 'parallel process') and provide powerful feedback

about how the coach-coachee relationship is developing right now.

It seems that sports coaches are now trying to nurture and improve their coaching relationships without really understanding how they might use their relationships to enhance performance. We would argue that truly relational interventions require a lot of (supervised) practice and a deep understanding of transference and parallel process, which are areas largely ignored by sports psychologists and coaches.

An evolution in sports coaching

Developments in sports coaching are placing the coaching relationship ever more central to the work. The quality of the relationship can grow through informal discussions about family, wellbeing or performance. However, more formal individual coaching that increasingly involves the input of the players themselves is also becoming more prevalent, even among youth players. Even athletes, who are supposed to achieve results through their bodies, are becoming like the 'knowledge workers' that Drucker predicted for our wider economies 50 years ago.⁷

There has been a slowly emerging trend over recent decades that began with the purely coach-centred, prescriptive management of the sports coaching environment to a more player-centred, humanistic form of coaching that began to emerge in the 1980s. Since then there has been a movement, though slow, towards *consciously* maximising the coach-athlete relationship through what has (erroneously) been referred to as 'relational coaching'.

Relational coaching, which attends to the strength of the relationship and develops the courage to review it explicitly and in the moment, has become equally important for executive coaches and for sports coaches.^{6,8} However, the definition of relational coaching appears to be slightly different in both professions. In sports coaching, the epithet 'relational' seems to refer mostly to a strong and trusted relationship; in other words, to a working alliance. In executive coaching, relationality is more about working *within* the relationship, about naming what is going on in the moment and noticing the flow of rupture and contact, ie both attraction and aversion.

Overcoming a resistance to the 'soft skills'

Unfortunately, some of the more 'hardened' sports coaches see the development and use of coaching relationships as irrelevant 'soft skills' simply because it is not what they experienced when they were young players or managers. In fact, the emergence of a 'professional, qualified sports coach' who is schooled in learning processes as well as domain-specific knowledge is relatively new. It was only some 15 years ago in Western countries that all a sports coach needed to qualify as such was to be an ex-professional player/athlete (and, likewise, a former 'executive' in the business coaching domain).

Inevitably, an additional limiting influence on the coach's ability to conduct effective coaching is the fact that coaches, particularly in football, are often exposed to very intense stress, which makes their interactions more charged than they themselves would like. Indeed, they are often in need of coaching themselves and many now employ executive coaches or, as they might prefer to say, 'thinking partners'. In many ways, the coaching education and licensing programmes are not preparing sports coaches for their professional roles. There is still little content on the theories of learning, psychological development and helping relationships, and the importance of skills in optimising coach-athlete relationships is largely ignored. This is unfortunate and needs addressing.

In many ways, the consistent and rigorous commitment to strong coaching relationships, and the personal development and wellbeing of the players, are what separate the great coaches from the rest. Personal coaching is now inseparable from wider player and team development. Other coaches might be great technicians, tacticians or strategists. That does not make them a great coach.

After exposing the 'cultural dysfunction' of the 2004 All Blacks, the new coaches, Henry and Smith, committed to a series of radical changes that included the rigorous development of the emotional intelligence and wellbeing of their players. They hired a mental skills coach, Gilbert Enoka, who supported their players when there were problems and found them whatever professional help they needed to stay in the

programme and perform at their best. To commit to the uncompromising daily regimen and standards that are set by the All Blacks, a prerequisite is that the players are fully engaged and, as such, are provided with all the necessary emotional and developmental support. Since this time, the All Blacks have enjoyed unparalleled dominance within their sport and are arguably the most successful sports team in history, with a 90 per cent win rate in the past 12 years.

The introduction of sports psychology

Clearly a coach will have a different relationship with his/her athletes than a sports psychologist or counsellor. The coach is a powerful figure in the life of a player/athlete, especially if they are involved in player/team selection. If the coach-player relationship is dysfunctional then failure is almost guaranteed. In this current climate, the coach often relates in a more intuitive manner because they have not been trained in psychological skills, so there is in our view a place for a coaching psychologist in the environment as well. A key point for discussion here is differentiating between what a sports coach might realistically offer in that one-to-one relationship and what a trained psychologist or executive coach might offer. It is wonderful to hear about strong relationships between a coach and his/her athletes, but do they have sufficient expertise to work within the relationship or to detect early signs of depression or burnout? It is interesting to hear the recent views of sports psychologist and ex-England cricketer, Jeremy Snape, who has been actively involved in the successful England rugby revolution under coach Eddie Jones, quoted in *The Guardian*:⁹

'I think sport psychology is the final frontier in performance. From the mid 1990s there was a decade of fitness, then there has been a decade of data and analytics, and now the next decade will be about optimizing the mindset of players, teams and coaches. It's a natural progression driven by technology because it's easier to measure physical attributes and also with the negative stigma around getting psychological help, people have been reluctant to reach out. Ironically, when people reach the very top we often hear that it was their mindset and →



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approach to the game that led to their success. With so many world champions speaking positively about the development of their mindset now it has created a new drive for people to find out what they could achieve.'

In some contexts players are still regarded as machines, devoid of feelings and psychological needs. Stress-related burnout is far more prevalent in professional sports than is generally known, and high-profile cases such as the suicide of German goalkeeper, Robert Enke, have brought this to light. However, the introduction of sports psychology or executive coaching is still met with scepticism in some areas. Snape claims that this is dependent on the sport and cultural norms. He suggests that the Olympic sports tend to lead the way, as does golf, and then, in his experience, cricket, rugby and football follow in that order. Football in the UK appears to have a unique resistance to the idea of psychological coaching.

According to Snape, 'Whether it's a business leader or a sports star, the road to mastery gets steeper and more hazardous as you progress, so we are all bound to experience fear of failure or setbacks as we push ourselves further. The scepticism towards psychological help has been replaced by fascination now and it's seen as courageous, not a weakness, to explore the mental game as readily as we do the physical one.'⁹

The way forward

The All Blacks coaches are so skilled in distributing leadership and facilitating a culture of mutual support that, in the week's build-up to a game, they hand over most of the responsibility and training to the players. This seismic evolution in coaching and relational support emerged in the aftermath of a traumatic defeat in the 2007 World Cup when the All Blacks' coaches felt that a lack of on-field leadership and an inability to deal with stress lost them the quarter-final game against France. The result of the subsequent, radical paradigm shift has been an unparalleled and uncompromising domination of the sport over the past eight years. It is important here, however, to point out that this evolution has

taken a long time and a lot of work, with growth pains along the way. At times, the players have asked the coaches to take a more traditional line, especially in times of difficulty. It appeared at the recent World Cup that the hard work had paid dividends.

Executive coaching has experienced a very similar journey to sports coaching over these past decades, starting from rather directive approaches such as GROW, expert consulting and business mentoring some 20 years ago. Similar to what has happened in sports coaching, *observation* and *inquiry* have gained importance, particularly observation of the here-and-now developing coaching relationship. Following on from observation, *psychological understanding* has been growing in importance: where clients see things in a new, refreshing way and also engage with internal obstacles that may be exposing or derailing them.¹⁰

In summary, here are the areas where we believe sports coaches could learn from executive coaches:

1. A rigorous appreciation of the here-and-now developing coaching relationship called 'the relational turn'.
2. Within the here-and-now coaching relationship, paying particular attention to (a) mutual agreement on tasks and goals⁵ and (b) to 'parallel process', ie meaningful reflections of other core relationships of the player/athlete into the here-and-now relationship.
3. Regular professional supervision from trained supervisors who are also coaching psychologists or counsellors, either individually or in groups.
4. Fostering an in-depth understanding of major *internal* obstacles to performance, such as anxiety, self-mortification, personality characteristics, and the so-called leadership shadow. ■



My two years studying for my MSc in Executive Coaching have made me more effective in the high performance environment. This is evidenced by feedback from athletes, coaches and peers. The most significant aspects of my learning from the Ashridge MSc, that I have taken into high performance, is the use of the relationship with my athletes and coaches as a vehicle for learning and development and taking this learning into our work to improve performance. My improved listening skills have also made a significant difference to my effectiveness in my role.

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