GUEST EDITORIAL: Exploring Sport Psychology in the Discipline of Sports Coaching

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Exploring Sport Psychology in the Discipline of Sports Coaching

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Welcome to this special issue of Journal of Applied Sport Psychology dedicated to the psychology of sports coaching. In this editorial, it is our intention to provide some insight into the nature of sports coaching and the complexity inherent within the coaching process. Further, we offer some consideration of the importance of exploring sport psychology in the discipline of sports coaching before outlining the contributions contained within this issue. Finally, this special issue concludes with an editorial epilogue in which we offer some reflections and commentary on the psychology of sports coaching.

In recent years, the very nature of sports coaching has come under significant scrutiny, with many authors arguing that traditional views of the field have oversimplified what is inherently a contested and ambiguous profession (e.g., Cushion, 2007; Jones, Edwards, & Viotto Filho, 2016). Certainly, researchers have posited that coaching is characterized by a complex social system underpinned by human-to-human interaction, meaning that the examination of sports coaching has to extend beyond the customary focus of training the
athlete to also specifically consider the coach and the organizational structures in which coaches operate (cf. Cropley, Miles, & Nichols, 2015; North, 2013). Arguments that have sought to conceptualize sport coaching as a complex process appear to hold credence at both individual and organizational levels. For example, the interaction between intrapersonal emotions, thoughts and behaviors, which become socially and contextually dependent, make understanding coach decision making and action a problematic undertaking (Cropley et al., 2015; Olusoga & Thelwell, 2017). Further, from an organizational perspective, the micro-political structures that are shaped by the multitude of relationships integral to the coaching process (e.g., coach-athlete, coach-support staff, coach-organization, and coach-stakeholder) require coaches to be open, adaptable and often reactive to the dynamic environmental interactions associated with sport (Thompson, Potrac, & Jones, 2015).

Perhaps linked to this conceptualization of sports coaching is the increasingly accepted notion that coaches should be considered as performers in their own right (e.g., Gould, Greenleaf, Guinan, & Chung, 2002; Thelwell, Weston, & Greenlees, 2010). Such a consideration has emerged due to the acknowledgement that coaches are often judged by their athletes’ performance outcomes and, amongst other things, have to: enact an ever-expanding number of tasks, operate under high amounts of external and internal pressure, cope with a distinct lack of job security, function under unrealistic internal and external expectations whilst maintaining their own psychological and emotional states, and build and sustain relationships with a range of stakeholders whose agendas are often in conflict (Cropley et al., 2015; McCarthy & Giges, 2017; Thelwell et al., 2010). Indeed, at all levels, coaching is widely regarded as a potentially fulfilling yet stressful occupation, and as a result we have seen a recent increase in the prevalence of coach burnout, poor well-being, and mental health issues (Bentzen, Lemyre, & Kenttä, 2017; Olusoga & Thelwell, 2017). Understanding the coach as a performer in this way allows us to move beyond conceptualizations of performers as one-dimensional entities. Instead, it provides us with a broad canvas on which future research can examine the complex amalgamation of factors that form the construction of the coach’s job roles.

Given the pivotal role that the coach plays in supporting the development of athletes (and people), preparing athletes and teams for successful performance, improving and maintaining participation rates in sport, and/or encouraging others into the coaching profession, it seems pertinent to call for greater empirical insights into the psychological aspects of sports coaching. Certainly, despite the long-established role of the applied sport psychology practitioner in working with sports coaches, there has been less attention dedicated to understanding the performance and well-being of this population in comparison (McCarthy & Giges, 2017). Whilst there has been a recent increase in research focus on the psychology of the sports coach (e.g., Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2016; Nicholls, 2017; Thelwell, Harwood, & Greenlees, 2016), there is still considerable scope to explore psychological principles associated with sports coaching and the performers who work within the profession.

With this in mind, it is our pleasure to introduce this special issue, which aims to place a spotlight on sports coaching, and in doing so, to bridge the gap between research and practice and translate emerging knowledge into an accessible and broad account of the field for practitioners. We hope that such a spotlight will facilitate the ongoing exploration of the sports coaching profession through the lens of sport psychology, paving the way for the development of the knowledge required to enhance sports coaching practice and the management of the coaching process. The articles presented in this special issue remind us of the breadth of foci relating to the study of
sport psychology in the discipline of sport coaching, as well as the importance of adopting varied paradigmatic positions for developing knowledge, understanding and practice in this area.

First, Fransen and colleagues offer a quantitative examination of the perceptions of empowerment within the leadership structures of 64 sports teams. The study provides a consideration of the impact of adopting a shared leadership approach on athletes’ perceptions of coach leadership quality and how closely these align to the coaches’ perceptions of team leadership. In doing so, the study offers a novel insight into the perceived value of shifting traditional hierarchical leadership structures in sports teams and the importance of coaches strengthening the leadership qualities of their athletes.

Second, Zakrajsek and colleagues present a study that focuses on the relationships between assistant coaches and head coaches in collegiate sport. Specifically, the study examines the role head coaches play in fulfilling or thwarting their assistants’ basic psychological needs and motivation. The study provides a greater insight into how effective interactions can enhance assistant coaches’ need fulfillment and, in turn, the degree to which assistant coaches can then adapt to the values, goals, and behaviors they are exposed to in their surroundings.

Third, Alexander, Bloom, and Taylor offer a qualitative exploration of coaching practice in the domain of parasport. Specifically, the authors have examined strategies and behaviors Paralympic athletes find most desirable in an effective coach, as well as the impact of the coach/athlete relationship on the performance and personal satisfaction of female Paralympic athletes. In doing so, the authors provide a welcome insight into the unique context of parasport coaching and the influence the coach has on the personal and professional psychological functioning of parasport athletes.

Fourth, Villalon and Martin offer an exploration of High School coaches’ (n = 2,018) experiences to determine whether sport psychology education and contact with applied consultants predict coaching efficacy, particularly in relation to gender factors. The study provides recommendations for practicing sport psychologists and coach education providers concerning gender differences in the confidence that coaches have in their ability to train athletes. Insights are also provided into the potential value of increasing coaches’ exposure to applied sport psychology consultants.

Fifth, Hamilton and LaVoi present a study that explores the tensions coaches face in Division-I collegiate sport in balancing the competing values of fostering athlete well-being whilst working in highly competitive performance environments. The study offers insights into moral exemplar coaches and illuminates a number of mechanisms by which coaches develop and sustain moral identity and highlights the importance of coaches maintaining personal integrity and congruence between values and behaviors.

Finally, Gould, Nalepa, and Mignano offer a timely insight into the nuances associated with coaches working with Generation Z athletes. The authors explore the characteristics of Generation Z athletes, as well as the challenges of working with them and effective coaching strategies that make the most of their strengths whilst managing their limitations. The findings offer valuable considerations for establishing positive relationships and intervention design for coaches and sport science staff more widely.

Collectively, these articles reflect the diverse landscape of sport coaching and the importance of exploring the psychological lines of enquiry required for shaping effective practice within the field. Further, the articles begin to highlight the ongoing need for research to focus on the psychology of the coach, as well as how psychological principles interact with and shape the coaching process, which is undoubtedly contested and inherently complex.
REFERENCES


