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No Coach, No Gain: The central role of the coach in the personal development of youth performance athletes.

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Introduction

Sport is played by millions of Children and Young People (CYP) across the globe. Whether in organised settings or in free play, over the last sixty years, sport has come to be an integral part of many CYP's everyday lives. Youth sport has therefore become a significant subject at national and international policy level. Due to its specific features and ubiquity in XXI century western societies, and increasingly in the rest of the world, participation has been proposed as a vehicle to achieve a variety of outcomes that go beyond sport. Influential bodies like UNICEF (2017), the International Olympic Committee (2017), and the European Commission (2017) have all emphasised the role sport can play in supporting the psychosocial development of CYP beyond the acquisition of physical and sport skills.

The impetus to maximise the role of youth sport as a tool to foster personal and social development in children and young people has led to an increase in research focused on this topic over the last three decades. This burgeoning body of research has highlighted a variety of influential factors in determining whether or not the sport experience leads to personal development. These include: the programme atmosphere and culture; a community orientation; the available programme resources and assets; the quality of interpersonal relationships; intentional programming; the quality of the programme activities; respect and support for individuality; and time spent in the environment (Agnew and Pill, 2016; Bean and Forneris, 2016; Carson and Gano-Overway, 2017; Draper and Coalter, 2013; Galatti, Côté, Silva, Allan, Montero and Rodrigues, 2016; Gould, Carson and Camiré, 2017; Martinek, 2017; Strachan, Côté, and Deakin, 2011; Turnnidge, Côté and Hancock, 2014).

The central significance of the coach within this complex and dynamic process has been identified by researchers (Carson and Gano-Overway, 2017; Draper and Coalter, 2013; Gould and Carson, 2008; Strachan, Côté and Deakin, 2011; Turnnidge, Côté and Hancock, 2014). However, the majority of this research has been conducted in what Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte and Jones (2005) characterise as interventions rather than in regular organised sport where most CYP come into contact with sport. Furthermore, little research has focused on investigating the actual processes that underpin the role of the coach as a catalyst for personal development (Gould, Collins, Lauer, and Chung, 2007; Pierce, Gould and Camiré, 2017).

Recently, however, projects like the Erasmus+ co-funded PsyTool have emphasised the role of the coach as an educator and a ‘producer’ of values and developed training tools to support coaches at grassroots level (Cruz, García-Mas, Stambulova, Lucidi, Márquez, Serpa and Jaenes, 2017; Lara-Bercial, Porem, Gamito, Lubowa and Rosado, 2017b). Yet research efforts have lagged behind applied work.

This is a problematic state of affairs. A lack of knowledge and understanding of coach-led mechanisms that foster personal development in regular sport makes it difficult for coaches to deliberately impact their athletes at this level. This study aimed to fill this gap in the literature by specifically attending to the coach-led processes that supported personal development in a youth elite sport club in England.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The study was part of larger investigation into the personal development outcomes of participation in a youth basketball performance development setting in the North of England. It

comprised of two distinct stages. Stage one focused on the identification of the programme theories (PTs; Pawson and Tilley, 1997) of current club coaches ($n = 5$), former ($n = 8$) and current club parents ($n = 10$) and former ($n = 6$) and current players ($n = 10$) in relation to the role of the coach in the psychosocial development of the young people at the club. This stage created a research framework to guide the efforts of the researcher during the second phase of the case study.

Stage two aimed to test and refine the PTs elicited during stage one. This was achieved through the immersion of the researcher in the setting for a period of one full season. Using a variety of ethnographic techniques such as interviews, casual conversations, document examination and participant observations, the coach-led processes involved in players' personal development were investigated leading to the confirmation, refinement, expansion or refutation of the PTs. In both stages, thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to categorise the findings.

Results

The study confirmed that coaches were paramount to the young players and their families' reported positive experiences and personal development. Coaches themselves espoused very strong philosophies in relation to the potential for sport to contribute to personal development and saw supporting this as a key part of their job, not as a by-product. The analysis focused particularly on the coach-related mechanisms linked to positive and negative developmental outcomes. Three major groups of mechanisms were identified in the analysis: genuine care; high expectations and demands; and the transformational coach.

Genuine care: parents and players stressed the sincere caring disposition of the club coaches as central to personal development. Coaches appeared to relish their role as a ‘surrogate parent’ or ‘carer’ and deliberately took steps to fulfil it. It is worth noting that this was, in part, mediated by a strong humanistic club philosophy which prioritised the person above the player. Genuine care created a climate wherein players felt valued and part of a bigger family that catered for their emotional and spiritual needs. Thus, it planted the seeds for personal development and nurtured them.

High expectations and demands: it was consistently reported that the heightened and regular level of demands and expectations placed on players by coaches acted as a catalyst for personal development. Parents especially highlighted the transformational effect these constant ‘having to be on your toes’ had on their children who had become more self-reliant, responsible, organised and resilient. A supported ‘sink or swim’ scenario was observed, whereby players had to learn to cope with the demands of elite sport as they went along. In addition, players also talked about how the constant demands made them feel good about themselves because it meant the coaches believed in their capacity to do better.

The transformational coach: coaches were described as inspirational and ‘sensei-like’. Parents often explained how their children took everything their coach said literally as ‘the gospel’ and stressed the high position of power coaches were in. Coaches were also defined as role models which exhibited valuable behaviours such as work-ethic, respect and care which rubbed off on the players. During the observation period, coaches were seen to be deliberate facilitators of learning. They made the most of every available teachable moment, not only to coach basketball skills, but to teach life-lessons. The high level of experience of the coaches who

for the most part had coached for more than 20 years and had also been high school teachers was seen to be a significant factor in determining their approach to coaching.

It is important to note that the same mechanisms that led to development for many of the players, had the potential to have a detrimental effect in a minority of them. Particularly, some players appeared to not be developmentally ready to deal with the high expectations and demands that elite sport placed on them and struggled to cope with them. Parents expressed concerns, yet understood that, in order to progress to higher levels of performance, their children had to be prepared to endure a certain level of developmental hardship and adversity.

Discussion

This study aimed to create a better understanding of the role of the coach as a catalyst for personal development in youth performance sport. It was established that coaches played a significant part in this development, yet the study went beyond the description of developmental outcomes and coach behaviours to delve deeper into the specific mechanisms at play. Three major families of mechanisms were identified: genuine care; high expectations and demands; and the transformational coach. It was noted that, particularly the increased level of expectations and demands, had a ‘double-edge’ sword effect with potential negative effects.

This investigation has a number of strengths in comparison with previous research. First, the sample included both former and current parents and players and thus, it allowed the researcher to explore both a ‘perspective’ and a ‘prospective’ view of personal development through sport. Second, the study went beyond the personal narrative approach to incorporate an ethnographic period which allowed the researcher to gain a ‘first-hand’ view of the phenomenon. Finally, this investigation focused specifically on the identification of generative mechanisms

leading to development, not just developmental outcomes or behaviours. This provides a much more nuanced, textured and practical understanding of the issues under scrutiny. The study's main limitation is that it describes personal development through sport in a very specific performance context, and thus generalisation power may be limited. Notwithstanding this, a set of principles and mechanisms are identified that may be used as guidance by practitioners in different environments.

The findings of the study are very significant for coaches working with young athletes in performance contexts. It highlights the need for coaches to develop personal philosophies that are attuned to the needs of young athletes at both personal and performance levels, and how indeed, these two areas may be interdependent. It also emphasises the requirement for coaches to consistently raise the level of demand to stretch athletes to new heights, yet the need to monitor these demands so they match the developmental stage and capabilities of the young person. A lack of equilibrium at this level can lead to negative outcomes. Most importantly however, the findings highlighted the vast power and influence coaches can have over their young athletes. Thus, coaches need to be aware of this imbalance and ensure that this power is managed and used in positive, transformational ways.

Future research in this area could consider the individual characteristics of both coaches and athletes and how these may mediate different approaches and developmental outcomes. Also, given that basketball is a team sport, similar studies in individual sports could elicit different findings and are thus worth exploring. Finally, the role of coach education in supporting coaches' understanding of this phenomenon could be investigated and recommendations for future coach development initiatives could be made.

Keywords: Personal development, Psychosocial development, Youth sport, Grassroots sport, Youth coach.

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