The influence of the social context and the coaching environment on the coaching process and performance evaluation

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Abstract: Despite the progress on coaching process evaluation and on coaching behavioural assessment, coaching performance evaluation still remains a confusing and under-researched area. Indeed, coaching terminology has been inconsistent and evaluation approaches have been unidimensional and inadequate. In addition, evaluation criteria have widely varied among scholars and behavioural assessments have provided poor practical implications. Similarly, the coaching process, the social context and the situational variables are not isolated but interrelated and interdependent. However, the holistic nature of the coaching procedure is also under-researched. As a result, a conceptual agreement on coaching performance evaluation has not been established. In conclusion, coaching is a cognitive improvisation, a set of flexible rules and experiences that alter in time and situation and prove "right" from the results. Since coaching may be both an art and a science and every coach may have his/her own way to achieve effectiveness, the focus on coaching performance evaluation may shift from *how* a coach is effective to *when*. Robust approaches of coaching performance evaluation accept team's and athlete's outcomes as the only objective, measurable and available criteria.

Keywords: results, coaching, effectiveness, winning

INTRODUCTION

Coaching performance evaluation has been a significant topic in the coaching literature [1]. It has also been a valuable tool for administrators when they decide to hire or fire coaching staff [2], a feedback mechanism for coaches to identify weaknesses or copy best practices [3] and focal point of coaching education programmes [4]. Nevertheless, coaching language and terminology have been inconsistent [5], while evaluation approaches and methods have been unidimensional and inadequate [5-7]. In addition, evaluation criteria have widely varied among scholars [8], behavioural assessments have provided poor practical implications [9] and a conceptual agreement on coaching performance evaluation has not been established [10]. It should be acknowledged that important queries on coaching evaluation are still not answered: (a) which practices lead to effective results; (b) which outcomes are considered effective; (c) when coaches should be evaluated and what should be evaluated and (d) who is responsible for the evaluation and under which procedure [5, 9, 11, 12]. In addition, it is under investigation if performance evaluation is sport and place specific or it applies to different sports, coaching environments and situations [8,9]. As a result, it makes no surprise that the lack of research and consensus on coaching evaluation [6, 9, 13, 5, 14] is a complaint expressed in the literature for more than 25 years.

The purpose of this review was to present the inherent limitations of coaching process evaluation, the influence of the coaching environment on the coaching process as well as to present robust ideas on coaching performance evaluation through results.

Limitations of coaching process evaluation

Lyle [5] defined coaching process as "both the contract and understanding which is entered into by the athlete(s) and coach, and the operationalisation of that agreement" (p. 40). Similarly, Cushion et al. [10] cited Borrie and Knowles, who defined coaching process "as a series of stages that the coach has to go through to help the player/athlete learn and improve a particular skill". However, the coach is responsible for several variables beyond the athlete/coach interaction [10] and such definitions are limited and unidimensional.

One of the most common scenarios of coaching process evaluation is to record practices of coaches considered as experts. Douge and Hastie [15], and Lyle [5] reviewed coaching literature from 1988 to 2001.

They presented a considerable number of sources that described the "characteristics", "competencies" or "behaviours" of the effective coach. They also focused on appropriate leadership styles, personal development techniques and behaviour observation systems. However, identifying qualities, duties or responsibilities was too simplistic [5] and did not offer a useful, valid and reliable mechanism to evaluate coaches, measure their effectiveness or compare them with other coaches [9].

Several assessment and observation systems are also presented in the literature. These systems record all team states during practices or games, coaching interactions with players and coaching behaviours. The most renowned in the literature is the Coach Behaviour Assessment System (CBAS) [16], whereas the most recent is the Coach Analysis and Intervention System (CAIS) [9]. CAIS successfully dealt with inherent limitations of previous instruments such as sensitivity [17], simplicity [18], lack of computerisation in data collection and analysis, as well as the application of coaching behaviours at different times and environments [9]. However, observer's training still remains crucial [17]. That is because the application of the instrument is complex and for this reason users should become familiar with behavioural definitions and computerised observational coding [9]. In addition, observation instruments cannot fully encompass the coaching process. Therefore, coaches' interviewing seems necessary to explain the background for the observed behaviours [19]. An alternative approach to coaching process evaluation is the construction of conceptual models for coaches to reference [5-8]. Nevertheless, the practical effects of such conceptual models were questioned [5], along with their validity and reliability at different countries, sports and coaching environments [2, 10, 20]. Additionally, Lyle [5] debates additional limitations: (a) models cannot reproduce coaching behaviour, (b) models consist of variables that are interrelated in a very complex manner, (c) models do not predict coaching results, due to several interferences (e.g. opponents, financial recourses, injuries), and (d) the cognitive element of the coaching process cannot be depicted in a model.

In general, several scholars [21-23, 14] expressed the need to adopt multiple methodological approaches and multi-level evaluation systems in order to adequately investigate coaching performance. A solution might be to gather data with two or more methods (observation practices, interviews, survey instruments), an approach that is called methodological triangulation. The combination of these methods results not only in recording those coaching actions, but also in identifying the causes that necessitate them [19]. Coaching behaviours now are more effectively approached and explained, the validity of results is increased and inherent weaknesses of single-method studies are overcome [19]. Finally, methodological triangulation increases the accuracy of the results, since coaches operationally define and explain their own behaviours and coaching decisions [24].

Undoubtedly, one of the most widely used criteria to evaluate the coaching process is "results". Opponents of this approach supported that results are unidimensional [23] and do not accurately depict the coaching process [11, 3]. Lyle [5] debated up to which limit a coach was responsible for his/her results, whereas pressure to win led many coaches to unethical practices or burnout [25]. Lastly, several scholars [26, 27] presented influences (e.g. managerial support, funding, and facility limitations) that affected outcomes. Consequently, a result is not always an objective representation of coach's performance. Besides, some games (e.g. basketball) are zero-sum games, one team always wins and the other loses, although both performances may be excellent or poor. On the contrary, Zhang et al. [8] indicated that coaching evaluation has been highly developed on win-loss percentages and athletes' achievements or satisfaction. Indeed, win/loss record [28, 23, 8] winning a championship [6] athletes' medals [11, 23] and improvement of team's or athlete's performance [1, 8], have been used as evaluation criteria in several surveys. That happens because these criteria are measurable, indisputable and data about them is widely available.

Since 2000, a debate has been transferred on the weight of results and the value of the observation instruments in evaluating coaching performance. Another point of view has been emerged; the coaching process as a part of a broader social context and the role of the coaching environment [9, 29, 23, 30].

The influence of the social context on the coaching process
Nowadays, sport science research is mainly focused on the psychological, physiological, technical and tactical areas of coaching [29, 31]. Coaches are also used to act as leaders who adopt behaviours and transfer knowledge [32]. However, coaches do not act alone but together with administrators, managers and coaching staff, funs, media, and sponsors, other coaches and athletes [25, 15, 12, 5, 31], who express their own opinions, judge the coaching performance and participate in coach evaluation [33]. As a result, coaching planning, practice and performance are not isolated procedures but they are influenced by the social context [29, 32, 34]. Consequently, research on coaching performance is incomplete, if the social context has not been considered [18].

It should also be acknowledged that the social context constantly transforms and evolves. For this reason, the coaching process receives diverse social influences and demands unique manipulation [35]. In

modern sport environments, the coach collaborates with athletes of multiple ages, races, colours, cultures, philosophies, abilities, background and experiences [26, 19]. Athletes' reactions are not expected to be linear and strict, but subjective and transforming [32]. As such, the coach-athlete relationship is a dynamic one and the roles are not predetermined, but change over time [36]. Mathers [37] indicated that "no two coaching situations are congruent" (p. 28). Furthermore, coaching practices differ substantially among countries and sports [2, 36]. Even for the same sport, coaches face different organizational, training and game situations [39, 5]. During the season, coaches tend to alter their training methods [9], whereas in the same training session coaches may apply different cognitive practices and behaviours [30]. Saury and Durand [40] argued that the best technical and tactical solutions are not available in advance. As a result, the innovating character of coaching should make coaches strive for new ideas and practices in order to create an advantage in their effort to win, rather than copy other coaches' methods and attend to significantly improve them [41]. In game situations, research on the cognitive functioning of coaches revealed that the demand for rapid decisions led coaches to superficial situation analysis on the basis of their experience [40]. Similarly, in practice, coaches do not follow a specific methodology, but improvisation and intuition [35, 10, 40, 42]. Lyle [5] supported that coaches unconsciously correlated past experiences with present situations. In conclusion, although research on training loads and athletes' physical adaptation is advanced [29], knowledge on how a coach could mould social influences and the specific social frame with personal expertise and experience in order to develop a training program, is under-researched [9].

The influence of the coaching environment on the coaching process

Coaching environment could be defined as the direct or indirect, internal or external to the team/athlete, situational, social, sport or physical conditions that influence the coaching process, performance and results. The literature revealed several environmental variables that influence coaches and athletes. Those include: (a) the opponent(s), (b) weather conditions [11], (c) injuries and/or illnesses, (d) financial recourses [23], (e) club organizational structures [5], and (f) the availability and/or the level of support service [5]. The argument that the coach should control environmental influences and the effect of such limitations on the coaching process and outcomes is a controversial issue in the coaching literature. Occasionally, coaches are expected to be held fully accountable for competition results [23], to be on top of everything [43] and have a response for every foreseeable situation [44]. On the contrary, some coaches blame unexpected situations to justify negative outcomes [29] and/or to defend their philosophy and patterns against new approaches in coaching [29]. On a more compromised position, Mesquita et al. [20] supported that coaches need to adapt and manage environmental effects, since coaching plans are produced inside the social and situational context that created them [34]. As Denison [45] emphasised, controlling athletes' emotions and reactions for unexpected losses or injuries is equally important for coaches, as managing training loads and intensities. Accordingly, the environmental element makes coaching more complex and unpredictable, but also much more simple and creative. Coaches do not need to discover the "holy grail" that leads them to success, nor do they need to force their teams and players to adopt and follow their personal philosophy and style. Denison [29] also argued that coaches who fail to understand the multiple interactions between the social and situational context and coaching practice, are prone to get "locked into patterns of thinking and being they believe they cannot influence or change" (p. 473).

In conclusion, coaching may be a cognitive "regulated improvisation" [10], a set of flexible rules and experiences [40] that alter in place, time and situation [29, 5] and prove "right" from the results [12]. Cushion et al. [10] believed that a holistic understanding of the coaching process is needed, and highlighted several scholars' arguments that coaching is both an art and a science [26, 5, 31].

Approaches on coaching performance evaluation

Although there is a significant research in the coaching literature over the last 30 years, coaching process remains messy, social and situational influences are minimally researched [10] and observations of coaching behaviour do not predict, on their own, coaching outcomes [9]. In fact, it is a common phenomenon poor coaching to end up with successful results [23] or vice versa. Hence, a valid and reliable method to evaluate and compare coaching performance beyond coaching outcomes, is still not established. For these reasons, winning, records and medals still remain the best solution to appreciate coaching outcomes.

In practice, in the modern sport society of sponsors and revenues, the focus on results is increasing rapidly. Indeed, the only way to achieve an objective, measurable and realistic evaluation of coaching performance might be via coaching results. That is to study *when* a coach is successful and not *how*, since every coach has his/her own way to achieve effectiveness [46]. Besides, the more intuitive the coaching practice and decisions, the more difficult it is to answer the *what* and *why* of the coaching process. In addition, outcome evaluation releases innovative ideas and stops transferring predetermined coaching recipes [29]. Jenny [12] emphasized that the value of results remains unchanged in time, whereas winning has the same meaning everywhere. Finally, positive outcomes may indicate that the coach has successfully

manipulated coaching practices, the social context, as well as, situational and physical variables. Therefore, a successful coach can argue that he/she is experienced and capable to become equally effective with different athletes/teams in time and situation.

Future research can focus on (a) identifying the criteria considered as coaching outcomes, (b) weighting their value, and (c) estimating their validity among different sports and populations. Moreover, the environmental influences should also be identified and their impact on the coaching process further explored. Finally, the coaching scholars should also take into consideration the mediating and moderating role of social and situational factors on coaching results.

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