

The role of the coach: a new look at an old topic.

Wayne Goldsmith

You've probably been to one.

You know lots of people who have sat through them.

I've done hundreds of them.

The ubiquitous ROLE OF THE COACH presentation that usually signals the start of most beginning coaching education courses.

You know how it goes...you could probably even run one yourself.

A group of excited, bright eyed, beginner coaches are sitting in the lecture room, pens at the ready, crisp clean, new books open at a new page, ready and waiting to begin taking notes and start their journey into coach education.

The presenter asks the audience, usually on the first morning of every "Beginning Coaches" workshop, "So, what is coaching? What is the role of the coach? What are the attributes of great coaches?"

And, on cue, in every country, in every culture, in every sport, without fail the audience members reply:

- "Communication"
- "Empathy"
- "Planning"
- "Honesty"
- "Technical skills"
- "Passion"
- "Integrity"
- "Energy"
- "Listening skills"
- "Discipline"

And "organisational ability" and "knowledge of training principles" and "an understanding of sports science" and and and andand you know the rest. We all do. Everyone knows what a coach is – what he / she is supposed to do, what qualities they possess and what coaching is all about...or do we?

After leading many of these sessions over the past 20 years and working through the “role of the coach” type presentations with thousands of coaches, I have come to this conclusion:

The role of the coach is to become redundant: to inspire passion for learning, improvement and self development in athletes to help them (the athlete) become independent and responsible for driving their own sporting careers.

Or, if you like, in the long term, the role of the coach is.... to have no role at all!

In coaching, less is more.

I know this sounds crazy. We all want to feel wanted. We all want to feel useful. We all want to have our skills, experience and knowledge valued, appreciated and utilised.

Plutarch said, “The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled”. He must have been a coach!

Because coaching courses and training programs are full of great content on planning, periodisation, sports science, technique, skills, etc, coaches feel the need to learn and pass on as much of this learning to their athletes as they can.

As a result, coaching becomes a game of volume learning, i.e. “the more I speak and the more I teach and the more I coach, the better I am as a coach”.

Who are the greatest teachers and coaches you have known? What made them so special?

Their knowledge? NO. Athletes don’t care how much you know...they want to know how much you care.

Their training? NO. Most athletes don’t have any understanding of how coaches learn or the meaning of Accreditation.

The greatest teachers and coaches are those who inspire others to learn for themselves. The greatest teachers and coaches are those who light the fires of determination and commitment within others. The greatest teachers and coaches ignite drive and passion in others – drive and passion which fuels the search for continuous improvement and an unquenchable thirst to learn.

Coaches get too focused on coaching “WHAT” – i.e. WHAT drills to do, WHAT foods to eat, WHAT training to do, WHAT stretches to do.....

Coaching is not about WHAT – it’s about HOW.

WHAT changes all the time – WHAT varies – WHAT trends in and out and cycles back and forth over time. This year stretching is in vogue, next year it’s out. Last week vitamin supplementation was in;

this week it's about eating healthy nutritional natural foods – the WHAT of coaching changes like the wind.

But the HOW is enduring. The HOW is permanent. The HOW is the foundation – the core set of qualities and values at the heart of every athlete. The HOW sustains the athlete through tough times, adversity, setbacks, illness and injury.

Think of it like this.

Imagine you were building a house: a house that you wanted to stand for many years and withstand the impact of wind, rain and stress and strain of the seasons.

The first step is to ensure that the foundations of the house – the concrete slab at the base of the house is solid, strong and dependable.

From that point on, it doesn't really matter what materials you use or what construction designs you introduce or what design influences you employ, the house will stand strong because of the strength, integrity and reliability of its foundations.

Coaching is like this. The foundations of every great sporting achievement are based on the fundamental values and basic skills of athletes. It is their values more than their training volume that determine success: values like honesty, integrity, sincerity, humility, passion, determination, work ethic, discipline and courage.

We get too concerned with buying the latest boots or using the latest piece of equipment or eating the latest sports bar when what really matters – what really makes the difference – are the basic, core human qualities of the athlete.

And, as a coach, with all the skills, abilities and instincts you have – all those “what is a coach” type qualities that you possess – you more than anyone else, have the potential to help athletes develop a strong foundation which will serve them well for the rest of their lives.

A nutritionist may work with an athlete and change their diet.

A conditioning specialist may work with an athlete and change their training program.

A psychologist may work with an athlete and change the way they deal with stress.

But coaching is about changing lives. Your ability to impact on the life of an athlete is unparalleled: your capacity to inspire an athlete is unmatched; your talent to unleash the potential of an athlete is unrivalled.

Want to become a better coach? Forget going to another coaching course...[go talk to a builder!](#)

Summary:

1. Coaching is one of few industries where your long term success will be measured by how little you do!
2. Avoid the temptation to be a VOLUME TEACHING COACH – inspire the desire to learn: don't "fill the vessel – ignite the fire"!
3. Change lives by unleashing potential – don't coach football or swimming or rugby or baseball....give athletes the freedom to become all they can be as individuals and as a consequence, the performances will come. It's People and Potential before Programs!

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About Wayne Goldsmith:

Wayne is one of Australia's premier high performance sports consultants. Over the past 20 years he has worked with The Wallabies, The Brumbies Super 14 Rugby team, North Melbourne AFL, Tennis Australia, The Australian Triathlon Team, The Australian Institute of Sport, The Australian Swimming team and many other leading sporting organisations.

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