

Expert Coaching: Implications for Education & Training

Christine Nash

University of Abertay Dundee

Introduction

In recent years, there have been attempts to professionalise sport coaching, with the involvement of many agencies and educational institutions. Much of this has been attributed to the emphasis on sport and physical activity as part of an active lifestyle and as a result, there has been considerable demand for appropriately qualified and skilled sport coaches. Quality coaching and guidance are one of the cornerstones in the development of sport, therefore, it is important to identify the elements that contribute to the development of expertise. Successful coaches are those who adapt their behaviour to meet the demands of their particular coaching environment (Jones, 2000, Lyle, 1999, Potrac et al, 2000). As coaches develop and work with high performance athletes, their role also changes, requiring more management skills (Lyle, 1997).

The study of expertise or how domain-specific knowledge is acquired has its historical roots in cognitive skill acquisition (Vanlehn, 1996). Expertise can be defined as “a fluid configuration of knowledge, information and situated experience, all of which are apt to change in response to questions arising in highly specific and localised contexts” (Nowotny, 2000, p12). Many aspects of expertise are still under debate, whether in a specific domain or across a number of domains (Shanteau, Weiss, Thomas & Pounds, 2002). It has been established that the development and maintenance of expertise in any discipline requires sustained practice over an extended period of time, commonly referred to as deliberate practice (Guest, Regehr & Tiberius, 2001, Ericsson, Krampe & Tesch-Römer, 1993). Expertise is an area that has been significantly researched across a diverse range of domains however within the realm of sport the emphasis has been on the performer. This preliminary investigation examines the development of expert coaches and relates this to the educational and training opportunities that are currently available.

Method

This study analysed the views of coaches in three different sports; swimming, hockey and football. These coaches were selected using three criteria:

1. they held a minimum of Level 4 Coaching Award from their NGB
2. they had a minimum of 10 years continuous coaching experience
3. they were coaching at a representative level and had developed national performers over a number of years

These interviews were inductively analysed, using grounded theory. This allowed for depth and “richness” of response to be reflected in the results.

Results and Discussion

The team sport coaches maintained that an integral part of their role was the effective deployment of resources and that this consumed a large quantity of their time, especially organising the various support mechanisms at their disposal. The swimming coaches stated that although the organisation of sufficient training time was a factor they tended to be more reactive to situations that arose. All of the coaches within this study felt that as they developed as coaches there was little provision by any education or training within the sport environment. Initially, provision of coach education courses had met some of their needs, especially expanding their knowledge in sport-specific areas of drills and techniques but none of these coaches had not attended a coach education course recently. As outlined by Cote’s model (1995), athlete development is multi-dimensional by nature; therefore, coaches’ knowledge across many domains would be beneficial to their performers. This knowledge should be reflected in course content within coach education programmes. This study has demonstrated that these coaches do not perceive their coach education courses delivering the type of information that they can utilise to improve their athletes, especially given their existing level of skill/expertise. A swimming coach stated:

“I have a very busy schedule, training, competition and work – I do not feel

that coach education courses are useful enough to make time for”

It has also been suggested that the available coach education courses are presented and assessed in a format that does not encourage learning to take place (Gilbert et al, 1999, ASC, 2001). The football coaches especially highlighted the sport skill specific nature of their training opportunities and the “false” nature of the attendant assessments, adding:

“the coaching situations in the assessments do not represent the coaching that I am doing – the kids all behave, or we coach one another. You also have to coach according to a formula to pass the assessment”

These coaches had clearly identified their own strengths and weaknesses within their present coaching environment but agreed that they had no guidance about how to enhance their skills. A hockey coach made the point that:

“Most of the time I feel isolated as a coach – all of the emphasis is on the players and the team. If I have a problem I feel I have to solve it by myself. I think that problem-solving is now one of my strengths”

Many coaches attribute their development of coaching knowledge to their own experiences and observing experienced coaches (Gould et al, 2002). These coaches agreed with this but indicated that forums for sharing information and experiences were not encouraged by their sports organisations and that any developments were generally informal and tended to be amongst friends and close colleagues. Coaches could also identify a key individual who helped or mentored them in the early stages of their coaching career. Bell (1997) has identified four stages in the development of expertise within both teaching and coaching as novice; competent; proficient; expert. Most coach education organisations operate a hierarchical structure, often reflecting four or five different stages or levels of achievement. However, these stages do not appear to reflect the competences expressed within the development of expertise (Gilbert et al 1999, Rutt-Leas & Chi, 1993).

Many of these coaches are now involved in delivering coach education courses, although one coach felt:

“I’m not sure if I am the best person to be delivering these courses, especially at the introductory level. It has been a long time since I did that type of coaching”

The coaches also thought that despite various changes and restructuring of coach education courses delivered by national governing bodies there was still little recognition of how coaches develop and expand their knowledge. A swimming coach stated:

“I find that I have to concentrate much more on the quality of the strokes and repetitions during training. At this level, quality reps are much more important than quantity – I try to insist on this during training”

Although these coaches were generally recognised as expert within their field they had never been asked to evaluate or contribute to the development of coach education courses in their chosen sports.

There is an obvious need for cooperation between education providers and sports organisations to meet the needs of coaches in general and there are some local examples of this. For sport coaching to develop and become established as a profession barriers need to be removed. Many of these barriers do appear to be situated within the organisational structures of the sports themselves. Coaches need to be recognised for their abilities and educational opportunities that meet the needs of coaches at the performance end of the spectrum need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. This may involve coaches and the NGBs moving away from sport specific delivery and seeking input from external experts to cope with the increasing demands of high performance sport. From this study it would appear that key areas to be considered in the development of expert coaches would be mentoring of coaches, evaluation and reflection and quality of practice activities.

References

- Australian Sports Commission (2001) A preliminary investigation into the effectiveness of the National Coach Accreditation Scheme, Australian Sports Commission.
- Bell, M. (1997) The development of expertise, *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 68:2, 34-38
- Cote, J., Salmela, J., Trudel, P., Baria, A. & Russell, S. (1995) The coaching model: A grounded assessment of expert gymnastic coaches' knowledge, *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 2, 1-17.
- Ericsson, K.A., Krampe, R.T. & Tesch-Römer, C. (1993) "The role of deliberate practice in the development of expertise". In: *Psychology Review*, 100, 363-406
- Gilbert, W. & Trudel, P. (1999) An evaluation strategy for coach education programs, *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 22:2, 234-250.
- Gould, D., Guinan, D., Greenleaf, C. & Chung, Y. (2002) A survey of U.S. Olympic coaches: Variables perceived to have influenced athlete performances and coach effectiveness, *The Sport Psychologist*, 16, 229-250.
- Guest, C.B., Regehr, G. & Tiberius, R.G. (2001) "The life long challenge of expertise." In: *Medical Education*, 35, 78-81
- Lyle, J.W.B., (1997) "Managing excellence in sports performance". In: *Career Development International*, 2,7, 314-323
- Nowotny, H. (2000) "Transgressive competence: The narrative of expertise." In: *European Journal of Social Theory*, 3, 1, 5-21
- Rutt Leas, R. & Chi, M.T.H. (1993) Analyzing diagnostic expertise of competitive swimming coaches, in J.L. Starkes & F. Allard (Editors) *Cognitive Issues in Motor Expertise*, 75-94, Elsevier Science Publishers B.V
- Shanteau, J., Weiss, D.J., Thomas, R.P. & Pounds, J.C. (2002) "Performance-based expertise: How to decide if someone is an expert or not." In: *European Journal of Operational Research*, 136, 253-263
- Vanlehn, K. (1996) "Cognitive skill acquisition". In: *Annual Review Psychology* 47, 513-539.

Contact co-ordinates author

Christine Nash, University of Abertay Dundee, Division of Sport & Leisure, Graham Building, Bell Street, Dundee DD1 1HG, Scotland

E-mail: c.nash@abertay.ac.uk