

Youth Sport Coaching; a contextualised process

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Abstract

With their own personal experiences in mind, ‘youth sport coaching’ may be a familiar term to many readers. While a useful anchor point, it is important to recognise that youth sport coaching is a socially constructed concept involving the ‘process of guided improvement and development in a single sport and at identifiable stages of development’ (International Council for Coaching Framework, 2013, p. 14). This process occurs in traditional sports clubs, school sport programmes, community outreach programmes and talent development systems. In these contexts, coaches may engage in a process involving planning, delivering and reviewing sport sessions aimed at the development of young people. Importantly, young people may have a variety of different needs and participate in a variety of sports and organisational settings. Furthermore, each of these contexts and the process of coaching young people are influenced by a wide variety of macro social, economic, and political factors that impact and shape the interactions between coaches and others such as young people, fellow coaches, and parents. This means that youth sport coaching, while a ubiquitous term can manifest in different ways in particular contexts. For example, youth sport coaching may involve the facilitation of informal physical activity in a particular sport. In another setting youth sport coaching could include the structured and detailed long-term planning of multiple biopsychosocial variables targeted at achieving competitive outcomes. With this variety in mind, youth sport coaching is best understood as an umbrella term for a varied range of contextual coaching that aims to support the development of young people in sport.

Keywords

Athlete-coach relationship; coaching domain; coaching knowledge; children

1.1 What constitutes sport coaching in ‘youth sport coaching?’

Sport coaching is the “process of guided improvement and development in a single sport and at identifiable stages of development” (International Council for Coaching Excellence, 2013 p.14). Inherent to this process is a relationship between an athlete and coach, wherein the coach attempts to support an athlete(s) and their developmentally appropriate needs. To greater and lesser extents, this athlete-coach relationship is characterised by dialogue, care, trust, and closeness. The relationship may be pedagogical in that the coach seeks to meet the needs of athletes by educating them ahead of sporting and non-sporting challenges to come (e.g., competition). This may necessitate the development of physical capabilities, technical and tactical sporting competencies, a range of psycho-social skills including communication, control, confidence, cohesion, character, and physical capacities (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). To

achieve these developmental outcomes, coaches may use a range of theories of learning (e.g., cognitive or constructivism), teaching/coaching styles (e.g., command or discovery), coaching methods (e.g., games-based coaching) or behaviours (instruction, demonstration, praise) to help athletes learn. This positions youth sport coaching as a pedagogical process focused on the development of a given young person. To enact this process, coaches may engage with the preparation, delivery and evaluating of sport practices, developing competition schedules, and managing resources such as facilities, equipment, and support staff. An effective process, may require coaches to utilise a range of knowledge including professional (e.g., physiology, psychology, sport-specific, rules, strategies, tactics and techniques), interpersonal (e.g., listening skills, ethical expectations, developing relationships) and intrapersonal (e.g., be reflective, understanding of their own biography, values and beliefs) knowledge (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). Utilising this knowledge to meet the needs of a particular athlete is not always easy. Rather, the effective integration of a range of knowledge to support the biopsychosocial needs of particular individuals can be a challenging social process.

1.2 Coaching domains

To make sense of the complex coaching process, researchers have recognised that sport coaching, can be understood as broadly occurring in two 'coaching domains' i.e., participation or performance (Lyle & Cushion, 2010). The distinguishing features between these domains include the overall aim of the activity (i.e., involvement or winning), the extent to which competitive outcomes are valued, the intensity of preparation, and the frequency of preparation for competition. For instance, a young person experiencing sport coaching within the performance domain may participate in a significant amount of practice time in a single sport (e.g., >12hrs per week). A key focus of such activity might include the development of biopsychosocial skills to compete successfully in formal competitions. This may involve the long-term planning, resourcing, and monitoring of variables to achieve objectives in areas such as strength and conditioning, psychological skills, technical and tactical proficiency. Here, it is not unusual for parents, coaches, athletes, and others in the sporting environment to promote and enact a performance narrative with a narrow focus on achieving competitive success. Practices such as a high volume of training, physically demanding training sessions and investment (e.g., emotion, finance) in the pursuit of sporting outcomes may be common in this domain. Indeed, in coaching contexts where the performance narrative dominates, competition may be unquestionably understood as beneficial, and the 'raison d'être' for sport participation.

Youth sport coaching within the participation domain is characterised by less preparation for future competition than the performance domain (e.g., <5 hrs per week). The intensity of preparation is likely to be less than the performance domain, and fewer components of performance may be trained (i.e., less specialist and individualised training may be available for the development of biopsychosocial skills). This is not to say that competition does not exist within the participation domain. Rather, while competition may occur, competition levels in the participation domain may be low and many participants will prioritise involvement as an outcome or other developmental outcomes (e.g., the development of fundamental movement skills, positive youth development). In practice, the youth sport coach

in the participation domain may plan, deliver, and evaluate sessions with an emphasis on maintaining the engagement of participants in a sport, facilitating fun, and supporting the long-term development of social, psychological, physical and sport-specific skills. For clarity, while a young person may participate in a particular sport (e.g., hockey) in either the participation or performance domain, the frequency of engagement, intensity of preparation, long-term planning and focus on competitive outcomes could be very different in participation-focused coaching when compared to performance-focused coaching. Nonetheless, while the coaching process may manifest differently, across both domains young people engage in a guided process of improvement and development in a single sport, and thus both can be considered youth sport coaching.

2.1 What constitutes ‘youth’, in youth sport coaching?

Childhood and ‘youth’ are social constructs, with current understandings rooted in notions of play, developmental stages, journeys to independence, and agency. Particular classifications of youth and therefore youth sport are constructed by local traditions, customs, conceptions and cultural norms. Thus, a universal chronological age to define youth sport coaching does not exist. Indeed, while athletes typically engage in youth sport coaching through to 18 years old, in some sporting contexts the ‘adultification’ of youth sports can occur at pre-adolescent (<10 years) or adolescent ages (<19 years). In other contexts, athletes may participate in youth sports characterised by modifications focused on youth development up to 21 years and 23 years of age. While competition at these levels can be significant, particularly in the performance domain, many youth sport coaches will nonetheless recognise that athletes are young people and articulate philosophies of long-term athlete development. From this perspective, the youth sport coaches’ role is to support the healthy development of an athlete as an individual, and as a sporting performer.

Notwithstanding long-term development discourses, some ‘exceptional’ young athletes may sign professional contracts and / or compete in adult orientated competitions and leagues. The prevalence of this can be influenced by a variety of factors. At the individual level, young athletes may develop physically to a point where it is deemed that they can compete with older or ‘adult’ athletes (e.g., >18 years). Here an important distinction is to be made between an athletes’ chronological (date of birth) and biological age, which reflects their individual growth and maturation. Additionally, young athletes may be prepared for competition through intense training that mimic adult practices, and schedules that resemble adult competitions. For instance, in what is termed ‘early specialisation sports’, accepted social norms encourage intensive specialised training at a young age (e.g., gymnastics, dance, skateboarding). These early specialisation athletes may focus exclusively upon, and extensively train for one particular sport and even develop proficiency to compete at world and Olympic level. Importantly, this is a contested position with research reporting numerous accounts of maladaptive outcomes from young athletes adopting adult like training and competition schedules. These include identity foreclosure and overtraining, leading to developmental challenges such as relative energy deficiency in sport (Bergeron, et al., 2015). Thus, maintaining appropriate practice is a key responsibility for the youth sport coach.

Reflecting their responsibilities and power, youth sport coaches may be obligated with a duty of care. For instance, in the UK, this duty of care has a legal basis where coaches of all

participants regardless of age are obliged to undertake ‘reasonable steps’ to prevent ‘reasonably predictable harm’ (Partington, 2017). This duty is predicated on coaches’ assumed expertise. In practice, this may manifest in youth sport coaches completing risk assessments, health and safety checks, managing training loads and exercise intensity. Such duties are relevant to adult coaches; nevertheless, youth sport coaches may have additional responsibilities including safeguarding and child protection. Coaches may adopt a position of ‘loco parentis’, and should ensure that athletes are free from neglect, psychological, physical and sexual abuse (Mountjoy, et al., 2016). While the International Olympic Committee provides explicit definitions of abuse, the specific practices that coaches undertake to protect children can be context and culturally specific. For example, touch is an acceptable behaviour in some sporting contexts (e.g., supporting a gymnast to complete exercises), whereas in other contexts touch is deemed inappropriate. Accordingly, youth sport coaches should critically consider the norms within their own context and regulations.

Beyond jurisdiction specific legal duties, the UN rights of the child (United Nations, 1990) are important considerations for those working with children such as youth coaches. For example, the convention establishes the right for children voices to be heard in activities relevant to them. Additionally, a range of research from different disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology and pedagogy) encourages youth sport coaches to facilitate athlete autonomy as a means of supporting athletes’ wellbeing, motivation and needs (e.g., Mossman, Slemp, Lewis, Colla, & O’Halloran, 2022). Given the wider motives within domains, range of knowledge required, and legal duty to protect, facilitating athlete autonomy can be challenging. Skilled youth coaches may, however, do this through listening to athletes, providing choice and empowering athletes to construct their knowledge and their own sporting experiences. Listening and dialogue is also a basis for an ethic of care which some research has argued should pervade youth sport (Cronin & Armour, 2018). Here, a distinction is made with a legal duty of care that centres on non-malevolence. Instead, an ethic of care embraces a moral aspiration for coaches to develop caring relationships that are needs based and reciprocal. To adopt an ethic of care, coaches may observe the sporting and non-sporting needs of athletes and consult research on such matters. Crucially, however, they should also intentionally listen to the expressed needs of athletes. This dialogical understanding enables the development of a pedagogical relationship because needs focused attention can provide a basis for pedagogical interventions. For instance, young athletes may express a desire for coaches to provide technical support. Through this dialogue, coaches can consider why the athlete may feel this way. Moreover, both the coach and the athlete can consider how, when and where the athlete’s need for more technical development can be met. To ensure that this is a genuinely caring relationship, and not a dominating one, coaches need to be mindful of their own power. Ensuring that dialogue is authentic and athletes’ voices are respected is therefore a key facet of an ethic of care. Reciprocally, the needs of coaches should also be respected.

3.1 Learning and development in youth sport coaching

Reflecting their pedagogical role (Armour, 2011), youth sport coaches may use a range of coaching methods to support athletes. For example, while theoretical underpinnings remain contested, games-based approaches can provide a structure to guide coaches’ session

planning and support athletes' tactical development (Kinnerk, et al., 2018). This approach involves participants engaging in modified games, tasks, and environments to support their learning. Alternatively, Mosston's teaching styles (Mosston, 1966) provides a range of pedagogical methods that youth sport coaches may use to achieve outcomes with participants. These styles range from the traditional command session led by the coach who pre-plans and leads the activity, to more learner-initiated styles where athletes have more autonomy and produce knowledge rather than reproduce what the coach has taught. The physical development of athletes can be supported by coaches' use of long-term athlete development models, periodised training, and principles such as progressive overload. Across these activities, psychological research encourages coaches to create a task focused orientation and support athletes through task mastery climates where coaches reward effort, focus on process goals and create positive environments (Harwood, et al., 2015).

Social, economic, geographical, and political factors can also influence the learning and development of talented young performers. Access to resources at the micro (e.g., coaches, sport scientists), meso (e.g., clubs, leagues) and macro (e.g., federations, cultures) levels can support an athlete's development (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). Related to this are talent development and talent identification processes. These processes can manifest differently in different contexts but may include identifying 'talented' athletes to enter talent development systems. Objective scientifically derived data (e.g., physiological and anthropometric profiling), and / or subjective evaluations of young people by coaches, scouts, or agents may guide this decision-making. Within a development system, young athletes may experience youth sport coaching alongside a range of support services (e.g., strength and conditioning, sport psychology) and competition programmes. Talent identification processes may also be used in youth sport to select participants for youth representative teams (e.g., national underage teams) or to progress athletes through talent development systems which typically involve selection and deselection at various points. For instance, based upon objective and subjective analyses, some young athletes may be considered in need of the challenge of moving out of 'youth sport coaching' settings and into 'adult' performance sport. Alternatively, others may be deemed 'not talented' enough to retain with the system. Beyond individual development, a range of social and economic factors may influence this process. These include the economic resources to support talent development services and opportunities, the economic imperative to secure talent or at least not 'lose' talent to competitors, the influence of biological maturation (e.g., growth rates), and social and political considerations which may lead to the marginalisation of some young people (e.g., those with impairments or those from marginalised groups). Thus, the efficacy of talent identification programmes, particularly at young ages (pre-adolescence), remains contested, and this illustrates that young people's learning and development is not linear, nor simple.

4.1 Youth sport coaching as a social and relational process

Youth sport coaching is an interdependent process, with the athlete-coach relationship as central to the process. Beyond the athlete-coach relationship, however, the process of guiding improvement may require sport coaches to work with other individuals (e.g., fellow staff, parents, funders, sport officials, media, supporters, and management). This means that youth sport coaches may need to consider the knowledge, motives, and power of a wide range of

individuals. Navigating the micro-politics of these relationships can be difficult for the youth sport coach. For instance, youth sport coaches may need to consider equal playing time and opportunities for children. Tension can arise here when the performance narrative pervades the youth sport coaching context. Players, parents, staff, and performance directors may aspire to achieve specific performance outcomes. In such circumstances, resources such as playing time, positions within teams, practice time, equipment, facility access, and the attention of youth sport coaches become contested variables. Akin to a conductor, coaches may need to orchestrate stakeholders to harmonise and co-ordinate these resources (Jones & Ronglan, 2017). For instance, in the participation domain, coaches may work with parents to support athletes in positive and meaningful ways (e.g., organising transport and food on competition days). Navigating these relationships may require intrapersonal knowledge (i.e., knowledge of themselves, their values, beliefs, and behaviours) and interpersonal knowledge (i.e., knowledge of how to work with others such as communicating and negotiating) (Cote & Gilbert, 2009).

Given the multiple relationships that coaches need to orchestrate, it is not unusual for youth sport coaches to feel overwhelmed with complexity or to be mired in challenging micro-political environments. Paradoxically, many coaches will seek to provide an impression of calmness, control, and confidence (Jones, et al., 2011). This confident ‘front’, which portrays authority and expertise is a powerful means of influencing others involved in youth sport coaching. For instance, acting out the role of the certain and assured coach has been associated with gaining respect from key stakeholders such as players and fellow staff. Nevertheless, behind the scenes, youth sport coaches may experience frustration, uncertainty, and anxiety that reflects the expectation for them to be in control of what is often a complex social and relational process. In addition, while meaningful and rewarding for many coaches, youth sport coaching can be characterised by a high turnover of coaches and coaches experiencing ‘burnout’.

5.1 Professionalization of youth sport coaching

The youth sport coaching landscape can be best described as a ‘blended professional arena’ (ICCE, 2013) with a mixed economy. Workforces comprised of full-time, part-time, and volunteer coaches operate in many countries. Consequently, coaches may hold multiple roles in contrasting environments and ‘coaching domains’. For example, a youth sport coach could work as a coach/teacher in a school and as a volunteer in a community youth setting. This may require coaches to enact a plethora of tasks. For instance, funding requirements may mean coaches are required to support wider social outcomes (e.g., health), improve sporting performance, and engage with multiple participant types (Super, Verkooijen and Koelen, 2018). Regardless of employment status, the youth sport coach can be an important community resource. This suggests the need for and value in, providing education for coaches to understand the meanings, value, and importance of their specific role(s).

To understand their specific role, coaches whether full-time, part-time, or volunteer, may require additional training, knowledge, and development. Coach education practices traditionally are focussed on the technical and tactical elements of coaching, giving little emphasis to the wider social or contextual elements of the coaching process. Herein, lies a paradox for those who employ and deploy youth sport coaches and need coaches to

understand their social context and to undertake relational work. Therefore, educational priorities for the youth sport coach may need to be adapted to ensure that sufficiently skilled practitioners are available. As coach education, is a continuum with multiple layers of vocational (coaching courses) and academic (up to degree level) input, this leads some to suggest a minimum standard of qualification is required. This issue remains a contested area in coaching literature. Nonetheless, the accreditation and registration of youth sports coaches as a means of improving standards of delivery is becoming prevalent. An effective coaching infrastructure and education platform are necessary to support these processes. These processes, however, require time, funding and planning to grow and nurture a 'developing profession'. Therefore, the current appraisal is that, while many coaches draw on professional knowledge to enact their practice, a 'true' coaching profession remains an aspirational concept across the field.

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