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Coaching Experience and Education

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Coaching has a long history of on-the-job mentorship. The indoctrination process typically begins back in the coach's own playing days observing and interacting with influential coaches. From there a normal progression takes place: from rookie coach with little responsibility to rising assistant given additional duties to head coach. For many, working up through the ranks and gaining experiential knowledge along the way is thought to be the appropriate growth path in the profession.

Anecdotal evidence would seem to support this assumption, since at the high school level and above nearly all head coaches have "paid their dues" as assistants. This manner of coach training is so accepted that its shortcomings are often overlooked or dismissed by many present and would-be coaches. Suggest to them that mastering a sound, structured coaching curriculum is also vital in the development of coaches and their reaction usually is one of dismay or disdain.

Why? The answer I most often hear is the amount of time required to complete an education course. Sadly and alarmingly, those who cite time as the biggest issue tend to focus on "certification" rather than "education." They also underestimate the value education brings to their ability to effectively and efficiently manage the many demands of a coach both on and off the field. I would argue that high quality coaching education could help a coach save time over the course of season by making the time investment in training upfront.

On the flip side, any honest educator would admit the shortcomings of relying solely on classroom based instruction without implementing an experiential learning component. That's why prospective teachers practice teach, future doctors serve lengthy internships and residencies, and aspiring chefs spend years as understudies before taking command of a kitchen. But dismissing classroom coach

training because it is not conducted “in the trenches” is unwise and potentially dangerous.

A well-constructed and effectively presented coaching education curriculum is highly beneficial to all coaches. Here are just a few of the reasons:

- Formal educational experiences fill the gaps and ensure a solid knowledge base.

Despite the old “dumb jock” stigma that still prevails today, effective coaches are smart and organized. They know about athletes’ different learning styles. They understand the principles of physical conditioning and how to train athletes in a proper, safe way. They create seasonal and individual practice plans to ensure the correct progression and range of experiences for athletes’ optimal development. They realize what a significant impact they have on athletes, so they conduct themselves in a respectful, adult manner. And, perhaps most importantly, they’ve reflected on the priorities of their role and are committed to serving the best interests of their athletes and their program. A quality coaching education curriculum, addresses all these qualities, often under the more formal labels of pedagogy, physiology, psychology, and philosophy.

- Coaching courses broaden and extend one’s expertise. One serious drawback of hands-on training only of coaches is that it consists of too limited of range and depth of experience. Say a coach works his way up the ranks in a high school program to assistant head coach relying on his own personal experiences and observations of other coaches. What is missing? For one thing, the coach has been exposed to a very small set of circumstances in which to learn about coaching, and he’s destined to be no better or worse than the one or two coaches he learned from. In short, he doesn’t even know what he doesn’t know. That’s called ignorance. An enriching educational program beyond the confines of his immediate experience would introduce him to a whole host of new ideas and information that will allow him to make better, more informed decisions in the future. These educational opportunities enhance not only one’s knowledge, but also one’s appreciation for the parameters of the coach’s role and the many methods that can be employed to meet a broad spectrum of situations and responsibilities.

- Coaching education challenges assumptions and “the way we’ve always done it” approaches.

Coaches that have not had a chance to participate in coaching education courses are essentially working with blinders on. Their behavior and decision making —right or wrong— is limited simply because that’s all they know. The potential for harm, here, should be obvious. Imagine coaches still denying athletes water, pushing salt tablets, and running them “til they drop” as was common practice some 40 years ago. Most of us know better now about proper conditioning methods, but many still do not, as we read about in every sport, every season. Reliance on old, handed-down coaching methods and instructions is inexcusable in this day and age when so much research and field-documented knowledge is available. Hundreds of resources and a variety of courses have been developed to further the learning of all coaches.

Experience is essential. But so are learning experiences outside the practice and competition arena. The best coaches follow their intellectual curiosity and desire to stay ahead of the competition. They not only open themselves to knowledge-enriching opportunities, they hunt them.

As a coach who wants to make the most informed decisions, ensure the best experiences, and eliminate as many deficiencies as possible in the programs you provide your athletes, the choice is clear. As a sports administrator who insists on offering quality coaching through the program and reducing liability due to improper coaching practices, the need to support that choice is even clearer. In the end, the decision is yours. Do you stand pat at your present knowledge level?

Find more information on coaching education at www.ASEP.com.