Why Elite Athletes Do Not Always Make The Best Coaches (And Why We Should Stop Disadvantaging The Rest!)

Introduction

Successful athletes nearing the end of their careers have traditionally been recruited in large numbers as coaches in elite performance settings.

However, I believe that high performance athletes do not necessarily make good coaches, tend to be over-rated in terms of their potential, and are provided with disproportionate opportunities to access high profile coaching positions.

The positive reasons why they are considered as potential coaches are clear. They will be likely to have developed a sound knowledge of the:

- ✓ sport itself
- ✓ demands made of elite performers
- ✓ social context within which it is played

Furthermore, they will possibly:

- ✓ be recognised as high achievers
- ✓ command respect and admiration
- ✓ be motivational role models for aspiring athletes
- ✓ have experienced years of sport specific coaching, from performance level coaches.

But let us caste a more critical eye over their credentials for such an influential and crucial role.

Positives or Negatives?

Knowledge of sport.

Is this knowledge acquired through prolonged participation narrow or broad focused? *An expert is someone who knows more and more about less and less* – i.e. they may coach what they know, and not seek help in areas they are less sure of.

For example, international judoka often tend to specialise in two or three throws, armlocks, or hold-downs. Thus, would they realistically be able to help beginners to develop a foundation of

broad ranging techniques; or coach competitive performers who prefer other techniques?

In rugby union, elite performers may have great familiarity with the rules, roles, techniques and tactics specifically associated with their particular position. But would a winger be better able to coach a hooker, because they have experience of high-level participation?

Similarly, ex-football players who were attackers, may experience success in improving team offensive, but difficulty in improving defensive performance

Knowledge of demands made of elite performers.
To what extent is this based on personal experience only? Does it help to better appreciate sub-elite demands? Knowing the demands does not necessarily mean that you understand how to prepare for them.

A performance cyclist recently told me how her coach had subjected her to a gruelling training regimen, because it had previously worked for him in achieving competitive success. The

programme took no account of individual differences in motivation, training response, potential, or even gender! Nor did it recognise the possibility of improvements in training methods. Not surprisingly, the athlete's performance suffered, the coach-athlete relationship eventually broke down, and the athlete no longer competes.

Can coaches, who were previously high achievers, relate to those athletes who choose to put other commitments first, such as family or study? Or do they tend to over-emphasise "paying the price" to achieve, and therefore possibly increase the risk of, injury, overtraining, and burnout? Worse still, might they apply inappropriate preparation programmes at lower performance levels?

Knowledge of social context within which the sport is played.
Ex-athletes are by definition outdated – i.e. the social context is likely to have changed substantially since the start of their playing careers.

Consider for instance, in football, the relative demise of booze culture, the influx and influence of foreign players, the rise of player power (and decline of authoritarian coaching).

Even currently, social context can vary greatly, and particularly between different performance levels/cultures, where new coaches may undertake early experiences.

For example, in many martial arts strict discipline, social etiquette, and rigorous training intensity, are maintained. However, standards may realistically need to be relaxed for recreational participants, children, and indeed members of a modern democratic society compared to those of ancient feudal Japan!

Ex-elite martial competitors have even been known to use excessive physical punishment and violence in instructing novices.

Traditionalists should appreciate that even the great masters moved with the times, and adjusted their style to the social context (as well as their age) – e.g. Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido, considerably softened his techniques and approach, post World War two (Stevens, 1995).

Recognised as high achievers.

To reach the zenith in sport, athletes need to generally be quite egotistical, selfish, and highly driven (how often have you heard that an athlete is “too nice” to make it?).

These qualities associated with athletic success, could constitute coaching weaknesses. Compromising necessary coaching qualities such as the delegation of power and responsibility (due to the interdisciplinary nature of modern coaching), and adherence to fair play and ethical behaviour.

Command respect and admiration.

Expert performers do not necessarily become expert coaches as the role of knowledge in expertise is extremely area specific, and does not usually transfer well (Abrahams & Collins, 1998).

Why should a martial artist who attains a Black belt, suddenly be called sensei (teacher) by lower grades, and be mystically imbued with pedagogical powers?

Why should a good footballer be automatically assumed to be a good coach?

Consider elite international football players, and subsequent coaches the Charlton Brothers. One became an accomplished national coach, the other failed repeatedly at lower league level.

Respect and admiration ought really to be earned specifically in coaching.

Furthermore, some successful athletes may be motivated to coach to maintain positions of power within sport, and as a continued outlet for oversized egos.

Motivational role models for aspiring athletes.

Is this status always deserved or appropriate in relation to ex-elite performers? Some will have been pretty ruthless in their rise to the top. Others may well be positive role models – but do they have to coach to fulfil that position?

Rightly or wrongly, plenty of athletic role models exist. What we need are more positive coaching role models (e.g. the dearth of Black or female coaches).

Whilst a famous name may motivate in the short term, coaching shortcomings could negate long-term athlete development.

For instance, can truly gifted performers really explain why or how they implemented skills or made decisions when they competed? If not, how can they coach others to be like them, or empathise with novices' problems?

There is also the danger of athletes blindly following the advice of high achievers, without questioning the rationale, or appropriateness for their individualised needs.

Experienced years of sport specific coaching, from performance level coaches.

Undoubtedly true, and some will find it hard to let go (one Premiership and former national coach still regularly joins in during training). Standing back and appreciating the coaching perspective may be problematic. They may consequently be over emotive regarding competitive performances, and suffer greater stress than coaches who are able to be more dispassionate and professionally detached.

Years of training experience could merely lead to replication of outmoded coaching methods used by former coaches (i.e. will they be critically aware of subsequent coaching practices or unquestioningly going through the motions?)

Certainly many high performance athletes are exposed to excellent coaching. But the athletes' focus during training is quite rightly on their own personal development, and many at top level choose to trust the coach, rather than question their practices.

So this is only an advantage if there is serious deliberation of the coaching role, apprenticeship and mentoring (all very rare!).

Coach Education

Modern coaches are expected to comprehend and utilise an ever more specialised, complex and interrelated body of knowledge; but have minimal exposure to coach education programmes (Gilbert & Trudel, 1999).

For ex-elite athletes this may be even more problematic, since NGB's often see fit to implement fast track systems for them.

Contact hours are typically shortened, distance-learning formats may be employed, and various accreditation of prior experience and learning opportunities are created.

Often course materials themselves are altered. When I asked one NGB coach educator how the fast track course pack for ex-professionals differed from the standard one, he replied, "It has more pictures"! Whilst accepting some element of tongue-in-cheek, there are alarming undertones of differential quality

standards, and adherence to unhelpful and inaccurate stereotypes about dumb athletes.

I believe APEL is essential, and that we should give credit for as much as possible of the ad hoc coach education and CPD that individual coaches are forced to pursue, and improvise.

BUT! Whilst all genuine education results from experience, not all experience can be considered as educational (Dewey, 1933). Learning is dependent on how experience is used – i.e. whether there is deliberate reflective thinking and critical self-analysis.

Therefore, NGB's need to be very careful about awarding APEL towards coaching awards for athletic achievements, or for years of coaching at certain levels when positions were only gained initially because of a playing reputation.

Without a reasonable coach education, ex-athletes will lack a sound knowledge base, be unfamiliar with their limitations, and may be conditioned not to seek expert help without feeling a loss of control.

Having recently retired, Tony Adams, resisted several offers to coach, and decided to undertake a sport science degree, and a football coaching qualification. Adams claimed he was sick of learning the hard way, and felt some preparation was required (The Observer, 11/08/02).

I believe he is to be applauded. But how many other retiring elite athletes will be willing to be swept into coaching via their fame; and how many athletes will be affected as they learn the hard way?

Summary

I fully appreciate that ex-elite performers can often make excellent coaches, and I value the contribution of this group to the development of coaching.

However, I feel that we assume far too much transfer between elite athletic performance and elite coaching roles. Furthermore, I sense we are giving an added advantage to an already over privileged group (more time, money, and opportunity to gain coaching qualifications, experience, and positions).

For example, in football, many foreign coaches come to work in this country with *reputations as coaches*, and some have little or no experience of having played at elite levels (e.g. Wenger or Eriksson). In contrast, English coaches predominately have *reputations as players*, and often gain key positions with limited coaching experience, and inadequate qualifications. Two recent England coaches had not a coaching qualification between them.

Furthermore, ex-players are often re-employed as coaches on the basis of reputation, even when serious deficiencies have been made obvious. Whilst home grown coaches without high profile playing careers, face a virtual closed shop, with few if any opportunities to gain coaching positions at elite levels.

Talent identification, and recruitment strategies in relation to athletes are well developed. But, how much coaching talent from non-elite performance backgrounds are we overlooking, or pushing aside?

David Turner, April, 2003

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