

Coaching Life Skills through Football: A Study of Award Winning High School Coaches

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This study examined how outstanding high school football coaches developed life skills in their players. In-depth phone interviews were conducted with 10 outstanding coaches ranging in age from 47 to 68 years ($M = 54$). Coaches averaged 31 years of coaching experience, and were highly successful (76.6% winning percentage). Hierarchical content analysis of the data revealed that two general dimensions or categories of strategies emerged: (a) general coaching; and (b) player development strategies. Within the general coaching strategies dimension, higher-order themes focused on working with players and strategies for dealing with other parties. In the player development strategies general dimension was the higher-order theme set of teaching life skills. Results highlighted that it was clear these coaches did not view the coaching of life skills as separate from their general coaching strategies for performance enhancement and while highly motivated to win, personal development of their players was a top priority.

Many of the world's greatest coaches are not only committed to teaching their players how to excel in the athletic venue, but in life as well. It is ironic, then, that the scientific community has not studied the life-skill-building strategies used by outstanding coaches more actively. This is surprising as Coleman Griffith (1926), the father of North American sport

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psychology, emphasized that a sport psychology educator's primary function is to observe the most successful and experienced athletes and coaches, record the psychological strategies and principles they employ, and utilize those principles to educate less successful and experienced athletes and coaches.

While a number of researchers have examined performance-enhancement strategies employed by highly successful athletes (e.g., Côté, Salmela, & Russell, 1995b; Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1992a, b; Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993a; Hardy, Jones, & Gould, 1996) and coaches (Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria, & Russell, 1995; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999; Kimiecik & Gould, 1987), the strategies coaches use to enhance personal development and life skills have been studied less often. This void in the literature is interesting as programs to enhance life skills through sports participation has become a topic of considerable interest in both sport psychology (e.g., Danish, Fazio, Nellen, & Owens, 2002; Petipas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005) and the broader field of youth development (e.g., Larson, 2000; Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005). Helping to begin to fill that void was the general purpose of this study.

While the specific strategies coaches use to develop life skills have not been extensively studied, youth development researchers have begun to examine how developmental outcomes are fostered through participation in extracurricular activities such as sports. For example, Larson (2000) has suggested that extracurricular and community-based after-school activities foster motivation and intense concentration in adolescents. For these reasons, it has been suggested that after-school activities may be particularly useful in allowing adolescents to develop positive skills such as initiative and the ability to set and achieve goals.

This assertion was supported in a recent study of 55 high school adolescents involved in extracurricular and community-based activities (72% of whom were involved in sport). Dworkin, Larson, and Hansen (2003) found that these young people viewed extracurricular activities as an important growth experience in which psychological skills such as goal-setting, time management, and emotional control were learned. In a second, more comprehensive investigation, Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin (2003) studied 450 high school students who reported the developmental gains they associated with involvement in a variety of extracurricular activities, including sports. Results revealed that these youth reported higher rates of learning experiences such as identity exploration, reflection, and team skills in sports and other extracurricular activities versus participation in regular school classes and unsupervised time with friends. Therefore, sports were identified as a context for identity work and emotional development. However, participation in sports was also associated with negative experiences such as peer pressure and inappropriate adult behaviors. Finally, Steen, Kachorek, and Peterson (2003) found that adolescents reported characteristics such as leadership, wisdom, and social intelligence were acquired through life experiences fostered by extracurricular activities.

In a slightly different line of research, youth identifying natural mentors such as relatives, coaches, counselors, and teachers felt that those mentors played pivotal roles in their development (Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Nataro, 2002). Specifically, in a sample of 770 urban youth, it was found that having a mentor in one's life was associated with less alcohol use, marijuana use, and violent delinquency. Although the importance of personal mentors is significant, the process by which mentors influence youth is relatively unknown and warrants further investigation. Similarly, literature regarding coaches' particular influences on youth development must be examined. Research that studies both the opportunities and constraints in which coaches function relative to teaching life skills is essential. Thus, a need exists to better understand how coaches teach life skills to their athletes.

It is important to note the above assertion does not suggest that sport science researchers have failed to examine the influence of coaches' actions on young people's development at all.

In fact, several lines of research have commenced that provide a foundation for future research in this area. These areas of research include: (a) how coaches' relationship skills relate to the psychosocial development of young athletes; (b) the organization and development of coaching knowledge and expertise; and (c) how coaches teach mental skills to young athletes. The synthesis of each of these lines of research provides a clear link into the research to date on coaching impacting life skills in athletes.

How a coach's relationship or feedback and communication skills influence a young athlete's psychosocial development has been a topic of considerable interest in sport psychology for some time. In research conducted by Smith, Smoll, and their colleagues (see Barnett, Smoll, & Smith, 1992; Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1979; Smoll, Smith, Barnett, & Everett, 1993; Smith, Smoll, & Barnett, 1995) it has been shown that young athletes who play for coaches who exhibit more positive reinforcement, greater skill instruction, and avoid using punishment like their coaches more, are more satisfied with their teammates and the season, and exhibit higher levels of motivation, lower anxiety and lower attrition rates. Thus, this research has shown that training coaches to be positive and encouraging leads to a number of positive psychosocial consequences. What has not been shown, however, is if these positive gains transfer beyond the athletic field to general life situations.

Researchers have also begun to explore how coaches develop expertise and conceptualize the coaching process. Côté, Salmela, and Russell conducted some of the earliest research in this area examining knowledge used by 17 high-performance gymnastic coaches in training and competition (Côté et al., 1995a, 1995b; Côté & Salmela, 1996). Relevant to the present study, these investigators found that the coaches used four interaction styles: supportive behaviors; giving responsibility to the athletes; providing instruction; and providing feedback.

In a second write-up from the study, Côté and Salmela (1996) reported the organizational behaviors of these coaches, emphasizing among other things the impact of working with athletes' parents, as well as helping gymnasts with personal concerns such as relationships with families and educational plans. These coaches, then, not only cared about their gymnasts' athletic development but also their personal development. However, the investigators indicated that because of this study's broad scope a resulting limitation was the depth lacking in coaches' responses (Côté & Salmela, 1996).

Finally, this research has resulted in a model for coaching team sports that considers the coaching process to consist of competition, training, and organizational components that are influenced by three peripheral factors. These factors include the coach's personal characteristics, the athlete's developmental level and personal characteristics, and contextual factors such as parents, job conditions, and assistant coaches (Gilbert & Trudel, 2000).

Several investigators (Gilbert, Gilbert, & Trudel, 2001a, 2001b; McCallister, Blinde, & Weiss, 2000) have conducted studies examining how coaches attempt to develop values and mental skills in young people. In addition to the work of Côté, Salmela, and Russell (1995a, 1995b) with gymnastics coaches, McCallister and her colleagues (2000), for example, interviewed 22 volunteer youth softball and baseball coaches who had no formal training to identify the values and life skills the coaches thought were important as well as the way the coaches felt they taught these skills and values. Results revealed that the coaches recognized the value of teaching a wide range of values and skills to participants. However, they struggled to explain how they did so and were also inconsistent in their explanations. Furthermore, the teaching strategies identified were very general (e.g., punishing, leading by example). The authors concluded that the teaching of these skills was not intentional and it appeared that most of the coaches felt the skills and values were automatically taught through participation. Thus, untrained coaches seemed to have difficulty teaching values and life skills to their players.

Using more experienced and trained youth coaches, Gilbert and colleagues (2001a, b) collected data on 19 male and female competitive youth ice hockey and soccer coaches with an average of almost 9 years of experience. Most relevant to the present investigation were their findings relative to teaching discipline and focus (Gilbert et al., 2001a). Discipline was taught through such strategies as individual meetings, fines, and withholding playing time, while focus was taught via pre-event speeches, pre-event routines, and restructuring the learning environment. While these findings show that more experienced and trained coaches report well-thought out, intentional strategies for influencing athlete behavior and personal characteristics, it was difficult to draw firm conclusions because the results of the study were not reported in great depth in this research-to-practice journal. Moreover, the authors indicated that the report integrated what the coaches told them with a review of the sport science literature.

Similarly, Wright and Côté (2003) examined how leadership was developed through sport, and found that coaches helped shape these leaders by being nice people who were genuinely interested in them, engaging the athletes in mature conversations, providing leader roles and experiences and employing stimulating environments for them. How leadership transferred outside the sport arena was not addressed.

Finally, while not studying coaches per se, physical educators have been evaluating field-based programs designed to develop social-emotional skills such as responsibility in after-school activity programs for underserved youth. In a recent review of many of these studies Hellison and Walsh (2002) concluded that while none of the studies contained sufficient controls to permit generalizations, evidence provided some support for the utility of teaching responsibility (e.g., respect for the rights of others, effort and teamwork, self-direction and goal setting, and leadership) to these youth through means such as awareness talks, group meetings and reflection time. It is important to note, however, that these programs were not typical extracurricular sports. Rather, they were specially designed after-school programs for underserved youth.

The review of the previous studies shows that sport participation can have important influences on athletes' psychosocial development and that the relationship skills of coaches are critical in this regard. The literature also suggests that trained and more experienced coaches seem to have better thought-out strategies for influencing athletes' mental states and personal development, although detailed explanations of these strategies have not been reported. Moreover, strategies coaches use to teach mental skills and foster personal characteristics that may transfer to other aspects of a young person's life have not been explored to any degree. The research on coaching knowledge and expertise development also shows that the coaching process is complex and influenced by a number of interacting contextual factors. Finally, given the increased interest in the youth development and sport psychology fields on designing interventions that enhance life skills in youth, a need exists to better understand how coaches actually go about doing this and their rationale for doing so.

Given the above synopsis, this investigation was designed to explore the process by which competitive high school coaches teach life skills to their athletes. In particular, it examined outstanding high school football coaches' specific methods and strategies used to develop personal characteristics and life skills. For the purposes of this investigation, we defined life skills in accordance with the views of Danish et al. (2002). Specifically, life skills were characterized as mental, emotional, social attributes, characteristics, and behaviors that athletes develop or refine through sport participation that have the potential to transfer beyond the sport venue.

Qualitative interviews were used given the lack of research on how coaches develop life skills in their players, the importance of understanding context in coaching knowledge, an interest in understanding why coaches did or did not employ specific life-skill building strategies, and

because of the opportunity the investigative team had to access outstanding coaches who were recognized for changing players' lives. Qualitative interviews are beneficial for exploring relatively unexamined topics, identifying patterns and themes from the perspective of participants, and for developing an analytic schema of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2003). By interviewing the coaches, we hoped to record their experiences to identify the strategies and processes that they felt enabled them to develop life skills through coaching. We approached this research from what Creswell has called the pragmatic qualitative perspective. This knowledge orientation focuses on finding solutions to particular problems and is not committed to any one epistemological methodology or worldview. Thus, depending on the question, a pragmatist uses multiple strategies and perspectives to understand the observed phenomena. Our goal in this study was not only to tell the stories of these coaches, but, based on their reported experiences, to look for general data patterns with the hope of developing a better understanding of the coaching life skills process.

METHOD

Participants

Ten coaches were interviewed with nine being Caucasian and one Asian American. The coaches were on average 54 years old, ranging from 47 to 68 years of age. Participants averaged 30.8 years of coaching experience, ranging from a low of 22 to a high of 44 years of experience. At the time of the interview, all 10 coaches were currently coaching football and all anticipated coaching in the future with the exception of one who was due to retire at the conclusion of the current season. Three of the 10 coaches indicated that they coached another sport in addition to football.

Based on the demographic information, the majority of the racial makeup of the teams these outstanding coaches were involved with were Caucasian (61.4%), followed by 32.4% African American, 1.7% Asian American, .5% Native American, and 3% listed as other. Additionally, four of the coaches interviewed coached at private, Catholic high schools, while the remaining six coached at public high schools.

These coaches had high levels of both formal and informal training. All 10 coaches were certified teachers and had at least a bachelor's degree, while seven of the 10 coaches indicated they had received a master's degree. Furthermore, 9 of the 10 coaches reported having had formal coaching training. Nine coaches also reported either a degree in Physical Education, Exercise and Sport Science, or Recreation. Moreover, these nine coaches reported having completed college-level coaching classes. Eight of the coaches participated in either a coaching education workshop or seminar, and three coaches indicated they had received some type of coaching certification. On average, the coaches spent 33.95 ($SD = 13.96$) hours a week in season coaching and a total of 601 ($SD = 528.44$) hours coaching in the off-season.

Record of Coaches

Overall, the coaches participating in the study had impressive win/loss records. The coaches had a combined total record of 1,447 wins, 427 losses, and 15 ties (one coach did not provide his record). These numbers accounted for an overall average winning percentage of 76.6%, with a range from 53% to 94%. On average, individual coaches had won 160.78 games, with the range of wins spanning from 30 to 304 wins. Similarly, the mean number of losses was 46.89 games, with the range falling from 6 losses to 89 losses.

Procedures

In-depth phone interviews were conducted with 10 high school football coaches who were finalists for the NFL “Coach of the Year Program.” Applicants for this award are coaches nominated by NFL players who feel that the specific coach had a major influence on their life development. Applicant materials are reviewed (including references and self-statements relative to one’s coaching), and a committee selects five to six finalists, ultimately awarding a single recipient who they feel had the most impact on his players’ lives. Coaches were identified via contacts in the NFL League Community Relations Office and generated from available lists of previous finalists and winners of the Coach of the Year Program. The lists consisted of the winners from 1995–2000. Five of these six coaches participated in the study. The sixth coach had recently retired from coaching and did not participate in the study.

The second source of participants was generated from the award finalists for the year 2000. Due to data availability problems, this was the only list of finalists available. Five of the six finalists for the year 2000 participated in the study. From the select list of finalists, the investigative team chose the participants based on a geographic distribution of finalists. The sixth coach did not consent to participation. Once a coach was identified, he was contacted via phone to receive an explanation of the purpose of the study. Interviewing 10 coaches allowed the investigators to draw conclusions about the coaches as a group, at the same time, richly describing each coach’s unique approach to developing his athletes as people and productive members of society.

After initial explanation and consent, each coach was sent a packet containing a written consent form and a 15-minute Coaches Survey to complete. The survey gathered information relative to standard demographic information as well as beliefs about coaching high school athletes. Once the packet was returned to the investigator, the telephone interview process began. The same investigator conducted all the interviews and contacted each coach via phone to set up an interview.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. All interviews were tape recorded and conducted by an individual who was trained in qualitative research methodology and had a strong knowledge of both the sport psychology and youth development research. She was also a former coach. In preparation for the interview process, the investigator conducted two pilot interviews to ensure the semi-structured interview guide questions were clear and to practice the phone interview technique and become comfortable identifying when to probe for greater detail. Phone interviews provided efficiency in data collection as the geographic and time zone distances between the participants and the researchers were extensive. Interviews were conducted during the off-season of high school football between the months of late November through late March.

Finally, in the general introduction to the interviews, participants were assured complete confidentiality and anonymity of their remarks. It was emphasized that they should feel free to voice both their positive and negative opinions. They were also informed that there were no right or wrong responses, and if they felt uncomfortable answering any question, they could simply state, “no comment.”

Instruments

Coaches Survey

This 15-minute survey included background information, coaching experience and development, racial make-up of the team, as well as coaches’ beliefs about winning, fun, and development relative to participation in football.

In-Depth Interviews

A semi-structured interview guide was used to conduct the interviews (see Appendix). This strategy ensured that the 10 coaches were asked a common set of core questions and that the most critical topics for the study were discussed in sufficient detail. However, in an effort to completely understand the process of coaching life skills, the interviewer was free to use “probes” to gather a more detailed, richer description of a response. The major questions in the interview guide were developed from a combination of factors. First, previous coaching education literature that highlighted philosophy, objectives, and coaching style (Martens, 2004) was incorporated into the interview questions. Additionally, based on the work of Martinek and Hellison (1997), factors relative to life-skill development were included. Finally, based on previous work in coaching education curriculum development as well as tacit knowledge of the coaching field, questions highlighting potential roadblocks and problems were also included. To clarify for the participants, life skills were defined as those mental, emotional, and social attributes, characteristics, and behaviors that athletes develop or refine through their football participation. The major components of the coach interview included information relative to the following concepts: coach background and demographic coaching philosophy; coaching style; goals for life-skill development; player characteristics; reactions to several life-skill coaching scenarios; greatest player life-skill accomplishments and disappointments; most frequent life-skills issues facing today’s players; life-skill coaching strategies; roadblocks; success rate; and advice and recommendations. This manuscript focuses primarily on the responses to goals for life-skill development and life-skills coaching strategies.

Data Analysis

Illustrated by the seminal work of Scanlan, Ravizza, and Stein (1989), qualitative research using a hierarchical content analytic approach has been critical to the development of knowledge in sport psychology research. The first author’s own experiences conducting a number of hierarchical content analyses, however, have lead him to feel that this approach needs to be expanded to better capture the “holistic” story of the participants. For these reasons, a two-step analytic procedure was used in this investigation. Step 1 involved developing individual case profiles and individual themes for each participant. Step 2 involved studying each profile, interview transcript, and identified themes to classify patterns across all 10 participants. Each of these steps is described below.

Step 1: Coach Profiles and Individual Coach Theme Identification

All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. After each investigator thoroughly read each transcript, an individual case profile was created for each coach and discussed extensively. This step in the data analysis not only aided in the development of a holistic view of the coach, but was a critical step in establishing trustworthiness in the analysis process. Before a profile was approved, all four members of the research team had to agree upon the contents. This profile told each coach’s story and summarized his thoughts and experiences relative to teaching life skills. After the investigation team agreed on the content and tone of each profile, each transcript was then content analyzed by four investigators, following procedures recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) and successfully employed in previous qualitative studies (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999; Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993a, 1993b). Specifically, each investigator studied the interview tapes and reread the transcripts. Raw data themes (i.e., quotes or paraphrased quotes representing a meaningful point or thought) were individually identified and consensually validated in group meetings with the four investigators.

Step 2: Identification of Patterns Across Coaches

A key goal of the data analysis was to identify and describe patterns within and across participants in an effort to enhance the “meaning” and understanding of the phenomena (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Thus, after reviewing and studying the profile, original transcripts, and individual themes for each participant, the four members of the investigative team met, discussed the 10 interviews in depth, and reached consensus relative to summary labels for organizing responses to specific questions. Similar to the process with the coach profiles, this step also aided in the development of trustworthiness of the data: as it was critical that the research team discuss and reflect on any self-bias each of the investigators brought to the data (Creswell, 2003) and then reach consensus after discussing different perspectives on a particular topic. Similarly, by analyzing such a large amount of data we found that this strategy ensured themes were not missed. Across coaches, the data were organized into general categories and sub-categories, and patterns across participants were identified. The process began with raw data themes. The investigative team consensually agreed on the grouping of raw themes into lower-order categories. Once lower-order categories were established, the group then individually merged lower-order categories (themes) into higher-order themes. The group met and came to consensus on the development of these higher-order themes. Once higher-order themes were agreed upon, the research group merged higher-order themes to develop broad-based general dimensions that reflected all levels of data.

Throughout the data analysis process the research team aimed to keep prominent the holistic view of the coaches while still maintaining the uniqueness each participant brought to the study. Based on the recommendations of Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Patton (1990), trustworthiness of the data was enhanced by always going back to its thick description and studying those data sources extensively and through the multiple person consensual validation procedure for theme identification and grouping.

RESULTS

When asked during the interview for specific strategies to implement life skills, there were 211 raw data responses. These responses coalesced into 66 raw data categories converging into 18 lower-order themes and four higher-order themes. Finally, content analysis revealed two general dimensions relative to strategies for implementing life skills. Table 1 depicts the two general dimensions, and both higher- and lower-order themes. These themes reflect responses to the question regarding strategies coaches used to develop life skills in their players. However, at times, some pertinent responses pertaining to life skills were extracted from answers to other questions (i.e., reactions to several life-skill scenarios, goals for life-skill development).

Effective Coaching Strategies

Working with Players

The first of these two dimensions, effective coaching strategies, consisted of two higher-order themes, *working with players* and *dealing with others*. Working with players was further divided into relations, standards/accountability, and other.

Relations. The sub-theme of relations combined the two lower-order themes of caring and treating respectfully and communication. As one coach indicated:

... we try to treat the players like young adults and they want to be treated as young adults. They want to feel like they are part owners of the program and we try to make them feel that way.

Table 1
Coaching Strategies for Implementing Player Life Skills

<p>Effective Coaching Strategies</p> <p>Working with Players</p> <p><i>Relations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Care/treat respectfully</i> (e.g., treat players like young adults) - <i>Communication</i> (e.g., communicate with care and tact) <p><i>Standards/Accountability</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Expectations/rules/accountability</i> (e.g., clear expectations) - <i>Rules infractions</i> (e.g., hold accountable/penalize) <p><i>Other</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Flexibility</i> (e.g., work around summer schedules) - <i>Individualized</i> (e.g., individualize feedback) - <i>Fun/humor</i> (e.g., make it fun) - <i>Coach as a role model</i> (e.g., serve as a role model) - <i>Information dissemination</i> (e.g., send out logistical information) <p>Dealing with Others</p> <p><i>Dealing with Officials</i> (e.g., questions officials in diplomatic manner)</p> <p><i>Effectively Using Assistant Coaches</i> (e.g., listen to younger coaches)</p> <p><i>Dealing with Parents</i> (e.g., involve parents)</p> <p>Player Development Strategies</p> <p>Performance Enhancement Strategies</p> <p><i>Motivation</i> (e.g., use mottoes/analogy)</p> <p><i>Set and Achieve Goals</i> (e.g., remind of goals)</p> <p><i>Team Building</i> (e.g., hold team outings/group activities)</p> <p>Teaching Life Skills</p> <p><i>Academic Enhancement</i> (e.g., Emphasize/reinforce importance of academic progress)</p> <p><i>Life Skills Development Transfer</i> (e.g., Use model/mentor to teach about life skill transfer)</p> <p><i>Teaching Positive Skills and Values</i> (e.g., Talk to players about being disciplined)</p>

The same coach also addressed this issue by saying,

... we try real hard in that respect and show them that we care and we do that through conversation and through team meetings.

Several raw data categories were included in the treating respectfully lower-order theme including humanely cutting players, treating players like young adults, treating players like family, and acting like guardians to the players. Content analysis revealed the second lower-order theme, communication, was comprised of the raw data categories of communicating with care and tact, encouraging open communication, positive communication, reprimand players while protecting their self-worth, and other, which was comprised of responses such as “be consistent when you deal with kids and use language they can understand.” Most interesting was the notion of reprimanding players while protecting their self-worth, which was reflected in the comments of the following coach:

We yell and scream at our kids and I instruct my coaches that if they get on a kid on the field and they are walking into the locker room to make sure you sit and talk or walk and talk with him so they know. They need to know the difference in being in the locker room and what we are trying to accomplish on the field and show them that you are human. ... My coaches get on our kids, we need that intensity, we yell at them but I don't think the kids should be belittled.

Additional raw-data responses in the other raw-data category were: “using words they do not understand” to emphasize the need to go to college; occasionally screaming to get attention; maintaining contact in the off-season; and implementing frequent short meetings/coaching on the run as strategies to develop life skills.

Standards/accountability. The second sub-theme within the higher-order theme of *working with players* was standards/accountability, consisting of three lower-order themes: expectations/rules/accountability, rules infractions, and flexibility. Content analysis revealed five raw data categories combined to form this lower-order theme of expectations/rules/accountability. These categories included clear expectations, discussing rules and expectations, emphasizing players as representatives of school and community, and an “other” raw data category. The “other” category consisted of expecting a lot from players relative to grades, attitudes, and school involvement. Coaches discussed the idea of conveying clear expectations in the following manner:

We’ve got standards. We set the expectations and make them clear from the very beginning and treat everybody the same. So they know there are definitely going to be consequences for being late to practice, missing practices and they’re clear cut and they are going to be applied the same.

The second lower-order theme in standards/accountability was rules infractions. These strategies included several raw-data categories such as: discuss and determine why there are rules infractions; establish a cool-down period and emotional control; hold players accountable and penalize; warn players of rules infractions. An additional “other” raw-data category was comprised of such statements as: monitor player behavior off-field and allow the team to decide if a player is back on the team after a suspension for rule violation. Additional raw data categories in this “other” raw data category were: putting players back in the game to prove they can follow directions; supporting players with mistakes instead of having them incur the coach’s wrath; assigning a coach to call players about rule infractions and find out how they can help the player; monitor player behavior off-field; support rules and administration; and step in and resolve conflicts relative to team rules.

Other. The third sub-theme under the higher-order theme of *working with players* was “other.” This category consisted of five lower-order themes. The first, flexibility, was comprised of working with players’ situations and another category was comprised of responses such as work around summer schedules. The second, individualized, was made up of the raw data categories of individualized feedback, meeting with athletes individually, and individualized punishment as reflected in the following remarks:

[Punishment] depends on what they are doing that determines how long they are out of the game. If a student is totally out of line I sit them out for a series. I tell them if they do it again they are coming out for good.

Similarly, another coach indicated:

I would pull them out and talk to him a little bit on the sideline. Let him know I disapprove of it and set him out to calm down. Once he came back and wanted to talk to me he may be able to go back into the ball game. However, that depends on the time period and how well things were going with him personally.

The third lower-order theme, fun/humor, consisted of making football fun and an “other” raw data category consisting of responses such as using humor to prevent teaching out of fear. The

fourth, coach is a role model, was made up of the same raw data category. Finally, the fifth lower-order theme, information dissemination, had four raw data categories: hold meetings, provide motivational information, send out logistical information, and another category comprised of such responses as post practice plans and maintain contact in the off-season as specific strategies used to enhance player life skill development.

Dealing with Others

The second higher-order theme in the general dimension of effective coaching strategies was *dealing with others* (see Table 1). Content analysis resulted in three lower-order themes coalescing to create the higher-order theme. These lower-order themes included dealing with officials, effectively using assistant coaches, and dealing with parents.

Dealing with officials. Two raw data categories were contained in dealing with officials: prohibiting players from talking back to officials and questioning officials in a diplomatic manner. For example, one coach stated relative to not talking back to the officials: "Their role is to be a player and they are not to be the official." Further, the same coach continued to address questioning the officials as the coach's job when he stated: "If there is a problem that they feel something is wrong or unfair they are to talk to the coaches and the coaches will talk to the officials."

Effectively using assistant coaches. Effectively using assistant coaches was comprised of two raw data categories as well; giving assistant coaches responsibility and listen to younger coaches. Coaches explained that younger coaches on the staff play an important role in the program because they have just finished their playing experience and can more readily relate to the athletes on the team. Therefore, it is important to listen to their input and feedback. For instance, as Coach 1 explained: "The younger guys—I have to listen to them because they are the ones who just got through playing football in college and we are together on things that we do." A second coach described how it is important to give assistant coaches responsibility. The sentiment is described when he stated: "Then I give the rest of the coaches enough responsibilities so that they feel that they are contributing to the overall success of our team."

Dealing with parents. Finally, four raw data categories coalesced to form the lower-order theme of dealing with parents. Content analysis in these raw data categories in this theme resulted in specific strategies for developing life skills in players: conflict resolution/prevention, inform/communicate via meetings and discussions, involve parents, and support/empathize with parents. Relative to involving parents, one coach commented, "We have a parents' night and we have a parents' meeting at the beginning of the season and I communicate with them through letters or by phone."

Player Development Strategies

Performance Enhancement Strategies

In the second general dimension, player development strategies, two higher-order themes emerged (see Table 1). The first, *performance enhancement strategies*, consisted of three lower-order themes: motivation, set and achieve goals, and team building. The responses making up this higher-order theme reflected the coaches' belief that teaching athletes ways to enhance football performance teaches skills that can be used in other life settings.

Motivation. Four raw data categories comprised motivation. These included using mottoes and analogies, emphasizing to players they play for others, rewarding effort and attitude, and an “other” category consisting of responses related to creating appropriate intensity and anxiety. Coaches in this investigation used a number of strategies to enhance motivation (e.g. coaches used mottoes or slogans to emphasize important points). For instance, one coach described this process.

... I don't think mottoes like winning a state championship are good. I think you have to have a motto that everyone can do. In other words, what happens when you don't win the state championship? For instance, last year our motto was “attitude is everything.” So everyone can improve on their attitude and we really dwelled on that.

Other coaches addressed motivation through playing for others such as your school and family. One coach remarked,

For example, I always talk to the players about their families coming out to watch them play, and that one of top priorities in their life should be making their families proud of them.

Another coach similarly addressed this point in stating,

We try to tell them they don't need to play for us, play for your family. We talk about the family needs. Play because your family is here. Your parents are here. They came to the game to see you; play hard, play hard for your school.

Set and achieve goals. The second lower-order theme, set and achieve goals, was made up of categories such as remind players of goals (e.g., review goals before and after each practice), help set goals (e.g., set realistic and dream goals), and teach players how to set goals and achieve goals. Relative to setting and achieving goals, the coaches in this study consistently addressed this issue. For instance, a coach stated “We have our goals laid out. They know what our goals are. We talk about those goals before we go out.” Further, a different coach addressed goal setting in this manner: “We go into the season with each team setting goals. Some of the goals are realistic, while others are set upon a pedestal to try to obtain.”

Team building. Team building, the third lower-order theme, consisted of the following raw data categories: empower athletes, hold team meetings/group outings, emphasize roles and role acceptance, and an “other” raw data category. The “other” raw data category consisted of such responses as keep them involved for a sense of belonging and talk about what it takes to be a good team as specific strategies for enhancing life skill development. A coach addressed emphasizing roles and role acceptance through team building in the following excerpt relating to team dinners where each player was responsible for a certain portion of the dinner:

We try to do things with our guys that are non-football related and but still bring us together as a team. We have a dinner every week where we meet and a group of parents will cook. The kids will be responsible for a certain portion of it. There is an understanding of ‘I have got to rely on other teammates to do their part for the dinner to be successful so that we can have another one next week.’

Teaching Life Skills

The second higher-order theme in the general dimension of player development strategies was *teaching life skills*. This higher-order theme was comprised of three lower-order themes

determined through hierarchical content analysis. The lower-order themes consisted of academic enhancement, life skills development transfer, and teaching positive skills and values.

Academic enhancement. The following four raw data categories emerged: communicate/work with teachers, emphasize and reinforce the importance of academic success, monitor academic progress, and an “other” category comprised of such responses as encouraging kids to get involved in other school activities. These four categories combined to form the lower-order theme academic enhancement.

Life skills development transfer. The second lower-order theme, life skills development transfer, consisted of the raw data categories of discussing and talking about life issues and problems, discussing priorities, emphasizing the link between football and life (e.g., how what is learned in football about goal-setting or motivation transfers off the field), using models and mentors to teach about life skills transfer, and an other category that consisted of responses emphasizing commitment as a key life skill in developing and maintaining relationships. Relative to emphasizing the link between football and life one coach said: “We talk a lot about how it’s not just something you want to learn to do on the football team but it’s a way to lead your life.” Similarly, another coach remarked:

We always talk to them about how football relates to their life. For example, I always talk to the players about their families coming out to watch them play, and that one of the top priorities in their life should be making their families proud of them. Whatever they do in life, that should carry over off the field too.

Teaching positive skills and values. Teaching positive skills and values was the third lower-order theme in the higher-order theme of *teaching life skills*. This lower-order theme consisted of several raw data categories of specific strategies for enhancing life skill development: appealing to players’ sense of morality, teaching them to ignore “trash talking” or taunting, talking to players about taking advantage of the talent they have, talking to players about being disciplined, avoiding the word “win” and stressing the word “achieve,” using a positive approach to teach players how to motivate each other, teaching the winning attitude, emphasizing that players are a positive role model, and talking about the belief in school and coaches.

In sum, coaches provided 211 raw data responses when asked to describe specific strategies used to help develop life skills in their players. These responses coalesced into two general dimensions of effective coaching strategies and player development strategies. Each general dimension consisted of two higher-order themes and several lower-order themes and raw data categories.

DISCUSSION

It has been our experience, that when asked, most coaches will indicate that participating in competitive sport builds desirable personal qualities in their players. However, these same coaches are often hard-pressed to specifically describe how this process takes place. In fact, this observation was verified by McCallister and her colleagues (2000) in their study of youth sports coaches when they found that coaches could not effectively identify what they did to build life skills in their players.

However, in the present study of highly experienced and award-winning coaches, the above was not the case. Rather, as has been the case in other studies (Côté et al., 1995b; Gilbert

& Trudel, 2001b), these more experienced coaches had better thought-out and much more articulated strategies for working with athletes. The coaches participating in this study identified a specific number of strategies and techniques for developing life skills in their players. For example, general coaching strategies for developing player life skills included such categories as treating players respectfully, using various motivational techniques, and team building. In addition to these generic strategies were specific activities such as providing alternatives when cutting players or organizing a team unity night each week.

Interestingly, some of these strategies parallel the practical implications emanating from sport psychology life skills and moral development research (Gilbert et al., 2001a; Shields & Bredemeier, 2001). That is, to effectively facilitate life skills and/or moral development in athletes, behaviors need to be clearly defined, repeatedly communicated, reinforced when emitted, reprimanded when inappropriate actions take place, discussed, and tied to guiding rationales. Similarly, the coaches in this study talked about setting long- and short-term goals and helping athletes develop strategies to achieve their goals, which are principles consistent with what sport psychology researchers are finding about goal setting in sport (Burton, Naylor, & Holliday, 2002).

At the same time, many life-skills development strategies were not specifically identified as such. Rather, it was through the process of participation and striving for excellence on the football field that these coaches emphasized such skills and values as discipline, work ethic, and emotional control. The coaches felt that these skills and values would not only facilitate play in football, but could be transferred to other life situations. Thus, the coaches spent a great deal of time emphasizing these same skills in off-field activities as exemplified in the following quote:

We sit down and have an hour to two-hour meeting and discuss some of the things we should accomplish this year. We discuss not just wins or losses, but some of the things each player should expect from themselves. We discuss what we should expect from them as far as grades, attitudes, participating in other school activities and general demeanor in the classroom, hallways, etc.

A key to developing both life and performance skills for these coaches was the ability to build relationships with their players. They did this through their strong communication skills and by treating their athletes as young adults. Interestingly, in their study of developing leadership in athletes, Wright and Côté (2003) found that holding mature conversations with athletes was an important contributor to leadership development. The coaches in the present study were found to also use all four of the interaction styles (support behaviors, giving lessons, providing instruction, and feeling) Côté and his colleagues (Côté et al., 1995a, 1995b; Côté & Salmela, 1996) identified in their research with coaches.

Establishing trust and on-going coach-player communication were seen as critical in regard to establishing strong coach-player relationships. While previous research (Smoll & Smith, 2002) has established how on-the-field coaching behaviors influence coach-athlete relationships and liking of the coach, few studies have discussed this topic in-depth. However, a recent series of studies by Jowett and her colleagues (Jowett, 2003; Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004; Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005) has begun to shed light on the nature of the coach-athlete relationship. In particular, this research has shown that three sets of factors (the 3 Cs model) are critically involved in the coach-athlete relationship: (a) closeness or the degree of mutual trust and respect; (b) commitment or attempts to maintain the relationship and maximize effectiveness; and (c) complementarity or the interpersonal behaviors of reciprocity and affiliation between coaches and athletes. Our results are in line with this model as all three components were evident in the

coaches' responses. Moreover, the coaches realized that player parents had a critical influence on the relationships that they had with their athletes and took steps to involve and inform parents, a finding that parallels recent results from Jowett and Timson-Katchis (2005).

Relative to interaction and relationship styles the concept some of the coaches identified of reprimanding players while protecting self-worth is very interesting. These coaches indicated that at times they were hard and reprimanded players on the field, but made sure players never left the football experience not knowing that their coaches cared about them as a people. Thus, when these coaches "got on" players they also conveyed to the players that they were attacking their performance or behavior and not their personalities. The youth sports coaching literature (Smoll & Smith, 2002) has not examined such a strategy, although it is worthy of further attention because it is somewhat inconsistent with the positive approach guidelines so often emphasized. Determining the efficacy of such an approach (especially with high school aged players) and how it relates to the empirically validated positive approach to coaching would be most useful. Future investigators may also want to examine this strategy in light of legendary basketball coach John Wooden's "scold reinstruct" approach to instructing players (Tharp & Gallimore, 1976).

While consistent in reinforcing players, these coaches reported how they individualized the process, in that some players received different reprimands than others. Past player behavior, the player's current emotional state, and other contextual factors were used in this process of individualizing the reinforcement process. Coaches' abilities to recognize individual differences in players have been noted elsewhere in the psychology of coaching literature (Côté & Sedgwick, 2003; Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005). However, much more needs to be known about how coaches individualize and utilize flexibility in reinforcement and motivation, with further attention paid to how to do so without being seen by players as unfair and/or inconsistent.

One of the more important strategies identified by these coaches included maintaining high expectations and performance standards and holding athletes accountable to these standards. Interestingly, in a study of high school coaches (Gould, Chung, Smith, & White, 2006) from a number of different boys and girls varsity sports, coaches reported that helping athletes take more responsibility and being more accountable for their actions was one of the largest problems facing contemporary coaches. Similarly, youth development leaders (International Youth Foundation—US, 2000) have emphasized the importance of holding high expectations for those involved in youth development. Hence, one of the reasons these coaches were successful was their ability to implement and follow-through on this strategy.

These coaches were well aware of both the positives and negatives of parental influence and did whatever possible to create a productive parental context for their programs. Researchers have shown that there are strong relationships between parental attitude and behaviors, and players' pro-social behaviors (Brustad, 1996), players' motives for participation (McCullagh, Matzkanin, Shaw, & Maldonado, 1993), and players' goal orientations (White, 1996). In an effort to engineer parental resources, coaches in this study actively communicated with parents (e.g., sent out letters regarding upcoming events) and encouraged parents to engage in football-related activities (e.g., asking them to prepare meals for team meetings, asking for input on team rules during pre-season orientation meetings).

Lastly, what was especially impressive with these coaches was the consistency with which they implemented these strategies. Looking across all coaches, it was clear that the players knew what was expected of them and that they would be held accountable for meeting those expectations. Coaches were very consistent in emphasizing key life-skills development strategies. The strategies were not things said once at the start of the season but were messages consistently reinforced throughout the season.

Not only do the findings of this study shed light on what football coaches can do to facilitate the personal development of their players, but they add to the emerging body of knowledge on positive youth development through sport. It is well-documented in the literature that positive youth development is not a product of short-term interventions. It requires a dedicated long-term commitment along with a genuine interest in the individual (Martinek & Hellison, 1997). Usually, positive outcomes in any sport evolve from quality relationships between participants and staff (Petitpas, 2002). The tremendous emphasis that the award-winning coaches interviewed in this study placed on quality relationships, then, is consistent with this literature.

The importance of being a team was another critical finding in this investigation. Coaches reinforced their players for being positive and supportive to each other as well as organized regular meetings to emphasize team unity (e.g., Unity Nights). These coaches understood crucial components needed to foster team unity and used many of the strategies recommended by group development researchers (Carron & Hausenblas, 1990).

Finally, over the past 30 years, Hellison (1978, 1983, 1985, 1995) has been working with underserved adolescents and subsequently has developed a model for teaching self-responsibility. Specifically, Hellison's general strategies for developing children's self- and social responsibility include: (a) teacher talk; (b) modeling; (c) reinforcement; (d) reflection time; and (e) student sharing. These strategies are strikingly similar to what we found from these outstanding coaches. During the analysis of specific life developing strategies, we discovered that all coaches used strategies that paralleled Hellison's general ways of enhancing athletes' life skills. For example, coaches constantly talked to their players before and after their practices as well as on game days, consciously modeled behaviors in the presence of their players, reinforced their high and clear expectations, allowed time for players to reflect on their on-field behaviors, and encouraged open communication with players.

These findings are also consistent with recent research conducted with adolescents (Steen et al., 2003; Zimmerman et al., 2002) that shows extracurricular activities are seen as a fruitful training ground for self-development. More importantly, our results begin to identify the process coaches as mentors use to foster positive psychological development in youth—a void Dworkin et al. (2003) identified in the previous literature.

Future Directions

This study examined strategies outstanding high school football coaches used to develop life skills in their players. While the sample was specific to football players and coaches, the key strategies may be generalized, with caution, to general situations in coaching, particularly those sports similar in context to football. It is important to note that the purposefully selected sample of only 10 coaches limits the possibility of making generalizations for all sports and levels of coaching. The coaches in this sample were successful not only in developing life skills, but consistently had winning records. Therefore, a larger, more varied sample, including coaches who are successful in player development yet do not consistently win needs to be examined to tease out the influence of a program with a winning record. This is especially important in light of Bloom, Schinke, and Salmela's (1997) research that shows coaches employ different strategies at different phases of their coaching careers. Additionally, similar research needs to be done paying specific attention to coaches of girls and women, to determine if the same strategies (e.g., tough love) are perceived to be effective across gender and situation, especially in light of Pratt's and Eitzen's (1989) finding that male and female coaches, while fairly similar in many ways relative to their coaching philosophies, also significantly differ in certain dimensions. Identifying potential differences in gender and context is an important future step. The present study had coaches working a variety of contextual environments (e.g.

public vs. private school, racial diversity, urban vs. rural demographics). Closely examining the impact of social context on the life-skill development process is critical.

Related to social context is the transferability of life skills. While these coaches consistently emphasized to their players the need to take what they learned through football and apply it to non-football situations in their lives, this does not mean this transfer actually occurred. For example, Martinek, Schilling, and Johnson (2001) conducted one of the few studies to test this issue. In evaluating an after-school sports club and mentoring program for underserved youth, Project Effort, these investigators used teacher and mentor logs and student exit interviews to determine if participants learned personal and social responsibility and then transferred these skills to academic classroom settings. Their results revealed that participants were able to apply the goal of “effort to learn” to their non-sport classroom settings. However, the students struggled to transfer goal-setting skills learned in the club to the classroom setting. This suggests that transferring mental skills learned in sport to non-sport settings may be much more complicated than often assumed and deserves further study.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this article we referenced Coleman Griffith (1926), who when setting out the functions of the field of sport psychology more than 75 years ago emphasized the importance of observing highly experienced and competent coaches, recording the psychological principles they use, and disseminating these principles to less experienced coaches. Given the current emphasis on developing life skills in youth sports and recent findings that show that inexperienced coaches say they develop values and life skills but cannot explain the strategies they use for doing so, studying coaches like those interviewed in this study adds to the emerging knowledge base on life-skills and personal development coaching strategies. It also provides valuable context information that can help intervention developers to design realistic programs grounded in the practical realities of youth sports.

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APPENDIX. COACH INTERVIEW GUIDE

Coach Background and Demographic Information

- How long have you been coaching?
- When did you start coaching?
- Why?
- What is your overall win-loss record? What is your record at the school you are currently coaching?
- Who influenced you to become a coach? What characteristics did he possess to make you want to coach?
- Do you have other roles in the school besides coaching? (athletic director, teaching, PE, etc)

Team demographic information

- What is the typical make up of the team? (number of seniors, jrs, etc)
- How big is your high school? (number of students)
- What is the racial/ ethnic make up of the team?
- Is that consistent with the make up of the school?
- Are the teams that you compete against generally similar in size and diversity?

Coaching Philosophy

Philosophy is often viewed as the building block to successful coaching.

- How would you describe your philosophy of coaching high school sports?
- Has your philosophy changed over time?
- How would you describe your philosophy relative to the emphasis you place on winning, fun, and development objectives?
- Do you find conflicts between winning, fun, and development?
- How are the conflicts between winning, fun and development objectives resolved?

Coaching Style Employed

Successful Coaches have many different styles. Some are calm and laid back. Others “get in your face.” Still others are strict disciplinarians.

- How would you describe your style of coaching?
- Can you give examples?
- Why do you employ this style of coaching?
- What type of climate or environment do you create for your players? (psychological, emotional, social)
- Do your assistant coaches have the same philosophy? Is it important to you to have your assistant coaches with the same philosophy?
- How do you typically react to misbehavior, bad calls, close games, win/loss?

Goals for Character and Life Skill Development

Life skills are those mental, emotional, and social attributes, characteristics, and behaviors that athletes develop or refine through their football participation.

- What specific life skills do you focus on developing in your players?
- Others?
- How do your players develop these?
- What factors influence their development?
- What strategies do you use to develop these life skills or attributes?

Player Characteristics:

High school football players today face many different challenges-both on and off the field. Racial diversity, academic issues, school violence, and substance abuse are all examples of problems facing high school students today.

- What are some of the major issues that you face with your players today?
- Do you have specific strategies for dealing with such issues?
- What type of guidance do you give players on current peer pressures like violence, drugs etc?

Reactions to Several Life Skill Coaching Scenarios

The following are some examples of situations that have happened with some high school football programs. Think about each situation and how you would react as the coach of that team.

- INSERT SCENARIOS
- Academic: A player is struggling with a math course and needs to improve grades to be eligible.
- College: Playing football could be the means to graduating high school and moving on to college.
- Emotional control: A player loses control on the field.
- Teamwork: Working with teammates to develop sportsmanship.
- Choices: A player starts hanging around with the “wrong crowd.”

Overall evaluation of player life skill success

- What roadblocks do you face in developing life skills in players today?
- What is your success rate (batting average) relative to helping players develop as people?
- Can you give an example of both a successful and an unsuccessful situation in helping a player develop life skills?

- Thinking back to the players that have graduated from your program, what similar characteristics to they have?
- How do you describe your personal reward for the hours you have spent coaching over the years?
- What advice would you give to other coaches relative to enhancing player character and personal development?

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