

Case Study: The USA Paralympic Volleyball Coaching Internship Course

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A group of American University Graduate Students participated in a one week internship at the USA Paralympic Volleyball training center in Oklahoma, USA. A primary goal of the internship was to increase the motivation of the students in the program towards their own coaching endeavors as they examined and reflected upon their core values in coaching. The student coaches in the study (n=9) were exposed to Coaching by Master Coaches from the USA Paralympic Volleyball team. These master coaches were skilled in an Athlete Centred Coaching Style that manifested the core values of: 1) an exemplary work ethic, 2) player empowerment, and 3) a prioritization of team cohesion. Upon the completion of the internship, data analysis revealed that there was a significant difference on scores for the student coaches on the Sport Motivation Scale II, a reliable and valid instrument designed to measure sport motivation. This increase in coach motivation occurred in large part as a result of the students' exposure and interaction with the Paralympic Master Coaches and the USA Paralympic Volleyball teams.

Background

In the area of Sport Coaching, one of the major discrepancies that exists is the life of the Coach is the disconnect between the coaches' core values that they profess on paper, and the actual coaching values that are expressed in reality. This disconnect between professed and perceived core values can be damaging to athletes. In each of the following cases, research has shown a decrease in team and coach motivation when the coaches' words do not match up with their actions. For example, a coach who professes the core value of developing cohesiveness but whose coaching practices more often alienates players, or a coach who professes that he is an empowering person and instead suffocates autonomy, or a coach who claims "work ethic" as a core value but gives the impression that he is unprepared or lazy, is a coach who will confuse his athletes and undermine the motivational climate in which the team plays its sport. What beginning coaches need, among other things, are role models in coaching who demonstrate a strong connection between professed core values and core values in practice. Specifically, coaching core values that incorporate specific psychological and physiological needs of the athlete create a synergy between player and coach that gives the beginning coach

confidence that he or she is on the right track. Coaches who learn of this synergy early in their career are on a path towards a fulfilling and fruitful coaching career. Therefore, it is important for coaching education programs to incorporate as early as possible internship opportunities where coaches can see best practices in coaching in action. These best practices include establishing a healthy motivational climate in which the athletes can learn and grow.

Research in self-determination theory (Deci, p.121) has shown that a healthy motivational climate exists when the individuals within the group have needs that are being met in three distinct categories. These needs consist of the need for competence (improvement in skills), autonomy (participation in the decision making process), and cohesion (feeling that you are an important part of the team). In such a climate, participants (athletes) will score high in sport motivation and will be intrinsically motivated to participate in their sport. The adage success breeds success comes into play when reflecting upon the fact that it is much easier for a coach to remain highly motivated when his or her players are highly motivated.

For a coach to foster growth in competence, autonomy, and cohesion for each athlete on his team requires a great deal of experience and coaching skill. For our coaching students, the goal was to expose them to a coaching environment where a coach who does foster growth in three key areas mentioned above could be observed and learned from. The coaching cadre for this internship was chosen based on these criteria. The head coach for the USA Paralympic team has over 30 years of coaching experience and is known for his ability to teach the importance of incorporating core values into his team's preparation for international competition at the highest level. The uniqueness of the USA Paralympic Volleyball Team motivational environment and the coaching staffs' willingness to allow us to attend their practices for a weeklong period, was an ideal venue for coaches of able-bodied athletes to learn from a master and the athletes in his program. A second factor that helped us in the selection of the USA Volleyball Paralympic site as the ideal internship environment was that the athletes from the National Paralympic team would also serve as a motivating influence to our coaches as they observed these athletes gaining competence in skills, leading each other, and in spite of whatever adversity, playing together with a unified purpose.

Methods

The participants in the study were a convenience sample. The participants were students in an existing internship course offered at a regional state university in the Southern USA. The participants were given the Sport Motivation Scale II (SMS II) at the beginning of their internship, and then, after a one-week internship with the USA Volleyball Paralympic coaches, the SMS II was readministered to the participants. The research hypothesis for this study was that the student coaches' exposure to the USA Paralympic Volleyball Team master coaches would create an increase in coach motivation as measured by the Sport Motivation Scale II for Coaches. The student coach's motivation would be measured by a pretest/posttest of the Student Coaches (N=9) on the SMS II. The SMS II measures the level of intrinsic motivation and positive extrinsic motivational factors that a coach might have towards their participation in their sport. The SMS II also measures the amount of amotivation a coach would have. Amotivation would lead to coach burnout and dysfunction within the coaches' team that he or she is working with. The higher the student coaches scores on the SMS II, the greater the likelihood for coaching success. One additional benefit to the SMS II is that a low score on the SMS II can be elevated over time as interventions can be implemented to help increase the coaches' motivation for coaching.

In order to facilitate student/coach engagement, the student coaches', as part of their curriculum during the internship, were given data that was presented as evidence of the master coaches ability to meet each of the core values being studied. For the core value of exemplary work ethic, the student coaches were asked to read about the USA Paralympic Teams Master Coaches research on Volleyball Skills Training. For the Paralympic athletes, the particular skill the master coach had focused upon was the volleyball skill of serve receive passing. It was pointed out to the student coaches that the Paralympic Team head coach had done extensive research on the game of volleyball and concluded that this particular skill (serve receive passing) was of primary importance to winning points (more so than hitting, setting, serving, or digging). A BYU study, highlighted by the coach, clearly showed the serve receive passing skill was paramount to successful point scoring (Miskin, p.11). By exposing the student coaches to this emphasis by the master coaches in practice, the students learned about one key characteristic of an exemplary work ethic. That being, to be a student of your sport, be aware of research going on in your sport, and implement these findings in your practices by (in this case) allocating more time to that particular skill. Based on a study that showed that at NCAA Division 1 competitions and at International Paralympic Competition that the Serve Receive

Pass was a skill highly correlated with Point Scoring (Mann, p.5), the student coaches were given an enhanced focus on this part of practice during the one week intensive time of observation at the training center. In summary, the background research conducted by the coach gave evidence of an exemplary work ethic and how such a work ethic translated to practice sessions where time was well spent on critical tasks.

The student coaches were also asked to make qualitative observations of the sense of competence that was demonstrated by the athletes during their practices by keeping a daily journal of the game like drills and skill focused drills that were conducted with the players each day. They were also given access to conduct personal interviews with members of the Paralympic team during breaks, and after the practice sessions. The Head Coach also spoke to the group at length about his coaching strategies and coaching philosophy. For the core value of player empowerment as it relates to the players' sense of autonomy, the student coaches were asked to observe different leadership roles within the team. The students were asked to observe with their daily journals if players felt comfortable leading different aspects of practice. This included everything from warming up to drills to game like activities, to actual scrimmage situations. Students recorded these observations in their daily internship journals. For the core value of developing cohesion, student coaches were asked to observe how the team approached social and task cohesion situations. This was unique because the USA men's and the women's Paralympic teams both worked out together, creating some unusual but also enlightening interactions from a cohesion perspective. Students recorded these observations in their daily internship journals as well.

Results

The quantitative data collected were the results of the pretest and posttest scores on the SMS II by the student coaches who participated in the student coaching internship at the USA Paralympic Volleyball Training Centre in Oklahoma, USA. The average (mean) improvement on the SMS II for the coaches (n=9) in the class was a 13.56 point improvement from pre to post test on a 100 point scale. The T-Score was 3.38 with a P score of .0048, making the improvement in the SMS Score for the participants statistically significant.

Student Reflections on their Observations of the Master Paralympic Coaches:

Below are key statements extrapolated from the qualitative data collected from the participants' student journals kept during the internship at the USA Paralympic Volleyball Training Centre in Oklahoma, USA.

OVERALL Observations:

"I would like to continue my transition from a coached centred methodology to a player centred methodology." "First I want to say the course was absolutely tremendous, from the first moment of walking in to the gym and seeing the Paralympic logo on the floor, as I did in the 1990's at Lake Placid where the 1980 Olympics was held. The feelings I had was goose bumps and a rush you could not imagine. There are so many things that I have witnessed in the past few weeks that will give me great insight on the coaching philosophy I will have."

COACHING STYLE: (Core Value of Exemplary Work Ethic: which helps athletes improve skills and become more competent.)

"From the week in Oklahoma, I have been inspired by these amazing and wonderful athletes. They have a different demeanor and attitude that you are just drawn to. You can't help but stare and watch them move because they move so effortlessly across the court. From these athletes, I have learned to be persistent and relentless, especially from Michelle. Michelle was born with her right arm that wasn't fully developed. She told us the story of how she started to play with her prosthetic when she made the team. Hours of setting against the wall, and all the times she constantly said she couldn't do it, but Coach Hamiter believed in her. From this, we need to remember that someone sees the best in us and they can see what we're capable of, so we need not to give up. Her determination when she was learning how to set is so inspiring."

"While in Oklahoma, they played "Fast 2s/Fast 3s" meaning they played quick games either 2 on 2 or 3 on 3 which I completely loved. The first reason why I loved this drill because it helps with a players focus, it allows for the player to always be on their toes and ready for anything. Another reason why this drill was amazing is because it allowed for increased playtime and contacts with the ball. It is annoying waiting in line during practice when all you want to do is play and touch the ball. This drill accommodates for that, and I will definitely use this drill in my future practices."

COACHING STYLE: (Core Value of Player Empowerment: which helps players to feel a strong sense of autonomy.) For the core value of player empowerment as it relates to the players sense of autonomy.

"Bill Hamiter spoke of wanting his players to be able to think for themselves so they do not need to depend on their coach in competition. He made it clear that if they are focused on the coach, they cannot focus on the game."

"While given the opportunity to listen to Coach Hamiter's coaching suggestions, he stated as well to ask questions. Ask questions to make them think and in return they will understand the game and will be able to adapt and make changes on their own. This is probably one of the most prominent aspects that I will be instilling into my coaching foundation and as a tool to help athletes be successful at an early age."

'feed-forward' as opposed to 'feedback' forces athletes to think, and empowers them. Feedback in general needs to be specific and immediate, but Bill Hamiter explained a different understanding of this. First, while feedback needs to be specific, it should not be given only when in relation to the result being good or bad. If we want athletes to learn skills we need to tell them, or ask them, what they did well or be specific as to what was a good/poor job in relation to the skill. Immediate feedback is also most beneficial, but not if it comes from coaches telling them what to do and thus disabling their ability to think for themselves."

COACHING STYLE: (Core Value of Improving Cohesion: which helps athletes feel that they are a vital part of the group.)

"Disciplined, determined and doubtless. I see all of these words in the women's sitting volleyball team. The team was so disciplined in practice even though Coach Hamiter was not present; they were so determined during practice. They allowed for peer feedback and critiques. They were so focused on what needed to be done during practice. The way this team carried themselves allowed us to feed off of their energy just watching them from the sidelines."

"The two challenges that Bill Hamiter mentions young coaches have: they talk too much and get too emotional. The solution he suggests is to know your coaching philosophy AND how to engage it, focusing on what is going to help the team."

“Like coach Hamiter mentioned you could treat all your athletes fair, but not the same. When he got down on the floor with his athletes they showed a strong bond they have between them but also a sense of respect. These are qualities I want to convey with my athletes.”

"Coach Hamiter's style of coaching more resembles what I would like for my athletes in the future. He has a quiet but respectable quality and he holds his players to high standards."

Discussion & Conclusion

Exposing coaching students to an athlete centred coaching philosophy at a highly competitive level was an enlightening experience for graduate students in sport coaching. Seeing master coaches who have extreme pressure to win, and yet, had a coaching style that was geared to measure up to the core values of putting athletes first, empowering them, preparing them, and allowing them to have a voice on their team, was a valuable experience for our collegiate student coaches to observe. Student reflections as evidenced in the qualitative data that was collected demonstrated appreciation for an athlete centered coaching philosophy. Such experiences will assist new coaches in goal setting and carrying out their own core values in their coaching. Quantitative data collected from the Sport Motivation Scale II (SMS II) also warrants the prioritization of student exposure to programs akin to the Internship experience with USA Paralympic Volleyball under Coach Hamiter, his staff, and his athletes as the results indicate improved motivation among student coaches to perform as coaches in the field, and to be athlete centered in their approach.