Coaches education – a perspective

by Vern Gambetta

1 Introduction

In the field of coaches education there are problems and possible solutions that transcend such specifics as a country's political ideology or the developmental state of its athletics. It is my belief that we must focus upon these commonalities if we are to improve the quality of coaching world-wide.

In order to do this it is necessary that nations which have developed, or are in the process of developing, their own coaches education and certification systems share their successes and their setbacks with others. In this article, therefore, I will offer a brief overview of the background to and formation of the Coaching Education Program of TAC/USA; not in an attempt to portray our programme as a model for others to follow, but rather in the hope that our experiences will assist them in the development of their own.

2 A brief historical perspective

For many years the US enjoyed a relatively unchallenged position of leadership in the international athletics arena. This domination was the result of several factors: there was and continues to be a large, healthy talent pool; the country was not devastated by war and famine; there were educated coaches available to athletes from the beginning of their career; there was excellent competition at all levels; excellent facilities were accessible to all.

By the early 1970s, other nations had begun to challenge America's track and field supremacy. Events that the US had previously dominated were now closely contested. One reason for this change was
a marked reduction in educational funding. As a result, mandatory daily Physical Education was gradually eliminated so that, today, only one state has PE at all levels. Thus a process which had produced a core of youngsters with a basic fitness level and sound fundamental movement skills was eroded.

In addition, there was a trend towards early specialization in sports other than athletics, and this cut down on participation. It also had the effect of reducing the number of coaches involved. In particular, the football or basketball coaches who had formerly coached several events in track and field no longer wished to do so because they were busy running their off-season programmes.

Furthermore, the inclusion of girls’ and women’s programmes in the scholastic and collegiate system – a positive developmental step – had the net effect of putting more pressure on the already declining number of qualified coaches.

These changes coincided with a period of time in which a number of experienced coaches became eligible for retirement. The ultimate solution, especially in schools desperate for coaches, was seen to be the involvement of so-called ‘walk-on’ coaches. These were non-faculty members who were interested and willing to help. They were usually given a small stipend. There was no assurance that they had any coaching qualifications.

It was this background that led to the formation of the Coaching Education Program of TAC/USA.

3 Formation and goals

The initial goal of the programme was to provide beginner coaches with a basic body of knowledge in the sport sciences and in actual athletic events. The intention was to provide them with a background in coaching athletes effectively at junior high-
school and high-school levels.

An ad hoc committee was formed to explore the concept. Three years later the first 'Level I' school was established, a result of work carried out entirely by volunteers and with limited funding. The committee examined certification systems from many different nations, borrowing the best aspects of several programmes and synthesizing them into one applicable to the situation in the US.

The next step - and the key to the success of any programme - was the development of a cadre of trained, qualified and committed instructors. This task proved especially difficult for TAC because many of the people originally chosen were already extensively involved in coaching and administration and had little spare time to donate to the programme.

The two main criteria upon which selection of instructors was based were a proven excellence in teaching the fundamentals of athletics and a well developed organizational ability. Instructors were also chosen according to geographic distribution; this was necessary in order to ensure that the programme was truly national in scope.

The second generation of instructors has come from coaches who have themselves participated in the Level I course. This has been very helpful, especially in terms of consistency of presentation. However, in future it will be necessary to place even more emphasis on the training of instructors if a high standard is to be maintained.

4 Structure of the education and certification system

To meet the needs of the athletic community as it has been traditionally structured in the US, the system of education and certification was divided into 3 levels, each consisting of a sport-scientific and an event-specific component:
Level I: Focuses on coaches who are working with club, junior high-school and high-school athletes. Provides a broad base of knowledge in all events with an emphasis on teaching basic skills and a fundamental understanding of sport science.

Level II: Focuses on coaches who are working with national-calibre athletes. Promotes specialization in an event group. Provides in-depth coverage of sport science.

Level III: Focuses on coaches who are working with elite athletes at national and international level with specialization in an individual event. Provides in-depth understanding of the sport science of that particular event.

The levels were intended to be hierarchical, in that one can be built upon another in a continually expanding knowledge base. There has been, and I am sure there will continue to be, much discussion as to where the distinction between levels should be drawn: it has not always been clear where one should stop and another begin.

Another aspect of the structure which has provoked controversy is the 'Grandfather' issue. Some people in the sport who had coached for a number of years felt that, by virtue of their knowledge and experience, they deserved immediate certification beyond Level I. Keeping in mind our fundamental philosophy - that of including everyone in the programme - a policy was developed that was good both for the programme and for those individuals.

They were asked to attend a Level I school to gain an understanding of the terminology and the procedures involved. They were then invited to apply to the level to which they felt entitled. Very few people in fact elected to exercise this option once they realized the additional knowledge they could gain by going through the programme in its entirety.

Levels I and II are now fully operational. Level III is in the final planning and development stage. Since it is possible that to Level II, the committee is taking more time to develop Level III.

Without question, however, the focus of the programme should be on Level I, for it is here that the greatest need for the greatest number of coaches is evident.

5 Possible areas for improvement and problems encountered

In developing the different levels of accreditation, the following areas of difficulty and doubt have been encountered.

5.1 Education versus certification

One of the primary issues that has arisen is that of 'education versus certification'. When the programme was in its developmental stages the focus was on certification. It quickly became apparent that this had too many negative connotations. The concept of education shed a more positive light on the proceedings, and this became the major thrust of the programme. Hopefully the programme is just the start of an educational experience for the coaches; one that will motivate them to continue their self-improvement outside the course structure.

I myself question whether it is possible to educate someone in the art of coaching. A great deal of it consists of a natural ability to feel, say and do the right thing at the right time. A coach can attend a course and pass a test; but this is no guarantee of his ability to impart his knowledge effectively. On the other hand, certain technical aspects can be taught and coaching skills can be improved. Communication, leadership and psychological skills can all be enhanced through education, as long as the coach is willing to learn.

5.2 Geography

As is the case in many other countries, the geographical size of the US has posed many problems. The foremost of these has been one of basic logistics, in the assignment of instructors and in the scheduling of schools in suitable areas.

Regional differences must be considered when designing a programme for a
country the size of the United States. In certain areas the club programmes are stronger and have more influence than the inter-scholastic programmes. Curriculum adjustments to account for this would have been helpful.

5.3 Funding

The fact that the programme had minimum funding did not make the process any easier. Fortunately the programme was able to support itself at a very minimal level due to attendance fees. However, funding continues to be a problem.

The size and level of the programme should be determined by the funds available. This may not necessarily be ideal, but it would allow for a level of excellence rather than a watered-down programme.

6 The importance of coaches education - a summary

Coaches education must be an integral part of any national development programme. The career of a good coach transcends the career of an elite international athlete, and produces a ripple effect - along the way there will be many athletes who will go into coaching as a direct result of his influence. It may be trite to say so, but coaches beget coaches; they are the foundation of a system. A small investment in coaches education is a true long-term investment in the quality development of a national programme.

Realities of modern coaching dictate that the coach cannot keep up with the volume of information necessary to stay current in all areas, particularly after the recent boom in information and knowledge. In the US the coach must be 'generalist' out of necessity; and this is especially true for those coaches working at the beginning stages of the development process.

However, as the athlete rises through the system, the coach must become increasingly more specialized to meet the changing needs. At no stage of the total coaching process should the athlete be limited in his or her development by a deficiency on the part of the coach. This may require that the coach eventually become the leader of a team of experts who can all influence the many aspects of an individual’s development.

This leads us to the issues of task identification, evaluation and accountability. What does a coach have to do to keep up with the development level of the athletes he is working with? What can be done to make the job easier and the coach more efficient in performance? Is the material that is being taught being understood and used? Is the coaches education programme actually changing coaching behaviour and improving the standard? What are they actually learning in the programme? Is the theory being translated into practice? Are the teaching and learning models that are being used valid? All of these questions demand answers to ensure that coaches education is effective.

All nations could profit from the new IAAF programme. Its international scope lends it a perspective which is forcibly unavailable to any individual nation. The development of a standardized international curriculum leading to an IAAF Diploma is a particularly positive step; nations can build upon it to suit their individual needs, using the IAAF programme as a standard by which to judge their progress.

They will meet problems along the way, as we did during the development of the Coaching Education Program of TAC/USA. This was, however, a tremendous experience for all those involved. We have gained a better insight into the coaching process. I hope that this brief overview will prove beneficial to others in establishing their own programme.