Expert or dilettante? Reflections on the professionalism of coaches and effective communication

by Nadine Haase

The importance of communication is perhaps taken for granted but there can be no doubt that it is fundamental to the success of any coach athlete relationship. An extensive specialist knowledge of a sport or discipline is a prerequisite for a top coach but that is only half the story. Competence in the various aspects of communication skills is essential in order for the coach to inform, advise and motivate athletes and enable them to fulfil their potential. The professionalisation of the role of the coach has taken place alongside the increasing profile and public importance attached to the coach, as part of the new and existing varied demands being placed on the individual. This must be acknowledged and the coach should feel that help, support and education is at hand when needed. There is a body of knowledge to be accepted and understood for the coach to become a conversation leader and effective communicator. Coach educators must adopt this aspect as an integral part of the development of the coach, because competence in achieving effective communication is central to the work of the successful coach.

I. Introduction

For coaches communication is an essential dimension of the repertory of skills needed in their daily job. The changes in what the coach has to do faces the individual with a variety of demands. In using the term “communicative competence” one possible aspect for further professionalisation amongst coaches is duly highlighted which will be enlarged on in this article.

Whatever the level of technical competence enjoyed by the coach, it remains somewhat limited if the individual lacks any relevant “communicative” knowledge. Furthermore, successful communication is the decisive basis for motivation and a trusting cooperation with athletes and thus for success in sport. Teaching communicative skills should therefore take an important part alongside technical aspects in the professional training and further education of coaches.
Initiating a discussion about the professionalisation of the coaches’ job

Once one looks into the sport specific literature more closely, one realises that only a few papers have been published on the professionalisation of the work of coaches. It is typical of these papers that the terms “profession”, and “professionalisation” are not interpreted consistently (GAHAI / HOLZ 1986, HAGEDORN 1987, BETTE 1984). This situation can be traced back to the different concepts of professionalisation which form the bases of the authors’ remarks on the professionalisation of the coaches’ work.

In terms of a relatively abstract description of the structural features of the coach’s role one comes across peculiarities, which, as will be shown later, stand in the way of a professionalisation of the coach’s job. These are:

1) “the success and competition orientation in top-class sport,
2) the structurally caused publicity of the role of the coach
3) the necessity of short-term role fulfilment” (BETTE 1984, 31).

These characteristics of the coaches’ job will be examined more closely in the following sections (BETTE 1984).

Success and competition orientation

Without any doubt success and competition orientation is an important influential factor in top class sport. Due to the public interest shown for a great number of Olympic sports, central elements such as politics, the economy and other social aspects are undoubtedly also influenced by this system. The consequence of this is that not only are considerable amounts of money negotiated and invested, but that demands are made by all the sectors involved and there is a high demand for success.

A considerable amount of social control is applied to all those involved in high performance sport, chiefly the coaches and athletes. This control, mediated diffusely or directly, can have considerable influence on or consequences for any commitment to a training programme” (BETTE 1984, 32). Because of this control, linked with articulated expectations, coaches become extremely sensitive to the demand for success. The only thing that counts is success, with increases in earning power and prestige depending on it, thus having a central impact on: the professional existence of a coach.

It is vital that success within the sporting world always means competitive success (HAGEDORN 1987, 62). Hence success - and competition orientation are not possible without the competitive principle (GURBONOV 1988, 86). With that being the case, cooperation amongst coaches is nearly impossible, as the rules of competition constantly challenge any loyalty they may have to each other. The coach therefore treats colleagues as opponents. The fact that no professional association exists is also a consequence of this, because any cooperation will go against the competitive principle.

In a closer look at the profession of a coach it can easily be recognised that the individual presentation of the achievements of a coach and the raking in of material or symbolic gratuities mainly depend on the proteges coached. (DIGEL 1979, 375, BETTE 1984, 33). According to BETTE the causes of the conflicts amongst coaches are revealed in the fact that “for the individual striving to promote his own performance

1) this can only be achieved through the performance of the athletes
2) the performance level achieved by the very same athletes means that the opportunity for self promotion by other coaches is either limited or made impossible” (BETTE 1984, 33).

The public aspect of role projection

The access of broad classes of society to competitive sport events, which are consciously organised in such a way that as many as possible can participate in them, does not only serve the promotion of individual abilities, but is also a prerequisite for the satisfaction of consumerism by the extensive social stratas.
With an entry made into the professional field of competitive sport the coach enters under the spotlight of public interest. Through their observation and comment, those involved in high performance sport leave themselves open to the influence of the media. Within the system of top-class sport, coaches not only represent central coordinating points with regard to talent search, recruitment and the motivation of athletes, they also function as “the junction point of the system and are the first reference point for anyone interested in sport” (BETTE 1984, 34).

Due to the fact that the work of coaches is now much more publicly transparent, justifiable claims for independence will rarely be accepted. The safeguard of independence as is granted to the classic professions like medicine or law, cannot be acknowledged in coaching.

A further difficulty is seen in the fact that the role of the coach is reduced to one dimension, namely the performance of the athlete in competition. Hence the work of the coach is merely judged by the success achieved by the athlete. From this point of view it becomes understandable if coaches do not primarily focus on working in particularly valuable aspects of pedagogy, but concentrate instead on maximising the performance output of their athletes in the most important competitions.

The fact that coaches have to deal with such a level of public interest (parents, club, community etc.) can really be seen as a tricky business, especially with regard to the media:

On the one hand coaches have to depend on a strong public interest, as their full-time job can perhaps in the long term only be financed and legitimised on that basis, on the other hand the intervention of the public is also perceived as a burden and a hindrance. Furthermore, in the case of failure in important competitions coaches are frequently allocated the role of ‘scapegoat’. Job dismissal is a common consequence of this personalisation of failure, especially in professional team sport.

Pressures on role performance

It has become clear that the position of the coach in general depends essentially on good news and that their role is subject to external control by certain groups. These circumstances and the rapid developments in international sport do not leave the coach time for experimentation in the training process. In considering the increasing expectations of all the interest groups it becomes all the more understandable if training is submitted to an ever increasing degree of tests and measures, short cuts and no long term planning. The negative effects of the growing demands on time, arising from the enlargement of the national and international competition system, should not be ignored because the competition calendar itself makes demands and requires decisions to be made.

The coach must take external time demands into consideration (such as school, family, profession, etc.), as high performance sport should not demand a total monopoly on the athlete. The coach has to have a sensitivity for the athlete as an individual, incorporating the non-sporting aspects too, and thus bringing the whole personality into the coach’s field of vision. This is a problem of special significance, as high performance sport “itself can only partially and then only rarely provide for a career after active participation” (BETTE 1984, 39).

The coach and athlete working at top class level are substantially pressured for time because of the demands placed on it. This shortage of time probably comes about primarily because of the growth of public interest, the profile of national representation, finance matters, or because of the time involved with the media or the community. Due to this time pressure, the coach can come into conflict with the individual athlete or with one of a number of interest groups making demands on the athlete’s time. ‘Official’ solutions such as sport boarding schools and training centres can be offered by the professional associations and clubs, so that appropriate staff can coordinate the different time demands of sport and
the other key elements. Whatever the case, there is no doubt that this time pressure is a source of disturbance for the training process.

The general structural features of the role of a coach already outlined clearly highlight the aspects that distinguish the coach from individuals carrying out other functions.

**Essential tasks of the coach with communicative relevance**

The challenge to coach someone and lead them to success requires the coach, consciously or unconsciously, to take on executive functions or positions of leadership. "Regardless of whether a coach defines his role as a "fatherly friend", "equal amongst equals", "advisor" or "boss", it has to be said that nevertheless nothing changes in his formal role as a leader" (HOLZ 1982, 27). Due to their position of leadership, coaches can influence their athletes in a variety of ways. Three different leadership styles – autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire – should be mentioned here. In this context reference should be made to LENK’s concept of the “responsible athlete” (LENK 1979, 488). To put his role model into practice LENK favours a democratic leadership style in training. This requires frequent discussions between coach and athlete, in which the latter can put forward their suggestions and feelings. In this situation the function of the coach is very much one of an advisor and observer, and to a great extent the athlete forms their own training programme (LENK 491ff.).

Starting with these considerations, in the paragraphs that follow a closer look is taken at the fundamental tasks faced by the coach in human relationship terms with the athlete.

*Training management* as a field of activity understandably forms an essential part of the work of the coach. An extensive knowledge of the particular sport is a prerequisite for working successfully as a coach. One has the expectation that the coach is a specialist (GABLER 1975, 186). It is an indispensable prerequisite of professionalism that the professional is equipped with a greater knowledge in the relevant fields. KORING demanded a continuous willingness of teachers for further and extended vocational training in order not to lose contact with the developments of science (KORING 1992, 68f.). The willingness for further and extended vocational training is, as already mentioned, indispensable for a professionalisation.

It is, however, not enough to just be an expert. Working as a coach implies teaching activities, since the coach has to explain the knowledge held in such a way that it can be processed by the athletes (GABLER 1975, 186). In contractual relationship terms, the *teaching* of sport specific movement techniques, biomotor abilities, tactical knowledge and abilities represents the major elements of the role of a coach (GAHAI / HOLZ 1986, 47). To achieve these tasks requires a great deal of planning of the whole training process, incorporating long term plans, annual plans, operational plans etc.

In addition to the demands outlined above, it is the task of the coach to make the all important movement characteristics clear to the athlete. In addition to practical demonstrations, the coach’s ability to give verbal descriptions, instructions and explanations is important in enabling the athlete to develop the ability to differentiate between movement concepts and ideas (GABLER / NITSCH / SINGER 1993, 163).

The correction of movement is a methodical means of achieving technical perfection, and to improve present performance this is absolutely essential. In this case it is of great importance to utilise this crucial need for communication as a central feature of interaction.

**The coach as “motivation instructor”**

Motivating an athlete correctly is one of the most difficult tasks facing the coach (TUTKO / OGILVIE 1967, 358). The coach should succeed in motivating the athlete in such a way that they are not only ready for the day to day challenge, but can also overcome the barriers faced in new and difficult training and competition situations (GABLER 1975, 188).
The coach who carries out this role well will provide their athlete with primary motivation giving them experience of an immediate satisfaction of their motives and they are thus more strongly motivated than those who are motivated secondarily. By systematic reinforcement, the coach can transform secondary into primary motivation of an athlete. (BAUMANN 1993, 132f.). HECKER stresses that athletes “must have an especially positive attitude towards their sport” and “they must have a high competitive striving, which motivates them enduringly for performance efforts” (HECKER 1999, 5).

In setting out to challenge and push the athlete in terms of their optimal personal and sporting destiny, the coach has the opportunity to set realistic goals (long-term and short-term) in cooperation with the athlete. When these goals are actually achieved they have a positive effect on current motivation levels. The coach can motivate the athlete by verbal measures and instructions and, in this case, the choice of the verbal phrasing used is crucial. “Language functions as a substitute for all inner emotional and motivational processes, which we appeal to and make known or which we are informed about by others. Verbal associations with unpleasant experiences and negative feelings do not contribute to positive motivational impulses” (BAUMANN 1993, 150). Positive emotions can be achieved by the motivating words of the coach: “You are going to win!” Less advisable wording would be: “You are not going to lose!” as negative experiences could be associated with this statement.

Moreover the coach should see to it that athletes do not lose their motivation if they cannot be taken into consideration in selection because of competition rules (e.g. limited number of participants). In this case the coach has to have an explanatory conversation with those concerned, so that there are no negative effects in the relationship and that motivation levels remains are maintained. Due to this and similar problems the task of the coach to motivate athletes represents a “complex and potentially explosive demand” (GABLER 1975, 190).

Coaching in competitions is restricted to situations where contact with athletes is possible. In competitions such as the European Championships the coach is not allowed on the track or in the field close to the athletes. Should the coach want to give the protégé corrections and advice, sign language agreed on prior to the competition forms a necessary and important means of communication. In the period after the competition the coach is expected to help the athlete cope with success or failure and to plan the next training units together as a team.

Within the coaching relationship the coach is frequently attributed the role of an advisor, on the basis that he or she “discusses human and social problems with the athlete and tries to solve them jointly” (GABLER 1979, 454). For HOTZ (1986) advising comprises everything that “contributes to actually achieving the planned learning and performance goals – possibly even under unfavourable conditions” (HOTZ 1986, 33). The role of advisor is not only restricted to the functional sport level. Advisory guidance is also needed in the case of problems with parents or the family, at school or at work (FORNOFF / KILZER 1994, 64). The coach is often challenged morally, particularly when working with young people who are looking for advice in their daily lives. At this point MEINBERG’s demand “to make ethics a compulsory subject in the education of coaches” becomes understandable (MEINBERG 1991a, 204). The training of a coach to produce high performance athletes has therefore not only a sport technical but also a moral ethical aspect.

**Communication as a fundamental component of the professional coach’s repertory of skills**

Communicative situations are not rare in the everyday life of a coach. They encompass aspects such as external representation (speeches, interviews, etc.), contacts with officials and, of course, the everyday work with athletes. Communication between the coach and all those in the working environ-
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Communication does not only take place through words, but also through paralinguistic phenomena such as intonation, pauses and laughing, body language etc., thus through behaviour of any kind. Therefore in every interpersonal situation any behaviour has the character of communication, and thus communication takes place (WATZLAWICK 1990, 50f.). WATZLAWICK’s meta-communicative axiom: “One is not able to not communicate” (WATZLAWICK 1990, 53) is equally valid for the world of sport.

On the same basis, it is impossible for the coach and athlete not to communicate. The interaction between coach and athlete is always affected by communicative competences. For this reason adequate communication skills are vital for the professional coach in high performance sport.

Despite the best specialist knowledge a coach will fail if he or she does not have the ability to put the knowledge held into suitable words. In the context of motivation, education and coaching/advising, conversational skills are vitally important. The coach’s ability to communicate objectively is guaranteed a challenge when a highly emotional athlete questions things after a failure - something every coach experiences.

**Fundamental impact factors of a conversation**

There are many factors that have an effect on a conversation. The participants of a conversation (e.g. coach and athlete) should know these variables and be aware of the fact that they can influence the course of the conversation. By paying particular attention to the external conditions, frequent obstacles to communication like noise and distraction can be reduced. Important conversations should always take place in a quiet place and at the right time, so as to be able to focus attention only on the person one wants to talk to.

“A cooperative way of leading conversations“

Success in leading conversations will only be possible if the partner feels “accepted”. CRISAND lists three behavioural characteristics, which the leader of a conversation should comply with, so that a comfortable atmosphere is achieved in the conversation and a mutual acceptance develops (CRISAND 1990, 33ff.):

◆ congruence and authenticity,
◆ sensitive, non-assessing understanding,
◆ accepting the partner, holding them in high esteem and respect.

1. **Congruence and authenticity: “approaching the partner honestly”**

A fundamental prerequisite for a positive outcome from a conversation is covered by this aspect. In relating to the conversation partner the leader of the conversation should just be him or herself, without hiding behind a “professional mask”. The behaviour must be natural and transparent not artificial and there should be “no soulless technique” (CRISAND 1990, 33) in evidence.

It is important to approach the partner as a person anxious to be open, so that they can talk confidentially about their emotional experiences and problems. Because of the open behaviour exhibited, they are in turn inspired to be more open themselves.

2. **Sensitive, non-assessing understanding: “I understand why you behave like that”**

This behavioural characteristic, also called empathy, defines the ability of someone being able to take another’s perspective into account (COLE 1996, 33). Here one tries to see the inner reference structure of the conversation partner and to understand their point of view. This however only means that one understands the approach. One can nevertheless not agree with it or even reject it.

The real effort towards an understanding of the situation can be shown by sending a “perspective message”. The assumed point of view of the partner is in this case worded sensitively and can be corrected or broadened if necessary (TREUTLEIN 1989, 133).
3. Accepting the partner, holding them in high esteem and respect: “I am interested in you as a person”

Holding the other person in high esteem is an essential condition of successfully leading a conversation (WEISBACH 1997, 69ff.). Regard and respect and, on the contrary, disregard and contempt are shown by words as well as by intonation, gestures and facial expressions. An esteem not bound to any conditions should be shown for the partner, i.e. they are accepted regardless of any statements or possibly controversial points of view. WEISBACH (1997) stresses that “we are not at all giving up our own position by showing esteem for our conversation partner and by taking somebody seriously” (WEISBACH 1997, 251). Hence in respect to the contents one can hold a different opinion to the partner, but they must feel that this does not limit the relationship.

The three listed behaviour characteristics always have to be seen in context and not isolated. Their realisation is in the first place a matter of attitude. These demands cannot be fulfilled easily, primarily because “there has to be real conviction behind it and they cannot be applied as a soulless, technical instrument” (CRISAND 1990, 34). One has to warn of a mere technocratic application, as negative effects for the coexistence of the participants of conversation are probable. This is incidentally also true for the communication strategies still to come.

Where one is able to show a positive attitude towards one’s fellow human beings, then the alignment towards the behavioural characteristics will primarily be a matter of exercise and effective communication becomes possible. In the following illustration the difference between the preferred “cooperative way of leading conversations” and an “authoritarian way of leading conversations” is made clear:

Illustration 1: cooperative way of leading conversations (LANGE 2001, 30)

Illustration 2: authoritarian way of leading conversations (LANGE 2001, 30)
Sending good information

Sending good information is a decisive and influential component in the communication process (COLE 1996, 50ff.). Good information enables you to state your own perspective and give a clear description of your own point of view. This communicative component should now be looked at in detail. For these considerations it is fundamental that the information is given in such a way that the participant in the conversation feels motivated to listen without constraint.

"Conversation troublemakers"

Many ways of commenting prevent a successful communication. They lead to misunderstandings or trouble, or the person just perhaps wants to finish the conversation as quickly as possible. These behavioural patterns unanimously provoke resistance in the conversation partner (WEISBACH 1997, 125). For this reason COLE calls these statements the "deadly sins of communication" (COLE 1996, 52).

Giving orders is an approach that should be seen as a conversation troublemaker. Such statements turn the conversation in a certain direction, in order to reach the desired result, if possible, without any delay. By so doing, the conversation partner is deprived of the chance of further discussion and they barely have the chance to find out anything more. The reaction to such an approach can vary from defiance to aggressive answers and to reluctant obedience. According to WEISBACH orders are “not very often boycotted because of their contents, but much more frequently because of their patronising form” (WEISBACH 1997, 126) and thus prevent a successful communication.

Furthermore, warnings and threats disturb any communication. In having orders imposed on them, the conversation partner is almost forced to act “correctly" by having the possible consequences highlighted if they do not do so; this often begins with an emphasis on their weak points. The desired aim is, however, often not achieved by this way of communicating.

Reproaches likewise obstruct a successful way of leading a conversation. They take away the self-confidence of the conversation partner and offend against their honour. “Depending on the state of mind the reaction here reaches from conformist ducking to rebelling and rejecting any blame” (WEISBACH 1997, 128).

Additional conversation troublemakers such as ironic remarks, interrogations, unasked advice, and the like, will only be mentioned here, as a detailed explanation would be too extensive (WEISBACH 1997, 126ff.).

It has become clear that when using conversation troublemakers the individual’s own position is brought to the forefront and there is no concentration on the conversation partner. This way of having a conversation does not encourage any continuance of the discussion and obstructs a successful communication. The aim of a professional way to lead a conversation is to create an atmosphere in which the other person feels understood. At a later stage in the article this behaviour will be examined more closely as it shows the conversation partner that someone is listening to them and that somebody is showing an interest in their feelings.

Messages within the conversation

Critical instances often come about because the people involved have different points of views on the same information or events (TREUTLEIN et al. 1989, 131f.). For a solution of the problem a description of the relevant perspectives is absolutely essential. With an I-message (GORDON 1977) one’s own perspective can be verbalised. TREUTLEIN (1989) et al. outlined the subsequent constituents of an I-message following on from the work of GORDON (1977):
- description of the situation (if you...)
- specific consequences (then...)
- expression of the coach’s emotions
- acceptance that there is perhaps no magic formula available and a request to participate in finding a solution (TREUTLEIN 1989, 132).
Example:

A coach finds it increasingly difficult to put up with a regularly occurring noise throughout training.

Possible I-message (the numbers in brackets refer to the constituents of the message): “When it is so loud (1), much of my important information and correction cannot be heard (2). This annoys me and I always have to pull myself together so that I do not yell at you (3). I am trying to solve the problem, can you help me with it (4)?”

I-messages describe the behaviour of the conversation partners and help to express one’s own point of view without blaming the other person. Conversation is encouraged because the conversation partner is not immediately provoked to justify, criticise or contradict. “The conversation can take a smooth, productive course” (CRISAND 1991, 36). Sending I-messages is not easy and has to be practised, so that it becomes part of the individual’s own behavioural repertory.

Most of the people, however, are more familiar with you-messages like. “you should try harder” or “it is your fault”, and they can easily bring themselves to say them. But the conversation partner just feels attacked by such messages and reacts in an irritated way. The course of the conversation is considerably impaired, and the antagonism and the critical incident are nothing but reinforced. What follows is an argument, but no conversation (CRISAND 1990, 96f.).

Positive talking

By talking positively the conversation partner receives information on an imaginable and desired target behaviour, “instead of coming to terms with the past, the whole attention is focussed on the organisation of the future” (WEISBACH 1997, 283). Phrases that contain a negation or even a prohibition, rarely result in the desired behaviour. Negative images are created in the mind of the conversation partner, which will often lead to the undesired direction.

Example:

Prior to an important relay run the coach should avoid phrases like: “watch out that the baton does not slide out of your hands and fall to the ground as we can forget about the final then!” What is advised are, are phrases that express the desired target behaviour: “Concentrate on a safe take over! Everything will be fine then!”

When involved in constructive conversations of criticism the entire focus should not be on the mistake, or the deviation from the standard. The explanation of what the conversation drives at, should not be missing. Negative phrases do not name the objective and are hence ineffective. They automatically put the conversation partner into a bad mood and can diminish their self-confidence.

Example:

A coach is not satisfied with the training effort of an athlete and criticises the protégé with the following words: “in the timed runs you sometimes have to go to your limits and show a little more toughness, otherwise you will never make the demanded norm!”. The reaction of the athlete will very likely range from a justification for his lack of effort to a search for explanations and excuses. In this case an appropriate positive phrasing would definitely be more effective: “timed runs rank among the most important training units. Always remember that ambition and hard work in this aspect of training will contribute a great deal to your increase in performance and as a result lead to a new personal best.”

In terms of finding an efficient way of leading a conversation, it is hence necessary to rephrase negative requests in a positive way (WEISBACH 1997, 279ff.).

Receiving good information

In addition to sending information, receiving good information is another important and decisive component of the communication process which can have a major influence (COLE 1996, 127ff.). The perspective of the conversation partner becomes clear from close observation of their counterpart,
through listening and empathy. An appropriate answer will only then be possible, when one understands the speaker.

Sending and receiving information are hence two mutually dependent components for an effective communication.

**Listening correctly**

Most of the time the importance of the ability to listen correctly is valued too little. Nevertheless, listening reduces difficulties in communication and helps avoid conflict. COLE stresses the importance of this leadership quality: “when you ask people who cooperate well with others, for their secret, then, with a high probability, 90 per cent of them will quote their ability to listen.” (COLE 1996, 134). Not only hearing, but real listening enables an effective communication. This listening requires putting one’s own expectations, opinions and prejudices last and focussing the whole concentration on what has been said. In wanting to give the conversation partner the feeling that they are listened to closely, one should pay attention to the following:

- let the speaker finish talking, grant them time
- do not immediately interrupt with advice and interpretations
- memorise what has been said
- do not temporarily be distracted or be secretly drawn away
- do not prepare your reply, while the other person is still talking
- announce pauses for reflections on what has been said

The ‘professional leadership of conversations’ first requires a discovery and understanding of the perspective of the conversation partner. Only this understanding of the other person enables an appropriate sending of information. Understanding the importance of listening is in the first place a matter of attitude. When the experiences and opinions of the opposite person are of importance to the individual then it will primarily be a matter of routine to listen on a concentrated basis for a longer period of time, to notice signals and not to be drawn away.

In contrast to other methods of influencing others, skilful listening is one of the best ways to keep hold of leadership throughout a conversation. Therefore a special form of listening should be analysed more closely in the following paragraphs.

**Active listening**

Active listening represents the highest and, at the same time, most difficult quality of listening (COLE 1996, 135ff.). The feelings and thoughts of the conversation partner are grasped by feedback. This way the speaker is given the opportunity to make their thoughts clear beyond that or to develop them further. In active listening one’s own wishes, opinions, etc. are put last. To receive a good share of information and to enable precise communication, it is necessary to concentrate completely on the other person. WEISBACH (1997) describes this form of listening as “key to the conversation partner (WEISBACH 1997, 29), creating a climate of solidarity and trust. The effect is an atmosphere, in which the other person feels understood. In this context it has to be stressed that feedback only means understanding, but not necessarily consent.

Active listening is based on an attitude of wishing to exclusively turn towards the speaker and to give them the whole of one’s own attention. At this point it should be underlined that “it is no technique to sound the conversation partner out first, but that it is an attitude expressing respect and regard for the other person” (WEISBACH 1997, 38).

The application of this form of listening, which really is slightly strenuous, has proven particularly successful, if:

- more information is required (e.g. if one believes having not quite understood the speaker yet; or if one would like to encourage the speaker to talk, etc.);
- one runs into a conflict (e.g. before criticising; if one is of a different opinion, etc.);
- a confirmation is necessary (e.g. after an I-message of the speaker, etc.);
one is in a situation, loaded with emotions (e.g. to calm down; if the speaker is talking about a personal problem or about their feelings, etc.) (COLE 1996, 138f.).

When listening actively one is paying attention to the content of what is being said, as well as to how the other person is talking and behaving, i.e. to the feelings, hopes, etc., that accompany almost every statement (WEISBACH 1997, 28). These two abilities are called *paraphrasing* and *verbalising* and they belong to active listening (CRISAND 1990, 69ff.):

*Paraphrasing* means reproducing what has just been heard in one’s own words. The conversation is actively supported by this simplest form of feedback. Although these wordings take a lot of time, they offer the big advantage that misunderstandings can be avoided right from the beginning. Phrases like “did I understand you correctly that...?” can clarify whether the message has got through correctly to the receiver.

In *verbalising*, however, the emotional content of the conversation partner’s statement is especially taken into account. According to CRISAND this technique of listening is less “a diagnostically superb feat, rather than the perceptible willingness to take the conversation partner seriously and their feelings, perceptions and moods, and to put oneself in the other person’s state of mind” (CRISAND 1991, 35).

**Example:**

A coach suggests to the athlete to increase the volume of training in future. The athlete answers: “I do not know whether I can manage that in terms of time!” The following answer of the coach would just be an attempt to calm the athlete down: “I am sure you can make it if you give it a try!”. An active support of the conversation and the chance to convey empathy would, however, be given by the following reply of the coach: “You are afraid you have to neglect other things and that everything will be getting too much for you?”

When the leader of a conversation succeeds in finding a suitable balance between active listening and announcing their own interests and feelings (= I-messages), then an effective communication is achieved (CRISAND 1991, 37).

**Conclusion**

Although not all the facets of an effective communication have been mentioned, it has already become clear through the possibilities outlined that this field of competence is of fundamental importance for coaches and that appropriate knowledge should be taught in the education of the future generations of the profession. Effective communication between coach and athlete is a necessary prerequisite for the shared work and success being aimed for. The coach should not only talk to the athlete, but should also be able to lead conversations and thus, amongst other things, have an idea of what the aims of the conversation are. Communicating skills should, in my view, be put on a professional basis for coaches in high-performance sport.

**Expert or dilettante?**

The answer to this question will in future not be marginally settled, depending on whether coaches will be able to merely hear or listen actively, if they can just talk or lead conversations. This matter will be decided not only by whether coaches will consider the ability to lead conversations as an integral part of their own professional qualification, but also by proving they are competent in respect of achieving effective communication.

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"Home is not where the place of residence is, but where one is understood.”

*(CHRISTIAN MORGENSTERN 1871 – 1914)*

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