

Aspects of managing coaches in athletics

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Introduction

The word “coach” in the sense of an “instructor or trainer in sport” probably came into the English language in the late 19th century and refers to someone who supports the central activity of preparation for participation in a specific sport or event.¹ The equivalent words in other languages may have different histories but they share this core meaning. Over time, the concept of what it means to be a coach or to practice coaching has expanded in sport and, more recently in business and other areas of life, and an increasing number of writers have added their own definitions.

In the case of sport, the role and activities of a coach will differ depending on the stage of development of the coached athlete(s) and other circumstances but the defined activities of coaching normally include:

- identifying and recruiting talented individuals for development into performers,
- teaching performance-related physical and mental skills,
- assigning and supervising activities to consolidate skills and increase physical capacity and fitness,
- creating the conditions necessary for maximal performance,
- filtering the overall environment of an

athlete or team so that motivation and focus are maintained and distraction is avoided,

- organising and coordinating support services (training scientists, biomechanists, physiotherapists, sport psychologists, and other technical experts) for the athlete or team,
- synthesising and applying knowledge from various disciplines and fields in order to best prepare the athlete or team.

But other definitions go beyond a direct focus on performance to encompass more psychological and social support through communication, teaching, mentoring and leadership aspects with the aim of developing athletes into well-rounded and successful human beings.^{2, 3, 4, 5}

It is difficult to overstate the importance of coaches to the sport of athletics. Their central role in the development of the abilities of athletes is well understood: they are a key component of any elite performer’s efforts to excel and, at the other end of the development spectrum, they can be among the most influential individuals in the lives of grass roots athletes aiming to achieve new personal bests and youngsters learning about the sport and improving their skills. Moreover, in some situations the work of a coach can extend to other areas necessary for the day-to-day functioning of the sport such as club administration or even competition organisation. Take coaches out of the equation and athletics as we know it today would likely collapse. Therefore, how coaches are managed is an important, if not critical, consideration for national athletics federations, clubs and other organisations involved in the operation and development the sport

Success in coaching can be defined in a number of ways. The criteria used depend on the performance level and aspirations of the athlete being coached or the expectations of the organisation within which the coach works. However, a successful coach is normally the net result of a complex of elements and factors on the personal, educational, experiential, organisational and contextual levels. This means that there are many opportunities for intervention in the preparation, development, support and control of coaches that could add value to their work and increase their chance to be successful. There is also scope for different approaches designed to be appropriate for local situations and factors. But to be effective in the long-term, it is necessary for those with responsibility in this area to understand the spectrum of aspects and interventions and how they relate to each other and based on this to implement a well-planned management system.

The aim in this paper is to provide a starting point for more detailed study of the management of coaches by presenting brief introductions to the following selection of issues and discussion points:

- management and support structures,
- recruitment,
- education and certification,
- professionalization,
- ethics.

Although the list of topics is by no means exhaustive and there are overlaps between the points, the idea is to give a general overview of the area and some of the challenges that are being faced.

Management and support structures

Good management calls for appropriate policies and an effective administrative structure. In the case of coaches, someone must be responsible for making and then implementing decisions about the support that will be provided and what expectations will be placed on them. In athletics at the national level, each federation will ideally have a national coaching structure to give the framework in which coaches work, from the local and club level up to the elite level. Of course, in athletically less de-

veloped countries this is not always the case. Without such a framework, or where it is weak, the work of coaches will be un-coordinated and haphazardly supported and the development of individual athletes and the sport as a whole will be compromised.⁵

Where national coaching structures do exist, the most common model in athletics is for them to be overseen by a technical committee, coaching committee or other body with a similar mandate and then run on a day-to-day basis by a professional Chief Coach or Technical Director, normally with the support of professional staff. However, are there many variations, both minor and major, on this theme.⁶

The more effective national athletics coaching structures will normally cover most of the following tasks:

- recruiting new coaches;
- maintaining a database of active coaches;
- coordinating the deployment, support and recognition of coaches;
- managing a coach education programme;
- disseminating coaching literature and scientific materials;
- coordinating the provision of scientific, medical and other support for the coaches of elite athletes,
- advising the federation on the annual calendar, national team selection and training plans for elite athletes;
- organising training camps for elite athletes and their coaches;
- coordinating with the IAAF on matters related to the Coaches Education and Certification System (CECS) and the High Performance Training Centres, etc;
- recognising and rewarding coaches who provide valuable service to the sport.

At the local level, any club, educational institution or other organisation in which coaches operate that is interested in consistent and long-term success on the track and the field would do well to carefully consider how its coaches are supported and then ensure that the appropriate structure is in place, and coor-

dinates with the national framework. It is to be expected that the main focus of such local structures would be on providing access to the various services required in order to best prepare their athletes (e.g. training facilities, equipment, physiotherapy, medical support, performance testing and diagnostics, funding for travel to competitions, training camps, housing and meals, etc.). Such structures will be less elaborate than a federation's structure due to the smaller numbers, the available resources and the existence of services already covered by the national framework, if it exists.

Key considerations at both the national and local levels are the resources, financial and human, necessary to establish and operate such a structure and how the return on the investment can be measured. A coaching structure is a long-term investment that will often be judged on the basis of relatively short-term results in competition. Athletics faces particular challenges in this area compared to most other sports because of the number of disciplines (and therefore potential coaching specialities with differing interests and needs), the potential level of participation and normally low ratio of athletes to coach compared to team sports (and therefore need for more coaches), and the fact that, contrary to a number of sports such as football, tennis and golf, the vast majority of athletics coaches around the world are not paid for their coaching work (which makes it imperative to provide tangible benefits when asking someone to support and work within a particular framework).

Many of the issues faced by national coaching structures often revolve around money – who is getting what there is, and who is in position to get it should an athlete become successful. These issues then interlink with motivation and commitment. Common problems of a general nature include:

- the effectiveness of communication with in the system;
- the different ways of dealing with coaches who do receive some type of payment (such as expenses, stipend, performance bonus or salary) and the pure volunteers;
- the availability of expense payments, and official accreditation, for coaches

whose athletes take part in major championships;

- the role of the those leading the structure and whether they should take over the training of top athletes developed by club or personal coaches (and thereby enjoy the benefits of the athlete's success);
- the hiring and management of foreign expert coaches and the potential impact they have on home-grown coaches (i.e. negative: de-motivation, positive: sharing new knowledge and techniques).

In addition to, or sometimes in the absence of, the national and local organisational structures mentioned above, coaches in many countries have formed independent associations. These allow the member coaches to conduct their own activities, develop advanced educational opportunities, support each other and have a collective voice on coaching related matters. These same aims are behind the IAAF policy to encourage coaches to organise themselves on an international level and make constructive input to the sport. It has done this by supporting the establishment and the ongoing function of Area coaches associations, and by appointing the leaders of these associations to serve on the IAAF Coaches Commission.⁸

Issues in this area include:

- the potential for tension between the position of federations and the coaches association, which in some cases has become open conflict damaged the image and development of the sport (this problem has not been as noticeable at the Area level, where the Area coaches associations receive financial and other support from the Area associations and in most cases are integrated in the constitutions of the Area association);
- coaches associations on both levels must deal with the issue of funding themselves through a business model that allows them to operate and provide services to their members;
- with the structure of the Area coaches associations and many national

coaches associations in place the challenge is to increase the level of cooperation and exchange while minimising unneeded duplication of effort.

Recruitment

In most cases, potential coaches identify themselves; that is, they decide they would like to coach and then find a way to become involved on a voluntary or professional basis. For example, many come into coaching through their studies in physical education or as an adjunct to their work as physical education teachers. At the grass roots or club level, parents of young athletes often start coaching to support their children and end up coaching others as well. We also know of many cases where former athletes take up coaching as a way to stay in the sport when their competitive career is finished. However, in places where athletics is not well established or other sports are dominant, it is often necessary to go beyond the *laissez faire* approach and actively recruit new coaches, particularly to meet the needs of the grass roots level.

Ideally, potential coaches should have the following characteristics:

- a strong interest in athletics,
- experience as an athlete,
- highly motivated,
- teaching skills,
- practical, problem-solving,
- good inter-personal communications skills,
- training in physical education.

The benefits that are most often communicated to potential volunteer coaches include:

- chance to work with and support the development of young people,
- opportunities and a framework for the development of knowledge and practical skills,
- transferability of coaching skills to other areas of life,
- personal satisfaction,
- enhancement of current employment situation (i.e for school teachers) or the possibility to become a professional coach.

The challenges in the area of in recruiting new coaches include:

- it is becoming increasingly difficult to fit the extensive time required to coach effectively into the otherwise busy lives that people live, particularly when there is little or no financial compensation involved;
- in many countries, laws requiring police background checks for those working with young people and burdens imposed by other health and safety regulations are disincentives for potential coaches;
- it is sometimes the case that requirements for coach education or certification set by the sport or other authorities are seen as too much for someone who simply wants to help out or would like to concentrate on coaching a specific event;
- in most countries the percentage of female coaches is very low due to variety of possible factors, including general social roles, discrimination from within the sport and inflexibility on the part the organisations in which coaches work (clubs, schools, federations).⁹

Education and Certification

While coaching is a craft that is largely learned through experience, the idea to provide coaches with theoretical information and practical advice can be traced back through athletics coaching manuals and other literature that have been published for at least 100 years.¹⁰ Coach education is much more recent, with the first formal programmes in athletics dating from just after World War II.

Nowadays, the need for the education and certification of coaches is generally recognised by both sports organisations and governments. A coach education programme operated by the national athletics federation or another institution - such as the university system, national sports institute or a multi-sport organisation – is usually a feature of athletically developed countries. Indeed, many leaders in the sport see education as the most important, if not only, element in the management of coaches.

To my knowledge there are no published results from a systematic attempt to map the characteristics of national coach education programmes in athletics, but from my experience, numerous descriptions of national coach education programme and some comparisons of different programmes¹¹ the following statements can be made:

1. National athletics coach education programmes have normally been created independently reflecting the culture, politics and traditions of the nation concerned. In other words, the national programmes develop in parallel and there is little cross over value from the investments made in other countries.

2. There are examples of athletics coach education programmes linked to nationally recognised academic qualifications (i.e. university degrees) and other programmes leading to sport-recognised certification. In both of these categories there are examples that are specific to athletics and others where athletics is offered as a specialisation within a multi-sport programme. In addition to these, there are other programmes that could be said to be “informal” or “informational” and do not emphasise certification/qualification.

3. Most coach education programmes include a number of levels of instruction, three to five being the most common, and progression through the levels is structured according to one or more of the following principles:

- “from all sports to one sport,”
- “from all disciplines to one discipline,”
- “from the youngest children to senior athletes” (age groups),
- “from beginners to elite” (performance level).

The list of issues currently being discussed in this area includes:

- delivery of education measures where it is necessary to use volunteer teachers and administrators because of a lack of financial resources and the effect on the quality of the educational experience provided;
- curriculum design, which itself encompasses many sub-issues such as the amount and type of instruction

(practical v theoretical), the focus on imparting coaching knowledge or developing a set of competences and at what level should specialisation be introduced (is it better to start new coaches off with a broad background or would more be attracted to coaching if they could start off learning about their chosen event?);

- use of mentoring as an integral part of the long-term development of coaches;
- the increasing use of distance-learning tools, particularly through the Internet, for education measures, which make it possible to reach more potential coaches, particularly in places where the logistics of organising a course are difficult or expensive;
- measuring quality and effectiveness (this issue touches on the both the criteria of success in coaching and the initial aims of the programme) and return on investment against the drop out rate or the number of trained coaches who leave the sport or the country (this is, of course, an issue for the overall management system as well);
- comparison of the content, quality and certification standards between coach education systems (to facilitate transfers between systems and the employment of coaches in markets where a different system is recognised).

For situations where there is not a national coach education programme serving athletics or where the existing programme is considered deficient, the 213 IAAF Member Federations have access to the IAAF CECS. The system, which features a five-level syllabus and qualifications, specifically trained lecturers and standard learning support materials in nine languages, has been developed over a 20-year period incorporating the contributions of many experts from different national systems around the world. With financial support from Olympic Solidarity through the national Olympic committees in participating countries, more than 14,000 participants in 130 countries have been served by the CECS.¹²

Apart from formal education, a wide and ever-growing number of information and

further development opportunities for athletics coaches are available as extensions of existing education programmes, by coaches associations and by private providers. These opportunities take the form of conferences, clinics, publications and other media. Of particular interest are the resources that are increasingly available through the Internet.¹³

Professionalisation

Even when athletics was, in theory at least, a purely amateur sport, the issue of professionalism, with the hypocrisy and double standards around it, touched coaches. At that time, the debate was whether a coach who received remuneration for coaching had compromised the values of the sport. Thankfully, this is no longer the case and there is no regulatory or cultural basis for denying coaches the opportunity to gain financially from their time, expertise and success.

It is still the case, as mentioned above, that the vast majority of athletics coaches around the world are not paid for their coaching work and that overall coaches have not benefited from the professionalisation of the sport to the extent of the athletes or the athlete representatives (managers). But now that the right for athletics coaches to be paid is generally accepted, the focus has changed to actually getting paid: where the resources can be found, the mechanisms for paying, how much coaches deserve and the working environment and conditions under which they work.¹⁴

The issue of professionalisation also encompasses raising the image of coaching to that of a profession, regardless of whether an individual coach is paid or not and the standards that are expected of coaches.¹⁵ The following points are seen as keys to positive change and are therefore at the top of the agenda for the national and Area coaches associations:

- requirements for education and certification;
- a commitment to long learning;
- means to assess coaching effectiveness;
- contracts between coaches and their athletes;
- maintaining high ethical standards.

In 2004, the IAAF adopted the aim of promoting the idea of coaching as a profession as a central element of its development programme. In addition to its support for coaches associations, it added a level of education to the CECS. This top level of the system, known as the IAAF Academy, offers instruction to prepare coaches for the main roles in athletics coaching where a reasonable salary can be expected:

- as a chief coach or another position in a coaching structure;
- as the coach of an elite athlete;
- as an educator or coaching development director.

Later, the specialty of Youth Chief Coach was added to the programme.

Ethics

By the nature of their work coaches come into contact with young people and serve as role models. In some cases, they become public figures that are recognised through the media. What they say and do at any time can have an impact on others so it is important that they behave correctly, demonstrate positive values and promote principles of fair play that are the foundation for the sport of athletics.

The situation is complicated by cultural and social differences across the countries where athletics is practiced and, more recently, by the commercialisation of the sport. The potential for athletes and their coaches to make significant amounts of money or a dependence on support that is contingent on success in competition creates a logic, pressure and temptation to use doping or to cheat in other ways.

Governing bodies such as the IAAF and the national federations in athletics can and do create and enforce rules for the good of their sport and all its stakeholders. Just as important as the legal dimension is the promotion of values and ensuring that each individual understands his/her responsibilities. An approach in this area has been the publication of ethical or honour codes.^{16, 17}

The IAAF has sought to promote this understanding through its CECS and the publi-

cation of its own code of ethics¹⁸, which calls on coaches to:

- respect basic human rights;
- respect the dignity of each individual;
- ensure a safe environment for athletics activities;
- respect the rules of competition;
- respect competition officials;
- encourage athletes to accept responsibility for their own actions, conduct and performance;
- demonstrate leadership in the prevention of doping and other forms of cheating;
- refrain from “poaching” athletes from other coaches;
- assist athletes to obtain the best possible coaching, even if it means moving to another coach;
- obtain recognised coaching qualifications;
- respect the image of coaching and maintaining high standards of behaviour and appearance;
- cooperate with all individuals and agencies that could play a role in the development of the athlete.

Conclusion

It can be seen from this overview that the management of coaches in athletics is a wide-ranging topic that encompasses a number of complex issues. The organisations in the sport need to take a serious and systematic approach to addressing them if the sport is to continue its development and play an important role in society. It is hoped that by identifying and classifying the issues this article has promoted awareness, contributed to the general understanding and helped to create progress in this area.

NOTES

- 1 The New Oxford Dictionary of English (1998). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 2 JONES, R. L. (ed.) (2006). *The sports coach as educator: re-conceptualising sports coaching*. London, New York: Routledge.
- 3 KIDMAN, L. (2005). *Athlete-centred coaching: developing inspired and inspiring people*. Christchurch: Innovative Print Communications.
- 4 MARTENS, R. (2004). *Successful coaching* (3rd ed.) Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics.
- 5 SAUNDERS, R. (2005). A humanistic coaching perspective. *Modern Athlete and Coach*, Adelaide, 43:1, 14-16.
- 6 For an interesting discussion of the state of athletics coaching structures and issues around the world see GADEA, O.; LOPEZ, V.; OBAJIMI, R.; SANDERSON, L. & SHUYONG, F. (2000). *Selected Coaching Situations*. *New Studies in Athletics*, 15:1, 25-33.
- 7 GLAD, B. (1989). *Coaching systems: An IAAF Development Report*. *New Studies in Athletics* 4:1, 47-55.
- 8 The first Area coaches association, the European Athletics Coaches Association, was founded in 1960 and by 2002 there were associations in all six IAAF Areas. For a deeper discussion of the IAAF's aims and policy see LOCATELLI, E. (2003) *Beyond the CECS Horizon*. *New Studies in Athletics*, 18:2, 37-41.
- 9 See PERIAC, K. (2004). *Women in high performance track and field coaching in Australia: missing in action*. *Modern Athlete and Coach*, Adelaide, 42:4, 13-18.
- 10 The earliest examples we found with just a cursory effort are HOOLE, F. (1888), *The Science and Art of Training. A Handbook for Athletes*. London and DOWNER, A.R. (1902, republished in 1982). *Running Recollections and How to Train*. Tarland (Aberdeenshire): Balgownie Books.
- 11 See CAMPBELL, S. (1993). *Coach education around the world*. *Sport Science Review*, 2:2, 62-74.
- 12 THOMPSON, P. (2007). *Meeting the needs of coaches and athletes, now and in the future: the new five-level IAAF coaches education and certification system*. *New Studies in Athletics*, 22:3, 69-79.
- 13 For recommendations on how coaching support websites should be set up see BLANCHONETTE, P. & STEWART, M. (2002). *A collaborative coaching environment for Australian athletics success: the online solution*. *Modern Athlete and Coach*, 40:3, 9-11.
- 14 DICK, F. (2000). *It's time for coaches to take care of business*. *New Studies in Athletics*, 15:1, 19-24.
- 15 WOODMAN, L. (1993). *Coaching: A science, an art, and an emerging profession*. *Sport Science Review*, 2:2, 1-13.
- 16 HANEY, C. J.; LONG, B.C. & HOWELL-JONES, G. (1998). *Coaching as a profession: Ethical concerns*. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 10:2, 240-250.
- 17 No Author (1998). *Coaches' code of ethics*. *Track & Field Coaches Review*, 98:3, 42.
- 18 THOMPSON, P.J. L. (2009). *Introduction to Coaching. The Official IAAF Guide to Coaching Athletics* (pp. 215-216). Monaco: International Association of Athletics Federations .