International Council for Coaching Excellence Position Statement
“Professionalisation of Sport Coaching as a Global Process of Continuous Improvement”

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The contribution that sport coaches make to society has received growing recognition among policy-makers over the last decade. Sport coaching is no longer only associated with professional and Olympic sport, trophies, and medals, and it is regularly proposed as an activity that contributes to the development of individuals, communities, and societies. Unfortunately, sport coaching has also been associated with negative outcomes, such as institutionalized doping, abuse of athletes, and match fixing. The level of scrutiny and expectations on coaches are higher than ever, and, therefore, more and more countries and sport organizations are examining how coaches are currently recruited, educated, developed, supported, employed, represented, and recognized. In the current landscape, the need to review the existing International Council for Coaching Excellence position statement on “Sport Coaching as a Profession,” written in 2011, is paramount. The 2021 position statement takes into account policy, practice, and research developments over the last decade to propose a way forward for sport coaching over the next 10 years.

Keywords: coach development, coaching policy, professionalisation, sport coaching, systems

This position statement is the result of a consultation process that was carried out in 2021 as part of project CoachForce21, an Erasmus+ co-funded initiative co-led by the International Council for Coaching Excellence and Leeds Beckett University. It is organized in two parts. First, the principal and extended position statements are presented. Subsequently, a short background and rationale paper are offered as supplementary information. The development of these documents took place in four stages. Stage 1 saw the CoachForce21 expert group develop an outline of the contents of the position statement. Stage 2 included the development of a first full draft of the statement and the rationale paper by the core authors. Stage 3 was composed of a global consultation with the International Council for Coaching Excellence (ICCE) member base. Finally, Stage 4 entailed the development of the final version based on the feedback received. The statement is intended to cover the period 2021–2030; however, it will be subject to periodical review and, if necessary, amended.

Principal Statement

In the context of the International Sport Coaching Framework (ICCE, ASOIF, & LBU, 2013) and the work conducted by ICCE members globally over the last 10 years, ICCE:

• Demands that the rights of sport coaches to education, development, appropriate recognition, and safe and ethical practicing conditions must be protected.
• Proposes that countries and national and international federations commit to a process of continuous coaching system improvement that powers a similar process of continuous individual coach improvement.
• Encourages national and international lead coaching organizations to develop appropriate professional standards that guide relevant quality assurance and licensing systems.
• Recognizes that all of the aforementioned recommendations are context dependent and must be interpreted and implemented locally.

Extended Statement

In the context of the International Sport Coaching Framework (ICCE, ASOIF, & LBU, 2013) and the work conducted by ICCE members globally over the last 10 years, ICCE:

Acknowledges that

• Sport coaches make a significant contribution to society by helping millions of participants achieve their personal goals and by delivering broader community outcomes.
• Sport coaches constitute a significant workforce globally—albeit with a blended profile (volunteer, part time, and full time) and clearly defined, yet overlapping, domains (participation and performance).
• Sport coaches must be supported to acquire the relevant knowledge, skills, and competences to fulfill the demands of their various roles.

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Recognizes that

- Sport coaching is currently undergoing a period of substantial growth and development, which carries increased levels of public and academic scrutiny.
- Substantial gains have been made in many countries to enhance the standing of coaching, including the creation of coaching laws, the regulation of the right to practice, and the improvement of coach education, development, and employment pathways.
- Aforementioned, there are areas where progress has been limited, including the development of national licencing schemes, optimal data collection, statistics and monitoring structures, functional and impactful representation bodies for coaches, paid employment opportunities, standards and training for the Coach Developer workforce, and Continuous Professional Development processes.
- Therefore, coaching cannot, at this moment, withstand a direct comparison to other long-standing professions.

Proposes that

- Rather than a binary “YES” or “NO” option, the professionalization of sport coaching is better understood as a long-term ambition and process of continuous improvement that aims to guarantee the quality of participant experiences and protect the rights of coaches and athletes.
- This process requires the coming together of a motivated and sufficiently resourced coalition of stakeholders, typically led by a National Lead Agency for Coaching, that can plan, implement, and periodically review its progress, using an approach that considers all elements of the system and their unique roles and interactions.

Urges Sport Coaches to

- Play an active part in the decision-making process related to the improvement of sport coaching.
- Where appropriate and feasible, come together under the umbrella of single- or multi-sport coaches’ associations to enhance the voice of the coach and its articulation to funders and decision-making bodies.
- Commit to a personal and individualised process of continuous development and lifelong learning according to their coaching role and practice domain.

Encourage National Lead Agencies for Sport Coaching to

- Adopt a systems perspective to the continuous improvement of sport coaching.
- Examine and understand what professionalization means for sport coaching within their national historical and social milieu.
- Carefully consider the goals for sport coaching in their specific context, including good governance, recruitment, diversity, education, development, support, employment, recognition, regulation, representation, ethical practice, licensing, research, statistics, and tracking.
- Design a long-term development plan with clear short- and mid-term actions that create and maintain momentum.

- Recognize the central role of the coach in the social dialogue in sport and thus bring the Voice of the Coach to the fore of this process by stimulating consultation and representation at the individual and organizational levels.

Background and Rationale Paper

Introduction

The contribution sport coaches make to society has received growing recognition among policy-makers over the last decade (Council of the European Union, 2017, 2020). Sport coaching is no longer only associated with professional and Olympic sport, trophies, and medals, and it is regularly proposed as an activity that contributes to the development of individuals, communities, and societies. Unfortunately, sport coaching has also been associated with negative outcomes, such as institutionalized doping, abuse of athletes, and match fixing. The level of scrutiny and expectations on coaches are higher than ever, and, therefore, more and more countries and sport organizations are examining how coaches are currently recruited, educated, developed, supported, employed, represented, and recognized.

In the current landscape, the need to review the existing ICCE position statement on “Sport Coaching as a Profession” (Duffy et al., 2011) is paramount. The 2021 position statement takes into account policy, practice, and research developments over the last decade to propose a way forward for sport coaching over the next 10 years.

The 2011 Position Statement

In 2011, Duffy and colleagues conducted an analysis of the potential for sport coaching to become a profession. Sport coaching was found not to be fully aligned with recognized professional traits. For instance, it was found to be lacking in areas such as common purpose, knowledge base, representational organization, “right to practice” provision, and ethical practice.

In addition, the complexity of sport coaching as an occupational area was also highlighted. This is reflected in the multiplicity of status categories (i.e., precoach, volunteer coach, part-time paid coach, and full-time paid coach) and coaching domains (i.e., children, youth participation, adult participation, emerging athlete, high performance athlete, etc.). Each of these statuses and domains was found to have their own characteristics and varying potential to meet the recognized traits of a profession. The authors thus advocated that coaching should be considered as a “blended professional area operating within the wider field of sport and physical activity” (p. 93) and that the aim should be to create “a strong professional identity within a blended model” (p. 113). This identity, the statement noted, could manifest in different ways across sports and countries.

Against this backdrop, the statement defined a series of indicative actions to guide the process of professionalization going forward. These actions included clear purpose, knowledge, organization, and ethics and were intended as the basis for ongoing dialogue, research, and development. The 2011 document recognized that these elements play out differently across national and sporting contexts and recommended that any application of these shared principles would require careful localised adaptation.

Status of the Coaching Workforce Today

Research-based estimates indicate that there are between 5 and 9 million active sport coaches in the European Union (Lara-Bercial
et al., 2017). This represents between 1% and 2% of the total population. It is reasonable to expect similar statistics across most of the developed world and, increasingly, in developing countries. Sport coaches therefore constitute a significant workforce globally.

Recent research conducted in the European Union (Lara-Bercial, Moustakas et al., 2020; Moustakas et al., 2021) has revealed a contrasting picture in relation to the indicative actions proposed by the 2011 statement and the recognized traits of professions. A majority of countries now have: Progress, however, appears less apparent in relation to the existence of:

- National licencing schemes and quality assurance mechanisms to actively regulate and guarantee safe and ethical coaching practices.
- Optimal data collection structures and systems to monitor and track the status, education, progression, evolution, and needs of the coaching workforce. A full picture of the total number of coaches, their demographic characteristics, qualification levels, and employment status remains unavailable.
- Standards for the selection and training of the Coach Developer workforce.
- Regular and high-quality continuous professional development processes and opportunities.
- Functional and impactful organisation and representation bodies for coaches (i.e., coaches’ associations).
- Paid employment opportunities for the entire workforce.
- A legal definition of coaching and specific laws to regulate practice.
- Recognized coaching as a profession within their national professional register.
- An organization or governmental department tasked with regulating and developing coaching.
- Formal occupational and ethical standards for coaches.
- Coaching qualifications aligned with and included within national qualifications frameworks.
- Involvement of higher education in the education of coaches as well as in the creation of an evidence-based knowledge base.

**Professionalization in 2021 and Beyond**

Since the publication of the 2011 statement, the debate about the readiness of coaching to pursue professionalization and the benefits of taking such an approach have intensified. Whilst, among policymakers, there seems to be an emerging agreement that coaching requires some regulatory drivers to maximize the chance of wider individual and societal outcomes, academics have expressed a number of concerns. Specifically, some authors have:

- Interpreted the overt regulation of coaching as an attempt to control coaches rather than to develop coaching (Cassidy et al., 2016; Taylor & Garratt, 2010).
- Suggested that the blended nature of the workforce makes it irreconcilable to aspire to professional status (Taylor & Garratt, 2013).
- Proposed that only professional coaches working in high-performance sport should be subject to anything akin to professional regulation (Lyle & Cushion, 2017).

Despite the aforementioned concerns, our research and practical experiences of working with governments and national and international federations indicate that positive steps toward contextualized forms of professionalization are still a valid aspiration for many of them. Importantly, however, a change of focus is proposed in the way professionalization is generally understood and pursued.

We hereby propose that the focus is shifted from professionalization as a single destination toward a continuous long-term aspirational process of occupational improvement based on system development (North et al., 2019). The basis for this shift arises from our ongoing research showing that countries are at different stages along this journey and that the key steps and processes are highly dependent on a range of contextual factors—culture, social structures, politics, and economics (Moustakas et al., 2021).

Moreover, case studies show that, even for countries and sports who have made significant progress in increasing the status of coaching as a profession, this has not been a quick process and that, in most cases, this has taken place over a decade of planned and coordinated small, successive steps, typically informed by a systems view of sport coaching (Lara-Bercial, Bales, & North, 2020).

The notion of professionalization has thus evolved to encompass not only the regulation of the right to practice and the remuneration status of sport coaches but their recruitment, education, development, support, employment, and recognition. This broader understanding lends itself better to the understanding of the professionalization of coaching as a continuous process of improvement of the overall coaching system. This, in turn, powers a similar process of continuous individual coach improvement which has a direct and positive impact on the participants’ experiences.

Importantly, depending on contextual conditions, these developments may happen at a national level or be limited to the efforts of specific federations or governing bodies of sport. Likewise, these processes may include short-, mid-, and long-term steps and goals ranging from improvements to qualifications, to the enshrining of coaching as a profession in national laws. Continuous improvement of sport coaches and coaching is the premise and the outcome.

Despite the flexibility of this approach, the guiding aspiration remains that suitably qualified and developed coaches carry out their practice within a national regulatory framework of occupational and ethical standards and qualifications aimed at guaranteeing the quality and safety of coaching activities; the fulfillment of participant outcomes; and the promotion and protection of coaches’ rights, rewards, and recognition.

**Conclusions**

Sport coaches and sport coaching are significant elements of the fabric of modern societies. Improvements to education, development, and regulation of practice have been proposed as mechanisms to guarantee the quality and safety of the participant experience and to protect coaches’ rights. Advancing sport coaching as a profession, however, is a complex and challenging proposition, which requires carefully contextualized solutions. Organizations and individuals interested in driving this process must engage and influence all relevant stakeholders—from government and institutions to the general public—to unlock more of society’s capital and human resources. Preparing the ground and laying the necessary foundations are prerequisites to allowing steady improvement over time.
Author Biographies

Dr Sergio Lara-Bercial is a Professor of Sport Coaching at Leeds Beckett University in the UK and the Vice-President for Strategy and Development for the International Council for Coaching Excellence. He has published widely in a variety of sport-related topics and delivered keynotes, lectures, and workshops across five continents. Sergio is also the co-founder of ICOACHKIDSTM, a global movement helping coaches put kids first in sport, and consults for multiple high-level organisations such as Nike, UEFA, and FIBA. He is also a former international basketball coach for Great Britain and at club level has coached teams to 17 National Titles in the UK.

John Bales is the President of the International Council for Coaching Excellence (ICCE), former CEO of the Coaching Association of Canada, and former Olympic coach. Under John’s leadership, ICCE has developed widely adopted reference documents such as the International Sport Coaching Framework, the International Coach Developer Framework, and the International Coaching Degree Standards. John regularly consults with multiple stakeholders across the globe to support the development of coaching as a profession.

Dr Julian North is a Professor of Sport Coaching at Leeds Beckett University and the Director of its Research Centre for Sport Coaching. He has been a social and sport researcher for nearly 30 years in a variety of policy, practice, and academic roles in the UK and Australia. Julian has authored numerous articles, books, book chapters, and reports in sport, coaching, and beyond. He also served as the Chair of the Research Committee of ICCE between 2019 and 2021. Julian is also a volunteer community football coach in Leeds (UK).

Dr Ladislav Petrovic is the Secretary General of ICCE and a Board Member of the European Network for Sport Education (ENSE). Over more than 20 years working in coach development, Ladislav has participated as an expert in several international and European projects and expert groups in coaching, coach education, good governance, and employment. Before joining ICCE, he played several roles in coach development at the national and international level in Budapest, Hungary, as director of the Institute of Coaching and Sport Education and director of International Coaching Course – a joint program with the International Olympic Committee Olympic Solidarity.

Guillermo Calvo is currently undertaking his PhD at Leeds Beckett University exploring how different countries support the development of coaching as a profession. He also works for ICCE and ICOACHKIDSTM supporting a variety of coach development projects. As part of this work, Guillermo co-led CoachForce21, an Erasmus+ co-funded project aiming to improve coach recognition and representation throughout Europe. He has been a basketball coach for over 20 years and for the last decade, a Technical Director for coach and player development for a large club in Madrid (Spain).

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