Professional Playing Experience Does Not Lead to Professional Coaching Success

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to analyze the relationship between coaches' professional playing experience and their professional coaching success. The sample (n = 134) included coaches who had the equivalent of three full seasons of head coaching experience in either Major League Baseball (MLB) (n = 46), the National Basketball Association (NBA) (n = 38) or the National Football League (NFL) (n = 50) as determined by the total number of games coached between the years 1997-2007. ANOVAs revealed no significant differences between coaches with more or less professional playing experience and professional coaching success as determined by professional winning percentage. Further, no significant relationship was found between professional playing experience and professional coaching success in MLB (r = -0.16), NBA (r = -0.05) or NFL (r = 0.00). It was concluded that professional playing experience was not a predictor of professional level coaching success. These findings support the notion that sources of knowledge other than playing experience may be necessary and useful in developing coaching expertise.

Key words: coaching, playing experience, coaching success, professional coaching
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In their seminal work, Simon and Chase (1973) built a convincing case that those reaching the elite level of performance do so only after extended experience in their domain. Their research with chess masters led them to conclude that it takes at least 10 years of study, practice and experience before consistently winning at the highest levels of the sport. Subsequent research in a variety of domains further established experience as an important pre-requisite to the development of expertise (Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Ericsson, Charness, Feltovich, & Hoffman, 2006).

Recent work in expertise has, however, begun to question precisely what kind of experience contributes to the development of expertise in one's domain. It appears that at different stages in developing expertise, different experiences have differentiated impact. For example, practice under the supervision of a knowledgeable coach or mentor appears to have a greater impact for those in the middle to later stages of development than it does for those new to the domain (Feltovich, Prietula, & Ericsson, 2006). The exact combination of practice, study and prolonged engagement in activities appears to offer the ingredients, but the formula for each individual factor looks to be far from conclusive at this time. Therefore, it seems that while experience is a necessary pre-requisite for becoming an expert, which experiences and at what level of competition remain largely unanswered questions.

The limited research on coaching expertise indicates that playing experience is a foundational experience for coaches. The successful coaches in a study completed by Gilbert, Cote and Mallet (2006) had accumulated thousands of hours of what the researchers described as “pre-coaching experience” (p. 72) as athletic competitors in organized sport. They noted a large variation in the total number of hours playing sport by coaches in the three sports studied (i.e., football, softball, volleyball). The researchers interpreted this finding to suggest that there may be a minimum threshold of athletic experience to become a successful coach. The 15 successful coaches, across three sports, averaged 13 years of athletic playing experience and appeared to be better than average performers in comparison to their peers. Most often, these coaches were starters or first-team athletes in their respective sports and, interestingly, few were team leaders or captains. It is important to note, however, that the level at which these coaches coached ranged from high school to college, with none of the coaches having coached in the professional ranks.

Extending the investigation experiences necessary for becoming a high-performance coach, Erickson, Cote and Fraser-Thomas (2007) studied the playing experiences of the 10 team and nine individual sport coaches at the university level. They found that playing experience was necessary but not sufficient in itself for one to become a high performance coach. In other words, their findings imply that coaches need some level of playing experience, but high-level playing experience alone does not insure coaching success. Further, the investigators suggest that what the coaches learned from their playing experiences potentially could be learned from other sources as well.
The lessons coaches gained from playing experience may differ depending on the sport. While LeUnes (2007) noted that having playing experience appears to be related to success as a head professional coach, this maxim may not be universally applied across all sports. He posited that American football may stand as an exception to the rule because of the role played by multiple assistant coaches and the many players needing coaching. Head football coaches, therefore, devote as much to coaching and collaborating with assistant coaches, and have less time for individual players. The problem becomes compounded when one considers football requires players to have fundamentally different skill sets and a football team may have between 50-100 players on a single team. With that many athletes and the diversity of skill set, development needs make football coaching different from coaching other sports. A similar situation may exist with athletics (i.e., track & field).

In addition to learning the game, its skills, strategies, rules and rituals, Cushion (2007) suggested that playing experience provides another important lesson: understanding what it takes to coach. Specifically, he notes that: playing experiences give coaches an unusually good opportunity to learn about coaching from their own coaches... [and] a degree of ‘organisational socialization’ where playing serves as part of the broader apprenticeship: an inculcation into shared understandings regarding ideology and critical aspects of the occupation. (p. 134)

Playing experience may also give a coach firsthand knowledge of the emotions and competitive stresses that her/his players face (Hanin, 2007). Coaches with playing experience have a stronger and more entrenched level of empathy for the struggles and successes athletes go through in their athletic careers. Playing experience may, therefore, provide a coach with insights and knowledge for structuring practices and programs to meet the emotional and competitive needs of athletes.

Previous research appears to support the notion that playing experience plays a role in the success of coaches, particularly at the elite or professional level. Yet, to date, there is no completed research specifically addressing the relationship between professional (the highest level of one’s sport) playing experience and success as a professional coach. Specifically, it is not known if playing experience at the professional level is an important prerequisite for success as a coach at that same level. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to analyze the relationship between coaches’ professional playing experience and their professional coaching success.

**Method**

**Participants**

Included in the sample (N = 134) were professional coaches who had the equivalent of three full seasons of head coaching experience in either Major League Baseball (MLB) (n = 46), the National Basketball Association (NBA) (n = 38) or the National Football League (NFL) (n = 50) as determined by the total number of games coached between the years 1997-2007. It should be noted that baseball, basketball, and football all have multiple professional leagues around the globe. However, these leagues were chosen because they are generally considered the pinnacle of their respective sports and the athletes playing in them represent the top performers in the world.
The criterion of three full coaching seasons was selected so only those coaches who were established and recognized head coaches that had coached a significant amount of games at the professional level would be included in the sample. These would be head coaches with enough time to establish team policies, procedures and practices that would make them fully accountable for their success as a coach and limit the residual elements from previous coaches that may have impacted the wins or losses of a team. This criterion also eliminated interim head coaches who may have been filling in while clubs made head coaching changes. It is possible that setting the criterion of three years minimum league coaching experience may have eliminated from the sample coaches whose initial attempts as a head coach were so unsuccessful that they were not rehired by any club. This concept has been referred to as ‘survivorship bias’ (Brown, Goetzmann, Ibbotson, & Ross, 1992) which would suggest that the sample is biased toward the most successful coaches by eliminating coaches who did not survive their coaching experience during this 1997-2007 time period. If this were the case, the sample of this study would be biased in favor of more successful coaches. But as the purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between coaches' professional playing experience and their professional coaching success, having a sample potentially biased toward more successful coaches was viewed as a strength and not a limitation to this investigation. Coaches, therefore, coaching a total of at least 496 games in MLB (162 per MLB season), 246 in the NBA (82 per NBA season), and 48 in the NFL (16 per NFL season) during this time period, were included in the sample. If a coach had several 'partial' seasons, but the total number of games coached in those seasons was equivalent to three full seasons of games, the coach was included in the sample.

The coaches' professional coaching success was measured by a winning percentage which was calculated for each coach by dividing the total number of victories by the total number of games coached in their professional lifetime, regardless of the timeframe in which those games were coached.

Data Collection

For this study, data collected included each coach's (a) years of playing experience in the MLB, NBA, and the NFL, and (b) professional coaching success as measured by the winning percentage in the same respective leagues. A year of professional playing experience was credited to a coach if they were on the active roster of a professional team for greater than 50% of the games in a given season.

On-line databases managed by each professional league, most notably from the websites of the teams in each professional league served as primary sources for data collection. National sporting league and association websites (Baseball: www.mlb.com; Basketball: www.nba.com; and Football: www.nfl.com) served as the primary sources from which data were gathered. Other sources consulted included specific sport reference sites (i.e., www.baseballreference.com, www.basketballreference.com; www.pro-football-reference.com; www.databasefootball.com), www.answers.com, and the popular media affiliated source for sport information www.espn.com. When discrepancies arose between sites, the researchers deferred to the sites kept by each professional league.
Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated for each sport to determine: (a) average number of years coached, (b) range in coaching experience, (c) average winning percentage, and (d) range in winning percentages (see Table 1). Data were analyzed for each sport using an ANOVA to determine if professional playing experience was a predictor of professional coaching success. Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated to test the relationship between the coaches’ playing experience and their success as measured by their winning percentage (see Table 2).

Results

The descriptive statistics revealed that MLB coaches \( (M = 10.02 \text{ years}; SD= 6.64) \) had almost twice the amount of professional playing experience as NBA coaches \( (M = 5.32 \text{ years}; SD= 5.06) \), and almost five times more professional playing experience than NFL coaches \( (M = 2.10 \text{ years}; SD= 3.82) \). The years of playing experience of these coaches seems similar to the average athlete’s career longevity in each of these leagues respectively: MLB players 5.6 years (Witnauer, Rogers, & St. Onge, 2007), NBA players 4.3 years (Norton & Olds, 2001), and the NFL is 4.7 (Norton & Olds, 2001). Given the historical and physical nature of each sport, these numbers stand to reason. Collectively, 78 out of the 134 (58%) coaches participating in this study had professional playing experience. In each of the three sports, there were coaches who had no professional playing experience at the highest level in which they coached. Football had the greatest number of coaches with no professional playing experience with 35 of the 50 (70%) football coaches included in this study having no NFL playing experience. Fourteen (37%) of the 38 basketball coaches had no NBA playing experience. Among the 46 MLB coaches, only five (11%) had no MLB playing experience. The greatest amount of professional playing experience of any coach was 21 years for a MLB coach. The greatest amount of professional playing experience in the NBA and NFL were 15 and 14 years, respectively (See Table 1).

The winning percentages for the coaches were collectively similar. The average winning percentage in MLB coaches was .498, with a range from .383 to .568. In the NBA, the average winning percentage was .510, with a range from .280 to .700. The NFL coaches' average winning percentage was .509, with a range from .292 to .661 (See Table 1).

An ANOVA was calculated to test the hypothesis that there are no significant differences between coaches with more or less professional playing experience and their professional coaching success as determined by professional winning percentage. The results of the ANOVA revealed no significant differences between coaches' professional playing experience and their winning percentage as a professional coach in the MLB, \( F(1, 45) = 0.782, p = .70 \), NBA, \( F(1, 37) = 0.658, p = .76 \), or NFL, \( F(1, 49) = 0.710, p = .71 \). In other words, coaches with greater amounts of professional playing experience did not experience significantly greater or lesser success as a professional coach over those with less or no playing experience. Professional playing experience was, therefore, not a significant predictor of professional coaching success.
To further test the relationship between playing experience and coaching success, Pearson product moment correlations were calculated for the coaches in the three sports. The results failed to identify a significant relationship between professional playing experience and professional coaching success in MLB \((r = -0.16)\), NBA \((r = -0.05)\) or NFL \((r = 0.00)\). The results suggest no relationship between the professional playing experiences of these coaches and their professional coaching success.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to analyze the relationship between elite coaches' professional playing experience and their professional coaching success. Based on the descriptive statistics, it appears that the majority of coaches in MLB and the NBA had played in the league where they later served as a coach. The majority of coaches in the NFL, however, had no playing experience at the level in which they were coaching. This finding lends some support to Mielke's (2007) research who in studying a similar population of coaches concluded that "to become a head coach/manger in the major professional sports, an individual would typically begin as a player in that sport and at that level" (p. 108). It should be noted, however, that in Mielke's study, he too found that the majority of National Football League coaches had no playing experience. These findings also appear to support LeUnes' (2007) conclusion that

... it seems clear that having been in the arena as a player does relate fairly strongly to being successful as head coach at the professional level. It is interesting to note that (American) football is the exception to the rule. It may well be that being a highly successful professional football coach has a lot more to do with creating and maintaining an environment where assistant coaches and players can succeed than it does with the actual execution of X's and O's, which may well be tied to actual playing experience (p. 124).

The findings of this study, along with previous research (LeUnes, 2007; Mielke, 2007) offer strength to James' (2007) conclusion that at the professional level, there may be significant differences in the professional playing experiences of coaches of different sports.

While there may have been differences in the amount of professional playing experiences of the coaches in this study, no significant differences were found between the coaches' professional playing experience and their professional winning percentage (success) in any of the sports studied. In other words, professional playing experience was not a predictor of professional coaching success for the participants of this study. At first glance, these findings may appear at odds with previous research which determined playing experience to be important to learning the rudiments of coaching (Cushion, 2007; James, 2007) and understanding player emotions and stress (Hanin, 2007). If one considers that the coaches in this study, in contrast to coaches in previous studies, were all professional level coaches, and the level of playing experience used as the criterion measure was professional playing experience, therein may lie the distinguishing factor between the current study and previous work. While beyond the scope of the present study, it may be entirely possible that all the coaches in the current sample had competitive playing experience at some level, but not all had playing experience at the elite level in which they coached.
The findings of this study would, however, appear to support and extend the work of Gilbert, et al. (2006) who found a large variance in the playing experience of elite level coaches. They suggested that there may be a minimal threshold of athletic experience in the background of successful coaches. Further, the results of their study suggested that the maximum threshold of athletic experience is somewhere below the highest level possible. Additionally, when studying university level coaches Erickson, et al. (2007) found that some level of playing experience was perhaps necessary, but not sufficient for becoming a high performance coach. The findings of the current study would support their conclusion that what coaches learned from professional playing experience could be learned from other sources as well. The coaches in this study did not all have playing experience at the level in which they coached, yet they found success. This finding suggests that, like the coaches in the Erickson, et al. (2007) study, they learned what was necessary to be a professional coach from sources other than playing experience.

This notion that a coach can learn what is necessary to be a coach at the professional level outside of professional playing experience finds support in studies investigating knowledge acquisition of expert coaches. This literature demonstrates that highly successful coaches learn as much as possible about their sport, athletes and coaching (Schempp, Templeton, & Clark, 1999) through sources such as, but not limited to, other coaches, coaching experience, books, athletes, workshops, certification programs, magazines, journals, films, formal education, and other popular media (Schempp et al. 1999; Schempp, 2006; Schempp & McCullick, 2009; Vickers, 2008). Additionally, the expert coaches continually improved performance through vigilant monitoring of their progress, goal setting and creating strategies to achieve their coaching goals (Schempp et al. 2006; Schempp, et al. 2007). The amount and combination of playing experience and other sources of knowledge that lead to success at the professional coaching ranks might be a topic for future research.

Empirically, the findings of this study, particularly when aligned with previous research, can hardly be considered conclusive relative to the importance of playing experience for coaching success at the professional level. The amount of playing experience accumulated by the coaches in this study varied both within and between the three sports studied. The findings of this study suggest, however, that to be a successful coach at the professional level, one does not necessarily need professional playing experience. Precisely how much playing experience and at what level might be considered baseline or minimum for success in coaching remains to be identified, and therefore would appear to offer a direction for future research.

As Gilbert et al. (2006) noted, coaches spend a disproportionately amount more time in roles where the stated intent is not learning to coach and these experiences are a part of a coach’s development as much is learned in these situations. A professional playing career is such an experience that can serve as knowledge source that surely adds to a coach’s knowledge base but as the findings of this study indicate, does not guarantee success as a professional coach. While playing experience meant nothing in terms of winning percentage in this study, it would be premature to conclude that professional coaches reap no benefits if he (or she) played professionally.
In interpreting the findings of this study, in particular when comparing the findings of this study to other research, it is important to remember that the coaches in this study held several characteristics that may make direct comparisons to other coaches problematic. First, the coaches in this study were all males from the USA. Second, they all coached professional athletes in professional leagues. The cultural bias, and differences between professional ranks and other levels of coaching (e.g., Olympic, collegiate, national elite) may introduce factors that bear upon the connection between same-league playing experience and coaching success. Third, the playing experience measured was professional experience only, and more specifically, playing experience in the same league in which they coached (which is considered the highest level leagues in their respective sports). It is quite possible, and highly probable, that these coaches had playing experience in their respective sports, but at a lower level in which they coached.

The relationship between professional playing experience and professional coaching success warrants more investigation and would be, perhaps, best served through the use of other research paradigms and by seeking added sources of data. A study of professional athletes of coaches who have played at the professional level and those that have not would lend insight into what professional playing experience means for the role and responsibilities of being a professional coach. Likewise, professional coaches with and without professional playing experience would be an excellent source of informing coaches and coach educators what it brings to bear on their job. Both studies would go a long way toward meeting Werthner and Trudel’s (2006) call for studies that help researchers, coach educators, sport psychologists, and aspiring coaches develop “an awareness of and understanding [of] the many different ways coaches may learn” (p. 210) and help all involved work with coaches more effectively.

However, these findings may have some practical relevance. Many teams and organizations in a variety of sports rely on and adhere to well-established tradition and customs derived from collected wisdom for decision-making (Lewis, 2003). One of these is the belief that to be credible as a coach one should have also been a player, and, preferably, at the level at which the person aspires to coach. The data from this study suggest that it would behoove those charged with hiring coaches for professional franchises and clubs not to bestow excessive credence to the notion that in order to be a successful coach one must have been a professional player of that sport. To those aspiring to become professional coaches this may be a relief as the data unequivocally indicate that professional playing experience is a pre-requisite to successful coaching at the professional level.
### Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Coaches in MLB, NBA, and NFL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>MLB (n = 46)</th>
<th>NBA (n = 38)</th>
<th>NFL (n = 50)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% with playing experience</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average playing experience (years)</td>
<td>10.02</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of playing experience (years)</td>
<td>0-21</td>
<td>0-15</td>
<td>0-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average winning percentage</td>
<td>.498</td>
<td>.510</td>
<td>.509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of winning percentage</td>
<td>.383-.568</td>
<td>.280-.700</td>
<td>.292-.661</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: Relation Between Professional Playing Experience and Professional Coaching Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>MLB (n = 46)</th>
<th>NBA (n = 38)</th>
<th>NFL (n = 50)</th>
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<td>.658</td>
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<td>$r$</td>
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References


