Inside the Call Room: Developing High-Performance Coaches in Ireland: A Commentary

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Introduction

This commentary highlights and explores some key issues surrounding the education and development of aspiring high-performance coaches and those currently working in this setting in Ireland. As Jones, Armour, & Potrac (2004) contend, an investigation into top level coaches’ views of their educational needs and wants could provide valuable information for those involved in the design and implementation of coach education schemes. In addition to identifying desired content, this line of inquiry could also address issues about the mode of course delivery and assessment (Jones et al., 2004). Drawing on the applications of the first phase of the Irish Institute of Sport Pursuit of Excellence Programme (PEP), issues surrounding professional development activities for high-performance coaches are examined, including broader emerging/underlying trends. While the value of this work is to signpost the most relevant coach development opportunities for organizations responsible for coach development (i.e., Coaching Ireland and Irish Institute of Sport), the findings may also be useful to similar organizations outside of Ireland.

Literature Context

The educational and knowledge requirements of elite coaches have been a topic since the 1980s, with research focusing on the origins and the relative value of knowledge gained by these coaches (Gould, Hodge, Peterson, & Petlichkoff, 1987; Salmela, 1995; Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2003; Irwin, Hanton, & Kerwin, 2004; Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998). A range of factors relating to the developmental trajectories of coaches from early coaching experiences to highly developed practice have been highlighted by various authors (Gould et al., 1987; Salmela, 1995; Jones et al., 2003; Irwin et al., 2004; Bloom et al., 1998; Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003). These have included elements of experiential learning, mentoring, shadowing, formal coach certification programs and previous sporting experiences. While much research has been concentrated in the participation context (Lyle, 2002), an increasing focus is now on preparing performance coaches, particularly those at the elite level (Salmela, 1994). In their work on coach development, Gilbert, Cote and Mallet (2006) noted that while a considerable amount of work has been conducted relating to the progression of athletes from novice to elite, a similar body of knowledge has yet to emerge in relation to elite coach development.

The practical, multi-disciplinary and context-dependant nature of coaching make it difficult to capture in the form of competency-based coach development programs which has...
been the dominant approach to coach education in countries such as Ireland, the UK and Canada (Abraham, Collins, & Martindale, 2006). On a more practical note, organizations such as Coaching Ireland¹, the Irish Institute of Sport, the Trainerakademie, Sports Coach UK, the Canadian Coaching Association and Sport and Recreation New Zealand (SPARC) are currently attempting to consider alternatives to the competency-based approach which has limited applicability to coaching in elite sport. This is happening while new ways of understanding the development process have emerged. Authors such as Lave and Wenger (1991) and Hager (2005) point out that the traditional view of learning has been increasingly replaced with the focus on the person as a member of a socio-cultural community in which functions, tasks, activities and understandings do not exist in isolation, but rather as a system of broader systems of relations such as those found in workplaces. It also has application to the coach education/development context as was more recently discussed by Rynne (2008), who examined the work of elite coaches in the Australian context.

In developing high-performance coaches, it has been recognized that the most successful initiatives engage the participants in negotiating their development paths (Rynne, 2008). By involving coaches directly in defining, proposing and negotiating their development paths, the PEP encourages the personal agency of the individual (high-performance coaches), which is critical in facilitating meaningful learning for coaches. The PEP is unique in Ireland in that it is coach-driven rather than program-driven (yet institution-led).

Irish Context

Coach education programs in Ireland are a relatively recent phenomenon, with more formalized attempts emerging only during the 1990s (Coaching Strategy for Ireland, 2008-2012). Furthermore, the development of elite coaches has only been a serious focus since 2008, as has been reflected in the establishment of the Irish Institute of Sport (IIS) and the publication of the Coaching Strategy for Ireland. Currently, a range of different sports are actively looking to develop coaches for the performance context. This is reflected in the pursuit of sports such as athletics, badminton, hockey, swimming and tennis. The individual developmental needs and interests of (potential) elite coaches are currently being addressed by the IIS through the PEP.

¹ responsible for coach education in Ireland.
Discussion

Performance Coach Pursuit of Excellence Program

The PEP, which was initiated in 2009, reflects the recognition that high-performance coaches are essential to the success of athletes and is a targeted approach to supporting (potential) high-performance coaches. It provides coaches within the Irish high-performance sport system with the opportunity to apply for grant aid and access to expert support towards coaching professional development activities (IIS, 2009, PEP briefing document). The PEP aims to encourage coaches to consider their personal and professional growth by facilitating and assisting them to explore those areas of development and experience which provide them with learning opportunities to realize their coaching potential. Ultimately, the PEP aims to encourage coaches in constructing their own development path (and career plan) and is based on an ethos of continuous improvement (IIS, 2009, PEP briefing document).

Eligibility for applying to the PEP was that candidates were working primarily with athletes included on the Irish Sports Council's International Carding Scheme at the time of application. Candidates also had to be in one of the following categories: head coach, assistant head coach, personal coach to carded athlete(s) or retired athletes pursuing a coaching career (IIS, 2009, PEP briefing document).

Nineteen coaches were endorsed by their NGB in application to the PEP. Participants ranged in age from 28-55 years and ranged in experience from recently retired athletes who wanted to develop as coaches to head coaches of high-performance programs who sought to move into more administrative (directorship) roles. All applicants were from focus sports\(^2\) (i.e., triathlon, canoeing, cycling, swimming, athletics, boxing, hockey, rowing).

Gathering Data for Discussion

When applying to the PEP, coaches were encouraged to consider a number of areas including ascertaining their goals as high-performance coaches (and requirements in reaching these), their current position and a self-description of their coaching role. More specifically, the process involved completing an application which, apart from applicant details, asked coaches to outline and justify proposed development activities (including costs). Each applicant also had to include a supporting statement and personal biography (coaching history/background, coaching philosophy, etc.).

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\(^2\) The high performance unit currently supports 16 ‘focus sports’, through high-performance funding, to develop and enhance NGB performance planning (http://www.instituteofsport.ie).
achievements and goals), as well as a nominating national governing body endorsement. Coaches were then interviewed to discuss their applications in more detail. In addition to financial resourcing of individualized development opportunities, the PEP coaches were also invited to attend a series of workshops hosted by the IIS. These workshops were aimed at exploring issues surrounding coaches’ views of high-performance sport, coaches’ culture/mindset and how this informed their own coaching culture. The findings reported below were drawn from a qualitative analysis of the application materials.

**Findings**

Drawing on the PEP applications, several interesting issues, questions and possible tensions relating to high-performance coach development in Ireland have emerged. Given that sports coaching in Ireland (as in other countries) lacks a ‘professional’ status, it was not surprising that individuals went about their development in a largely *ad hoc* manner, presumably related to their often part-time (or volunteer) coaching status. This was irrespective of the coaches’ level of experience (i.e., whether just embarking on high performance coaching or having already worked in this environment for a considerable length of time).

Examining the proposed professional development activities of candidates highlighted a number of issues regarding valuable development opportunities (i.e., the relevance of formal coaching courses; the importance of interacting, shadowing and mentoring opportunities; and the importance of context in identifying meaningful development opportunities). These are interesting to explore as they offer valuable directions for program design and attempts to professionalize coaching. Just to note, a small number of candidates (three) indicated that their proposed development activities would aid them in transitioning into new roles (they found themselves at a juncture in terms of their career development). However, most of the applicants (16) were looking for specific opportunities or information to develop as coaches.

*The relevance of ‘formal’ coaching courses*

In line with the literature (Irwin et al., 2004; Erickson, Côté, & Fraser-Thomas, 2007), it emerged that formal coaching courses were chiefly of relevance to those less experienced (i.e., those recently embarking on their journey into performance coaching) and those who had not had the opportunity to experience formal courses. Only three of the 19 coaches applied for formal courses.

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3 These transitions included from athlete to coach (personal coach to a high performance senior athlete), from head coach to performance director and seeking supporting structures in the form of a HP centre to provide education for coach and support for athlete.
coach education courses and most were overseas and were not (yet) available through sports governing bodies in Ireland. Certification was seen as a way of fuelling credibility by formalizing their development pathway, as well as targeting specific areas of perceived weakness.

*The importance of interacting, shadowing and mentoring opportunities*

In contrast, exposure to a high-performance environment (training camps, clinics, program visits) was strongly advocated by 13 applicants. All applicants emphasized the value of visiting similar programs/set-ups overseas in order to ensure exposure to the high-performance environment which was not available in Ireland. The value lay in interacting, shadowing and being mentored by those perceived to be more experienced and successful coaches. These findings are similar to the work carried out by Irwin et al. (2004) which contended that “foreign experiences allowed the coaches to go beyond the boundaries of their existing knowledge” (p. 434).

*The importance of context in identifying meaningful development opportunities*

It was noteworthy that among the applicants, three were seeking to develop their managerial skills, suggesting their preparation for a transition to new roles (i.e., directorships). The wide variety of ways in which coaches defined their sport-specific roles and functions emerged from the applications. Here ‘coaching’ appeared to be an umbrella term including aspects of sports science and performance-related areas (e.g. sports massage, sports psychology, physiology, strength and conditioning). This highlights the unique circumstances of each sporting context and the ways in which this translates into a wide variety of specific coaching roles and functions. This raises the more practical question of what the design and delivery of coach education programs for the higher levels should entail and how this could be best catered for given the considerable variability and ambiguity regarding elite coaches’ (potential) roles and functions.

**Irish Institute of Sport: Comments**

This section highlights several interesting issues, questions and possible tensions of PEP from an institutional perspective. As PEP is a new area for the IIS, the first phase was intended to be exploratory based on an unpacking of the coaches’ perceptions of ‘expertise,’ ‘credibility’ and ‘professionalism.’ The underlying emphasis was on building (new) relationships both between coaches and between coaches and the IIS. This was facilitated through semi-structured
workshop with coaches, performance directors and CEOs from a variety of sports. The workshops were designed to explore the experiences of the participants in their professional roles; identify role demands, overlaps and conflicts and ultimately the development needs of the participants. Issues raised by coaches included the complexity of and challenges for coaches in dealing with complex relationships (e.g., personal coaches; science, medicine and lifestyle professionals; parents; corporate governance; budgets; external institutions and media) associated with coaching elite athletes and the importance of continuous professional development. There were two key benefits of the workshops: firstly the sharing of experiences, peer support and community building was reported as highly beneficial by the participants; secondly, the emphasis in coaches’ thinking towards the enhancement of people (rather than technical components) was redirected as this was seen as critical in impacting positively on athletes.

As the first phase of the PEP was exploratory, the second phase (Autumn of 2010) aims to address some of the shortcomings which emerged from phase one. The launch of this expanded second phase, aimed to widen the spectrum of potential candidates to include developmental level coaches. The program will continue to explore the coaches’ perceptions of the issues surrounding their work. It will also include the development of mentor-mentee relationships, athlete talent-identification processes and career path development for high-performance coaches who strongly reflect the concerns and interests of coaches in the program.

Closing Remarks

As Williams and Kendall (2007) pointed out, coaches at the elite level are concerned primarily with enhancing sports performance, but addressing this requires a multi-disciplinary approach. This necessitates that coaching be viewed as a highly complex, dynamic and unpredictable set of practices aimed at improving or sustaining performance towards identified goals (Dickson, 2001; Lyle, 2002). In an Irish context, the PEP is an attempt to respond to and better take account of the diverse needs and circumstances of each sporting context which translates into a wide variety of coaching roles and functions.

The historically limited resources for performance coach development in Ireland and current funding pressures lends an added impetus to effectively capturing and tapping into latent coaching expertise and developing this in a more sustainable manner. While for many NGBs in Ireland, the high-performance route is largely unchartered, the PEP has offered an opportunity to encourage NGBs to develop performance (in addition to participation) pathways for coaches and athletes. Although it may be early days, the recent progress in coach development in Ireland is
promising as it presents an important inroad in the development of meaningful systems, structures and supports.

Given that coaches on the program operate within widely differing performance environments\(^4\), subsequent phases of the Pursuit of Excellence Programme would be strengthened by acknowledging that relevant developmental opportunities are dependent on the specific role of the coach within the performance context of their sport. For example, including two phases (Aspiring and Excelling) would better cater for the range of candidates’ needs and the context in which they operate\(^5\). Additionally, this ‘streaming’ would help ensure that elements such as mentoring, shadowing and workshops are more appropriately tailored, thereby being of potentially greater benefit to participants.

\(^4\) Some sports have high performance centres catering for elite athletes while others are primarily working in community club settings with developmental level athletes.

\(^5\) Notwithstanding that there are occasions where a mixing of different levels of experience is beneficial.
References


Rynne, S. (2008). Opportunities and Engagement: Coach learning at the Queensland
