Emphasis & Behaviors: Are Coaches on the Right Track?

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Summary of Presentation

Research indicates “having fun” is a frequently cited reason athletes give for participating in sport, and “lack of fun” is a motive for sport dropout (Coakley, 2008). According to the Youth Sports National Report Card (Citizens through Sport Alliance, 2005), sport has lost its child-centered focus. An understanding of track and field coaches’ perceptions about what they emphasize and how they behave is needed to develop interventions to promote appropriate behaviors in the sport environment.

Results:

Interscholastic coaches agreed there was an appropriate emphasis on a variety of factors in the sport setting. A one-way ANOVA was used to determine if differences, based on level of certification, existed in perceptions of emphasis: winning [F(3, 135) = 2.56, p = .058], performance [F(3, 135) = 1.59, p = .195], enjoyment & fun [F(3, 134) = .43, p = .740], and developing character [F(3, 135) = .94, p = .424]. None were identified.

Coaches agreed they offered praise and encouragement to athletes. They were less likely to praise athletes for making mistakes in practice or competition. Yet, coaches reported praising athletes for trying new things. This inconsistency warrants further investigation because coaches may be sending a mixed message. Athletes may interpret this as, “coach thinks I am ‘good’ because I try new things, but I am ‘not good’ if I make mistakes.” A one-way ANOVA was used to determine if differences, based on level of certification, existed in the seven perceived behaviors. None were identified.
Conclusions and recommendations:

(a) Coaches perceived an appropriate emphasis was placed on a wide range of factors in track and field. Larson, Hansen, & Moneta (2006) indicated the long- and short-term effects of sport participation may be indirect and dependent on the interpersonal and intrapersonal processes that operate in the sport settings. Therefore, USATF CE should continue to prepare coaches to be reflective participants and to take action through the governing body with jurisdiction – NFHS/State Association or USATF – when the emphasis changes in an inappropriate way.

(b) Coaches reported praising and encouraging athletes to try new things, yet perceived they were encouraging but not praising the athlete when making mistakes in practice or competition. Coatsworth and Conroy (2009) suggested that coaches can influence athletes’ experiences and self-perceptions through their direct interactions with their athletes as well as through the broader motivational climate they create in the sport context. Therefore, USATF CE should continue to train coaches on how to create a “learning environment” which includes positively toned feedback, effective and consistent communication, and an emphasis on self improvement and having fun in the sport setting.

(c) Whether the coach should praise (the person) or encourage (the behavior) or both will depend on the particular athlete. Chelladurai and Carron (1978) reported that if a coach adapts his behavior to comply with the athletes’ preferred behavior, the athlete may be more readily inclined to repay the coach through improved performance. Therefore, USATF CE should continue to prepare coaches to understand athletes’ motivations and to be sensitive to athletes’ needs.
Resources


Journal of Coaching Education

Author Bios

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