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COMMENTARY ARTICLE

A Coach's Example is Important: Coaching Education Can Play a Part

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ABSTRACT

Coaching is a very visible profession, to the point that a coach's every move is scrutinized. This was clearly evident in the tragic events that transpired in 2011, involving legendary American football coach Joe Paterno at Penn State University. With this high visibility, coaches need more than ever to set good examples for those they represent. In school or college settings they represent athletes, parents, the student body, administrators, and the community. The purpose of this commentary is to reinforce a coach's responsibility to set a good example and the responsibility of coaching educators in preparing future coaches to be good examples.

Key Words: Coaching, Ethical Behaviors, Coaches in Training

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Coaches interact with many different stakeholders on a regular basis, including athletes, parents, administrators, and the media. Knowing how to work with each group takes a tremendous amount of skill and patience in order to be successful, and coaches are expected to model appropriate behaviors at all times. We live in a world where news is quickly and easily accessible in all forms. This quick and easily accessible media also applies in the world of sports. We can obtain the latest scores from games we are following, statistics of the game are a click away, and other desired information is right at our fingertips. One consequence of this quick and easily accessible information is increased transparency of behaviors of coaches at all levels. In November 2011 this quick and accessible information exposed abuses of Jerry Sandusky while coaching at Penn State University. As sad and tragic as the events that transpired at Penn State were, these occurrences reinforced the idea that coaches are always being watched and need to set a good example in everything they do.

Asking coaches to be a good example in “everything they do” may be expecting too much. Yet, coaches need to know with whom they are working and whom they represent. It has been said that coaches live in a fishbowl. A recent example of this occurred when a high school football coach in a southern state in the United States was audiotaped addressing his team before a game. The football coach’s address was laced with profanity, and eventually the tape was obtained by the school’s athletic director. The football coach resigned shortly after his tirade became public (Varlas, 2011). The fans, student body, school administrators, parents, and most importantly the players frequently watch the coach to see how he or she will act and respond in certain situations.

Unfortunately, in this situation the football coach’s words lost him his coaching job. This example demonstrates the importance of coaches showing their athletes how to behave and act in certain situations. Why is it so important that coaches serve as a good example to their athletes? Because many athletes could someday become coaches, and their experiences as former athletes can affect their coaching approach and behaviors. Social learning theory (Perry, Baranowski, & Parcel, 1990) offers an explanation for this concept of coaches behaving in ways similar to the manner in which they were coached when they were athletes. In summary, the theory states that the consequences of behaviors influence the likelihood of continued performance (Mears, 2008). So in a coaching context, according to social learning theory, athletes will coach in the way they were coached when they were playing. For example, if an athlete had a coach who yelled at everything he or she did, there is a strong likelihood that when this athlete becomes a coach he or she will yell at his or her athletes too. It is believed that these types of behaviors are “ingrained” in coaches from their past experiences as athletes watching coaches (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2004).

What can be done to prepare better the young men and women who want to coach young athletes? One solution is to recruit interested candidates into coaching education programs in colleges and universities. However, there has been much criticism in the literature about the ability of large-scale coach education programs to prepare future coaches (e.g., Malete & Feltz, 2000). One documented impact of participation in coach education programs is an improvement

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in coaching efficacy. Malete and Feltz (2000) studied interscholastic coaches in Michigan who had completed the Program for Athletic Coaches Education (PACE). This curriculum includes topics such as legal aspects of coaching, emergency procedures, care and prevention of injuries, and maintaining discipline. The results of their study showed that coaching efficacy increased after participation in the PACE program.

Regardless of what curriculum is used, coaching educators have a great responsibility in their preparation of future coaches. Many of these future coaches enter their coaching education classes with years of athletic participation. They have been exposed to many different personalities, philosophies, and ethical ideals of the coaches to whom they have been exposed. The *National Coaching Standards and Benchmarks* (National Association for Sport and Physical Education [NASPE], 2006) stresses the importance of ethics in coaching. These standards touch upon developing a coaching philosophy that aligns with organizational mission goals and that is in the best interest of the athletes. This is an important area for aspiring coaches to understand and apply to their coaching practices.

The *National Coaching Standards and Benchmarks* is an important place for coaching educators, practitioners, and researchers alike to start in preparing future coaches. The purpose of having national standards is to provide a framework of what is expected from coaches and what coaching practices are appropriate (NASPE, 2006). The author of this commentary recently surveyed university students' perceptions of coaches' ethical responsibilities (Barney, 2012). University students planning on coaching were surveyed regarding ethical questions in athletic settings with an emphasis on the coach. One item from the survey stated, *"Because officials don't see or call every infraction, it's generally proper to do whatever they let you get away with."* Male students' responses to this question did not provide an overwhelming majority (9% strongly agreed, 37% agreed, 43% disagreed, and 11% strongly disagreed). Yet, the female student responses were quite different: 10% strongly agreed, 14% agreed, 71% disagreed, and 5% strongly disagreed with the statement. Another survey item stated, *"An athlete or coach should do whatever is not specifically prohibited by the values if it helps him or her win."* Here again opinions were quite different. For male students, 10% strongly agreed, 39% agreed, 47% disagreed and 4% strongly disagreed. For female students, 10% agreed and 90% disagreed. One last survey item stated, *"Effective taunting and trash-talking that throws an opponent off his/her game is a legitimate part of competitive sports."* For male students 15% strongly agreed, 55% agreed, 27% disagreed, and 3% strongly disagreed. For female students, 38% agreed, 52% disagreed, and 10% strongly disagreed with this statement. These results indicate that these female college students had a better grasp of ethical matters in coaching than their male counterparts. These kinds of results indicate that coaching educators have their work cut out for them in preparing future coaches to be ethical.

As stated earlier, coaching educators have a tremendous responsibility, and need to seriously consider their preparation of future coaches. Hardman and Jones (2010) concluded that:

Coaching educators, across all levels of coach preparation, have a responsibility to construct a learning environment that not only provides the necessary content knowledge, but also empowers future sport leaders to make sound choices and decisions in a sport

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culture that typically overemphasizes outcome at the cost of athlete well-being and character development. (p.3)

Hardman and Jones stressed the duty that coaching educators have to provide learning opportunities that will educate and empower future coaches to make sound and ethical decisions to benefit their athletes.

Coaching educators can begin by teaching the “why’s” of ethical coaching behavior. For example, coaching educators should explain why taunting and trash talking during a game are unacceptable behaviors. Coaching educators can also use case studies to teach about ethical behaviors. Baghurst and Parish (2010) discussed the ethical implications associated with examining case studies. When case studies are presented to future coaches in coaching education classes, all of the different variables and consequences that are involved in the case study can be discussed. This encourages the coach to reflect on how he or she might manage a similar case. As the coaching educator explains the consequences of unethical behavior, it is hoped that future coaches will understand how these actions can affect people, a community, or school.

The final suggestion for coaching educators is to provide future coaches with an opportunity to work with an experienced coach in an internship setting. Internships or apprenticeships provide a powerful method of training for inexperienced coaches, because it allows them to observe how a more experienced coach plans for practice. Experienced, principled coaches can demonstrate how ethical interactions can occur with other coaches and players during a game. Gould, Giannini, Krane, and Hodge (1990) studied the educational needs of 130 expert American coaches from a variety of sports. One of the main findings from their study was that the coaches felt that an important method of gaining knowledge was by observing other successful coaches. Therefore, future coaches can use internships with more experienced coaches to ask questions, to discuss, and to reflect on what has been observed.

Many future coaches have ideas about how to coach. Inexperienced coaches could gain insight into the practical application of their ideas through close observation and interaction with a mentor coach. When aspiring coaches are given an opportunity to work with ethical coaches, they can experience opportunities to observe what is ethically sound (Dieffenbach, Lauer, & Johnson, 2010). When it comes to placing a future coach with a mentor, Bloom (2012) provided a few suggestions for coach educators. First, young coaches need mentor coaches who are passionate about their coaching. A passionate coach has great love and respect for the sport they are coaching. Second, mentor coaches should have a deep knowledge of the sport that they are coaching. This knowledge should obviously include knowledge of techniques and tactics, and extend to knowledge of how to build effective relationships with athletes and other coaches. Third, a mentor coach must be willing to invest the time needed to respond to the young coach’s concerns and other matters that occur during the internship.

The suggestions mentioned throughout this commentary are offered as starting points for preparing future coaches. Realistically speaking, coaching educators are not going to be able to cure all the ills that take place in athletics. Yet, coaching educators can teach and explain why certain behaviors and practices are unacceptable in an athletic competition. Furthermore, future

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coaches serving apprenticeships with coaches who exemplify ethical behaviors can “ingrain” the importance of being an ethical coach. It is anticipated that application of the suggestions provided in this commentary will help future coaches set good ethical examples for their own athletes, many of whom will become the coaches of tomorrow.

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