A Response to Collins, Collins and Willmott

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We are truly grateful for the dialogue which began around our article (Ojala & Thorpe, 2015) on coaching in snowboarding and continued with a comment by Collins, Collins, and Willmott (2015) a few months later in ISCJ. As we stated in our article (Ojala & Thorpe, 2015), the respondents also agreed that the unique value system of action sports should be carefully considered when coaching practices are designed and executed. However, Collins, Collins, and Willmott (2015) have two main concerns with respect to our paper: a) “the picture presented of performer perceptions is limited”, and, b) “the presentation of PBL lacks balance or criticality and misses an essential point of good coaching” (p. 90). In this brief comment we would like to respond to this critique.

Our article was part of Anna-Liisa Ojala’s (2015) PhD dissertation in which Holly Thorpe was one of the supervisors. Ojala examined Finnish freestyle snowboarders’ perceptions and experiences of the field of professional snowboarding. One of the research questions was: what role do coaches play in the careers of Finnish snowboarders? The primary data included semistructured interviews with Finnish professional and semiprofessional snowboarders (19 male, 2 female, 17–31 years). The role of a coach in the data were surprisingly minor. Follow-up questions for the informants were necessary. Between February and November 2013 Ojala conducted 15 short semistructured interviews with Finnish professional and semiprofessional snowboarders. The questions tried to further understand professional snowboarders perceptions of the benefits and challenges of working with coaches.

The informants of the follow-up interviews included 4 female snowboarders and 11 male snowboarders, of whom 10 were professionals and 5 semiprofessionals, aged between 20 and 31. Five of the professionals were film-oriented male snowboarders and four competition-oriented snowboarders (3 male, 1 female). One professional was oriented toward both filming and competing (male). Four of the semiprofessionals were competition-oriented (1 male, 3 female). One semiprofessional male rider was oriented in both competitions and filming. The competition-oriented riders occasionally took part in filming and photo shooting sessions. Conversely, two film-oriented riders had won the X games and two had taken part in the Olympics. Moreover, all Finnish Olympic and many recent World Championships medalists were included in this data. Thus, while the data that could be presented in the original piece may have appeared somewhat limited, this was due to the scope of a ‘research note’ and not the breadth or depth of the empirical evidence upon which the arguments were based.

Participants’ perceptions concerning the extent of the beneficial role of coaches are divided into the four following categories: 1) The coach is beneficial for snowboarding skills, 2) The coach is beneficial for physical training and life skills, 3) The coach is beneficial as a manager and as a resource administrator, and, 4) The coach is ineffective. Only in the first category did the informants speak about coaches who had a positive impact on their snowboarding skills, which is the more traditional role considered for a coach (cf. Cassidy, Jones & Potrac, 2009, 33). However, it is important to note that only a minority of comments fell under the first category, with most others coming under categories 2–4.
The female snowboarders in this study valued peer support but also found coaches to be beneficial in enhancing snowboarding skills. However, the male professional snowboarders doubted the effectiveness of the coach with regard to snowboarding skills. Two professional snowboarders—who had not worked with a coach during their career—did not value a coach. Nine informants who had experienced working with a coach (8 professionals, 1 semiprofessional, all male, 6 film-oriented, 1 film- and competition-oriented, 2 competition-oriented) found coaches to be ineffective for improving their snowboarding skills. Participants’ peers and their own motivation were more valued. In addition, one semiprofessional (male, filming and competing) and one professional (male, competing) welcomed the help of coaches for snowboarding performances, but toward the end of the interview they also expressed doubts as to how useful a coach would have been in general. Despite this, many snowboarders found coaches to be beneficial in physical (rather than skill) training.

In other words, these findings support the argument that Finnish top snowboarders perceive traditional coaching as ineffective for them. For that reason we decided to investigate whether there are any pedagogical methods which would fit with the preferred roles of coaches expressed by the snowboarders. Soon we found out that Problem Based Learning (PBL) could be such a candidate for two main reasons. First, it allows for the unique value system to be cherished. Traditional sports are built upon discipline (Dunning 1999); that is, compliance with rules and federations is advisable for athletes in many traditional sports. On the contrary, lifestyle sports are built upon ideas of participant control, creativity and fun (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2013). Due to the participant control and reverence of creativity, these new forms of sport are developing incredibly rapidly, and there are no rules defining the right way to perform or further a sporting career. If athletes can choose to be creative sports entrepreneurs, gathering the necessary knowledge, actors and resources around them, building media productions around their sporting skills, all the while participating in both competitions and free-format performances where technique and style are limited only by personal creativity, there are no definitive answers when it comes to performances or careers. This is why methods like PBL, which value supervision and facilitation over traditional teaching or coaching, might work well with action sports athletes.

Second, PBL also values peer collaboration, which is important in elite snowboarding. Ojala’s (2015) PhD dissertation data highlighted that peer coaching, mentoring and support is highly valued among snowboarders because peer coaching is a good method of keeping up with the fast developments in the sport, and learning from those with the most cultural capital in the eyes of the athletes (Thorpe, 2011). Moreover, the snowboarders enjoy sharing their successes and failures with their friends.

Despite some advantages of PBL, we share Collins, Collins, and Willmott’s (2015) concern that PBL is not an all-encompassing method for coaching. Indeed, a sporting career is far too complicated to be covered sufficiently using just one method or theory. Different stages of an individuals’ career alongside other life changes will influence their attitudes and perceptions of the value of a coach, just as changes in the sporting culture more broadly will also influence an athlete’s willingness to work with a coach. As we noted in our previous research note, we are very aware that action sports are developing at a rapid pace, with many young and up-and-coming athletes working closely with coaches, managers and agents to make the most of their training, competing and career development. We should also note that we expect to see much more of this as more action sports are included in the Olympic Games and other such mega events. However, PBL seems to be valuable in fulfilling some of the requirements revealed in the data from Ojala’s PhD work, particularly that action sport athletes require coaches who understand, even cherish, the unique value system and allow them to maintain a sense of participant control over their everyday training and their longer term goals as athletes and cultural participants. In fact, also Paralympic athletes from several sports have benefited of an autonomy supportive coaching style (Cheon, Reeve, Lee, & Lee, 2015). Moreover, peers tend to be extremely important also for coaches in learning coaching skills (e.g., Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003). In this light, it does not seem unusual that Finnish snowboarders highly regard the perceptions of their peers. In addition to asking the athletes what their own personal goals are in relation to their careers, the PBL method takes the snowboarding culture into account, encouraging us to ask the athletes how they’d like to develop a career and lifestyle in snowboarding. There are career options available to the best snowboarders, and coaches should not assume all are interested in following a competitive career path. In our opinion, these questions cannot be asked too often.

Note

1. The first author has written elsewhere (cf. Ojala, 2014) about the different career options available to professional snowboarders, with some opting to feature in various media (i.e., films, online videos) rather than focus on competitions. Athletes in other action sport cultures often have similar routes available to them—filming versus competition (e.g., Snyder, 2012).

References