Effective Coaching: the Winning Discourse or Educational Foundations?

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Abstract

A multitude of discourses inside and outside of sport suggest the value of winning. The result of these discourses has contributed to the belief that winning is evidence of effective coaching and that winning is the aim of sport. This paper begins by describing several of the winning discourses constructed by the media, academic community, sport stakeholders, and coaches. Furthermore, I argue that the winning discourse has tacitly contributed to coaches identifying the outcome of a sport contest (e.g., win or loss) as an appropriate measure of good, effective coaching. After identifying the perils of this view and associated illogical thinking, I suggest the creation of new discourses related to the educational foundations of effective coaching.
Effective Coaching: the Winning Discourse or Educational Foundations?

“Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.” — Vince Lombardi
“If you’re not first, you’re last.” — Will Ferrell as Ricky Bobby in Talladega Nights
“We are the champions!” — Queen

These three quotes represent a sampling of the discourses that have taught our coaches, and culture, one important and enduring lesson: WIN! One does not need to think long or hard to recall many well known aphorisms imploring us to achieve this ultimate sport destiny. The call to “just win baby” (Al Davis, owner of Oakland Raiders) is heard from a multitude of sport insiders and outsiders such as coaches (Lombardi), actors (Will Ferrell) and musicians (Queen). Seemingly trivial characteristics of sport, such as how we refer to a coach’s won-loss record as a winning percentage when it could just as well be called a losing percentage, unreflectively suggest the value of winning. The relationship between winning and effective coaching is so strong that many use a posterior reasoning to conclude that a cause-and-effect relationship exists between the two; if you win (effect), you are an effective coach (cause). Since the winning discourse1 has soaked every fabric of sport, it is seemingly natural, self-evident, and accurate to use wins and losses as the measure of a coach’s effectiveness. To even question that winning isn’t the aim of all coaches or to acknowledge that there may be other aims of coaching would seem quite odd, teetering on blasphemy.

Other discourses have defined effective coaching as the growth of positive psychosocial outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, satisfaction, fun, participation) (Chelladurai, 1990; Horn, 2008; Smith, Smoll, & Hunt, 1977). Along this line of thought is the idea that building character and teaching life lessons is not only possible through participation in sport, but should also be included in a conceptualization of coaching effectiveness. Then there are discourses from some academic scholars who assure us that winning is indeed an important and just goal of sport, but also gently remind coaches that they should be developing athletes in other ways as well (Martens, 2004; Thompson, 2003). These discourses offer coaches the opportunity to reconcile their need to win, while also using sport to teach athletes other lessons. Nevertheless, when a coach (or society) asks himself, “Was I a good coach?” it appears that the winning discourse has dominated this evaluative and reflective process2. Indeed, the barrage of winning discourses has helped to create what coaches know all too well — winning matters.

The purpose of this paper is to review the discourses that have, regrettably, defined winning as effective coaching and how these discourses have contributed to coaches identifying themselves as being either a winner or loser. Drawing upon the work of scholars such as Nietzsche (1989a; 1989b), Foucault (1992, 1994) and others (Piggin, Jackson, & Lewis, 2009) who use a type of discourse analysis to identify who created the “truth” and the power of these sources to seemingly create these universal truths, I analyze discourses related to (re)creating the truth that winning is good, effective coaching. I also draw attention to the perils associated with

1 Throughout this paper I use the term ‘winning discourse’ because of its readability and to signify that winning qua winning has dominated the discourses on coaching effectiveness.
2 Throughout this paper I will use the male pronoun ‘he’ for the sake of readability, but I mean no offensive for its exclusive use.
viewing winning as effective coaching and offer insight into the educational foundations of sport coaching. Having critiqued the universal and modern idea that effective coaching is winning, I conclude by drawing heavily upon the fields of philosophy of education and sport to put forth the idea that coaches should give serious consideration to how they will choose their own definition of effective coaching.

Discourses of Winning

Media, Entertainment, and Big Business

Denzin (1996) poignantly stated, “Those who control the media control a society’s discourse about itself” (p. 319). While Denzin was referring to Nike and the promotion of Michael Jordan, the media has also powerfully and passionately helped to construct the winning discourse. The unification of the media with professional sports has created sports as big business which promotes an ethos of winning that hungry consumers are eager to purchase. One notable and easily recognizable example of this fusion is the World Wrestling Entertainment Inc. (WWE) which is an amalgamation of sport, entertainment, and big business. The winning discourse is evident in the WWE as it routinely glorifies its “champions” who go on to become the cultural icon of the day. The following sections will describe and analyze the winning discourses from the fields of music, movie, and television and print media.

Music Media

It is telling of American culture that musicians write songs that exalt winning and that many of these songs go on to be pop hits. In spite of being released over 30 years ago, it’s not for nothing that Queen’s 1977 smash hit “We are the Champions!” continues today to flood the airways, which contains this easily recognizable chorus:

- We are the champions - my friends
- And we’ll keep on fighting - till the end
- We are the champions
- We are the champions
- No time for losers
- ’Cause we are the champions - of the world

Queen’s song, which is routinely played at sporting events, softly and unreflectively seeps into our psyche suggesting that being a champion only goes to those who fight and to be anything else is to be a loser; a lesser being unworthy of our time. Queen’s champion is not only the best, but he is also the best in the world, an achievement par excellence. In the same song, Queen continues to demonstrate the love and lionizing typical of the music industry to those who are champions, “You brought me fame and fortune and everything that goes with it and I thank you all.” Queen’s champion, the gracious winner, on behalf of champions everywhere, rightfully and humbly accepts the benefits of winning.

Nelly, a contemporary rapper, is evidence of how music and movie can unite when his popular song “#1” debuted in the movie Training Day and went on to ring loudly in locker rooms and gymnasiums throughout
high schools, universities, and professional sports. Nelly, like Queen, extols the virtue of winning while emphatically teaching us that being 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 3\textsuperscript{rd}, or \textsuperscript{n}th is meaningless:

- I.. am.. number one - no matter if you like it
- Here take it sit down and write it
- I.. am.. number one
- Hey hey hey hey hey hey - now let me ask you man
- What does it take to be number one?
- Two is not a winner and three nobody remembers
- What does it take to be number one?

Nelly also recorded another popular song titled, “Heart of a Champion” which again extols the virtues of those who are the best, as evidenced by being the champion. Upon becoming a champion, athletes’ or coaches’ work ethic and determination is confirmed. These songs and discourses legitimize that the rightful team won; they fought the hardest and rightfully deserved to win. Those who were not champions “just didn’t have what it takes.” Non-champions are told to work harder and to revaluate every decision that caused them to fail. From Queen to Kayne West, the music industry’s emphasis on being a champion today is as prominent as it was 30 years prior. The present day mega pop star Kayne West exemplifies the winning discourse with his song titled “Champion.” West’s song has a catchy (although not original) beat with this suggestive chorus, “Tell me what it takes to be number one? This is the story of a champion.” The music industry, unwavering in its commitment to honor those who are first and degrade everybody else, certainly puts forth the notion that winning is the measure of effective coaching.

Movie Media

A recent example of the winning discourse in the movie media was delivered by Rickey Bobby in Talladega Nights when he quipped, “If you’re not first, you’re last.” Undoubtedly, this retort is being repeated for some sort of motivational purpose by coaches, athletes, parents, and fans alike. The movie is a series of humorous, but maligned one-liners and short quotes preaching the benefits of winning:

- “You gotta win to get love. I mean, that's just life. Look at...look at Don Shula, Legendary coach. Look at that Asian guy who holds the world record for eatin' all those hot dogs in a row. Look at Rue McClanahan, From The Golden Girls. Three people, all great champions, all loved.”

Although we might not take Rickey Bobby too seriously, does he not insightfully recognize that our culture loves not only winning, but winners—those real beings who have achieved immediate and sustained success? Indeed, we all rightfully and willingly accept “to the victor go the spoils.” Along the lines of Rickey Bobby, the sporting world often accepts the dichotomy that there are two types of people in the world: winners and losers.

The movie industry provides ample examples of the winning discourse. There are movies about coaches or athletes who win the championship game (Remember the Titans, Hoosiers, Coach Carter, The Express), make it to the championship game (Friday Night Lights), or teams that were losers but through some sort of miraculous
turnaround became champions (Bad News Bears, Major League, The Mighty Ducks, Balls Out). While many of these movies address other issues related to motivation, race, power, or education, the requisite for producing any sport movie requires that the protagonist fall into the dichotomy of being a champion or becoming a champion. Would Hollywood ever produce a movie that glorifies a coach if he lost more games than he won?

**Television and Print Media**

Both nationally and locally we are greeted with the faces of winners on the covers of magazines, the front page of newspapers and the sports section, and daily news shows lead off with stories about their winning ways. Is it not telling of our national obsession with winning that every year winning teams are brought to meet and be greeted by the President of the United States and have their winning legacy cemented with a photograph in front of the White House? Perhaps the grand-daddy of all outlets for which a winner’s face could be adorned and enshrined for eternity is—a box of Wheaties! In a similar move of vanity, every newspaper with a sports section proudly posts the weekly top 25 poll of which the average consumer could name many, if not all, of the head coaches. Similarly, media outlets such as ESPN and The Sporting News regularly present polls of the Greatest Coaches of All-Time (D’Alessio, 2009). The criterion which carries the most influence for selection to the chosen list is no surprise—winning.

It’s not enough that the media has promulgated this winning discourse, but they have also created a discourse related to becoming a champion, the “post-season.” The seemingly never ending stretch of collegiate football games in December and January has been dubbed the “college football bowl season.” All big-business professional sports, and some college sports, have a playoff system or championship game broadcasted on the most watched television networks that guarantee to deliver us “non-stop and continuous coverage.” It is so important to have a clear and consensual national champion that even politicians are publically voicing their dissent and decrying the injustice of the selection process for the NCAA’s Bowl Championship Series (Press, 2009). Naturally, consumers of sport are not permitted to miss a televised game as they would likely be admonished by a co-worker during a water cooler break who wouldn’t ask, “Did you watch the game last night?” but rather, “How about that game last night!” We are expected to watch the big game, it is expected, perhaps even a moral obligation.

Of significance to the formation of a coach’s identity is this tacit message communicated through hours of media consumption, “Coach, if you win a lot of games we will pay homage to you, honor you, your face will be on television. Losers don’t get our attention.” ESPN has become the panacea for the American people who hurriedly change the channel to Sports Center and watch with such fever and intensity that they might appear to be in a trance. The same people read the pages of *Sports Illustrated* with such care and attention to detail that they might be confused for an auditor. The American public and its coaches willingly and eagerly consume more and more of these discourses in an attempt to quench their thirst in order to understand how to achieve sport immortality. In fact, if you don’t “win it all,” it’s like you never even existed as noted in the retort, “Nobody remembers who finished second.” While a losing coach would be akin to Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952), a being with no confirmation of his existence, he would also have to live with the stigma of losing as
purportedly noted by former Washington Redskins coach George Allen, “Losing is worse than death; you have to live with losing” (as cited in Hyland, 1990, p. 37). The effect of the winning discourse, which promotes winning and admonishes anything but, is unquestionably powerful on the identity formation of coaches who believe winning is the logical, natural aim of sport.

Sport Stakeholders

Sport stakeholders are involved in numerous discourses that have helped shape how coaches measure themselves in terms of wins and losses. Sport stakeholders, who often blame the coach for “blowing the game,” can be the harshest critics when coaches lose lambasting that the “program is headed in the wrong direction” and demanding swift action “to get this thing turned around.” So long as their children are winning games parents are more likely to be forgiving of coaches’ seedy tactics and questionable behaviors. One committed father recently reported to this author that the owner of a local gymnastic academy, where he sent his 8 year-old daughter for training, had fired four coaches in the last couple of years because they were not producing enough champions. This concerned father continued with his evaluation and stated, “I guess that’s good. You want what’s best for your kids. You want them to be winners.” Indeed, given the power of the winning discourses, what could be better than winning?

Irrespective of their qualifications or intimate knowledge of sport and coaching, sport stakeholders use personal blogs and websites as a means of evaluating a coach’s effectiveness. If a coach loses too many games it is only a matter of time before some judging fan develops a website calling for their immediate dismissal. Given the recent popularity of websites that unite “fire” with the coach’s last name (e.g., www.firecoach.com), one sport entrepreneur has sought to capitalize on this by auctioning off a variety of domain names to potential bidders which may include disgruntled fans, but interestingly also the organization that employs the coach in order to avoid the ‘bad’ publicity (McCready, 2006). One of the pages on this website offers a beguiling marketing ploy that appeals to core American values, “Combining Football and the First Amendment, REDSHIRTED.COM offers domain names that empower your opinions” (“Combining,” 2009). It is apparently the civic duty of every American to demand the firing of the losing coach.

Possibly of greatest concern are the evaluations of particular stakeholders (e.g., owners, athletic directors) who are also the primary decision makers. It requires neither insider knowledge nor great speculation to determine why many coaches are fired. A quick glimpse of the headlines from local and national newspapers at the end of the sport season tells us whether the coach was effective or not—at least at winning games. These decision makers send a message to coaches, and the community, that reinforces not only the value of winning, but also its necessity as a means to sustain the entire financial health of the organization, especially at the professional and “big-time” collegiate level. Thus, when fan attendance had dropped by a few thousand, boosters voiced their displeasure, and the team lost a few more games than in previous years, it was hardly surprising when current University of Tennessee athletic director Mike Hamilton fired then head football coach Phillip Fulmer. During an interview with a local media outlet Hamilton made publicly known to all that, “He was looking for a

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3 I’m using the term sport stakeholders to collectively refer to fans, athletes, parents, athletic directors, principals, and other people involved in the everyday life of sport and coaches.
While winning has long been valued in sport, perhaps it is a sign of the times that Fulmer was fired in spite of having achieved a career winning record of 152 wins and 52 loses, one national championship, and two Southeastern Conference championships. Winning is so valued that sport stakeholders are more than willing to forgive the misgivings of coaches so long as they win a lot of games. For example, the University of Texas head baseball coach, Augie Garrido, was given a mere few day suspension after being arrested for driving under the influence at 1:00 a.m. (“Texas,” 2008). In a scandal that was dubbed “Spygate,” New England Patriots head football coach, Bill Belichick, kept his job after the National Football League determined he had been cheating by recording his opponents’ signals during games (“Belichick,” 2007). Most recently, University of Louisville (UL) head men’s basketball coach Rick Pitino, whom in spite of admitting to adultery and being involved in what is turning out to be some sort of sex-extortion scandal, has received no punishment or admonishment from any administrator at UL and athletic director Tom Jurich even boldly proclaimed that he was, “a million percent behind Pitino” (“Pitino,” 2009). This discourse tells coaches that there is no need to repent when you win, but rather losing is the sin for which you must ask forgiveness.

On the other hand, it is more difficult to identify coaches who model morally acceptable behaviors; doing the “right” thing comes after winning, not concomitantly, if it comes at all. Recognizing that what we know about coaches often comes from second hand sources and that we may not know exactly what these coaches do in their everyday life, there still appear to be some who not only model care and character, but explicitly try to educate athletes about these same virtues. During his coaching career Tony Dungy became well respected for modeling “good” morals and applied this to his coaching philosophy (Dungy & Whitaker, 2008). He is held in such high regard that after his coaching career he became well known for mentoring the embattled Michael Vick (NFL athlete) and Mike Locksley (The University of New Mexico head football coach) (“Dungy,” 2009; “Locksley,” 2009). It also appears that Rutgers University’s head women’s basketball coach Vivian Stringer models care and character in the community and in her coaching practice (Stringer & Tucker, 2008). In reaction to the lewd comments from broadcaster Don Imus, Stringer used the opportunity to educate us all away from ignorance and toward respect by providing a dignified response that effectively re-humanized her, the individual athletes, woman, and African-Americans. Although I am arguing against winning as evidence of effective coaching, we must also reject those who tell us that winning and proper virtues cannot be simultaneously modeled and instructed. Not only because some winning coaches model care and character, but more poignantly because an educational view of sport does not permit coaches to be anything but moral educators.

Researchers & the Academic Community

One of the culprits most responsible, but yet to be accused, for helping to create the winning discourse are researchers and the academic community. Researchers have long studied (and journals have published) head
coaches who have a high winning percentage such as: Pete Carroll (Voight & Carroll, 2006), James “Doc” Counsilman (Kimieck & Gould, 1987), John Gagliardi (Gentner, Wriskberg, & Whitney, 2008), Pat Summitt (Becker & Wrisberg, 2008; Wrisberg, 1990), and John Wooden (Gallimore & Tharpe, 2004; Tharp & Gallimore, 1976). In what turned out to be the first of a continued wave of behavioral observation studies of coaches was the study of legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden (Tharp & Gallimore). Although this study is often credited as “pioneering” research because it was the first to systematically record the behaviors of a coach, this view doesn’t fully account for the effect this had on the research community. This study was pioneering research ex post facto because it recorded the behaviors of the winningest men’s collegiate basketball.

As educational psychologists, the researchers’ stated purpose was to draw upon their findings and apply them to the classroom (Tharp & Gallimore, 1976). However, the aftermath of this study was not that teachers acted more like coaches, but rather researchers of sport heard a message that must have sounded like, “If we can determine the behaviors of winning coaches, then others could replicate these behaviors and win.” Are we to conclude that if a coach were to replicate the behaviors of Wooden that he too would win multiple national championships? Logically, it would appear that:

\[ p: \text{John Wooden exhibits behaviors at practice.} \]
\[ q: \text{John Wooden won multiple national championships.} \]
\[ r: \text{John Wooden’s practice behaviors caused him to win multiple national championships.} \]

Although \( p \) implies \( r \) and \( q \) implies \( r \), this syllogism is not useable because there may be other reasons why Wooden won multiple national championships. In spite of this false logic, now that open season had been declared, several researchers hunted in search of the mythical behaviors that would lead to winning (Becker & Wrisberg, 2008; Bloom, Crumpton, & Anderson, 1999; Claxton, 1998; Dodds & Rife, 1981; Gallimore & Tharp, 2004; Lacy, 1983; Lacy & Darst, 1985; Langsdorf, 1979; Model, 1983; Potrac, Jones, and Armstrong, 2002; Smith, Smoll, & Hunt, 1977; Tharp & Gallimore, 1976; Williams, 1978). Interestingly, this line of research suggests that coaches with similar won-loss records exhibit comparable patterns of behavior (Claxton; Model). Even if we could clone Wooden and his clones were coaching every team, given the current playoff system there would still be only one national champion; and researchers would likely extol his behaviors! The mere title of one recent study, “Effective coaching in action: Observations of legendary collegiate basketball coach Pat Summitt” (Becker & Wrisberg, pg. 197, 2008) demonstrates the “winning triad.” Beyond being legendary, Summit is also described as “representing another exemplar of coaching success” (p. 198) and having, “Inarguably…achieved the highest level of coaching success in her sport” (p. 209). Thus, when Summitt recently won her 1,000th game as head collegiate basketball coach of the Lady Vols, it was hardly surprising that the media swarmed the campus before, during and after the event, commemorative posters were

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4 The word “winningest” appears in both the Webster’s college dictionary (Costello, 1991) and the Merriam-Webster online dictionary (winningest, 2009), although what should be its equivalent “losingest”, appears in neither; which serves to reproduce the discourse on winning.

5 I have created this word for this paper. The winning triad consists of (a) winning as a measure of effective coaching, (b) a false assumption that the coach’s behavior causes winning, and (c) any homage or lionizing of coaches based on winning.
struck, the stands were filled with cheering fans, and even the commissioner of the Southeastern Conference came to pay homage.

While sport and educational psychologists created this winning discourse, even more socially, culturally, and pedagogically oriented researchers have sustained and extended this line of inquiry (Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2004). *Sports Coaching Cultures* is an original gaze into the “lifeworlds” of several coaches and a refreshing acknowledgement that coaching is complex and constantly changing. However, the selection of the coaches was based on a familiar, cookie-cutter standard, “practicing, top-level coaches, who currently operate at the very apex of their sport (the sample has won national championships, international championships, and, as coaches of national teams, world championships)” (Jones, Armour, & Potrac, p. 3). *In toto*, this approach reinforces what researchers have always stated tacitly—if you win, you are an effective coach.

To close this section we identify two scholars who, in spite of their well-intended efforts to put “winning into perspective,” have helped to (re)construct the winning discourse (Martens, 2004; Thompson, 2003). In *Successful Coaching*, Martens warns coaches against a winning-at-all-costs attitude and he argues that coaches should develop an athlete-centered philosophy, symbolized in the mantra, “Athletes first, winning second” of the self-created American Sport Education Program. While Martens is certainly passionate about valuing athletes over winning, the word “win,” or a close variant (i.e., winners, winning, won), is mentioned 77 times in the first two chapters alone. Leading off several sections are these suggestive titles, “A ‘Winning Philosophy,” “Keeping Winning in Perspective” and “Striving to Win.” Martens also used pictures and direct quotes from coaches presumably to demonstrate the link between his argument and the “reality” of sport coaching. While all of these coaches, Phil Jackson, Rhonda Revelle, Eddie Robinson, Pat Summitt, Tara VanDerveer, and of course, John Wooden, are referenced as examples of what Marten’s believes to be a desirable way to coach, they all share an underlying characteristic—they all have extremely high winning percentages.

Jim Thompson, founder of the Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA), represents a “new” model of coaching although it bears strong resemblance to Martens. Thompson (2003) blames the “win-at-all-cost” model as having caused numerous and diverse problems in sports such as the emotional and psychological abuse of young athletes, athlete burnout and dropout, and physical abuse amongst parents, coaches, athletes and referees. In response to the erroneous ways coaches have been leading our youth, Thompson proudly proclaims the lofty goal of the PCA as being, “committed to replacing the ‘win-at-all-cost’ model of coaching with the ‘Double-Goal Coach’ who wants to win but has a second, more important, goal of using sports to teach life lessons” (p. 288). Thompson argues that the real value of sport is teaching life lessons (e.g., character, responsibility, citizenship), yet he lauds the importance of winning by not only cementing the duality of goals in the formal title of his ideal coach (Double-Goal Coach), but through the passionate and persistent language he uses extolling the virtue of winning, “Positive Coaches want to win. And we’re not ashamed of it!” (p. 12). Thompson tells coaches what they want to hear—you can win and teach life lessons through sport. Thompson’s *Double-Goal Coach* is old wine in new bottles; another discourse reaffirming the aim, value, and seemingly ontic human need of winning.
Coaches

The social construction of winning as the measure of coaching effectiveness has also been (re)constructed by numerous discourses from coaches themselves. While there is some debate over the context, origin, and exactness of the quote, “Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing,” most often attributed to Lombardi some 50 years ago, the fact remains that it is still widely used and universally recognizable (Overman, 1999). Whether or not Lombardi really meant to emphasize winning or striving to win is not as telling as how the version of the quote that focused on winning prevailed.

Given the current role of sports in American society, winning is arguably more important today than it was during the days of Lombardi. A contemporary example is demonstrated in the comments of 1st year head football coach for the University of Clemson Tigers’ Dabo Sweeney, who knows of the importance of winning, “Well, I may be a rookie, but I’m not stupid. We’ve got to win the opener. That’s where all of our focus is” (Wallace, 2009). Winning must be very meaningful if coaches are unanimously and triumphantly focusing their team’s effort on achieving it through countless hours of watching film, practicing, recruiting, and scouting. Other examples of coaches having created a winning discourse abound. At coaching conferences the lineup of speakers is determined by who won the most games during that particular year, as well as coaches who have been able to sustain the “winning tradition.” It comes to the shock of no one when the coach who won the most games takes home the highly coveted Coach of the Year award. A quick scan at the local retail bookstore reveals a smattering of books written by coaches sharing the common achievement of a high winning percentage or a championship. Effective coaches not only win more games than they lose, but the most effective coaches win the most games, the most championships. Too obvious is the example of how coaches refer to their colleagues as having had a “Good year,” a decision seemingly based on the sole criterion of that season’s won-loss record. John Wooden (Wooden & Jamison, 1997) was aware of this when he wrote, “I’m perceived as a very successful basketball coach because of the ten national championships UCLA won while I was there” (p. 95). If Wooden hadn’t won all of those championships would he still be held in such high esteem?

While a coach may have acted immorally in order to achieve the goal of winning, some maligned coaches would provide this shameful response, “Yes, but he’s still a winner.” Those of us who are inclined to know a little sport history may recall that Woody Hayes, former head football coach at The Ohio State University, knocked down an opposing player during a game because he had intercepted a pass. Younger or naïve coaches simply associate Hayes with winning. The questionable methods of former men’s collegiate basketball coach Bobby Knight may be forgotten in a few years, but his winning percentage will not. It is likely that New England Patriot’s football coach Bill Belichick will be remembered for winning multiple Super Bowls, not for having been found guilty of cheating. Coaches may be the best at forgiving the sins of their peers, so long as they win a lot of games.
A Historical Caveat

Many of the examples provided have demonstrated a long standing view that winning relates to effective coaching. The value of winning and the respective moral issues that go into a winning-at-all-costs attitude is not a new phenomenon, in spite of the latest rhetoric telling us that it is (Farrey, 2009; Thompson, 2003). Governali spoke of the winning discourse over 40 years ago, “To stay in coaching, a physical educator with or without tenure knows [emphasis in original] he must win his portion of games or more” (p. 33). Segal noted that the significance of winning dates back to the ancient Greeks, “The single aim in all Greek athletics was—as the etymology (from athion, ‘prize’) suggests—to win. There were no awards for second place; in fact losing was considered a disgrace” (as cited in Weiss, 1969, p. 175). In his article from 1976, Delattre (as reprinted in Morgan, 2007), discussing the relationship between success, failure and competitive athletics, was unreflectively aware of the winning discourses, “Is winning everything in such competition, the only thing, the sole criterion of success? We have been told so often enough, and we have seen the young encouraged to believe that winning and success are inseparable, that those who win are ‘winners’ and those who lose, ‘losers’” (p. 199-200). It appears that the values of sport may be learned only if you are a winner, a champion. Not only is winning the cure to all of our ills, “winning makes everything better,” but losing is a disease that we desperately and hurriedly need to vaccinate; losers in sport means losers in life.

Coaches: A Winning Identity

I have argued that these discourses collectively merge together to bombard and socialize coaches to believe the aim of coaching sports is to win. When questioned as to what the aim of sport is, it is hardly surprising then that the 25 coaching education students in the 300-level Sport Pedagogy course I teach resoundingly stated, “To win.” If we peeked inside the thoughts of a coach during the season might we likely find him thinking: “If I can win just one more game it proves I’m a good coach,” or “If I can’t win this game maybe I shouldn’t coach?” How about the following example which is decidedly commonplace:

Grocery Store Clerk: Coach, how you gonna be this year?
Conservative Coach: Oh, pretty good I think.
Grocery Store Clerk: You guys finally gonna beat Valley this year?
Conservative Coach: We have a pretty darn good squad this year. I think we got a chance.
Grocery Store Clerk: Good luck this year coach, win ’em all.
Conservative Coach: That’s what we’re trying to do.

The conservative coach is a bit humble about reaching the holy land of victory, but the consequences of such a pragmatic experience are two-fold. First, the coach learns quickly and repeatedly that his aim is to win and that he is judged based on wins and losses. Second, we can see that the conservative coach replied to the clerk’s initial question by guiding the conversation into the foreseeable direction of wins and losses. The coach could have countered with a witty retort of, “The boys are going to learn a lot this year” or “They have really grown and developed a lot since last year.” But no, the coach has constructed an identity of coaching centered on winning and he continues to reproduce this discourse.
Given the demand that coaches win immediately and sustain this “winning tradition”, many coaches are less humble in announcing this as their guiding aim. At a dinner for boosters, coaches, and administrators, newly appointed head football coach at the University of Tennessee Lane Kiffin said rather boldly that he was looking forward to singing the school’s celebratory song “Rocky Top, all night long after we beat Florida next year” (Edwards, 2008). It is not surprising that Kiffin lives up to this winning identity given the creber of discourses he has been exposed to during his life—his father Monte is a long time football coach and was one of the most winning assistant coaches in the NFL. However, given that the younger Kiffin is a mere 34 years-old, there appears to be no change in how coach’s identify their own effectiveness; that ultimate criteria which has stood the test of time—winning.

The Winning Discourse: Its Perils and Illogic

How can we determine the contribution of the coach in achieving the outcome of victory? Some coaches may have an unfair advantage simply based upon their geographical location that disposes them to a greater quantity and quality of athletes. Further, there are a multitude of factors outside of the coach’s control that may affect the outcome of the game such as injuries, budgets, and scheduling (Governali, 1966). We would not expect a team with paltry resources (e.g., coaches, facilities and monies) to lose to a team with Cadillac-type resources. Nobody really expects the New York Yankees to lose to the Pittsburgh Pirates and if for some bizarre happenstance this occurred then we would likely deem it a fluke, not a sign of effective coaching.

Of relevance to the current deconstruction of winning as an appropriate measure of coaching effectiveness I draw upon Dixon’s (as cited in Morgan, 2007) critique of winning and competition. Dixon rightly identifies that (un)intentional referring errors could affect the outcome of the game and thus degrade the value of competition. If we assume a referee makes a “bad call” and the team, and thus coach, wins or loses because of this call, it would hardly be considered fair to conclude the coach was effective based on the referee’s wrong doing.

To go a step further, what if the winning coach, or his supporters, paid the referees to intentionally make calls that would unfairly influence the outcome of the game. Dixon (as cited in Morgan, 2007) identifies cheating as another factor that could hinder the value of fair competition. As was identified earlier, Bill Belichik is widely considering an effective coach although it is well known that he cheated (e.g., Spygate) in order to obtain an unfair advantage over his opponents. Was Belichik an effective coach before he was caught cheating, or after? It is commonly assumed, and NCAA infractions confirm, that collegiate coaches cheat quite frequently, especially when recruiting prospective athletes. High school coaches are perhaps no less guilty as it is widely believed that many athletes are encouraged, perhaps paid, to move into their school district. At any rate, the lines are certainly blurred when winning is viewed as evidence of effective coaching.

How should we measure the effectiveness of the coach if the athletes he coaches cheat or unfairly affect the outcome of the game? Athletes could cheat during the game by breaking the rules (e.g., holding, illegal contact) or they could cheat during the off-season (e.g., taking banned performance enhancing drugs and practicing
during “dead” periods) in order to obtain an unfair advantage over their opponent. If the coach of a team of steroid using, illegal practicing, class skipping athletes won often should we deem him an effective coach? Sadly, I believe many of us would wrongly identify this coach as a good, effective coach. At the least, winning does not always provide us a clear picture of how to measure the value of the coach. At the worst, we misattribute the value of the coach to the lonely criterion of wins and losses.

Because the winning discourse has reached hegemonic status, the pressure to “win-at-all-costs” is often identified as a contributing force of questionable ethical decision making. Feeling this pressure and knowing that their job is “on the line,” coaches may do things that are less than caring or virtuous. There are undoubtedly many good, ethical, life changing coaches that are fired annually because they lose a few too many games. A coach could do great things, but if he is judged predominantly on wins or loses we are likely to overlook the positive and desirable influence a coach may have. Further, if coaches are looking to “move up the ranks” believe it is necessary to cheat, lie, abuse, or coerce in order to win, then it seems likely that the sport will have little social value and that the winning discourse will be reproduced. It may be that some coaches want to coach in order to resist and demonstrate that the aim of sport isn’t solely to win, but to frame the argument in this manner seems absurd. How can it not be absurd to fire a coach who is a moral leader; a successful educator who guides athletes learning and encourages them to be good people?

The winning discourse degrades sport, coaches, and athletes. A coach could spend a lifetime contributing to the education, learning, and growth of an athlete, but if he didn’t win some idealistic percentage of games, then he runs the risk of being considered a loser. An athlete could respect, care for, and perhaps even love his coach, but if he didn’t win, he would be a loser. A coach could contribute to a monumental change in an athlete, a school, a community, a state; a coach could emancipate, liberate, and empower, but if he didn’t win then he would be a loser. The concern is that the winning discourse has created what Frankl (1959) calls an “existential vacuum.” A coach who has accomplished all of these deeds may unjustifiably feel emptiness, an existential void. However, the coach who has accomplished nothing beyond a perfect record, a ring, a trophy, may paradoxically, feel entirely full, or even entirely empty. Winning means everything. Winning means nothing.6

When I gaze out at the world in which I live it appears that winning cannot be kept in perspective, but rather it needs to be eliminated from our perspective, from our discourse. To reproduce the winning discourse is to legitimize its value, albeit mostly meaningless. The educational value of sport contests is not winning itself, but what can be learned from winning or even losing. To dichotomize winning with the growth possible through sport is not doing us any good. While winning may be the aim of sport contests, we must do much more to reject winning as the aim of sport as an educational process. Winning is a possible achievement from a sport contest; learning is a possible educational achievement. My point is that emphasizing winning in any perspective takes away from an educational view of sport. Rather, we should evaluate and laud coaches who facilitate learning and do it in a morally justifiable way. Analogous to determining quality in teaching (Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2005), a quality coach must do both.

6 For the intentional contradiction used here I am indebted to the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche.
Does winning really matter? Sadly, it does, but it should not. This is not to confuse the outcome of winning with the process of what has been called “striving to win” (Weiss, 1969, Martens, 2004). The coach’s aim is not to teach athletes to win or to strive to win, but rather to teach athletes to strive to compete. Winning and losing are inherent to sport contests; keep score and they will happen. Those who claim winning to be the first, second, or nth aim of sport are misguided. Winning is an outcome of a sport contest. Dare I say all coaches or athletes want to win the game? Such is a normative statement recognized by John Wooden (Wooden & Jamison, 1997), “Players fifty years ago wanted to win just as much as players today…Athletes today have no greater desire to win than athletes at the first Olympic Games. The desire then and now is the same” (p. 56). The coach educates athletes to strive, to compete in the game, but also in school, in society and in “life.” But yet it is the outcome of the game that we overwhelmingly use for evaluation. The point is that the winning discourse is not about growth, it is not a process; it is an outcome, an end. The strength, frequency, and multi-directional attack from the winning discourses has made coaches, and perhaps all of us, believe that winning is the aim of sport. There are, of course, no inherent aims of sport coaching and it is up to coaches to choose what and how they will coach.

Permit me to redirect and lay claim to perhaps what may seem to be a novel idea, although it is not. Winning or losing has nothing to do with determining if a coach has facilitated the education of an athlete unless he uses either of these outcomes as an opportunity to foster learning—a teachable moment. For the coach to be an educator, then he must have tried to bring about a desirable change in the personal disposition (in a Deweyan sense) of athletes (Dewey, 1916). Or in an existential sense, the coach authentically encounters the athlete in an attempt to will the athlete to power; to freedom (Greene, 1973; Nietzsche, 1967). While it may be that participation in sport contributes to the development of desirable virtues, what Weiss (1969) calls “the making of better men,” he is wrong in using this as justification to encourage sport. It would be absurd to encourage participation in sport if the coach did not model these virtues, but was abusive and uncaring.

Heeding the admonition of Lyotard (1979), if speaking is “to fight,” then I choose to fight the winning discourse. I choose to encourage others, especially academia, if we are to embody what is right and to act as a moral compass for our students and community, to help establish new discourses of socially and educationally sound coaching. It does not suffice to view The Sports Coach as Educator (Jones, 2006). Rather, we need to more boldly demand that a coach should be an educator as was the view of John Wooden (Wooden & Jamison, 1997) and Phillip Fulmer (Fulmer, 2008). However, we do not need to emphasize that both of these two great educator coaches won a lot of games; we need to emphasize their educational philosophy.

Tom Farrey (2009) did exactly this in the epilogue of his book Game On when discussing the effectiveness of a high school rugby coach, Tal Bayer, in an urban school in Washington, D.C., Hyde Leadership Public Charter School. Farrey wrote, “Much of the credit belongs with Hyde’s educational philosophy…Hyde’s success is instructive. The U.S. educational system, from the middle schools on up, needs either to bring athletics into the mainstream of its teaching culture or to get out of the enterprise entirely” (p. 333). In this section of the book,
Farrey doesn’t dwell on the coach’s won-loss record or extol the virtue of the coach’s winning ways. Rather, he writes that every “kid” who played for Coach Bayer had gone on to college, that the coach teaches effort, attitude, accountability, communication, empathy, character, and hard work.

Along the lines of this educational foundation thought, we need to recognize the multiple ways coaches contribute to what Maxine Greene called the “landscapes of learning” (1978). Now, more than ever, is the time to use our imagination to help coaches, to help sport, be grounded in educational foundations. As Drew Hyland (1990) recommended, we need to call coaches “teachers” more often and “We need to assure that coaches regularly think of themselves as teachers of ethical values in addition to sport skills, and to insist that they be understood as such and rewarded (or fired!) as such by administrators and colleagues” (pg 40). We need to know how coaches help facilitate what Orlick (2000) called the “pursuit of excellence,” which is a process, not an outcome.

It would, perhaps, be undoubtedly idealistic to believe widespread change would occur after becoming conscious to the winning discourses and its perils. Unless those who control the media and those in power change the discourse such a paradigm shift, as warranted as it is, appears unlikely. However, this should not deter coach educators and sport stakeholders from developing new discourses with comparable strength. We can become aware of what Greene (1978) calls the “mystification” process that corners us into one reality; that believing winning is good, effective coaching. At the least we can encourage and educate coaches to become more “wide-awake,” to believe with such commitment and intensity that their real power, their real effectiveness, is in educating, emancipating, and transforming athletes (Greene). If we are, as Hyland (1990) suggests, to answer the deep philosophical question of, “Who am I” we need coaches to answer this question not by looking at the scorecard, but by the response given by Amos Alonzo Stagg when a reporter praised him after his football team at the University of Chicago won more games than they lost during one particular season, “I won’t know for another twenty years or so whether you’re correct” (as cited in Wooden & Jamison, 1997, p. 105). Winning is dead. Winning remains dead. And we have killed it7. I may be before my time in making such a proclamation, but like any good, effective coach—it may be another twenty years or so before I know if I’m correct.

Davis (1961) speaking on a similar existential crisis in physical education 50 years ago stated, “It is true there must be a period in a profession’s development in which attention is given to arriving at or revising the main purpose (italics in original)” (p. 216). Why coach? Why sport? Of what value? For what purpose? (ibid). Coach to win? Coach to learn? If we choose to ground sport as an educational process it will be up to us to choose how. I am not the good shepherd; I do not have all the answers (Nietzsche, 2005). Greene (1973) reminds us not to be “bemused by metaphors” (Greene, 1973), nor will I provide any dogmas or clichés that are already pervasive in sport—as if they could thoughtfully guide our action! Rather, I want sport coaches to be fully-aware of what they do and why they do it (ibid).

7 This phrase is a modification of Nietzsche’s well-known statement, “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him” (p. 99 as cited in Oaklander, 1992).
Borrowing from Denzin (2009), I think what we need are new “paradigm dialogues” that will help explore what it means for sports to be educational. I am reminded that when we choose for ourselves, we choose for all mankind (Sartre, 2007). Therefore, I choose to oppose the winning discourse in favor of sport as education, grounded in learning, caring, empowerment, freedom, or what hooks (1994) calls “teaching to transgress.” By coaching this way, coach educators may help to create a world of sport that we are proud of—one opposed to the winning discourse. Opposed to using winning as the grand measure of effective coaching, a potential benefit of this new educational discourse is to have coaches be existentially full, or self-actualized, only by authentically encountering and educating athletes. This benefit would deeply touch a coach’s identity if he were at peace with his life as a coach such that he would choose to live that life again and again or what Nietzsche (2005) called the “eternal recurrence.” I invite you to create new discourses, new futures of hope and responsibility.

To avoid further digression, I offer the following conclusions as “signposts” (Kretchmar, 1994) to summarize the current argument as well as provide items for further dialogue or rejoinder:

Signpost #1: Winning, or losing, is an inherent outcome of a sport contest. It does not address the critical value of athlete learning.

Signpost #2: A coach who is not a moral exemplar cannot simultaneously be considered an effective coach.

Signpost #3: While winning, or losing, is not antithetical to an educational grounded view of sport, its inclusion in our discourses takes us away from grounding sport and coaching as educational.

Signpost #4: More research, literature, and commentary are needed on coaches who are moral exemplars and great educators.

Signpost #5: Sport coaches, especially those working with our youth and in our schools and universities, should be viewed and evaluated as educators.

About the Author

Brian T. Garity is in his first year as an assistant professor in the Sport Coaching Education program at the University of Southern Mississippi. He completed his PhD in Educational Leadership at the University of Tennessee (UT) while specializing in philosophy of education, qualitative research methods, and statistics. For his dissertation he used a qualitative phenomenological approach to study Athletes’ Experience of Poor Coaches. Brian also served as a strength and conditioning at UT for the previous eight years working with numerous athletes and teams. His research interests are multiple, but center around coach education and learning and the coach-athlete relationship.
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