Coach Education in Ireland: Observations and Considerations for High Performance

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Abstract

The high-performance sports system is a rapidly evolving and increasingly important element of the Irish sporting landscape reflected in public policy, the direction and level of spending, and organisational/institutional evolution – all signalling a formal recognition of the high-performance sector as central to sport in Ireland. While certain aspects of high-performance sport in Ireland are beginning to be reflected in research (e.g., Guerin et al. 2008), this is yet to be extended to high performance coaching. The education, development, and support of coaches are key areas of the Coaching Strategy for Ireland (2008-2012). An understanding of high-performance coach activities and needs will become increasingly vital in underpinning the effectiveness of resources directed at high-performance coaching as Ireland seeks to reposition itself within the world’s elite in sport. The purpose of this article is to better understand the development of high-performance coaches in Ireland and the key influences on this (e.g., exposure to different coaching environments, sources of knowledge, and preferred ways of learning). It aims to explore what high-performance coaches believe has been most important in developing and fostering their coaching ‘know-how,’ and what this may imply for future educational interventions for high-performance coaches. This article brings to light insights generated through semi-structured interviews with 10 high-performance coaches currently and/or recently working in Irish sport.

Key Words: coach education, coach development, high-performance coaching
Inspiring coaching has been recognized as essential in the development of Irish sport across all contexts, from grassroots to high performance (Coaching Strategy for Ireland, 2008-2012). Although sports coaching in Ireland has traditionally taken place in a voluntary capacity (largely non-paid), there has been a renewed commitment to the development and improvement of coaching in the country. It is overwhelmingly ‘participation-oriented’ (Lyle, 2002) as high-performance sport has historically played a minor role. The system of coach education in Ireland has evolved only since the early 1990s and is thus a relatively recent development compared with many of the European neighbors.

Attempts to formalize and develop coach education emerged with the establishment of the National Coaching and Training Centre (NCTC) in 1992. In 1993 the National Coaching Development Programme (NCDP) was introduced to assist National Governing Bodies (NGBs) to develop coach education in partnership with the NCTC. The aim of formal coach education was to prepare coaches to work effectively with players and athletes at all phases of development from beginners to elite, and is based on a five-level coaching framework (Introductory to Level 4 awards) (see National Coaching and Training Centre, 2002).

The extent to which coach education has been developed varies greatly across sports depending on sport-specific circumstances (e.g., the size of the sport, opportunities for full-time or professional coaching, historical links of the NGB, influences from international federations, or funding). The vast majority of coaching certificates awarded since the inception of the NCDP have been at ‘Introductory’ and ‘Level 1’ (Coaching Strategy for Ireland, 2008-2012). With each sport having a unique developmental trajectory, only a small number of sports (i.e., badminton, hockey, swimming, equestrian, rugby, soccer, and tennis) have attempted to develop coaching courses intended for those working with athletes in a performance context. Tennis Ireland, for example, has developed a ‘Level 3’ coaching course in response to the establishment of a high-performance tennis center and to create a feeder system to in the form of developmental level squads (known as ‘Futures Squads’) at the regional level (T. Lambe, Tennis Ireland Level 3 tutor, personal correspondence, September 4, 2009). In contrast to tennis, the development of certification for ‘Level 3’ and above in soccer has been based on the international federation’s pro-license (Fédération Internationale de Football Association, FIFA).

Each NCDP coaching level was associated with particular coaching capacities or knowledge (e.g., knowledge of the sport and of the athletes; values and ethics; needs analysis and planning; coaching at practice sessions or at competition; communication; or review, evaluation and self-reflection). These were then to relate to athlete capacities at different developmental stages. Syllabus or course development at each NCDP coaching level would be developed taking...
account of these capacities in a sports-specific way and reflecting the circumstances of individual NGBs.

The implementation of the NCDP was carried out by both NGBs and NCTC. Broadly, NGBs developed coach education and coaching systems based on sports-specific needs. The NCTC facilitated this development by assisting NGBs to put in place the elements of the system in terms of needs analysis and planning, course development, delivery and review, quality assurance and tutor training.

At the end of 2008, the NCTC evolved into Coaching Ireland and encompassed an all-island remit and a clear focus to lead the development of coaching in Ireland. The need to update and put in place a new strategy for coaching has arisen out of the increasing demand for more quality coaches (Coaching Ireland, 2008), including high performance coaches. The vital role played by coaches at all levels in sport, and the need for education and development opportunities, has been reinforced recently by the Coaching Strategy for Ireland 2008-2012. Over the next four years Ireland’s coach education programme (NCDP) – now known as the Coaching Development Programme for Ireland – will evolve in an attempt to address several important issues relating to coaching and coach education.

While the Coaching Development Programme for Ireland maintains the direction and philosophy of the NCDP (from which it evolved), consideration will be given to new areas for incorporation in order to address the evolving educational and developmental needs of Irish coaches (Coaching Ireland, 2008). This has prompted a renewed look at what works best in developing coaches, and includes, for example, the need for a greater recognition and understanding of the practical, social/interpersonal and contextual nature of sports coaching (Jones et al. 2006) and the implications of this for coach education (in terms of the balance of formal, informal, and non-formal elements, course/syllabi development, assessment and certification).

This momentum and commitment to take a renewed look at what works best in developing coaches, is finding particular expression in relation to high-performance coaching. This is underpinned by the growing impetus to develop high-performance sport in Ireland, coupled with the limited development to-date of education for coaches working in this context (with the exception of sports such as soccer and rugby which have drawn heavily on their respective international federations). Ireland’s high-performance sport system is in its infancy and, consequently, the wider organizational, institutional, and cultural context has to-date been largely absent. However, high-performance sport is becoming an increasingly important element in the Irish sporting landscape,
which is reflected in public policy, the direction and level of spending, and organizational or institutional evolution (e.g., establishment of the Irish Institute of Sport in 2006, Focus Sport designation by the Irish Sports Council) – all signalling a formal recognition of the high-performance sector as central to sport in Ireland.

It has been encouraging that coaches have been recognized as the cornerstone of high-performance sports development (Irish Sports Council, Feb. 2006) and developing coaches for high performance is one of the strategic themes of the Coaching Strategy for Ireland 2008-2012. Furthermore, addressing the paucity of coaches (particularly indigenous) with the requisite skills and experiences at high performance is a key priority for Coaching Ireland and the Irish Institute of Sport. On a practical level, 10 NGBs have recently indicated an interest or aspiration to embark on developing programs to prepare coaches for performance sport in 2010/2011 (T. Lambe, Tennis Ireland Level 3 tutor, personal correspondence, September 4, 2009). This is generating new questions for policy makers and those charged with developing and supporting coaches (NGBs, Coaching Ireland, IIS).

Discussions of how coaches in high performance are optimally developed and supported have been ongoing in the coaching literature, and has involved a critical re-examination of the traditional approach within education and development initiatives (Cushion et al. 2003; Irwin et al. 2004; Jones et al. 2004; Nelson et al. 2006). The need for a greater recognition and understanding of the practical, social, interpersonal, and contextual nature of sports coaching and the role of coach education or development initiatives in this process has been a central theme and has sparked new conversations between the applied and academic domains (Jones, 2006).

The purpose of this study was to better understand the development of high-performance coaches in Ireland and the key influences (e.g., exposure to different coaching environments, sources of knowledge, or preferred ways of learning). The aim was to explore what high-performance coaches believe has been most important in developing and fostering their coaching ‘know-how.’ A subsequent aim was to consider the implications of this for future educational interventions.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

Given that high-performance sport in Ireland is an emerging niche, this project drew upon in-depth interviews with 10 coaches in an effort to obtain rich and diverse information. The participants were chosen through purposeful sampling techniques, which relate to the selection of unique cases or participants that are especially informative in relation to an in-depth
investigation of the topic under study (Patton, 1990). The coaches were selected based on their involvement or previous involvement in what have been identified by the Irish Sports Council as ‘Focus Sports’ (i.e., triathlon, swimming, athletics, tennis, boxing, hockey, and rowing). These coaches were responsible for the preparation of Irish athletes for international competition (either as head coaches or performance directors) and on their availability and interest in the project. The coaches, rather than coach educators, were targeted for this project because they are one step removed from issues surrounding coach education and high-performance coaching. Consistent with Denison (2010), we believe this is an essential part to better understand high-performance coach development.

Participants represented a diverse group (30-60 years old) and with a minimum full-time coaching experience of six years, with both Irish and non-Irish included. Interestingly, participants were from a range of vocational and educational backgrounds and entry points into coaching (e.g., teaching, military service, human sciences including sports science, business), thus indicating the manner in which coaching attracts a diverse population. All but one, who had retired at the time of the interview, were employed on (full-time) contracts, indicative of the somewhat precarious nature of the profession. More specific individual-level demographic detail was deliberately omitted by the authors so as to protect participants’ anonymity.

Procedure

Involvement in the project required the coaches to participate in a semi-structured interview which ranged in duration from one to two hours. Interviews were open-ended and followed a general interview guide approach (Patton, 1990). This provided the flexibility for coaches to initiate questions and elaborate answers (Wilson, 1996). The main areas of discussion during these interviews were the coach’s background and entry into coaching (e.g., ‘How did you transition into coaching?’ ‘What have been the greatest influences on your coaching?’); the coach’s specific role and function in their current position (e.g., ‘What are the greatest sources of pressure in your coaching role?’); and issues relating to coach development (e.g., ‘How do you develop yourself as a coach?’ ‘What have been the most influential or important areas of development for your work?’). Consistent with Jones et al. (2004), the rationale for focusing on these particular areas was underpinned by the desire to obtain a ‘deeper’ understanding of the complex, dynamic, and context-specific nature of the coaching process.

Interviews were semi-structured which allowed the interviewer flexibility in relating the interview to the participants and to explore additional topics that might have arisen. This approach not only allowed for a greater depth of information but also assisted in the building of rapport (Vazou et al. 2005). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each interview
transcript was returned to the respective participant to check for accuracy (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Transcripts were returned to the investigators with no changes.

Data Analysis

As little work has been done to understand high-performance coaching in Ireland, it was of interest to allow themes to emerge from the data. Therefore, an inductive analysis of the interview transcripts was undertaken. Here the investigators drew upon a variation of grounded theory methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This manual analysis required three steps: preliminary, fine-grained, and final. To begin, the transcripts were carefully read and re-read to determine common features, as well as to identify meaningful pieces of information or ‘meaning units’ (Tesch, 1990). A search was then conducted which highlighted commonalities and uniqueness within the ‘meaning units.’ These findings were then categorized further by organizing frequent and dominant themes inherent in the interview transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Discussions between the investigators ensued about these dominant themes, with these being further developed in the course of subsequent interviews (acknowledging the authors’ subjectivity as a producer of the text). The final themes emerging from the analysis included: the role of formal coach education initiatives (i.e., the traditional ‘level’ based qualifications), informal and/or unmediated learning strategies (e.g., visiting high-performance sports settings and shadowing of other coaches), and a problem-driven approach to knowledge acquisition (i.e., responding to the unique needs of athletes).

Findings and Discussion

All the coaches in the study recognized a place for formal coach education programs in their development, indicating that they served as useful ‘stepping stones’ or ‘scaffolding’ on which to ‘hang ideas’ and allowed for some stability by giving direction and focus. The limitations of formal coach education in addressing the practical concerns of coaches has been widely discussed in literature, which presents coaching as a mechanistic process that can be presented and used in a standardized manner (Nelson et al. 2006). However, as one interviewee contended “… it’s a bit like passing your driving test. It doesn’t make you a good driver … the formal education will only take you so far. It’s just the building blocks. It’s just the bare bones of it.”

In reflecting on the relative value of formal and informal coach education, this interviewee noted that while formal initiatives were of particular value early in their coaching career, their value diminished as their careers developed: “I found the informal coach education was probably the major way of learning in my latter years because I’d finished with the formal.” This sentiment is widely supported in the literature (Cushion et al. 2003; Irwin et al. 2004; Jones
et al. 2004; Nelson et al. 2006), which in examining how sports coaches acquire the knowledge that underpins their professional practice concluded that while coaches learned from a wide range of sources, formal(ized) learning episodes were found to be relatively low impact endeavours when compared to informal, self-directed modes of learning.

As has also been found in the literature (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006), the coaches interviewed drew attention to the discrepancy between knowledge acquisition and application which ‘typically’ characterized formal coach education initiatives. As one of the coaches commented:

“You don’t end up with practical coaches if you just give them information! They have the information but they don’t know what to do with it! The other thing you’re not taught on courses is that at the end of the day the relationship with the player is the most important thing and the relationship with your players is more important than the knowledge you have … it’s adapting to people, you have to adapt! You have to be sometimes more direct and sometimes …. And you don’t learn that in your Level 1 course! … that for me is really, really, really important.”

Here, formal coach education courses appear to be limited by their inability to take sufficient account of the dynamic nature of each sporting context.

The strong emphasis on people to develop and foster knowledge (rather than texts or curriculum) was the most important message from those interviewed. The main sources of coaching ‘know-how’ were other coaches (i.e., coach-to-coach information exchange dominated). These coaches were largely using unmediated learning strategies by drawing on ideas generated from interactions with other coaches (derived both verbally and visually).

As one of the coaches contended, “I think any occasion that you have a chance to coach with another coach, you’re learning or you’re learning how not to do it, or how to do it better or you might learn something about yourself!” The coach highlighted that this element was not sufficiently incorporated within coach education. “Talking to other coaches is a major thing in coaching development and we’re not doing that enough! I don’t think we get enough opportunity!” This also emerged in the work of Denison (2010) as well as Rynne, Mallet and Tinning (2010).

This has been echoed in the literature in which learning from others has been repeatedly shown to be critical in coach development (e.g., Bloom et al. 1998; Cushion et al. 2003; Gould et al. 1990; Jones et al. 2003). The coaches in the Irish study indicated that this interaction took several forms, of which mentoring, shadowing, observation, and informal conversations were the most important in their development. It is noteworthy that these interactions related almost exclusively to those with far more experienced coaches rather than coaches at a similar stage,
and echoed the work of Owen-Pugh (2007), whose research with basketball coaches in the UK identified similar findings.

Findings such as these raise questions as to whether the promotion of non-hierarchical peer groups through ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998) are necessarily the most appropriate forum for facilitating coaches’ learning within high performance due to the inherently and particularly competitive nature of coaching in this context (Culver & Trudel, 2006; Cushion et al. 2003). As one of those interviewed pointed out, “I think it’s important that you can talk about what you do without getting this feeling that ‘oh you’re getting better than me’ and stuff like that.” This resonated strongly with another participant who confided “I couldn’t talk to [Head Coach] about [coaching] because when I bought a DVD or a book or something then he was getting angry with me because I had new knowledge coming in and he didn’t.”

The extent to which this may be ameliorated by encouraging cross-sport ‘communities of practice’ for high-performance coaches is interesting to consider. It would also be necessary to investigate the extent to which this coach-to-coach information loop is actively chosen by coaches, and the degree to which it reflects simple convenience or indeed a lack of options or alternatives. This latter point emerged in the work of Rynne et al. (2010), who described a sample of coaches who were perceived to be socially and professionally isolated.

What was particularly striking from these interviews, but not necessarily surprising given the results-driven nature of high-performance coaching, was the coaches’ motivation to continually access, process, and critically evaluate the relevance of training-related materials. As one of the coaches commented:

“I’m always at this, like every day, every day, but different things. I go to workshops maybe a couple of times a year but I’m always in contact with other international coaches, we’re always sharing ideas, I’m always looking for new things from them, I’m always giving them stuff from us. Every day.”

This was reinforced by a second coach who stated, “I developed a lot through books and watching videos and going to work at international matches and I studied and studied and studied!” The initiative to draw on multiple sources is underpinned by the coaches’ awareness of and reflection on potential weaknesses in their own portfolio. Such an approach supports conceptualizations of coaching as a fluid rather than fixed process (Denison, 2010).

“I think you realize your strengths and weaknesses and you know what you need. I think that happens with experience. You see yourself as a coach a little bit different, you keep changing, things change and you keep changing and you realize that there are things
you’re good at but that there are things maybe you’re not so good at and that can have an influence.”

While the coaches continuously strove to build their coaching ‘know-how’ they did recognize their limitations within the dynamic context in which they operated. One of the coaches remarked, “You can’t know everything as a coach! You don’t! There are things that come up no matter how experienced you are…. You’re dealing with individual.”

The highly context-specific nature of their work came through strongly in looking at what coaches identified as the ‘spark’ for their inquiries. All coaches interviewed emphasized that it was their athletes who were setting and indeed raising the bar for them in their own development.

“You learn a lot from different kinds of players and often I find myself needing something for somebody … I have to go and read about it and then talk to the physio tomorrow and those things are a constant learning curve, but that’s from a player!”

A problem-driven approach to developing their ‘know-how’ and one which was also responsive to athletes’ individual needs, suggested a truly ‘athlete-centred’ and ‘coach-driven’ ethos. As one of the coaches explained: “A situation with a player can force you to have to learn different things and as you go up the level and as the players go up the level, the bar is always changing so small things become even more important that weren’t important in the beginning and you have to also change.”

A similar sentiment was identified by another interviewee who in reflecting on their development as a performance coach explained, “I found myself then, to be challanged by them [athletes] to improve a bit more … I need to improve myself as a coach.”

It is this context-specific approach which allows coaches to be (more) athlete-centred and according to interviewees, more effective. This sentiment strongly echoes that of Charlesworth (2008), the renowned Australian high-performance hockey coach, who in relation to the challenges of sustaining success in high-performance sport contended that athletes were the great innovators and that coaches must learn to be adept at tapping into this and learning from the experience. This reinforces the centrality of skills relating to developing perception, judgement and rapport – the ’intangibles’ – as one of the coaches called it. As one of the coaches highlighted, in high performance, the response to most questions relating to what to do “… probably starts with - well, it depends!” This may be said of coaching at all levels but becomes particularly relevant in the high-performance context because of the small margins in elite sport performance.
The coaches interviewed all highlighted the importance of trying things out within their coaching practice and the need to accommodate at least some scope or opportunity for ‘trial and error,’ as one of the coaches argued: “We tell coaches to allow players to guide their discovery, let them learn themselves and set the environment and all these things and I think that’s important as a coach that the players do this but we should also probably do this for the coaches! We should create environments for them so that they can learn rather than giving them just the information all the time!” This has also been strongly advocated by coach educators such as Kidman and Hanrahan (2004) and is reminiscent of Hotz’s (2009) assertion for the need to operate outside of their comfort zone in order to develop as practitioners (notwithstanding the element of threat to high performance coaches’ job security in the event of falling short of performance expectations).

In referring to how this could be better integrated into meaningful developmental experiences for coaches, one of the interviewees suggested: “I was watching the ‘Apprentice’ program and I do think that there is a need for this kind of approach in coaching – ‘apprenticing’ if you like – that you take on people … like you can’t beat this on a course … I think that part of courses could be that they have to spend a certain amount of time with various high-performance coaches.” This ‘apprenticeship of observation’ has long been alluded to in the coaching literature (Schempp & Graber, 1992; Jones et al. 2009).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to better understand the development of high-performance coaches in Ireland and the key influences (e.g., exposure to different coaching environments, sources of knowledge, and preferred ways of learning). The aim was to explore what high-performance coaches believe has been most important in developing and fostering their coaching ‘know-how.’ Subsequently, we were interested in considering the implications of this for future educational interventions. Ten high performance coaches and performance directors participated in this project which yielded data based on a wide range of experience, and consequently generated an in-depth discussion of high-performance coaching in Ireland. Admittedly, a small sample size informed the findings, yet some key messages emerged which contribute to debates surrounding coaching in high performance and its ultimately messy, complex, and unpredictable nature (Bowes & Jones, 2006; Jones et al. 2004). From a practical point of view, our work draws attention to the need for a more holistic approach to coach education and development, which takes better account of the strong emphasis on people to develop and foster knowledge (rather than texts or curriculum). This suggests the need for an alternative approach to educating, developing, and supporting coaches in Ireland. Elements of this appear already to have been initiated within some sports (for example, triathlon and swimming who are integrating elements such as mentoring as part of coach development). The current challenge for Coaching Ireland and the Irish Institute of Sport is to improve the practical aspects of coaching and to address the...
often apparent discrepancy between qualification and certification and the ability to ‘do the job.’

Another important message of interest to the wider high-performance coaching community
emerging from this project, is that many aspects of coaching at high performance do not correlate
readily with a ‘level-based’ curriculum but rather suggest a need for flexible and individualized
education and development opportunities. Such an approach inevitably raises challenges for
policy governing resource allocation. The concern here is the ability to balance sufficient
numbers of coaches, while ensuring the quality of their expertise. Regardless, Ireland has made it
clear that high-performance sport is a priority (e.g., creation of IIS), and it is therefore an
opportune time for sports to (re)consider what constitutes the most meaningful and relevent
development programs for their coaches.

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supporting this work.
References


Footnotes

1Possibilities for developing links between coach education programmes and third level institutions is being explored.
2high performance here is defined as preparing athletes for elite /international competition.
3The high performance unit currently supports 16 ‘focus sports’, through high performance funding, to develop and enhance NGB performance planning (http://www.instituteofsport.ie).
4Tacit and practical knowledge.
5In collaboration with the participants, the terms ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ were understood to be: ‘formal’ referred to classroom based and certification driven activities; ‘informal’ referred to participant-driven, small-scale, interactive developmental experiences.
6One was retired at the time of the interview.
7This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the University of Limerick, Ireland.