“Could and Should Sport Coaching Become a Profession? Some Sociological Reflections”

A Commentary

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I am grateful for the opportunity to comment on the ‘Insights’ manuscript published in this issue of the International Sport Coaching Journal (ISCJ) titled: “Could and Should Sport Coaching Become a Profession? Some Sociological Reflections.” The authors deserve to be commended for their efforts to provide a thoughtful piece on this important topic. I appreciated the viewpoint taken by Malcolm et al. in offering a contrasting position to the ICCE and UK Coaching Framework. These types of papers are needed to provoke thought and discourse within the coaching and coaching education community.

From their perspective as sport sociologists, the authors adequately address some of the issues related to the current challenges faced by sport coaches in developing ‘professionalism.’ This is a path down which many professions have travelled. For example, Duffy et al. (2011) point out how the fields of teaching, medicine and law have undergone similar processes. These challenges are to be expected from an emerging profession—especially from a field (coaching/coaching education) that is growing so fast, with so many constituents (athletes) to serve. The authors’ perspective as a ‘critical friend’ from a sport sociology perspective is a valuable frame of reference that is important to consider.

Assumptions About the Current Status of Professionalism and Coaching

Admittedly, this reader is not an expert in sport sociology. Therefore some of the elements and theories of the paper were unfamiliar to this reviewer. However, from a coaching/coaching education perspective, the authors offer positions that possess both strengths and limitations. For example, it is not clear exactly what ‘coaching community’ has determined that the professionalization of coaches is needed and/or desired: is it coaches themselves who are creating the push for professionalization or is it another group (e.g. national governing bodies, administrators, coaching educators, parents, athletes, etc.) who desire that coaches become more ‘professional?’ Lyle (2002) discusses that the desire for the professionalism of coaches has been driven by two forces: (a) accountability of coaches’ actions and (b) a desire for bona-fide profession. Recent publicity for holding accountable coaches who act improperly has been well documented in the mainstream media (e.g., CNN.com, 2013; James, 2013). These examples demonstrate that, in many current cases, coaches are more often being held accountable for their actions. Furthermore, the “desire for a bona-fide profession” needs to be clarified: what groups are clamoring for increased professionalism in coaching? It seems that Malcolm et al. assume the unstated implication that the field of coaching (and/or coaches) is not already considered professional. These examples of anecdotal evidence suggest that, based upon the criteria outlined by Duffy et al. (2011), many coaches are already conducting themselves as ‘professionals.’

Coaching Licensure and/or Certification

Malcolm et al. provide a thoughtful viewpoint to some of the risks and hurdles associated with ‘professionalizing’ coaching. In fact, this kind of debate has occurred within several professions that are connected to coaching such as sport psychology (Anshel, 1992; Zaichowsky, 1992) and athletic training (Parsons, 2010). These vocations faced similar obstacles in their growth in becoming professions (i.e. possessing an agreed upon knowledge base; articulating national/international standards; stated ethics and; organization of membership). In fact, in the United States, many of the state high school athletic associations already expect some of their coaches to adhere to some of these ‘criteria for coaching professionalism’ (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2013). Recently there has been movement toward developing state coaching licenses or certifications to create minimum standards for interested parties to become coaches. Some professional coaching organizations in the United States already require licenses and mandatory coaching education by
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literature (from coaching and/or coaching science) that
have been to provide readers with a brief overview of the
criteria, especially those standards listed by Duffy et
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tions that the authors provide is thought-provoking
already known about this topic. The sociological per-
toward professionalization) has been ongoing for several
decades. While the authors’ sociological perspective is
interesting, the paper adds little information to what is
already known about this topic. The sociological per-
tative that the authors provide is thought-provoking
(e.g. their comparisons of the ‘power’ vs. ‘trait’ depic-
tions of sport coach professionalism). However, it is
not clear what new practical knowledge is offered to
advance the process of professionalism for coaches. In
fact, it is not clear that a well-supported argument has
been made to convince readers that, based upon some of
the criteria discussed by Duffy et al. (2011), coaches (in
many places) are not already considered ‘professionals’. Therefore, this reader is unconvinced that a realistic need exists to adopt a new approach (i.e. ‘power’) to advance coaching professionalization. For example, certainly coaches who are employed in the National Football League (NFL), National Basketball Association (NBA), National Hockey Association (NHL) and Major League Baseball (MLB) are considered ‘professionals’ by most any criteria, especially those standards listed by Duffy et al. An improved argument for the authors’ position would have been to provide readers with a brief overview of the literature (from coaching and/or coaching science) that discusses this topic (e.g. McCullick, Belcher, & Schempp, 2005; Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). Furthermore, a stronger argument would have been made if the authors

Comparisons With Other Professions

This reader appreciated the Malcolm et al.’s efforts to offer comparisons with similar professionals in industries that might be analogous to coaching. For example, the authors assert: “Not only does the implicit hierarchy between performance and participation-oriented coaching undermine professional unity, but the essentially competitive character of sporting competition serves to stratify individuals within the occupation.” The authors choose the profession of medicine as a field of comparison. Unfortunately, the medical field is not a reasonable group with which to compare coaching. The profession of medicine has had much more time to address the hurdles that have been placed in their path to establishing themselves as a professional body. Furthermore, it could be argued that most all professions are stratified within their occupations. If the authors choose to stand by their comparisons between coaching and medicine, then there are certainly many examples of different types of medical doctors (e.g., surgeons, general practitioners, specialists), yet professional unity does not seem to be undermined in the medical field. This criticism of coaching seems unfair and unfounded. In fact, the authors review of the identification of different categories of coaching (‘performance’ vs. ‘participation’ coaches) is probably more useful for researchers who seek to study/categorize coaches than it is for coaches practicing in the field. There is an inherent unity within coaching, regardless of the terms ‘participation-’ or ‘performance-oriented.’ Based upon the authors’ assertion, it could be inferred that a performance-oriented coach might meet a participation-oriented coach at a coaching clinic and dismiss him or her because he or she occupies a higher step on the ladder of the coaching hierarchy. In fact, the opposite is mostly true: performance oriented coaches who are higher on the ‘hierarchical ladder’ are often very interested in helping lower level participation-oriented coaches: this probably contributes to the feelings of unity and fraternity that exist throughout much of the coaching community, regardless of sport or coaching level.

Role of the Coach

The authors seem to inaccurately describe the role in which many coaches view themselves. For example, the authors state “Finally, and increasingly in an age of celebrity, coaches frequently have to defer to athletes in terms of status. While coaches and athletes clearly have different skill-sets, frequently it is the athlete who is the star of the show, with coaches (seen) only to perform supporting roles.” Is this not the role of a coach/teacher, to perform in a ‘supporting role?’ Getting out of the way to be the ‘guide-on-the-side,’ (not ‘the man-in-the-middle’)