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Essential Coaching Knowledge

Becoming a quality coach requires a foundation of core knowledge that covers a wide range of subjects. Every coach enters the role with a unique foundation of education and experience. When first learning to coach, new knowledge is stored as isolated bits of information. With additional experience and careful reflection, coaches begin to see patterns, and the knowledge becomes more organized and easy to retrieve. The use of this process, referred to as building mental representations,¹ is a defining characteristic of quality coaches. Expert coaches differ from novices both in the quantity and quality of mental representations of their knowledge.

Skillful coaching rests on a strong foundation of essential coaching knowledge. In the United States, the *National Standards for Sport*



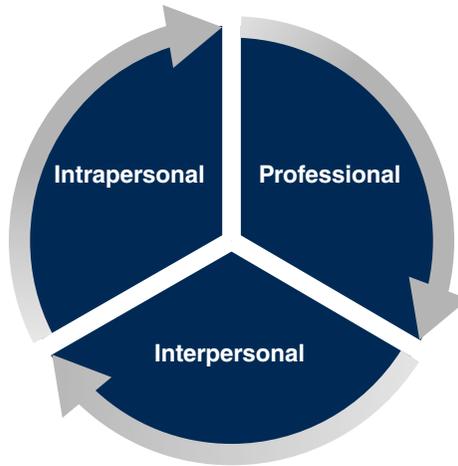


FIGURE 2.1 Coaching knowledge components.

*Coaches*² traditionally has served as valuable guidance in identifying essential coaching knowledge. Since these standards were first introduced in 1995, much has been learned about quality coaching from the vast amount of coaching and athlete development research that has emerged. It is now widely recognized, including in the updated *National Standards for Sport Coaches*³ released in 2019, that the foundation of essential coaching knowledge consists of professional knowledge, interpersonal knowledge and intrapersonal knowledge (see figure 2.1).^{4,5}

Professional Knowledge

Professional knowledge relates to two main functions of coaching: designing quality training sessions and guiding athletes to optimal performance in competitions. The ability to effectively teach and guide athletes requires a deep understanding of the history, rules and unique demands of the sport. Therefore, coaches' professional knowledge is measured by their experience and expertise, teaching and learning abilities, and aptitude for competition coaching.

Sport Experience and Expertise

At a minimum, knowledge of sport-specific rules and safety issues² and mandatory requirements is a must for coaches in any environment. Also beneficial is an understanding of the sport's unique tradition and culture, which can be learned in part by studying or observing the sport. However, much of the traditions and cultures inherent in each sport are only learned through direct participation in the sport. In the performance sport

setting, therefore, some level of experience as an athlete in the sport is advantageous, although certainly not required. Direct experience as an athlete can help coaches to better relate to the challenges encountered by their athletes, and it has also been shown to build the athletes’ trust and confidence in the coach.⁶ But that does not mean that the best athletes in a sport will necessarily be the best coaches.

Teaching and Learning Abilities

Coaches who conduct training sessions that are most beneficial to athlete development

- set, or insist that athletes set, challenging and specific practice goals;
- keep athletes physically and mentally active throughout practice;
- give athletes choices and seek their input on practice design and
- conduct competitive and gamelike practice activities.⁷

These features collectively constitute what is often referred to as deliberate practice.¹ This type of practice is purposeful, intentional and designed to help athletes improve their skills. The ability to design deliberate practice training sessions requires an awareness of four basic principles of athlete learning (see table 2.1).

TABLE 2.1 Principles of Athlete Learning and Sample Coaching Strategies

Athlete learning principle	Sample coaching strategy
1. Prior knowledge can help or hinder athlete learning.	Have athletes explain or demonstrate a skill before attempting to teach it to gauge their readiness to learn the skill.
2. Athlete motivation directly influences the learning process.	Ask athletes for feedback on the difficulty of learning activities to help find the right challenge–skill balance.
3. Skill mastery requires athletes to learn component skills.	Try describing, and then walking through, the steps needed to perform a skill before teaching it to your athletes.
4. Combine deliberate practice with targeted specific feedback.	Identify in advance feedback cues and bandwidths to help athletes meet learning and performance standards.

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Teaching is the heart of coaching. Knowledge of these four basic athlete learning principles provides a solid foundation for becoming a better teacher. Quality coaches take great pride in learning how to teach effectively.

Aptitude for Competition Coaching

Optimal athlete performance in competition requires careful guidance before, during and after competition. Prior to competition, quality coaches strive to ensure their athletes are well rested and peaking at the right time. They also facilitate precompetition routines that help athletes find their individual zones of peak psychological and emotional states. Immediately before the competition, they ensure their athletes are sufficiently fueled to meet the energy demands of their event.

During competition, quality coaches carefully monitor athlete performance and intervene when needed. The ability to directly coach athletes during competitions varies widely depending on the rules and characteristics of each sport. However, as a general rule of thumb, quality coaches emphasize the three E's of competition coaching to guide their athletes to optimal performance: examine, encourage and educate.⁷

Competition coaching does not end with the athletes' performance. The moments following a competition are prime opportunities to start preparing athletes for the next competition or training session. Quality coaches encourage athletes to use postcompetition time to rest, recover, reflect on their performance and process their emotions—whether the main emotion is joy from succeeding or frustration after falling short.

Interpersonal Knowledge

Interpersonal knowledge is a coach's ability to build positive and productive relationships with others. Whereas professional knowledge provides a foundation for knowing *what* to coach, interpersonal knowledge equips coaches with an awareness of *how* to coach each unique athlete and to work with others in the sport environment.

Interpersonal knowledge in coaching is most associated with emotional intelligence and transformational leadership.^{8,9} Developing emotional intelligence and transformative leadership skills improves communication and contributes to positive and appropriate coach–athlete relationships. Athletes, and parents of young athletes, trust coaches to create safe environments. Quality coaches understand that abuse of that trust is never acceptable.¹⁰

Emotional Intelligence

Quality coaching requires keen observation skills since coaches spend much of their time observing their athletes and thinking about how to create the right conditions for athlete development. In addition to observing an athlete's skill development, the coach should also be monitoring the athlete's feelings, emotions and motivation. Unlike technical or tactical skill deficiencies, which often are relatively easy to spot, the affective state of an athlete can be extremely difficult to gauge. Coaches with strong emotional intelligence are especially effective in

- perceiving emotions (identifying their own feelings and the emotions of others),
- using emotions (generating emotions to improve attentional focus, decision making and problem solving),
- understanding emotions (recognizing the causes of emotions and how emotions influence the behaviors of others) and
- managing emotions (controlling their own emotions and teaching athletes how to identify and regulate their emotions).

Transformational Leadership

Leadership in sport is one of the most studied and complicated aspects of coaching. Athletes rely on coaches for leadership. However, quality coaches also teach their athletes how to become good leaders.

Current leadership models emphasize shared and transformational leadership. Coaches should therefore distribute leadership roles and responsibilities among their athletes and across their programs. When athletes and other members of the coaching environment are empowered to lead, it builds confidence and ownership in the sport experience. This leads to a greater sense of cohesion, sometimes referred to as collective efficacy.

Transformational coaches serve as positive role models, inspire others with a compelling vision, encourage and support athlete input and act in the best interest of their athletes. Transformational coaches serve athletes to help them achieve their goals. (This contrasts starkly with transactional leadership: Transactional coaches use athletes to meet their own needs.) Research shows that leadership that is shared and transformational enhances coach-athlete relationships and athlete enjoyment while contributing to improved performance.

Intrapersonal Knowledge

It is now widely recognized that coaches themselves are performers, too.¹¹ Performing at their best requires that coaches constantly reflect and update their coaching strategies. This requires intrapersonal knowledge, the third type of knowledge that underpins quality coaching. Whereas professional and interpersonal knowledge concern what to coach and how to coach, intrapersonal knowledge is all about self-awareness, reflection and striving for continuous improvement.^{2,3} This is essential for helping a coach identify his or her core values, improve coaching abilities and sustain a coaching career.

Self-Awareness

Coaches coach for many reasons: to give back to sport, to help others grow and reach their goals, to earn a living and so on. But quality coaches don't just have a rationale for coaching—they have a *purpose*. A strong sense of coaching purpose should act as both a pull and push for coaches. It should serve to inspire coaches (pull) toward their vision and goals. It should also motivate (push) coaches to hold themselves accountable to the same high standards they set for their athletes.

A coaching purpose might be considered a coach's "why." A coaching "why" may not be evident or well defined early in a coaching career, but for astute coaches it becomes increasingly obvious and easy to articulate through regular reflection.

Reflection

Intrapersonal knowledge is improved when coaches engage in regular and systematic reflection, which is the process of thinking about coaching. Quality coaches use two types of reflection: reflective practice and critical reflection.¹² Both types of reflection are stimulated by coaching dilemmas.

Coaches engage in reflective practice when they try to solve coaching problems. Problem solving is a regular part of coaching, and quality coaches seek out possible solutions from a wide range of sources. The best coaches often conduct experiments to test potential solutions. This might involve asking another coach or an athlete for feedback on the strategy before implementing it.

But the best coaches don't just aim to solve problems; they pause to analyze problems, referred to as critical reflection. With critical reflection, coaches first ask themselves probing questions—such as why something is a problem—before they try to generate solutions.

Because coaches are often pressed to make quick decisions, reflective practice is much more common than critical reflection. However, periodically suspending the tendency to try to solve a problem quickly, and setting aside time for inquiry and reflection, is a valuable way for coaches to revisit and refine their coaching purpose while also identifying areas for continuous improvement.

Continuous Improvement

Quality coaches are confident, yet humble enough to recognize that there is always more to learn. Legendary college basketball coach John Wooden said it best when he stated, “It’s what you learn after you know it all that matters most.”¹³

Coaches typically wait until the end of a season to reflect on things they need to improve. The best coaches, however, are constantly identifying aspects of their coaching that need improvement.

Although small learning gains may be possible during the season, the best opportunity to improve as a coach comes from self-guided study in the off-season. Learning efforts are most effective when coaches focus their studies on either a topic or a coach. High-impact topics can be identified by reflecting on athlete and coach performance from the past season. To select a coach to study, the coach could review popular coaching autobiographies or ask peers to identify their favorite coaches from among all sports.

The learning benefits that come from regular and rigorous self-guided study are magnified when connected to the learning networks of other coaches. Participating in social media networks frequented by other coaches and attending coaching clinics are valuable ways to build and sustain a learning network. Building strong learning and support networks is critical, both for continuous improvement and for maintaining perspective as a coach.

CHAPTER 2 | Takeaway

To coach effectively, it is not enough to have played or watched the sport, or to have merely read about how to coach. Quality coaching requires essential professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge used in coaching practice to meet the needs of athletes in that setting. Informed daily decisions and behaviors that serve the best interest of athlete well-being, the team and the program are the ultimate demonstration of quality coaching.