



COACH LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT THEMES ARISING FROM THE ASSISTANT COACH WEBINAR: A PERSONAL PERCEPTIVE

Dr Paul Perkins

High Performance Coach Development Advisor Australian Institute of Sport
Associate Professor University of Canberra Research Institute for Sport and Exercise

Introduction

The AIS Coach Development team held another highly informative online information-sharing session last week as part of the 2023 National Coach Network Webinar Series. The event was hosted by AIS HP Coach Development Manager Bill Davoren, and focused on the role, challenges and demands of assistant coaches. Bill was joined by 2 expectational panellists: Australian Kookaburras assistant coach [Rob Hammond](#) and Fremantle Dockers assistant coach [Matt Boyd](#), who shared openly and freely throughout the night. The following summarises the key coach learning and development aspect of the session and uses available research to help explain Rob and Matt's coaching journeys.

Theme 1. Backgrounds

It quickly became apparent during the session that Matt and Rob developed the foundations of their craft during long periods of involvement in their sports as athletes. Whilst research shows that this is more evident in certain sports than others, it also demonstrates how exposure to this early source of informal coach learning can provide a broad range of positive outcomes, including:

- > A basic understanding of the coaching role through exposure to different coaches, approaches and practices.
- > Participation in impactful learning and developmental experiences.
- > Generation of important insights into some of the challenges associated with the planning and delivery of training sessions.
- > An ability to empathise with athletes.

The following passages help to demonstrate the importance of these incidental coach learning experiences:

"Rob was an elite hockey player who played for over 13 years [with] the Kookaburras and [won] gold at the 2004 Athens [Olympic Games], bronze at the 2008 [Beijing Olympics], as well as a number of World Cups. Rob transitioned into [HP] coaching after a period working in the junior space and became an assistant coach of the Kookaburras in February 2017"

– Bill

"I mean a lot of my learning is informal [and] on the job, but I think it was set up from a strong interest through my playing years"

– Rob

"Matty was close to being a 300-game player with the Western Bulldogs and was part of their 2016 premiership team. He started [his coaching career in 2017] as a development coach with Collingwood [and is now an assistant coach] with the Fremantle Dockers"

– Bill

"You know, I think I had 5 or 6 senior coaches throughout my playing career and [that gave me] an opportunity to learn from different styles and different people"

– Matt



Paul Perkins is an associate Professor at the University of Canberra and a member of the Australian Institute of Sport High Performance Coach Development Team. He is a dedicated, passionate and experienced coach, educator and researcher with an extensive background in the Australian sport sector and a passion for helping others and seeing people succeed. Paul is skilled at, and highly experienced in developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating multi-layered sport-based development initiatives and has a thorough understanding of deductive, inductive and abductive reasoning and how these different processes can be used to draw conclusions, make predictions, and/or construct explanations. Whilst Paul's research has been multi-disciplinary and positioned within the broader societal context, he is currently exploring the benefits of more social and collaborative approaches to coach learning and is interested in contributing to long-term positive outcomes through the use of Australian First Nations methodologies.

Theme 2. Influences

Throughout the discussion, Rob and Matt also discussed how their approaches to coaching have been influenced by the people they have worked with over the course of their careers. This is important in the present context, as there are numerous studies showing how the interactional activities of meaningful relationships enable the transfer of highly valuable domain-specific knowledge when they are framed by a commitment to continuous improvement and geared toward meeting the individual needs of each partner. Three pertinent and representative comments highlighting the importance of this point were as follows:

"There's been quite a few Bill and, I guess, I've tried to cherry pick the best parts out of all the people I've been involved with"

– Matt

"He said one sentence to me [at] an 8-game series, but it was enough to have a huge impact on my career - coaching doesn't need to be complicated. It's about making the complex simple and I think the coaches that I've mentioned already are very, very good at that. Do they get it right all the time? No, but they get it right more often than not"

– Rob

"They need to have this great ability to inspire through storytelling and give their players something to really hold on to. These are two examples of some of the things I've picked up from the coaches I've worked with"

– Matt

Theme 3. Habits and traits

The importance of personal traits, behaviours and habits was also discussed during the session, and Rob and Matt both considered these qualities to be essential for the development of coaches. The emergence of this theme is compatible with research showing that coaches develop their domain-specific expertise from setting goals, acquiring knowledge throughout their careers, expanding their thinking, interacting with and observing other coaches and practices, critical self-reflection, self-monitoring and evaluation, and improvement of certain cognitive skills including problem solving and automaticity. Importantly, the above can all be learnt, developed and enhanced through regular practice and are evident in the following extracts:

"I think having [an] inquisitive mindset and creating some space every day to reflect and do some reading outside of what we're actually doing in our own little bubbles is really important because the whole time the wheels are just turning about how this might relate to my work. But it's also knowing that you don't have to know [everything] and coaches need to curate and pull information from people who are the experts in their fields"

– Rob

"Yeah, I mean, I've been lucky in my short time that I've been introduced to a lot of really good people, and I think the key to how I learn is through informal channels and [the] ability to have conversations with people from different sports and different areas of business. They're the sort of experiences that just create inspiration for me and motivate me to wanna be a better coach. And the more you can create opportunities like that for yourself, the better it is, I mean the better ideas you're getting the more motivation you get to be the best coach you can be"

– Matt

Theme 4. Stages of development

Toward the end of the session discussions centred around development and Matt and Rob's thoughts on this topic were consistent with what has been reported in the literature. For example, one study used a five-stage developmental process to analyse and describe the skills, knowledge and capabilities of beginner, competent, proficient, and expert coaches. According to the authors of that study, every expert coach starts at the first stage as a beginner and progresses through the various stages by identifying their deficiencies and the ways in which they can be addressed through largely self-directed learning journeys. Progression through the different stages is determined by several factors including the degree of exposure to high-level coaching, the extent of opportunity to take part in formal and non-formal learning experiences, personal characteristics, and influences outside of sport, such as work and family commitments.

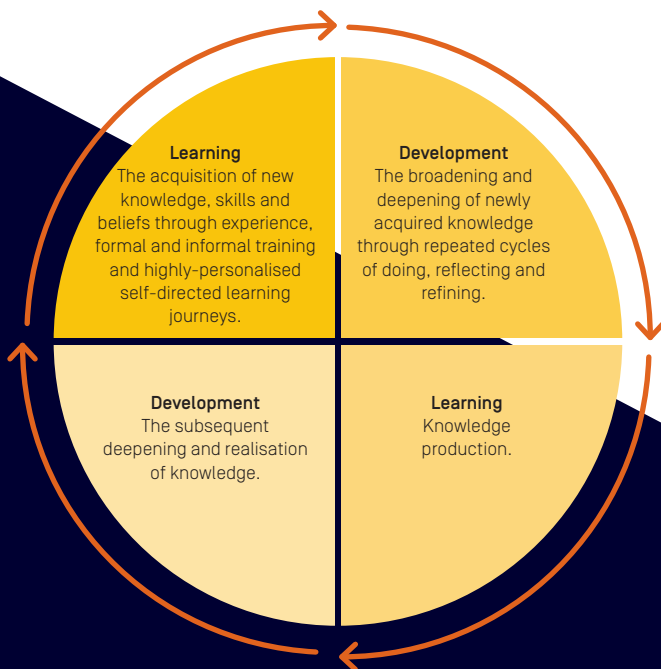
The authors concluded that the seven key attributes are required for expert coaching. These are summarised below:

- > **Extensive knowledge:** Expert coaches are passionate about learning and acquire their knowledge through various means, including personal experiences, formal educational programs, mentorships, attending workshops, courses and conferences, reading, and working with athletes and other coaches.
- > **Planning:** A key characteristic of expert coaches is that they have high regard for planning, with many seeing it as an integral and essential part of their role.
- > **Intuition:** Whilst expert coaches often use "gut feelings" when making decisions, a key factor that tends to separate expert coaches from less expert colleagues is the extent to which intuitive decision-making yields positive outcomes and useful solutions.
- > **Problem-solving:** Expert coaches are often much better at analysing problems and developing solutions than their non-expert counterparts.
- > **Attention to the atypical:** When discriminating information, expert coaches have a knack for recognising what is important and ignoring what is unnecessary by subconsciously screening and assessing situations for both typical [usual] and atypical [unusual] occurrences. Upon detecting a negative atypical event, an expert coach calls upon his/her extensive knowledge to firstly discover the

cause of the problem and then quickly resolve the issue by providing the most appropriate response with a minimum of fuss.

- > **Self-monitoring:** Expert coaches are generally better than non-expert coaches at acknowledging, identifying and understanding their shortcomings and tend to be more open and committed to the concepts of self-improvement and professional development.
- > **Automaticity of behaviour:** Expert coaches can perform a wide range of complex tasks in ways that appear to be completely natural and almost effortless, but that nearly always produce the intended outcome and/or result.

Nevertheless, and something worth noting is that coaching expertise is not achieved by simply acquiring the above characteristics. Instead, many other important factors, including motivation, ambition, personal traits, and opportunity all play vital roles in the development of domain-specific coaching expertise.



Concluding thoughts

- > The information generated from the webinar highlighted that coach learning and development is a complex process that occurs through meaningful and impactful interactions and is predominantly and perhaps even exclusively a social process.
- > Rob and Matt showed, however, that learning is not confined to contrived times and physical spaces but continues throughout life and at times when readiness to learn is high.
- > Matt and Rob also demonstrated that effective HP coach development requires highly personalised and self-directed learning journeys and should therefore not be seen as a one-off, event-based activity but as something that is part of a bigger and ongoing development experience that involves the re-shaping, re-producing and re-using of shared information rather than the direct transfer of original material.
- > Coach developers and social learning leaders can play an important role in allowing this to happen, provided they are sufficiently aware of the operational circumstances of the coaches and that close and trusting relationships exists.

Acknowledgments

The AIS Coach Development Team would like to thank Rob and Matt for taking part in the session and sharing their thoughts and feelings so openly with the group.