



HOW DO COACHES BECOME EXPERT PRACTITIONERS?

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Introduction

Involvement with sport occurs for various reasons that can be broadly categorised as follows:

- > **Participation for Personal Wellbeing:** Participants take part in sport for personal wellbeing reasons including the social and health benefits associated with participation.
- > **Personally Referenced Excellence:** Participants gain enjoyment from skill development and the challenge of surpassing their previous performances.
- > **Elite Referenced Excellence:** Participants engage with sport for the purpose of winning at the highest possible level and generally measure success by win/loss ratios.¹

A key requirement for sustained success and the realisation of positive outcomes across each of these categories is exposure to highly effective coaching.^{2,3,4} For example, it is now widely accepted that effective coaches play a critical role in promoting the physical and social benefits of sport participation⁵, enhancing the performance of individual athletes and teams⁶, and assisting the positive growth and development of young people through the provision of transformative sporting experiences.^{7,8,9}

Given the importance of the role, the recruitment, training and ongoing development of coaches across the entire participation spectrum is a key priority for most sporting organisations.¹⁰ This short paper aims to support that task by summarising the different ways coaches have developed their domain-specific knowledge and expertise.

The importance of experience and more knowledgeable others

Comprehensive understanding of the ways in which coaches can develop their expertise is an essential requirement for any initiative aimed at aiding the development of current practices and guiding the advancement of coaching as a profession. Consideration of this task is challenging, however, since no absolute consensus exists concerning an optimal approach to coach development.⁴

Physical education research, suggests that expertise is a domain-specific trait and that high levels of subject matter knowledge and experience are essential for its development.^{11,12} This point was highlighted by Chen and Rovegno¹³ who examined the differences between novice and expert teachers and discovered that the experts had developed certain skills over the course of their careers which enabled them to be much better than their non-expert counterparts at facilitating opportunities for the development of such important outcomes as positive student interactions, critical thinking, and the linking of new learning to prior knowledge and experiences. Similar findings were reported by Bell¹⁴, who argued that experience is far more effective than verbal information for the development of domain-specific knowledge and expertise. Bell¹⁴ also noted the importance of providing learners with carefully planned and well-organised continuous learning opportunities throughout their careers and suggested the use of more knowledgeable/capable others as ways of facilitating this process.



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.

The link between knowledge production, expertise and mentorships

There are numerous studies showing the importance of mentorships and the ways in which they have supported the professional growth and development of relational partners at different stages of their careers.^{15,16,17,18} Swap et al.¹⁹, for example, demonstrated how the interactional activities of these relationships enable the transfer of important and highly valuable domain-specific tacit knowledge when they are framed by a commitment to continuous improvement and geared toward meeting the individual needs of each partner.¹⁹

It is worth noting, however, that studies investigating the effectiveness of mentorships appear to have been conducted mostly within particular fields of interest and with a specific type of relationship focus. Results from this research [17,18,20] are highly compatible with what has been reported in the coach learning literature⁴ in showing that mentor/mentee relationships are often highly complex, have the potential to produce both positive and negative outcomes, and require a significant investment in time and commitment from both parties to be effective.^{17,18,20}

Consequently, a one-size-fits-all approach is not feasible or even practical when attempting to establish these types of relationships. Instead, to be truly effective, mentorships must be evolutionary in nature and adaptive to the needs of both members as it evolves.

Non-formal pathways

Coaches typically begin their non-formal learning journey during a long period of involvement in sport as athletes. Later, experiences obtained as coaches and observation of more capable others can become powerful mechanisms for the development of domain-specific expertise.¹⁰ For instance, it has been consistently reported that many coaches across the entire sport spectrum developed the foundations of their craft as athletes.^{21,22} While this is more evident in certain sports⁴, participation experience as an athlete is an unquestionable source of non-formal coach learning and development.^{21,22,23}

Gilbert and his colleagues²⁴ demonstrated this point when they examined the developmental profiles of successful American high-school sport coaches [basketball and cross-country running]. They found that the coaches in their study had extensive experiences as athletes (Mean = 2428.8 hours; 19.6 seasons), rated their playing ability as above average, and had participated in both individual and team sports during their athletic careers. Similar results were presented by Lynch & Mallett²⁵, who utilised the same in-depth quantitative structured interview approach to investigate the developmental profiles of successful Australian elite-level track and field coaches. Lynch & Mallett²⁵ reported that all of the coaches in their sample had participated in various team sports, perceived that their athletic ability was above average in comparison to age-matched peers, and had accumulated an average of ~4400 hours of sporting experience as athletes.

The major themes reported in the above studies (i.e., accumulating thousands of hours as athletes, being of above average in ability and not specialising in the sport they now coach) are consistent with the findings of other scholars who have reported that positive outcomes achieved through this early stage of coach development include that it provided a basic understanding of the coaching role through exposure to different coaches and approaches^{24,25,26}, promoted multiple learning experiences^{22,23}, gave important insights into some of the challenges associated with staging a training session^{21,25}, and, perhaps most importantly, facilitated an ability to empathise with athletes.^{25, 26,27}

Characteristics, habits and traits of expert coaches

When looking at the different ways coaches have developed their expertise, DeMarco & McCullick²⁸ examined prior research on coaching effectiveness and other domain-specific expert performances, before identifying the following five key characteristics of expert coaches:

- > They possess extensive, specialised knowledge.
- > They organise knowledge hierarchically.
- > They are highly perceptive and superior problem solvers.
- > They exhibit automaticity during analysis and instruction.
- > They have highly developed self-monitoring skills.²⁸

According to DeMarco & McCullick²⁸, coaches develop their expertise from experience, goal setting, acquiring knowledge throughout their careers, expanding their thinking, developing their memories, interacting with and observing other coaches and practices, self-evaluation, critical reflection, and improvement of certain cognitive skills including problem solving and automaticity. These authors, however, emphasise that coaching expertise is not achieved by simply acquiring the above characteristics. Instead, they note that many other important factors, including personal traits, motivation, ambition, and opportunity all play vital roles in the development of domain-specific coaching expertise.²⁸

Stages of development

Educational theorists^{29,30,31,32} have argued that there are two distinct phases required for meaningful personal and professional growth – knowledge production (learning) and the subsequent deepening and realisation of that knowledge (development). Learning considered in this way therefore should not be seen as a one-off event-based activity, but as something that is part of a bigger and ongoing development experience.

The idea that learning precedes development was highlighted by Schempp et al.²⁷, who utilised Berliner's³³ five-stage developmental process to analyse and describe the skills, knowledge and capabilities of beginner, competent, proficient and expert coaches.

Schempp et al.²⁷ propose that every expert coach starts at the first stage as a beginner and progresses through the various stages by identifying his/her deficiencies and the ways in which they can be addressed through largely self-directed learning journeys. According to Schempp et al.²⁷, progress through the 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. Schempp et al.²⁷ concluded that seven key attributes are required for expert coaching. These are summarised below.

Key traits	Description
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. ²⁷
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. ²⁷
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. ²⁷
Problem-solving	Expert coaches are often much better at analysing problems and developing solutions than their non-expert counterparts. ²⁷
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. ²⁷
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. ^{2,10}
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. ²⁷

Supporting the development of coaching expertise through regular periods of reflection

In the present context, reflective practice refers to the process coaches use to think about and reflect on what they did in a given situation so that they can better understand and improve their practice.^{34,35,36} It is closely linked to the concept of experiential learning (i.e., learning from experience) in that coaches need to consider what occurred and what they would do differently next time^{35,36,37,38} and involves critically examining, reformulating and continually testing new ideas through repeated cycles of planning, doing, reflecting, and refining.^{34,35,36}

What's involved?

The practice involves integrating reflective activities into daily life on a routine basis, and often improves such valuable skills as emotional intelligence, decision-making, problem solving and critical thinking.^{34,35,36,37} Essentially, the process entails:

- > Listening to ourselves.
- > Being aware of our feelings.
- > Addressing our assumptions.
- > Noticing patterns in what we see.
- > Changing how we see things.^{34,35,36,37}

Suggestions aimed at supporting reflective practice

The following, based on the “3W model”³⁸, seeks to support and encourage reflective practice by providing a suitable framework for coaches to document and explore their thoughts, feelings and experiences.

Step 1: What happened? [Description]

Provide a descriptive account of the experience

- > What happened?
- > Who was involved?

Step 2: What's important? [Interpretation]

Reflect on and interpret the experience

- > What was the most important/interesting/relevant/useful aspect of the event?
- > How can it be explained?
- > How is it similar/different to other experiences?

Step 3: What's next? [Outcomes]

Determine what can be learnt from the experience

- > What have I learned?
- > How can this be applied in the future?

Concluding thoughts

While experience is a key contributor for the development of expertise, other important factors such as high levels of motivation and determination, good fortune, and an existing foundation of talent and innate ability are also required. Experts can adapt their practices, styles and approaches to best suit the needs of a particular situation. Expert coaching can therefore be described as: *“an agile, dynamic and fluid endeavour that is constantly adjusting and adapting to the specific demands of a particular setting in an attempt to best meet the individual needs of each athlete”*⁴⁰ – an undertaking described by Cushion³⁹ as “structured improvisation”, and by Berliner⁴⁰ as “flexibility in practice”.

This description is important in the present context because it not only provides a bench- mark to measure current work practices, but helps to demonstrate that, to be truly effective, coach development undertakings should at least consider the following three most common findings reported in the literature.

- > Expertise is a dynamic state.
- > Expertise is domain specific.
- > Basic components of expertise can be identified as knowledge, experience and problem solving.⁴¹

Questions, reflections and critical self-analysis

- > Can the above be of any use to you and your work?
- > How would you describe your coaching journey?
- > What have your most effective learning and development experiences?
- > What advice would you give to other coaches who have elected to pursue a high performance sport trajectory?
- > How important has reflection been for your development?
- > Is a coaches' observation and imitation of more knowledgeable and capable people more effective for the development of coaches than formal curriculum?
- > How have changes in definitions of knowledge capital modified what your organisation considers to be an effective coach learning and development experience?

Dedication

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Professor Keith Lyons, a wonderful mentor, confidant and friend who always provided great advice, wisdom and genuine care when it was most needed.

“Let us be grateful to the people who make us happy; they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom”

– Marcel Proust



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