

## COACHING

# A Qualitative Exploration of Successful High School Baseball Coaches' Silence During Practice

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## Abstract

*For athletic coaches, there are many methods to coach athletes. One method that may not be as common, or even thought of as coaching, is silence. Silence is when the coach does not speak but is thinking of specific team, player, and competitor items. The purpose of this study was to interview consistently successful high school baseball coaches with an emphasis on their silence as a coaching behavior. Five successful high school baseball coaches in the southeastern United States were interviewed. Generally, it was found baseball coaches were strategizing, or thinking of baseball-related items while being silent during practice. The results from this study are a valuable addition to the literature, showing that coaching is not only about talking or yelling but also about a coach's silence, a powerful form of coaching.*

The following scenario could occur at a high school baseball practice: Two parents are watching their sons during a 2-hr practice session. During practice, parents observe a myriad of drills and other related baseball activities their sons and their teammates are participating in while their coach observes. As the practice continues, one parent comments that the head coach does not say much

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to the players during batting practice, ground-ball drills, and other activities. Another parent agrees and states the coach mainly observes with his arms folded and does not say much. As the parents' conversation continues to center on the head baseball coach's limited verbal interaction with his baseball players, both think this coach should be regularly talking and making his presence felt during the practice. These types of conversations have probably occurred on a number of occasions among parents.

Many people, including parents, feel successful coaches have to provide constant instruction, feedback, or other interactions to be successful (McGaha, 2000). Yet a coach's silence does not mean they are not coaching; in fact, it may indicate the opposite (Cushion & Jones, 2001). Many times, during these periods of silence, a coach is thinking about their next move, how to help their athletes, or a multitude of other issues (Cushion & Jones, 2001). In fact, in the literature, silence is a sign of expertise. Tan (1997) identified these elements of expertise: (1) extensive knowledge base and domain specificity, (2) hierarchical organization or knowledge, (3) acute perceptual capacities, (4) problem representation and solving, (5) automaticity of behavior, and (6) self-monitoring skills. Extensive knowledge base and domain knowledge are skills developed over many years of experience (Carter et al., 1987). The knowledge deals with a particular field and the experts highly skilled in the application of the knowledge. Hierarchical organization of knowledge allows experts to store and organize vast amounts of knowledge accumulated throughout their experience and practice in long-term memory as structured patterns (Chase & Simon, 1973). Thus, experts can sort, identify, and analyze information to make decisions (Chase & Simon, 1973). Regarding acute perceptual capacities, experts can recognize patterns during a performance more readily than nonexperts can (Chi et al., 1981). For problem representation and solving, experts rely more on underlying principles when analyzing and representing problems (Chi et al., 1981). For experts, a type of unconscious behavior or automaticity becomes apparent regarding their mental and physical skills related to their area of expertise (Glaser & Chi, 1988). Finally, concerning self-monitoring skills, experts can accurately identify causes of their failure and take corrective actions more readily than nonexperts can. These characteristics of expertise align

nicely with Bloom's taxonomy, which states a schema is developed over time with practice. Knowledge is represented and organized by an internal schema in long-term memory and stored as correct performance standards against which to compare present and future performance. A schema is knowledge from experience, and when incoming information is recognized, the information in memory is then accessed and informs the diagnostic process (Chi et al., 1988).

The literature regarding expertise in coaching has identified instruction and silence as the most common behavioral categories observed among coaches (McGaha, 2000). Lacy and Darst (1984) defined silence as a period when the coach is not talking and the behavioral category "other" as any behavior a coach exhibits that the observation instrument does not specifically describe. The literature has investigated a number of coaching behaviors, and for many of the studies, silence has been a repeated result. For example, Smith and Cushion (2006) studied the coaching behaviors of professional youth soccer coaches during games. One of the top coaching behaviors identified was silence. One coach stated,

I want to let the players play unencumbered by the pressure of my voice. So, I want to let them go through the process of making decisions and choices during the course of the game unfettered by me telling them what to do and when to do it. So, I'm specifically looking at the key moments in possession, and out of possession and transition. (p. 360)

Smith and Cushion concluded that silence was used as a learning tool. They expressed that too much intervention denied the players not only opportunities to learn but also the opportunity to demonstrate what has already been learned. During moments of silence, the coaches were involved in a number of cognitive processes. They were observing and analyzing the play of their athletes, letting the play unfold, allowing their players to learn for themselves, and checking learning of players decision making (Smith & Cushion, 2006).

Another study about silence observed youth soccer coaches' coaching behaviors (Cushion & Jones, 2001). Cushion and Jones (2001) compared eight English male youth soccer coaches between two levels of competition (i.e., Nationwide and Premier Leagues). The soccer coaches were observed during practice. The study revealed

that silence was the third largest behavior the coaches exhibited. Cushion and Jones concluded that coaches did not constantly have to talk during practice, because they wanted the players to play and not feel tension of the coaches' remarks. The coaches felt that much learning can occur among the athletes without the coach commenting on the players' play during practice.

One last study examining silence in coaching studied youth soccer coaches with different levels of coaching qualifications (Stonebridge & Cushion, 2018). This study observed 10 male youth soccer coaches between the ages of 24 to 55. It found that silence was the second most frequently observed behavior among the youth soccer coaches. Stonebridge and Cushion (2018) further observed that coaches who had higher qualifications had longer periods of silence when observing their athletes during practice, compared with coaches who had lesser qualifications. Once again, coaches made statements regarding their silence. For example, one coach stated, "When I'm silent, I'm watching their actions, whether they've got the grips with and doing things that I want to see." A second coach with lesser qualifications stated,

I feel if I'm coaching a session and I sit back and observe for even two minutes . . . I personally, feel the session's getting away from me . . . I feel like I've lost control of the session. So, silence for me as a coach, I'm saying it's not right or wrong, but for me it's uncomfortable.

For all of these studies, all of the coaches coached youth soccer. The results from these studies are valuable, showing that silence for a coach is an important part of coaching. With the number of studies focused on soccer coaches, this presents an opportunity to study coaches in other sports. Thus, the purpose of this study was to interview consistently successful high school baseball coaches with an emphasis on their silence as a coaching behavior.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

This study used a convenience sampling of five male high school head baseball coaches from the southeastern United States. The

baseball coaches had 4 to 10 years of coaching experience as head coach. They were considered successful, winning an average of 73% of games coached. The university institutional review board (IRB) approved this study. The five baseball coaches also consented to participating in this study.

## **Procedures**

Upon gaining IRB approval, Patrick McGaha contacted the baseball coaches and interviewed them over a 5-day period about their silence during baseball practice. Each interview took approximately 45 min. All interviews were audio recorded. The interviews occurred in the coaches' offices.

## **Semistructured Interviews**

This study used semistructured interviews, which do not involve the use of a structured set of questions that are asked in the same manner to each participant. The coaches were asked open-ended questions.

## **Data Analysis**

The baseball coaches responses were correlated for each interview question and reviewed, and preliminary coding categories were generated with framework analysis methodology for participant responses, as Check and Schutt (2011) outlined. Framework analysis incorporated stages of (1) familiarization, (2) thematic, (3) identification, and (4) charting and interpretation (Rabiee, 2004).

## **Results**

The themes extracted from the interviews with the baseball coaches were (1) thoughts during times of silence, (2) fatigue's effect during periods of silence, (3) strategizing during silence, and (4) silence being effective and instructional (Table 1).

### **Thoughts During Times of Silence**

This theme may appear broad in scope, yet many of the coaches expressed specifically what they were thinking during times of silence. For example, one coach said, "After I've made a comment, I'm looking to see how the player will react, or what they will do." Another coach stated,

**Table 1***Interview Themes Regarding High School Baseball Coaches Using Silence*

<b>Interview theme</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Thoughts during times of silence	<p>“I am focusing in on particular aspects...trying to think of certain comments that might make it easier.”</p> <p>“Trying to gather as much information as he can...to make qualified statements.”</p>
Fatigue’s effect during periods of silence	<p>“I’m sure that there are times in freshman practice...my mind wanders”</p> <p>“This has been a crappy practice.”</p> <p>“This has been a waste of a day.”</p>
Strategizing during silence	<p>“How can I get the most from my kids?”</p> <p>“While we were taking [batting practice], I remember still considering who was going... to go with this guy.”</p>
Silence being effective and instructional	<p>“If they aren’t doing what they are supposed to do, they know the coach is fixing to get on them.”</p> <p>“I know that when I’m quiet and they see my wheels turning that they also have to think about what they just did.”</p>

I was focusing in on a particular aspect and especially in the early part with skilled players trying to think of certain comments that might make it easier for them to understand what they’re doing. I’m sure a lot of these occasions that is what I was trying to do.

A third coach stated,

I feel like a good coach, many times, is trying to gather as much information as he can to make a good comment, to make qualified statements, as to not hurt whatever they’re

working on unintentionally. I think that silence probably plays a very important role in what kind of statements I make.

A fourth coach stated,

I think of a wide variety of things. For example, I think that I don't want to overcoach, to kind of let the kid think a little bit, stimulate what he's doing whether positively or negatively, and give him feedback afterwards.

Finally, another coach stated, "As I analyze my players, I go through a mental checklist. I go through hitting, pitching, or whatever skill it might be."

### **Fatigue's Effect During Periods of Silence**

This theme covered how fatigue affected the coaches thoughts during practice. The coaches repeatedly used words or phrases such as "wandering," "daydreaming," and "thinking of non-baseball things." One coach stated,

I'm sure that there are times in freshman practice for example, that my mind wanders more than at the varsity-level practice. But the higher-level practice, I would say, I don't tend to think of other things that are not baseball related. I think the situation dictates when that can happen and when it can't.

Another coach stated,

Because of fatigue there's going to be some times that I'm going to be thinking, "This has been a crappy practice," "This has been a waste of a day," and "I should have just sent them home." Because I am tired, my thoughts may tend to be or dwell on the negative.

A third coach stated, "There are times that I am thinking about everyday events in life, such as a sick child, the car in the shop, or an anniversary. This is when I have to get my thoughts back to practices." One last coach stated,

No, I really don't. We've got 22 to 23 kids and we've got two coaches, and there's just always something going on,

and when we are through with practice, I'm usually more mentally drained than physically, just from all that's going on. I can't afford to daydream.

## **Strategizing During Silence**

The theme of strategizing during periods of silence was common among the coaches. The first coach stated,

Yes, I am thinking, "What can I do to get that kid's confidence up?" It may be that we go hit off the tee for 30 minutes. I think you're looking, you're always thinking, "How can I get the most from my kids?" I know what the kids expect from me and they know what I expect from them and that's to get it done on the playing field.

A second coach stated,

This was right before an intersquad scrimmage game, and I remember thinking about that, trying to plan ahead. I know even while we were taking [batting practice], I remember still considering who was going to try to go with this guy, watching these guys hit, what lineup are we going to use. So, I think I was kind of looking ahead, thinking ahead to the scrimmage game.

A third coach described strategizing individually with one of the players:

If I see a kid doing something and he's in the cage, and he has three or four swings left, rather than instruct him right then, I'll just let him finish his cuts, and then get him out behind the cage and try to tell him—I guess I was being silent during the actual skill—then try to get him back there after that to where he can think about that and mentally rehearse that while the other two guys in front of him are hitting, then when he goes up there, he's hopefully got a clear head and can work through that, and not interrupt on his time in the cage.

## Silence Being Effective and Instructional

The last theme was silence being effective and instructional. When baseball coaches were asked if silence could be effective and instructional at a certain time of practice, all of the coaches said yes. For example, one coach said,

I think it is. I think it's essential. If you have two kids that are messing around and if they know you're watching them—I don't have to tell them anything—if they aren't doing what they are supposed to do, they know the coach is fixing to get on them, then that's a period of silence and they can correct that themselves, which is accountability. I think that it's a very valuable tool.

A second coach stated,

I think it [silence] is. I think it's essential. If you're always on them or saying something to them every time, then they are going to develop a sense of "I can't do anything right." I think that it's a very valuable tool; but, at the same time, if you sit back and never say anything, they're going to say, "Coach is an idiot. He doesn't know anything." You have to pick and choose when you're going to use that.

Another coach said silence can be instructional:

I think kids, adults, all people, all beings, all the time, are capable of picking up information from many different instructional techniques and I think silence is one of those. I know that when I'm quiet and they see my wheels turning that they also have to think about what they just did. If I have to think about it, obviously something is not right. If they're reviewing what just happened in their minds, they're also getting an educational benefit out of the silence. It may be silence pondering is not the same look as silence and giving somebody a dirty look. There is a lot silence also. I know many people that I can read their mind by their facial expression that they have on and I'm quick to use facial expressions in my coaching. They can see pleasing facial expressions, they

can see terrifying facial expressions, and I think they know the difference.

One last coach stated,

I think to a certain degree it is effective. To let a kid play during a game, to be silent there, or during a drill to be silent like you talked about, or just being silent, but giving a look or whatever to a kid, that he knows you didn't approve of what he did or how he handled himself in a certain situation. I think that sometimes that's good. Sometimes, silence can be a good enforcer method of feedback.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to interview consistently successful high school baseball coaches with an emphasis on their silence as a coaching behavior. Generally, all of the baseball coaches concluded that silence during practice can serve as an effective coaching behavior. Four themes emerged from the interview data: (1) thoughts during times of silence, (2) fatigue's effect during periods of silence, (3) strategizing during silence, and (4) silence being effective and instructional.

The theme of the coaches' thoughts during times of silence revealed they were thinking of baseball-related items and what was happening in the moment. For this study, one of the coaches described a conversation he had with himself: "If I move John [pseudonym] from shortstop to second base, this should allow me to put Frank [pseudonym] at shortstop, thus giving us a stronger bat in our lineup. Yet how can I utilize Joe [pseudonym] when I sit him?" This coach was thinking about his personnel and how to make his team more competitive during his time of silence. This example is what Cushion and Jones (2001) labeled cognitively processing important factors that have the possibility of affecting the outcome of a game. From Smith and Cushion's (2006) study of youth soccer coaches, one of the coaches wanted to be in the moment during practice, and while analyzing his players' performance during practice, he thought of game situations to impart to his athletes that could benefit them later in a game.

From the theme of fatigue affecting the coaches' silence, the coaches used words and phrases such as "my thoughts were wandering," "daydreaming," and "thinking of non-baseball things." These responses hint that when tired during periods of silence, coaches found themselves thinking of things not related to baseball. One coach stated,

Because of fatigue, there's going to be some times that I'm going to be thinking, "This has been a crappy practice," "This has been a waste of a day," and "I should have just sent them home." Because I am tired, my thoughts may tend to be or dwell on the negative.

Another coach had a different perspective about fatigue's effect on a baseball coach's silence: "I'm usually more mentally drained than physically, just from all that's going on. I can't afford to daydream."

The literature regarding fatigue's effect on coaches' silence is limited. For this reason, it presents opportunities to investigate the effects of a coach's fatigue on coaching behaviors. One key factor from these baseball coaches' fatigue could be they were classroom teachers. They had taught a full day of classes, so going to baseball practice would make for a very long day for these coaches.

A third theme discovered from this study was the coaches were strategizing during their periods of silence. Smith and Cushion (2006) observed soccer coaches and noted that because of the nature of soccer, the soccer coaches would silently observe their players in game-like situations. Following this silent observation, the coaches would call a time-out, gather the players around, and discuss with them what they had seen. The coaches would then strategize how the players could implement certain situations during gameplay.

From this baseball study, one coach discussed watching his team take batting practice and considering who he was going to play against a certain opposing pitcher. The coach stated, "I think I was kind of looking ahead," which is a clear example of strategizing during silence.

The final theme from this study was the coaches' belief that silence was an effective and instructional behavior for their players. Stonebridge and Cushion (2018) studied youth soccer coaches with different levels of training and their coaching behaviors. The soccer

coaches were asked about the purpose of their silence during practice. One coach stated, “To observe. To make sure when you do go in, you coach something that’s real as opposed to . . . it just being based on what you want to do.” A second coach stated, “To let them make their decisions so I’m not telling or trying not to tell them the answers.” Both of these coaches felt being silent during practice gave them an opportunity to give valuable instruction and/or feedback and gave the athletes a chance to learn while practicing. From this study, the baseball coaches used silence as a time for their players to think for themselves and make the necessary adjustments. One coach stated, “If the player has not made the necessary adjustments during the time I am silent, then I will pull the player aside and talk him through what he needs to do.”

### **Study Limitations**

There are limitations to this study. The baseball coaches are from the same geographic region of the United States, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. Another limitation is the baseball coaches all coach at the high school level. It would also be interesting to study college coaches at the collegiate level (e.g., National Junior College Athletic Association, National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, and National Collegiate Athletic Association).

### **Conclusion**

The findings from this study are beneficial for baseball coaches and coaches in other sports. To the untrained eye, a coach’s silence may appear to be wasted time when a coach is giving no instruction. However, this study found that during these periods of silence, baseball coaches are focusing on how to improve their players, how to better prepare the team in game-like situations, and thus how to better prepare the team for competition. These baseball coaches believe team practices provide them time to think through a multitude of game situations and strategies, thus allowing them to use these periods of silence to prepare their players. We feel the findings from this study will strengthen the coaching literature in the area of silence, hopefully helping parents, school administrators, and athletes who find themselves with a coach who is exhibiting silence as an instructional behavior to ready the team to compete (Claxton, 1988).

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