Behavioral Characteristics of 'Favorite' Coaches: Implications for Coach Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to use athletes' and former athletes' memories of their favorite coach to improve coach education curriculum. Player preferences of coaching behavior can affect both their attitudes toward their sport experiences and team performance. By identifying positive coaching behaviors as recalled by athletes, coach educators can ensure that the curriculum in their courses reflect those preferences. University students enrolled in introductory coaching classes over a period of six years (12 semesters) were asked to list up to ten behavioral characteristics of their favorite coach in their athletic careers. Their responses were analyzed to determine specific examples of behaviors that defined coaches who were remembered as favorites. Comparisons were made with standardized measures of coaching characteristics (Chelladurai & Saleh,1980) in hopes of determining ways to improve the coach education curriculum.

Behavioral Characteristics of *Favorite* Coaches: Implications for Coach Education

Both researchers and practitioners agree the development of athletic talent is dependent upon quality coaching (Bloom, 1985; Cote, Baker & Abernathy, 2003). Likewise, the quality is often determined by how coaches behave in all aspects of their sport. Coaching behaviors in practice, at games, and away from the sport have strong influences on players (Murray, 2006) and can impact both players' performances and continued participation. Memories of athletes and former athletes can be very beneficial in determining the most valued behavioral characteristics of their coaches. The purpose of this descriptive study was to present composite memories of nearly 400 athletes and former athletes as to the characteristics of their favorite coach. Coding methods established by Chelladurai and Saleh (1980) were used to classify coaching students' memories of the behaviors of their favorite coaches. Through this classification process, it was hypothesized coach educators could better understand preferred coaching characteristics of athletes, and develop, expand, or modify coach education curricula to produce more effective coaches (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2007).

As early as 1978, Chelladurai and Carron wrote that sport performance would be positively affected if coaches adapted their behaviors to comply with athletes' preferences. In the foundational work of the Leadership Scale for Sport (LSS), coaching behaviors were investigated as they related to players' preferences, coaches' perceptions, and actual coaching behaviors. This work resulted in extensive investigations of leadership behavior and preferred characteristics of coaches. Similarly, Iso-Ahola and Hatfield (1986) noted that player satisfaction in sport is often a direct result of coaching behavior, not successful team performance. They further noted that positive coaching behavior was a key factor in many aspects of athletic performance. Later, Ansel (1990) found athletes and former athletes are powerful, yet often untapped resources for descriptions of coaching behaviors. Ansel (1990) felt since players experience coaching behaviors

on a daily basis, their input is both current and valid.

In an earlier study, Stewart (1993) found that coaches exhibiting positive behaviors were remembered by their athletes as being strong role models. He found athletes and former athletes described *favorite* coaches as those who acknowledged the inevitability of mistakes, stressed doing one's best, welcomed and used player input, and treated players fairly. Additionally, *favorite* coaches were those who demanded higher levels of effort while not criticizing or belittling athletes, and were creative and exciting when working with the team and individual players. Conversely, the negative behaviors of coaches were remembered just as vividly. *Least favorite* coaches were remembered as stressing winning at any cost, lying to players, demanding respect without earning it, and overworking players. Some coaches were even recalled as abusing smaller or younger players and unnecessarily running up scores against weaker opponents. Smoll and Smith (1996) related athletes' memories and perceptions of coaching behaviors to coaching effectiveness as well. They found that the psychological impact of sport participation on athletes could be examined by how players and former players remembered their coaches' behaviors. Later, Kenow and Williams (1999) stated that surprisingly little research had been reported on the consequences of coaching behaviors and its effectiveness. In their study, they found players who perceived their coaches as being more compatible, evaluated the coaches' communication ability and player-support levels more favorably. Conversely, if athletes disagreed with the coach's goals, personality, and/or beliefs, some of the psychological needs of the players were not met. That failure often resulted in frustration and a loss of self-concept by the player. During this same period, Newton and Duda (1999) stated that athletes' perception of coach behavior was the foundation of their evaluation of their athletic environment. The more positive the athletes perceived their coaches' behaviors, the more positive was their athletic experience.

More specifically, Turman (2003) reported the importance of the relationship between coaching behaviors and team cohesion. The author documented behavioral techniques deployed by coaches that either motivated or failed to motivate athletes thus having specific effects on team cohesion. Many researchers believe there is a strong relationship between team cohesion and athletic performance. For example, Widmeyer, Carron, and Brawley (1993) reported that 83% of studies reviewed found a positive relationship between team cohesion and athletic performance. They hypothesized coaches' styles of leadership and the impact on team cohesion had gone unexamined. Westre and Weiss (1991) and Gardner et al. (1996) used open-ended, qualitative recording and coding procedures to study coaching behaviors. In those studies, athletes described coaching behaviors that either motivated or failed to motivate them to continue playing their sport. The authors found that coaches could promote higher levels of task cohesion for their players by exhibiting positive behaviors in areas such as training and instruction, displaying democratic actions, providing social support and using positive feedback styles, and avoiding autocratic coaching behaviors. Recently, Murray (2006) affirmed that coaches' styles and behaviors have a great effect on team performance. He stressed the relationship between coaches' behaviors and team success as expressed by Chelladurai and Saleh's (1980) development of the Leadership Scale for Sport (LSS). That work defined five dimensions of coaching behavior worthy of investigation; *training and instruction, positive feedback, democratic behavior, autocratic behavior, and social support*.

Therefore, from a coach educator's approach, it made sense to continue to investigate the psychological environment that coaches create and how that environment contributes to the quality of the athletic experience (Ames, 1992). This study contributes to the investigation of the psychological environment as expressed by the

Table 1

Demographic Information of Subjects

Gender	N	Years played (means)	Highest level played	Top 3 sports played	Gender of favorite coach
F	180	10.2	cv*= 50 (28%) hsv*= 117 (65%) other= 13 (7%)	basketball (41%) volleyball (20%) track (14%)	M=73% F=27%
M	211	11.3	cv*= 62 (29%) hsv*= 127 (61%) other= 22 (10%)	football (37%) basketball (30%)	M=96% F=4%

Table 1: note

cv = college varsity
hvs = high school varsity

memories of athletes of their favorite coaches. The findings of this study can assist coach educators in the preparation of future coaches.

Method

Over the course of six years (12 semesters), students (N=391) in introductory coaching classes (all of whom had played or were still playing some organized sport) were asked to describe up to ten behaviors of their favorite coach. It was a voluntary activity and students were not restricted in any manner other than *not* to provide the coach's name. In addition, demographic information such as gender, years played, highest level of play, and top three sports was gathered on all the students. The demographic data is presented in Table 1.

Coaching behaviors were transferred verbatim to a standard spreadsheet and coded for patterns using techniques presented in several texts (Babbie, 2005; Baumgartner & Hensley, 2006; Neuman, 1997). These techniques require a researcher to code responses and then determine common themes throughout. In addition, the author used a variable oriented analysis in a nomothetic *(the attempt to identify a few causal factors that generally impact a class of conditions)* approach to further refine the responses. Once this coding process was completed, the behaviors were coded again using the dimensions developed by Chelladurai and Saleh (1980) in their creation of the LLS.

Results

Students in introductory coaching classes (N=391) provided positive behavioral descriptors (n=2580) of their favorite coach from their athletic careers. For initial comparison, the participants'

Table 2

Behaviors of Favorite Coaches by Dimensions (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980)

Dimensions *	Males	Females
Social support [1]	48%	48%
Training and instruction [2]	29%	32%
Positive feedback [3]	12%	9%
Autocratic behavior [4]	8%	7%
Democratic behavior [5]	3%	4%

Notes:
1….characterized by concern for the welfare of individual athletes, positive group atmosphere & warm personal relations with members.
2 ….aimed at improving athletic performance by emphasizing and facilitating hard & strenuous work; instructing them in skills, techniques & tactics of the sport; clarifying the relationship among members & instructing & coordinating the members' activities
3…..that reinforces an athlete by recognizing and rewarding good performance.
4. …that involves independent decision-making and stresses personal behavior authority.
5. …that allows greater participation by the athletes in decisions pertaining to group goals, practice method, games & tactics.

responses were divided by gender (males = 211; females=180). Demographic characteristics of participants by genders are presented in Table 1.

The positive characteristics of both genders were sorted alphabetically, coded by themes and re-sorted based on the aforementioned five dimensions of Chelladurai and Saleh (1980). Approximately one-half of the behavioral characteristics were classified as belonging to the *social support* dimension. That dimension is characterized as a coach showing concern for the welfare of the individual athlete, providing a positive group atmosphere and providing warm personal relationships with players. Examples of the most common raw descriptors in this dimension were *caring (or cared), understanding, friend, respectful, supportive, fun, enthusiastic, fair, role model* and *honest*.

The second most mentioned dimension was the more traditional, *training and instruction*. About 30% of the responses were categorized as being related to this area that is characterized by

improving athletic performance through hard work, skills development, practice in techniques and tactics, and *instructing and coordinating other athletic activities* (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980). Examples of the raw data from this dimension are *knowledgeable, competitive, intense, organized, smart, worked us hard,* and *had high expectations*.

Positive feedback, autocratic behavior and *democratic behavior* were the last three dimensions with about 10% or less of the responses in each area. While making up a minority of the traits, educators should acknowledge that they do play important roles.

Male and female participants were very similar in their results (Table 2). The five dimensions for both genders ranked in the same order; *social support* first with nearly 50%, then *training and instruction* at about 30%, *positive feedback* (about 10%), *and autocratic behavior* and *democratic behavior*, each at less than 10%. Based upon these results, there were little if any gender differences in the behavior of *favorite* coaches.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to use written responses of athletes and former athletes to determine the behavioral characteristics of coaches remembered as their *favorites*. From this information, coach educators could ensure that specific information related to the formation of positive (or favorite) behaviors of coaches would be included in the class.

Approximately one-half of the behavioral characteristics of favorite *coaches* were classified as belonging to the *social support* dimension. That dimension is characterized as a coach showing concern for the welfare of the individual athlete, providing a positive group atmosphere and providing warm personal relationships with players. Reinbot, Duda, and Ntoumanis (2004) stressed the importance of the social environment of an athletic team. They defined a social atmosphere as one that is autonomy supportive, emphasizes improvement, and is socially supportive. Positive social settings maximize the satisfaction of athletes' basic needs that, consequently, foster their well-being. Coaches can satisfy the need for autonomy, they wrote, by giving athletes' choices and options, providing rationale for requested behaviors, and encouraging self-regulation. At the same time, coaches should provide the information needed to solve problems, learn a new skill or strategy, thus promoting athletes' sense of competence. If accomplished, that coaching method developed athletes' self-referenced improvement and increased their efforts in practice or competition. Finally, coaches should address the need for relatedness by accepting, caring for, and valuing players as people and not just performers.

The second most mentioned dimension was the more traditional, *training and instruction*. About 30% of the responses were categorized as being related to this area that is characterized by *improving athletic performance through hard work, skills development, practice in techniques and tactics*, and *instructing and coordinating other athletic activities* (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980). Of course, coaches' knowledge of their sport, often described as *the Xs and Os*, is important. However, knowledge is not enough. *Xs and Os* are not enough. A coach must exhibit the necessary teaching skills to accompany that knowledge. It is important to also note that, *demanding, hard-nosed, competitive* coaches can be both effective and perceived as *favorites*, but only if they exhibit those traits in a positive social environment. Teaching young coaches to accept that combination can be a daunting task. Traditionally, the new coach, fresh from her/his playing days, wants to concentrate on the *Xs and Os* and ignore or avoid the more mundane tasks of organizational teaching skills. In addition, the same new coaches often do not possess the empathy for what it is like to be a beginner in the sport. The coaches often expect players to have the same levels of skills and motivation they possess without accepting that no athlete begins

their participation with advanced skills or intense intrinsic motivation.

Based upon these findings, coach educators should carefully examine the content on which their curriculum is based. In educating new coaches, curricula should stress that coaches can demand dedication, commitment to teamwork and hard work, while stressing technique and tactics if done in a positive environment. In those environments, athletes want coaches who care for them both on and off the field of play. From an educational perspective, more time should be spent with the beginning coach on how positive environments are created and maintained.

Positive feedback, autocratic behavior and democratic behavior were the last three dimensions with about 10% or less of the responses in each area. While making up a minority of the traits, coach educators should acknowledge that they do play important roles. Gardner, et al (1996) and Westre and Weiss (1991) found coaches could promote higher levels of task cohesion for their players by using specific strategies. The authors found that motivating behaviors by coaches such as *positive feedback*, *personal coach/athlete relationships*, *support and dedication* had implications on team behavior, cohesion and morale. They concluded that since there are numerous other uncontrollable reasons for team separation (offense/defense/special teams; starters/non-starters, etc.), coaches should not contribute to the reduction of team unity by exhibiting negative behaviors (Gardner, et al, 1996); Westre and Weiss, 1991).

Summary

Obviously, one of the more important roles of the coach in competitive sport is to improve athletic performance (Martens, 1987). To achieve that goal, the coach must not only be technically and tactically sound, but engage in behaviors receptive to the athlete. To complicate this issue, a coaching behavior that is positive for one athlete may be an ineffective approach for another. Similarly, specific behaviors by the coach may be more productive for certain outcomes than others (Tinning, 1982). The coach/player relationship is a very influential factor in sport (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). In their research, the quality of the coach/athlete relationship was pivotal in the athletes' satisfaction, motivation, and performance. In addition, coaches' behaviors and the coach/athlete relationship influenced the athletes' intrinsic and *self-determined* extrinsic motivation through the athletes' perception of autonomy, competence and relatedness. According to the authors, coaches could improve many aspects of athletic welfare and performance by providing opportunities for choices, emphasizing task relevance, explaining reasons underlying rules, acknowledging athletes' feelings and perspective, giving athletes an opportunity to take initiative, providing non-controlling competence feedback, avoiding controlling motivational strategy, and preventing ego-involvement in their athletes. They concluded with three determinates of these coaching behaviors were personal orientation, coaching context and athletes' behavior and motivation (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003).

Conroy and Coatsworth (2007) also recognized that coaches play an important role in the motivational climate and development of young athletes. They stated that coach education could be developed or revised to focus on the most effective behavioral strategies for supporting athletes' autonomy and enhancing motivation.

In conclusion, it is apparent that coaches' behaviors are pivotal to many aspects of sport. An autocratic or controlling leadership style has the potential to destroy the athlete-coach relationship (Mallet, 2005) thus affecting both player performance and satisfaction. However, promoting a healthy coach/athlete relationship often results in high quality sport performances and positive affective outcomes.

Just as the competitive coach strives to improve athletic performance, the coach educator strives to improve the performance of emerging coaches.

Even when only considering the development of athletic expertise, Cote, Baker and Abernathy (2003) found that *positive experiences with a coach* and *enjoyment of an activity* were as important as *successful performances* in motivating young athletes to select a specific sport for long-term participation. The challenge to the coach educator is to *sell* this concept to the novice coach.

Coaches should be aware that preferred coaching behaviors of athletes influence both athletic performance and motivation. According to Chelladurai and Carron (1978), if a coach adapts his or her behavior to comply with the athletes' preferred behavior, the athlete may be more readily inclined to repay the coach through an improved performance. Coaches do not have to sacrifice hard work, commitment, or improvement in tactics and technique to achieve a positive social environment. However, the combination of those desired behaviors might require basic changes in existing coaching behaviors. The responsibility of the coach educator is to identify the methods to introduce these concepts to novice coaches who, too often, are engrained with *performance* and *winning* as the only determinates of athletic success and player satisfaction. One method would be to use findings such as presented here as examples of why there is much more to coaching than *Xs and Os.*

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