

Expertly Done – Coaching



Many personal and technical attributes are required for a coach to be labelled an expert in their respective field. **Cathy Sellers** of the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) gives her thoughts on a number of issues regarding coaches working with high-performance athletes.

The characteristics of expert coaches in elite performance

In my experience, elite coaches tend to be lifelong learners, who approach almost everything with an open mind. They are continually looking for an edge that can help improve their athletes or themselves. Many are voracious readers with a wide variety of interests, but their reading tends to be dominated by scientific literature and popular leadership/business resources.

Elite coaches are problem solvers: they will search for answers to problems. Many have developed networks of service providers who can help when issues arise about which way to take something. These people help to either confirm the pathway or suggest a new direction. Elite coaches are also leaders and possess impressive leadership skills. We sometimes forget they are not just coaching and directing athletes, but also managing a large and varied staff, a budget and different logistics.

Such coaches can develop and sustain relationships; indeed, relationships between elite coaches and top-level athletes are often fascinating. There is a huge amount of trust and respect between these two parties. Such people typically have a long-term working relationship (eight years or more) and are mentally in sync with each other. In my opinion, the best relationships are those in which the coach has become the guide: the athlete is self-reliant but requires the coach to offer advice and suggestions, and to be the eyes and ears of the performance. The coach is not there to tell the athlete what went wrong, but to guide on how to achieve a better performance. It is a true partnership working towards one goal.

Elite coaches require passion about what they are doing and why they are involved at the high-performance level. Being a coach at the top is a challenging job and I can empathise with the hours spent on the road and the pressures of coaching they face.

At USOC we recently surveyed our Olympic coaches regarding the skills they considered important. They ranked in the following order:

1. Communication skills
2. Knowledge of sport
3. Skill development
4. Team development
5. Passion.

We also asked them to write their own job description and list the top five requirements: this list proved a little different.

1. Technical knowledge
2. Planning and organisational skills
3. Teaching skills
4. Interpersonal skills
5. Experience and leadership.

How elite coaching skills are learnt

Many of these skills are intuitive, but any skill can be learnt by a coach or athlete. The quality of the learnt skill may vary, but it can be improved with effort. Coaching has foundational skills that can be taught; for example, an understanding of physiology and psychology applied to coaching, communication skills, teaching skills and training design to name just a few. The difference between a beginner coach and an elite coach is how they use these skills.

Personally, I possess a strong bias in how we develop coaches and am a true believer in coaches' education. I learnt skills and information that made me a much better coach and have seen others improve in the same way. However, I would like to see a repository for coaching knowledge that is easily accessible; for example, research that can be used and understood by coaches should be widely distributed. Coaches don't have a lot of time, so let's help them.

High-performance Athletes

Observation is another tool often under-utilised. Watching how a leading coach operates their team in training and competition is extremely helpful, so opportunities could be created for less experienced coaches to learn by observation.

The importance of coaching to athlete success in different sports

Coaching is always important, but in different sports the role of the coach during competition varies a great deal. A team coach has the ability to change the course of the competition as it occurs, whereas many individual sport coaches have to provide all instructions and guidance prior to the start. Just because the coach is not visible during competition does not diminish the role of the coach – but it is different.

The biggest difference is that team sport coaches have to be able to demonstrate 'emotional intelligence' during competition. Their behaviour and actions under pressure in the competitive arena have a direct impact on athletes, the team, the referee and the opposition. We can all relate to the importance of this emotional intelligence from watching televised events.

The transition from athlete to coach

Advantages exist for elite athletes to become coaches. In fact, the Chinese are actively recruiting their elite athletes to become coaches after they have completed their university studies.

The upside is that athletes have an intimate knowledge of what it is like to be an elite athlete – the competition state, travel, facilities etc. The downside is that unless their coach was a great teacher and had them truly understanding the whys of workout designs, for example, they are completely missing the foundational skills of coaching. I cannot tell you the number of times I have heard former athletes talk about how they did not realise the difficulties of coaching. It surprises me they prepared for life as an athlete, so why would they think preparation would not be key for life as a coach; doing and knowing are not always the same thing!

The expert coaches' response to high-level competition

I have been fortunate to attend several Olympic Games and remain convinced the Games are unlike any other competition. Coaches are constantly thinking about what-ifs, knowing full well that although they have A, B, C and even D plans, they must always think about what could happen. In the Games, performances are measured in 1/1000th of seconds, so everything matters. However, the peculiar thing is that coaches have made plans and have attempted to cover every base, but it is the athlete's responsibility to perform (you will see the calm and collected experienced coaches and the wound-up younger coaches. Much like the proverbial duck, calm on top but paddling like mad underneath). Sleep, food and exercise are the essentials, and at least two out of these three need to be achieved to cope well.

In conclusion, and to highlight the importance of the coach/athlete relationship and coaching expertise to athletic performance, allow me to give this true story.



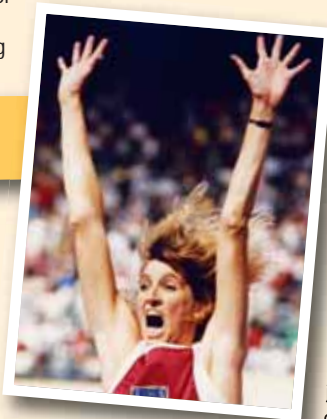
In 1988, a coach and an athlete had been working together for about 12 years. The coach was a great teacher, teaching the athlete everything about her event (the high jump); the athlete was a willing learner. Together, they would watch film and he would ask what errors she would see in technique, challenging her with different tasks. One night, he asked her to attend the high jump pit after dark and, under torchlight, she put down her marks. The torch was then turned off and she jumped in the dark. The level of courage and, more importantly, the confidence it inspired were profound (this should not be attempted with beginners). The coach wanted her to realise she could jump in any kind of condition, even darkness.

In the same year, the athlete competed in the Seoul Olympic Games. Her coach had decided not to attend because he wanted her to focus solely on jumping. Before she left the coach, they talked about all the possibilities and different things that might happen at the Games. How would she respond if this happened? A lot of mental preparation for the what-ifs.

The high-jump expert announcing the event knew the athlete well and did not give her a chance even to make the final, because of a number of knee surgeries; no-one had expectations except the jumper and her coach. The competition was tough, but the jumper made the finals. She was enjoying a great meet but kept watching her competitors as each one jumped, analysing what they were doing. At the end, it came down to her and one other jumper in a tie for the gold medal.

Every jump was critical and she had no coach there, but she did have all the knowledge she had learnt over 12 years and all the confidence he had instilled in her. It was a jump-off, so the pressure was intense. Athletes dream all their lives about achieving gold, the medal being placed around their neck and the national anthem played as they stand on the podium. Each athlete took a jump and both knocked the bar off. The officials lowered the bar, they both jumped again and both missed. However, the athlete noticed her competitor made the same mistake twice. She also knew what her own mistake was and, more importantly, knew how to correct it. Imagine how her

confidence increased when she realised how she could improve, but her opponent did not. Her opponent jumped and missed. All eyes focused on Louise Ritter (pictured left) as she made the third jump to win one of the most improbable medals of the 1988 Games. Bert Lyle, her coach, watched on TV as his athlete won gold, knowing that all those years of preparation and teaching had enabled Louise to win a medal for both of them.



Profile

Cathy Sellers is the Coach Education Manager for the United States Olympic Committee (USOC), based at the US Olympic Training Centre in Colorado Springs. Before taking up this position, Cathy worked for United States Track and Field, with responsibility for junior teams. In both capacities she has been to many major sports events, working closely with high-level coaches in both the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games.

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