

Canadian University Coaches' Perceptions on the Importance of Effective Planning and Communication Skills

Percepción de Entrenadores Canadienses Sobre la Importancia de una Planificación Eficaz y Habilidades de Comunicación

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate Canadian university coaches' perceptions on how they prepared themselves, their athletes, and their support staff for continued success at National Championship tournaments. Interviews were conducted with five highly successful university team-sport coaches, who had combined to win nine coach-of-the-year awards and 19 National titles. Results of a thematic analysis revealed the importance of developing detailed seasonal plans of all aspects of training and competition – beginning with the first day of training camp and ending with the National Championship game. The coaches also highlighted the importance of communicating expectations and roles to athletes and support staff throughout the entire season, but especially leading up to the National Championship tournament. Findings from this study provide a rare glimpse into the knowledge and behaviors of expert coaches, including what they do to prepare their university sport programs for continuous success.

Keywords: University Athletics, Coaching Psychology, Communication, Planning, High Performance Sport.

Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio fue investigar la percepción de entrenadores Canadienses sobre lo que involucra su preparación personal, y la preparación de sus atletas y personal de apoyo para tener éxito continuo en campeonatos nacionales. Se realizaron entrevistas con cinco de los entrenadores más destacados al nivel universitario en Canadá, quienes han ganado un total de nueve premios como mejores entrenadores del año y 19 títulos nacionales. Los resultados del análisis temático revelaron la importancia de desarrollar una planificación detallada que incluya todos los aspectos del entrenamiento y competencias - comenzando desde el primer día de campamento de entrenamiento y finalizando con el último juego del campeonato nacional. Los entrenadores también resaltaron la importancia de comunicar sus expectativas y roles de cada atleta y su personal durante toda la temporada, especialmente durante los días previos al campeonato nacional. Los resultados de esta investigación nos dan una única perspectiva sobre el conocimiento y los comportamientos de entrenadores expertos, incluyendo lo que hacen para preparar a sus equipos de deportistas para ganar títulos nacionales año tras año.

Palabras clave: Deporte Universitario, Psicología del Deporte, Comunicación, Planificación, Deporte de Alto Rendimiento

1. Introduction

Researchers have meticulously studied sport coaches' roles, responsibilities, and behaviors due to their important role in the development of athletes [2][4][19]. Examinations of several renowned American university team-sport coaches like Pat Summitt, John Wooden, Anson Dorrance, and Russ Rose have helped broaden the understanding of the knowledge and behaviors used by successful university coaches [10][15][20][21].

For example, basketball coach Summitt, who won eight university basketball titles, emphasized the importance of adopting an athlete-centered coaching style based on respect and honesty, and being a good communicator and listener [4]. Coach Wooden, who won 10 university National Championships during his illustrious coaching career, highlighted the importance of caring for his players and teaching his athletes how to achieve their goals on and off the basketball court. Volleyball coach Russ Rose, who won four consecutive National Championships, stressed the importance of planning, establishing goals, and having a vision.

Taken together, these examples illustrate that successful coaches have a wide body of knowledge that influences both individual and team performance.

Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria, and Russell (1995) created the coaching model (CM) to conceptualize the knowledge and behaviors of effective coaches during all phases of their job. The CM posits that the coaching process is divided into three primary components: *organization, training, and competition*. In particular, organization has been defined as a crucial variable for the success of any individual or team sport. The organization component involves the coaches' ability to successfully prepare themselves, their athletes, and staff members for training and competitions [9]. Planning and having a vision are key elements for both the short- and long-term components of team success. In the short-term, coaches must communicate their thoughts to each player and to the team as a whole, which also influences long-term goals such as winning a National Championship [9].

Coaches are constantly dealing with various team matters on a daily basis, such as athletes' personal issues, planning practices, and numerous administrative responsibilities, that all affect their abilities to coach optimally during competitions, including winning games and championships [2] [9][18][19]. As a result it is not surprising that organizational skills have been found to be a "crucial variable for the success of any individual or team sport" [4]. For example, Greenleaf, Gould, and Dieffenbach (2001) found that a coach's plans, management skills, and vision influenced the individual and team performance. In a similar manner, researchers have found that athletes' regular-season performances were influenced by the development of pre-competition and competition plans and routines by their coaches, as well as high-quality training sessions [5] [8] [13] [14]. For example, Bloom and colleagues (1997) found that expert Canadian coaches had routines for themselves and their teams for the day of the game, which included team meetings, game plan rehearsals, and engagement in physical activity to help reduce stress and maintain a positive focus. Although research clearly indicates that impact of coaches' preparations before important regular season competitions, research has yet to specifically focus on their coaching knowledge and behaviors during National Championship competitions.

In addition to having strong organizational skills, research has found that effective coaches must be good communicators [7]. This is unsurprising given that coaches must communicate with a wide

range of people including athletes, support staff, officials, parents, potential recruits, league administrators, on a daily basis. To date, a great deal of the research in this domain has focused on coaches' communication with their athletes, particularly with respect to athlete roles. Results from this research has revealed the importance of clarifying athletes' roles, to the point where both individual and team performance have been shown to be adversely affected if athletes are uncertain about their roles and expectations [1] [3] [11]. To date, research has yet to focus on the importance of athletes' roles leading up to important competitions, such as National Championship tournaments. Additionally, researchers have yet to specifically investigate role clarification in relation to support staff, including how lack of role clarity (i.e., role ambiguity) could impact team functioning and performance, especially at important competitions.

The purpose of this study was to investigate highly successful Canadian university coaches' perceptions on how they prepared themselves, their athletes, and their support staff for continued success at National Championship tournaments. Qualitative interviews (cf. Rubin & Rubin, 2012) were used in the present study, which allowed the expert coaches to use their own words to describe the factors they felt contributed to their continuous success in this previously untapped area of coaching expertise.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

Five coaches (three men, two women) of Canadian interacting university male or female team-sport programs were the participants of this study. The coaches had been in their current position for at least five years, participated in at least four National Championship tournaments, coached in at least three National Championship games, and won at least one National Championship title. Together, the participants had combined to win nine Canadian Interuniversity Sport coach-of-the-year awards and 19 National titles. The participants' average age was 47 at the time of the interviews.

2.2 Research design

The current study followed a qualitative research approach. More specifically, an instrumental case study.

2.3 Data collection

Each coach participated in a face-to-face interview conducted by the principal investigator. The interviews lasted between 46 to 103 minutes.

2.4 Data Analysis

The interviews were audio recorded and the data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-phase guidelines for thematic analysis: (a) *familiarization with the data*, (b) *coding*, (c) *searching for themes*, (d) *reviewing themes*, (e) *defining and naming themes*, and (f) *writing up*. Pseudonyms were used to ensure the participants' confidentiality. Two higher-order themes stemmed from the thematic analysis and were labeled "planning is key for success" and "communicating expectations to athletes and support staff." Methods of validity were also implemented in this study. In particular, we followed recommendations for establishing *researcher reflexivity* and *peer debriefing* [17]. These methods were implemented so that we, the research team, accounted for how our backgrounds and biases influenced our interpretations of the study findings, and to ensure that we presented the most realistic representation of the coaches' perceptions of their knowledge and experiences.

2.5 Procedure

Approval was obtained from our university's research ethics board prior to contacting participants. The lead investigator conducted an online search for successful Canadian university coaches based on the number of National Championships they had won. After conferring with the other two investigators of this study, participants who met the selection criteria were contacted by e-mail using a recruitment script. Prior to gathering data, each participant was given information about the procedures of the study and methods of data collection. Subsequently, they were asked to read and sign a consent form.

3. Results

The two higher-order themes will be presented in this section and will be illustrated using direct quotations from the five coaches. Each coach was assigned a pseudonym (e.g. Cecilia) to credit their quote and protect their confidentiality.

Planning is Key for Success

This theme represents the coaches' insights on developing seasonal plans, beginning with the first day of training camp and culminating with the National Championship game. Coaches talked about the importance of starting the season with a well-developed plan that includes every aspect of training. For example, having days scheduled for physical conditioning, tactical and technical skill development, skill assessments, team building activi-

ties, and individual and team meetings. Additionally, the coaches talked about planning aspects once they qualified for the Championship tournament. The coaches highlighted that every part of their daily preparations during the season helped prepare them for the National Championship tournament:

Every day is preparation for Nationals. Every detail I demand starts from day one. Before the season starts and throughout the season I try to follow the top teams in the league. I try to simulate in practice the pressure of what the athletes will have to face in a game. I simulate that through putting pressure through time, through goals, through mental and emotional pressure (Cecilia).

To help with their seasonal preparations, some of the coaches simulated National Championship competitions during various points of the season to help the athletes prepare for the event:

You play four games in four days at the Nationals and that is tough both mentally and physically. We prepare for Nationals throughout the season by mimicking the tournament two or three weekends before we leave (Martín).

During the season we have practices at different times because during the tournament practice time varies between eight o'clock in the morning and five o'clock in the evening. So, we prepare for something like that (Gonzalo).

Additionally, the coaches talked about the importance of maintaining routines throughout the entire season that would carry over to the National Championship tournament:

I think the biggest mistake a coach can make when you get to a National Championship game is to change your routine. For example, if the coach shows ten video clips before every game all year long and then, all of a sudden, before the championship game you are showing them 30 video clips or doing things differently, then you are making a big mistake. You need to keep the same routine and have confidence in it. I remind the support staff to be themselves before we leave for Nationals, I tell them, 'Be yourself. If you haven't done something up until now, then don't start doing it now. Do what you have been doing. That is why we have gotten to where we are' (Pedro).

We want to prepare the same way for a preseason game as we do for a regular season game as we do for a National Championship. So, in the eyes of the players we don't change too much (Gonzalo).

In particular, coaches talked about the logistics behind preparing for a National Championship tournament once they know they have qualified. According to the coaches, all logistics are taken care of before leaving to the Championship tournament venue. The coaches all met with their support staff before leaving to the tournament:

Everybody has a copy of a schedule I make with my manager. We have relaxed time, study time, team time, video time, and dinner time. The managers order food. Players do not have to worry about anything. They do not have to make many decisions. I think that the less decisions players have to make the better it is. So they follow a schedule. They rest their brain (Cecilia).

Two coaches talked specifically about including academics in their plans to help the athletes be more focused during the tournament:

The big thing [about preparing for Nationals] is school, because you are going to be missing a week of school. Players can't tell their professors on Sunday that they are leaving [for Nationals] on Tuesday. Professors are willing to help you if you let them know ahead of time. That is a lot of pressure off the students right away, knowing that school is not going to be a problem and that all they have to do is play (Martín).

Communicating Expectations to Athletes and Support Staff

The coaches described the importance of communicating expectations and roles to athletes and support staff throughout the season, especially during the days leading up to the National Championship tournament, as a key strategy to avoid distractions and keep the team on task. In this theme, the term support staff refers to all team members aside from the head coach and athletes, such as assistant coaches, video coaches, strength and conditioning coaches, sport psychologists, etc.

The coaches all felt that communicating with their athletes and support staff on a regular basis throughout the season helped prepare them for their roles at the Championship tournament:

I make sure that they [players] know what they have to do. There aren't too many questions at Nationals because I think we do a pretty good job of telling the players what we expect from them throughout the season. Communication is major! It is all about how you communicate your vision, the activities, and their roles (Irina).

We work together with our strength and conditioning coaches. They are the ones who will make sure the players are training the way I want them to. I make sure that everyone on the support staff is on the same page (Pedro).

In addition to outlining expectations and roles during the regular season, the participants also described their communications with athletes and support staff prior to leaving for the National Championship tournament. For example, the coaches described how they speak to their athletes about expectations and roles before Nationals:

Before we leave, I always prepare the team by explaining what is ahead of them. There are players who have been there [the National Championship tournament] before but you have players who are in their first year and really nervous about it. So, I always try to explain what is going to happen: there is a banquet, opening ceremonies, and the format of the championship. So, when we get there they know exactly what to expect (Irina).

Some of the coaches asked the senior players to talk with the first-year players to share their experiences of playing at a National Championship:

Experience is such a huge part [of preparing for Nationals]. Experience even amongst the players. I get the older players to talk with the new ones and that helps them know what to expect (Pedro).

In the days leading up to the tournament, the coaches believed it was fundamental to reiterate their expectations to the support staff. Although the coaches highlighted the importance of maintaining routines, they also believed it was critical to talk with the support staff about specific adaptations for the National Championship context:

Everybody has to know exactly what he or she is doing. For example, I tell the support staff where they should be in between periods, who is expected to be in the dressing room, and at what time. I plan this beforehand because I don't want to

have to coach the players, *and* my support staff all at the same time (Irina).

During our first National Championship, my [support staff] started to give directions on the floor, directions to the athletes, and directions to me. We were all giving different directions and everything was so disorganized. We made the girls nervous and we lost that game because we mishandled the communication on the floor. Now I know I must have a healthy support staff and I make sure to tell them that I am the only person who speaks on the floor. I also tell them to remain calm during Nationals (Cecilia).

4. Discussion

Results revealed that the coaches believed effective planning and communication skills were critical factors for the ongoing success of their university sport programs, including at National Championship tournaments. The coaches noted how their yearly preparations began the first day of training camp and continued right up to the final National Championship contest. This finding extends our understanding of the organization component of the CM [9] by including the optimal types of coaching knowledge and behaviors for success at important competitions. Previous research on expert North American coaches has demonstrated they were meticulous planners during the regular season [8] [18] [19] [20]. The coaches in the current study noted that some of their seasonal practices were specifically designed to prepare their teams for the National Championship tournament. For example, one of the coaches said he scheduled practices at different times of the day (morning vs. evening) to expose his athletes to the same physical and psychological demands that take place during a National Championship tournament. Preparing their athletes during the regular season for the different routines that take place during the National Championship tournament was viewed as a key factor ensuring individual and team success at this important part of the season (cf. Gould & Maynard, 2009), and reinforces the notion that effective coaches are meticulous planners throughout the entire season, which includes Championship tournament games [8] [18] [19] [21].

While the coaches in our study discussed the importance of daily communications about roles and expectations to their athletes and support staff throughout the regular season, they felt this task was magnified leading up to the National Championship tournament. Specific to the support staff,

the coaches felt it was important to clearly articulate expectations to their assistant coaches about optimal behaviors and communication styles with athletes and other members of the team while coaching at the National Championship tournament. Research on the roles and responsibilities of assistant coaches is in its early stages of development [16], and little empirical attention has focused on understanding how assistant coaches can influence athlete or team performance, especially during high-pressure games or matches. The highly successful university coaches in this study believed their assistant coaches should not change the way they communicated with their athletes at the National Championship tournament because, in their past experiences, it has led to adverse performance results. These results extend the literature on the role and importance of assistant coaches as a way to enhance team performance (cf. Sinotte et al., 2015).

The coaches also spoke to athletes to clarify their roles prior to the National Championship tournament, as a way to help avoid distractions and enhance performance success. The coaches' communications with their athletes about their expected roles and behaviors were supplemented by having senior athletes share experiences from their previous National Championships with their less experienced teammates. To date, the majority of research on role clarity has been from the athletes' perspective, has been quantitative in nature, and has primarily focused on regular season success [1] [3] [11]. Findings from the current study extend this body of literature by demonstrating the coaches' perspectives on the importance of athlete role clarification throughout the entire season, especially leading up to and at National Championship tournaments.

In conclusion, this study adds to the coaching psychology literature by exploring the previously underreported context of a National Championship tournament, and by including the coaches' interactions with athletes and his/her support staff. The findings of this study benefit both head and assistant coaches by offering insights and strategies on how to develop and maintain a culture of excellence in elite sport programs. As a result, research into the knowledge and strategies of coaches should continue to explore other aspects of coaching excellence.

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