

A CALL TO REFORM COACH EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

¹Swisher, A. and ¹Abbott, H.

¹East Tennessee State University, Department of Exercise and Sport Sciences, Johnson City, TN USA

Current practitioners and researchers have found that existing opportunities in coach education are inadequate, ineffective, and/or do not include all necessary information.(Gearity, Hudson, & Murray, 2014; Gilbert & Baldis, 2014; Grant & Dorgo, 2014; Judge & Craig, 2014; Massey & Maneval, 2014) This poses a real threat to the coaching profession according to Massey et al. (2014), because “The viability of any profession is based on its ability to educate and socialize new members into the discipline.”(Massey & Maneval, 2014) Our aim is to highlight some of the shortcomings of the introductory-level coach education programs and propose methods to remedy them with the goal of improving the overall quality of coach education courses in the United States.

Issue 1: Short course duration

Many veteran coaches have noted that a one- or two-day clinic simply cannot cover the depth and breadth of information necessary to equip a coach to be successful in all aspects of his or her job.(Grant, Dorgo, & Griffin, 2014; Hsu, 2014) Introductory coach education courses typically take place over a single weekend. Course instructors have between 12 and 18 hours of face-to-face contact to educate coaches. Hosting courses on weekends gives coaches a large block of time to dedicate to learning, as most coaches taking introductory-level coach education classes have other jobs during the workweek. However, what facilitates the best learning and retention of material is repeated exposures over time rather than one long block of exposure.(Cepeda, Pashler, Vul, Wixted, & Rohrer, 2006; Pashler, Rohrer, Cepeda, & Carpenter, 2007) In other professions, such as medicine, law, business, education, engineering, and accounting, the education required to become a licensed practitioner is measured in years, not hours. High school students spend 180 days in a chemistry class to gain proficiency and are subjected to multiple exams, labs, and assignments, yet they are still not handed the keys to the lab to conduct independent experiments. Under no circumstances would anyone advocate a mere two days of instruction to become proficient in anything, and yet that is the model used by most all coach education programs in the US.

The proliferation of online educational platforms, video conference call services, and hybrid courses taught partially in person and partially long distance offers a real opportunity to enhance coach education courses. Utilizing these tools, coach education courses could span weeks or months, while allowing coaches the flexibility to engage with course materials at any time. Course instructors could facilitate online discussions about course material or help answer questions posed by course participants. Collectively, this would enable coaches to gain and retain a stronger foundational knowledge and to tackle more advanced material during the course.

It is out of convenience and tradition that many courses are only one weekend long. With a hybrid course spanning several months, the hands-on portion of the course could become a series of weekend meetings rather than only one. Logistically, this would require courses to be held in a location that is within driving distance of both coaches and course instructors. This design would inherently create a greater time commitment for all parties involved, but if coaching is to earn respect as a profession these changes would be a good first step in legitimization the process.

Issue 2: Low standards for obtaining coaching certification

In higher education, courses frequently have prerequisites so all students enrolled in a particular class have a common knowledge base. In introductory coach education courses, there are no prerequisites for either content knowledge or coaching experience, which makes it difficult for the course instructors and participants. A course participant with no formal educational background or coaching experience is clearly not a proficient coach after 16 hours of exposure to a coach education course. Yet this is exactly what is happening in coaching courses; both the coaching profession and the athletes working with these coaches are suffering.

Coaching courses should be structured to have prerequisites such as a documented internship or mentorship under an advanced coach or several years of coaching experience as well as a foundational understanding of physiology, kinesiology, and biomechanics. In addition to the prerequisites relating to basic anatomy and physiology, biomechanics, and pedagogy, these areas should be components or all coaching

courses as every sport coach should bear these in mind when making training decisions and working with athletes.

Participants in introductory coach education courses typically must complete a practical and/or written exam, though the rigor of such exams varies widely. Course exam failure rates are not readily available, but it is likely that the rates are close to zero. Many courses allow participants the opportunity to take the exam multiple times, to take the exam with the aid of a textbook, and to take it online without supervision. Furthermore, course instructors often emphasize material covered on the exam rather than focus on the needs of the course participants. As a result, many of the introductory coaching courses run by sport national governing bodies (NGBs) are notorious for effectively awarding certifications in exchange for the course fee paid by participants. Certifying coaches for monetary gain has created a slippery slope for many NGBs. Many sport NGBs rely on revenue generated from coach education courses, so there is no incentive for the NGB to raise standards or require prerequisites, as it may discourage coaches from signing up. The lack of oversight has created poor educational standards for coaches in many sports.

Exams taken at the conclusion of the coaching course should reflect the knowledge a beginner coach should know in order to be deemed proficient and can include both a written and a practical component to ensure coaches understand and can apply what they have learned. Written exams should be administered once at the conclusion of the course, in a closed-book, supervised fashion whether in person or online.

Issue 3: No oversight of course content by a centralized organization

A coach's goal in training athletes is to bring about physical, anthropometric, motor skill, and physiological changes; however, not all coach education courses address the basic physiological underpinnings of training. It is our belief that a foundational knowledge in physiology, nutrition, sport skills and tactics, strength and conditioning, and pedagogy should be required of coaches in all sports. Yet many of these key areas receive only cursory attention in current courses. This may be due to a variety of factors, such as lack of qualified course instructors, lack of course prerequisites, or a different philosophy of coach education within an organization. Regardless of how each sport NGB arrived at its current coach education course content, what is clear is that more uniformity in universally applicable content is needed. Basic course objectives and learning outcomes should be agreed upon and content should be regularly updated to reflect current practices. Currently, individual NGBs have control over the coach education course content and certification criteria. One option to evince significant change is to give the USOC oversight of Olympic sport NGB coach education programs to ensure basic coaching skills and knowledge are being covered. The creation of centralized oversight would allow for unified prerequisite courses, standardized certification criteria, reliable and current course content, and a higher level of instructor training. For non-Olympic sports, a coach education position in the national office could provide these functions.

Issue 4: Minimal attention paid to pedagogical best practices

Stemming perhaps from short course durations and a lack of pedagogical training for instructors, little attention is paid to pedagogical best practices during content delivery. Most courses rely on lectures and PowerPoint presentations, ignoring the overwhelming amount of literature suggesting that lecturing is one of the most ineffective teaching methods. (Bowen, 2012; Doyle, 2011) Courses should both model and teach best practices for teaching sport skills.

Instead of relying on lectures, course content should be delivered through more effective methods such as problem-based learning (the case study method), which fosters deeper learning and critical thinking about the material than merely lecturing. (Bowen, 2012; Doyle, 2011; Gearity et al., 2014) Working through scenarios that coaches are likely to encounter helps to bridge the gaps between theory and application. Other more effective modes of learning include hands-on experience, discussions, and presentations. (Bowen, 2012; Doyle, 2011)

Many coaches know how to perform sport skills, perhaps from their days as an athlete, but they often struggle with how to teach them to other athletes with diverse backgrounds and abilities. To help coaches learn how to be more effective teachers, coaching courses should make the pedagogical reasoning behind teaching methods a focal point and promote best practices in the field. Practical, real-world examples should be discussed where possible and post-course resources should be made available to coaches to help reinforce information given in the course.

Issue 5: Insufficient continuing education and outdated coaching resources

Coaches have a strong desire to achieve professional development through the acquisition of knowledge, but the quality of much of the available information is poor. (Nelson, Cushion, & Potrac, 2013) When a coach works with an athlete or a team for the first time, it can be an overwhelming and confusing process. Complicating matters, is that fact that more information than ever is available on the Internet, in books, in magazines, on TV, and at gyms from experts about how to design training. Wading through all of this information is a difficult task, and NGBs need to do a better job of teaching coaches how to filter out misinformation and make good training choices. It can be hard to ignore messages from so-called industry experts, testimonials from famous athletes, or pseudo-scientific graphs from alleged “real research.” Coaches need the tools to be able to separate fact from fiction through a solid foundation in basic physiology, kinesiology, biomechanics, and nutrition and to effectively convey the correct information to their athletes.

The USOC, tasked with centralized oversight, and the individual NGBs can enhance coach education by providing certified coaches with opportunities to learn more about current evidence-based best practices. This would ensure that coaches have access to quality information, which should be presented in a way that is easy to understand for new coaches. There are many options for continuing education opportunities that can be done remotely, such as reading a coaching newsletter, reading a webpage with coaching resources, or creating a network of advanced coaches willing to mentor newer coaches. Ensuring that NGBs have current and easily understandable material will allow new coaches to expand their expertise in a trustworthy and reliable setting.

Conclusion

We propose that updating the current coach education model in the USA is imperative to improving the quality of coaching (Figure 1). If coaching is to become a respected profession, the educational process and awarding of coaching certifications needs to be legitimized.

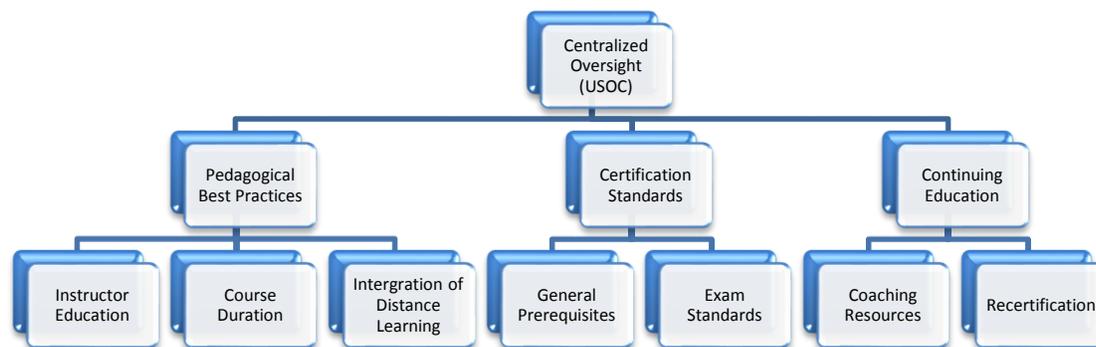


Figure 1: Summary of proposed changes to current coach education structure in the USA

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