What makes them so good? The constructs used by coaches to identify coaching prowess

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Abstract

The criterion which coaches use to judge their peers are extremely pertinent to the study and enhancement of coach development. The aim of this two-part study was to offer insight into how a sample of British sub-elite coaches judged coaching prowess and perceived the nature of the expertise possessed (or perceived to be possessed) by their own self-selected role model coaches. Data from field notes and transcribed conversations with 143 coaches, drawn from over 15 years of conversations, were interpreted following an inductive analysis. Subsequently, follow up focus group interviews involving 15 level three coaches in a range of sports were used to augment and, if appropriate, question these data. Results yielded an array of personal characteristics, which participants used to describe "what" role model coaches did or were like, as opposed to professional or behavioural characteristics that explained "how" they worked. Consideration of these findings offers some areas for immediate exploitation, alongside some key concerns which must be addressed if the trend for social learning based coach development initiatives are to have optimum benefit.

Keywords: coach education; coach development; coach learning

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During the last 30 years, there has been considerable growth in the provision of coach education initiatives as a means to raise coaching standards, alongside a growing drive to establish coaching as a bona fide profession (Taylor & McEwan, 2012). Typically, a model of formal coach education has emerged that encompasses standardised curricula of theoretical and cognitive knowledge, often designed against a "gold standard" of effective coaching that learners must mimic (Abraham & Collins, 1998). More recently however, the coaching research literature has suggested that the impact of such initiatives is limited, and that the majority of coach development in fact occurs outside of formal educational settings through informal and non-formal learning experiences and sources (cf. Cushion et al., 2010).

As a result of coaches' apparent preference for informal development when learning how to coach, a growing body of coaching research has begun to highlight a social theory of learning in the development of coaching knowledge and practice (e.g., Culver & Trudel, 2006; Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2003; Mallett, Trudel, Lyle, & Rynne, 2009). Similarly, coach education programmes have begun to acknowledge learning as a social activity and embrace the value and benefits of informal approaches to development that encourage on-going social interaction (Cassidy, Potrac, & McKenzie, 2006; Gilbert, Gallimore, & Trudel, 2009; Werthner & Trudel, 2006). For example, the importance of coach mentoring is frequently discussed and mentoring schemes are commonly established by National Governing Bodies of sport (NGBs) outside of formal learning settings (Cushion, 2006; UK Sport, 2013). Similarly, Wenger's (1998) concept of learning within a "Community of Practice" (CoP) is increasingly cited as a mode of facilitating coach development (e.g., Callary, 2013; Cassidy et al., 2006; Culver & Trudel, 2006; Culver, Trudel, & Werthner, 2009). These methods of development clearly hold potential for the developers of coaches; however, there remains a paucity of research examining the social influences that underpin

them and which subsequently impact upon the development of coaching knowledge (Stoszkowski & Collins, 2014).

Consider, for example, the social environment within which coaches create knowledge and attribute meaning to what they learn (Callary, 2013). This environment is extremely complex, and individuals are faced with a diverse range of influences, many of which they may not be consciously aware of, which pressure them to behave in certain ways in order to conform and secure approval (Bowes & Jones, 2006; Collins, Abraham, & Collins, 2012; Stoszkowski & Collins, 2014). This social "milieu", in which a developing coach is inevitably embedded, can incorporate a wide range of significant others and multiple stakeholders (e.g., athletes, administrators, peers, role models, parents, policy makers, NGBs), who may all be working to varying agendas, with competing egos and within complex hierarchies (Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2004). In addition, the pervasive roots and influence of socio-cultural values and tradition in sports run deep, and many elements of knowledge and coaching practice remain largely guided by tradition and historical precedence in the sport (Cushion, Ford, & Williams, 2012; Williams & Hodges, 2005). As a result, the subtleties of this milieu are a powerful source in promoting and perpetuating the value and acceptance of certain types of knowledge and behaviour over others (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003) and guiding what coaches choose to pay attention to as well as what they choose to learn (Werthner & Trudel, 2006). For example, the "best" ways to structure practice and behaviour are explicitly repeated and reinforced in the testimony of more experienced "fellow" coaches, retired coaches, and ex-athletes. In addition, the sports media may "sell" or promote certain ideological interpretations and coaching values, which may either compliment or contradict the extant or dominant values.

As such, if the right messages are (a) being sent, (b) being received, and (c) are genuinely correct, then subsequently integrated with practice in an appropriate context, the

social milieu might be a highly efficient and effective tool for coach development, either solely or in tandem with other approaches. However, this is at best a "triple whammy" assumption, and, as of yet, there has been limited research examining these processes in detail. Consequently, before we can strategize ways of improving informal methods of coach development, we first need to understand and consider more critically the processes already taking place as coaches learn their craft (Occhino, Mallett, & Rynne, 2013). For example, if we wish to avoid coaching practice being guided by uncritical inertia, and similarly prevent out-dated knowledge and behaviours being passed on and reproduced during informal development activities such as CoPs (Cushion et al., 2012), we need to look at the constructs that the existing social milieu uses to judge coaching quality. As such, the criterion which coaches use to judge their peers are extremely pertinent to the study of coach learning and development.

Firstly, these criteria form part of the received wisdom and social schematics used by coaches to establish pecking orders and mutual reinforcement (Ritzer, 1996; Wacquant, 1998). As such, identification and exploitation of these criteria can provide coach developers with some useful tools. Secondly, the constructs used by coaches will play a key role in the development of social schema (as described excellently by Bowes & Jones, 2006). These structures are created as a result of past interpersonal experiences and have a powerful influence on current behaviour. For example, the acceptance of new information in any learning experience will be dependent on its compatibility with a coach's existing schemas (Nassaji, 2002). An understanding of the constructs used by coaches could therefore help uncover how coaches develop a mental framework for their behaviour (Baldwin, 1992) and, subsequently, a great deal about the priorities for attention in raising coaching standards within and across sports. Thirdly, monitoring and regularly revisiting these schemas can offer a genuine and impactful measure of progress. In driving through change, administrators

and coach educators alike can then make use of such knowledge in monitoring the evolutions in perception that both reflect and enhance the process. In this regard, genuine culture change must have an effective political dimension as well as a sound scientific rationale (Butcher & Clarke, 2008). In short, while what the public thinks isn't always right, it is a vitally important consideration in any change process.

With these factors in mind, the aim of the present study was to offer some insights into how a sample of British sub-elite coaches judged coaching quality and perceived the nature of the expertise possessed (or perceived to be possessed) by their own self-selected role model coaches. Equally, by examining the perceptions of coaches, the study aimed to identify what the social milieu encourages coaches to learn i.e., are the "right" messages being sent and/or received, and are they in the right direction? Or, does the social milieu simply serve to magnify and perpetuate the issues that coach developers should endeavour to nullify? In an attempt to fulfil this need, the study had two distinct phases. First, we drew on exhaustive field notes and transcribed conversations made by the second author over the last 15 years as part of his on-going work in coach education. These notes and annotated conversations were initially designed for use in contextualising new information and educational materials to the coach-clients' environment, goals and opinions. Subsequently, in order to test the veracity of these initial findings and explore them in greater depth, three focus groups were administered with similar levels of coaches from specific sports. While we recognise these findings cannot be considered definitive, they offer an effective preliminary insight into the constructs used by coaches in judging their own or their peers' coaching prowess.

Method

Phase One

Participants

The insights presented are based on field notes and transcribed conversations collected by the second author from a convenience sample of 143 coaches of (by present day standards) level three status (Sports Coach UK, 2012). As such, all the coaches were sub-elite but experienced coaches acknowledged by their respective sports as being capable of autonomous practice. The coaches used in generating the data included 105 male (*M*age = 42.4 years, *SD* = 5.8) and 38 female (*M*age = 39 years, *SD* = 7.4) coaches from a range of sports. The breakdown was as follows:

- 31 athletics
- 29 rugby (union or league)
- 16 tennis
- 13 judo
- 13 canoeing
- 11 karate
- 9 hockey
- 8 curling
- 7 Olympic weight lifting

The remaining six (making up the total of 143 participants) perceived themselves as multi-sport coaches albeit with a good level of perceived (or at least certified) coaching prowess. All participants were UK citizens or had been domicile in the UK for a minimum of five years. The median coaching experience was reported as 12 years, with experience ranging from 6 to over 40 years. All recruitment was by personal contact, with complete anonymity guaranteed; an assertion reinforced by the informal/visiting presenter roles held by the author when data were collected.

Procedure

In all cases, responses were made to the question "why is Coach X such a good coach?" where Coach X was the "role model" identified by the coach from his or her own sports domain. The question was posed by the second author at the beginning of coach education courses as part of an informal needs assessment and in order to ascertain course participants' beliefs and schemas surrounding "effective" coaching. Consequently, this

process offered the second author clues on how he might present participants with subsequent exemplars and facts to best effect during the course.

Responses were wide ranging and often rambling but, with the imperatives employed for neither self-presentation nor hidden agendas, we are satisfied that the responses were genuine. This trustworthiness was further enhanced by the use of triangulation (Patton, 2002) using participant responses from other settings (e.g., group discussions) and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) whereby field note summaries were shared with participants and confirmed as realistically reflecting their views (see also Sparkes, 1998).

Data Analysis

An inductive analysis of the raw data was carried out following the procedures described by Côté, Salmela, Baria, and Russell (1993) for organising and interpreting unstructured qualitative data. First, to increase familiarity, the field note summaries were read several times by both authors before being analysed line by line to identify and label meaning units (i.e., raw coach quotations of varying length that exemplify a meaningful thought, point, or piece of information). This allowed for thick description to be reflected in the results (Creswell, 2003). The meaning units were then listed before being compared for similarities and grouped into distinct categories referred to as lower order themes (Côté et al., 1993). Finally, the analysis proceeded to a higher level of abstraction, whereby the lower order themes that had emerged from the data were grouped into larger and more general higher order themes in a higher order concept. This process allowed for the constant refinement of the results until theoretical saturation occurred (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

To enhance the trustworthiness of the data, the two authors, both of whom are experienced researchers in qualitative methods, discussed the meaning units, categories and themes at each stage until a consensus of opinion was reached on their accuracy and clarity. Following the recommendations of Krane, Andersen, and Strean (1997), a reliability check

was also conducted by asking an independent investigator, trained in qualitative methodology but blind to the objectives of the study, to audit the assigned categories and themes to ensure that they accurately reflected coach quotations. This discourse resulted in a high level of agreement between individuals, with only a small number of minor discrepancies requiring adjustment or further rationale.

Phase Two

Participants

For the second phase of the study, participants ($N = 15$) were purposively selected (Patton, 2002) using criterion sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this regard, the coaches were required to possess the level three qualification provided by their respective NGB, therefore reflecting the overall makeup of the coaches in phase one. All coaches were male UK citizens (Mage = 37 years, $SD = 7.6$). The median coaching experience was reported as 11 years, with experience ranging from 6 to over 30 years.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, the study received ethical approval from a university research ethics committee. Once participants had returned a signed informed consent form, three focus group interviews were moderated by the first author: one group with 4 hockey and 3 rugby league coaches, one with 5 golf coaches, and one with 3 squash coaches. Reflecting the procedure employed in phase one, coach groups were asked to consider their own personal role model, defined as "a coach who, in your experience, characterises what you would aspire to be in your coaching." As before, the main question asked was "why is Coach X such a good coach?" Reflecting recommendations for the administration of focus groups (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013), open-ended prompts were used to encourage participants to expand upon their ideas and evocate rich discussion. Elaboration and clarification probes were also used to help ensure that clear and comprehensive descriptions were elicited

(Gratton & Jones, 2004; Patton, 2002). Typically, these probes involved the moderator giving a summary of a point a coach had made and asking them to offer additional detail (e.g., "Why do you think that is the case?") or examples (e.g., "Can you provide the group with a specific example of that?"). Otherwise, conversations were allowed to proceed freely, with all focus groups lasting approximately 60 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim, with transcripts checked twice against the audio recording to ensure accuracy. To enhance credibility, the word-processed interview transcript was emailed to each participant for checking. This form of member checking (Patton, 2002) gave the participants the opportunity for reflexive elaboration (Sparkes, 1989) and the chance to comment on and clarify the meaning of their responses to ensure an accurate representation of their views had been obtained. No changes were requested.

Data Analysis

In this case, manipulation of the unstructured interview data were aided through the use of a qualitative data analysis software package (QSR NVivo 10). The raw data were again submitted to an inductive content analysis and followed the same process as outlined in phase one of the study. Lastly, participants were sent a summary of results and asked to provide feedback on their accuracy and credibility (Creswell, 2003). No changes were requested and the emergent lower and higher order themes were acknowledged as providing an accurate representation of expressed coaches' views.

Results

Phase One

For presentation purposes, the themes that emerged from the inductive content analysis are shown in Table 1. What follows is a brief and selective summary of the generally expressed perceptions. Quotes are used to enable the reader to gain a better appreciation of the context in which the themes emerge from the data.

Knowledge and experience

Participants commented on their role model's knowledge base, most notably and frequently in the sport-specific area. In particular, the ability to come up with "tidy" answers quickly was noted. For example, a rugby coach said "he is a great walking resource…he will almost always provide a practical solution" while a canoeing coach described the importance of "knowing" when to change tack as necessary:

> He seems to have an uncanny knack for knowing when something isn't going to work…he will persist and persist, often much longer than is reasonable. At what always seems to be the right time however, he will drop it and go with a new idea.

Certainly, for many participants, the previous experiences of the role model as a high level performer were seen as an extremely positive feature. For example, an athletics coach said "been there; seen it, done it, got the T-shirt. Whatever the situation throws at him, X…and therefore his athletes know what to do." For others, however, a coach's previous limitations as a performer were seen as an advantage. A rugby coach was adamant that "because X had to work so hard to get there, he really understands and caters for the challenges his players face. They can have confidence that he understands…"

Communication

Clarity of expectation was seen as a desirable feature of role model coaches. A weightlifting coach said "X is a hard bastard. The athletes know where they stand and what he expects. They tend not to f*** about." Similarly, another rugby coach described the selection process implemented by their model coach and how that is communicated to their players:

> All X's players know where they stand in the pecking order, what they need to demonstrate to move up, and the things they need to do to make that happen…he will always let you know where you stand. Selection is no longer a mystery.

The ability of role model coaches to communicate instructions and information in a clear and unambiguous way was also viewed as a key quality. For example, a hockey coach felt that:

> The way he presents stuff is really good. Calmly and methodically he exposes the plan so the team are taken along with it. Questions are asked and counters made so, at the end of the meetings, everyone is confident in the master plan.

More specifically, participants consistently alluded to the utility of analogy as a method to deliver instructions and information clearly. A curling coach commented "one of his best features is the use of little stories, stick diagrams or examples from real-life…he can bring an idea to life, make it relevant and understandable." This view was also reported by several individual sport coaches, including a tennis coach who said "she will always try to relate ideas through examples or stories. It gets the message across really well." Alongside this, almost all the participants referred to their model's ability to make comparisons with the historic or current performance of world-class performers or coaches in order to make their point. For example, a rugby coach explained "he will use contrasts with world class players to justify his advice…Jonny does it like this but if you had watched Jenks…"

Models were also seen as being adept at portraying confidence when communicating the decisions they had taken. A hockey coach stated "the players never seem in any doubt that X has got it taped. He doesn't show doubt publicly and they don't doubt his decision." Nevertheless, it was clear that, while overt confidence was seen as an essential component of the role model coach, the social construction of this was subtly but crucially different from setting to setting.

Motivation

Participants identified the dedication necessary to reach the highest levels of coaching, and related this to the choices often made by role models. In the majority of cases, role models were seen as being highly driven individuals, making big sacrifices to achieve.

For example, a hockey coach said "X's life revolves around coaching. She has even changed jobs…quite literally gone down market, to give her more time for coaching and to do her PhD." An athletics coach further emphasised this point by saying "even before it was his job, X was completely committed to his athletes. Work was scheduled around their needs, on or off the track."

Participants also highlighted their role models' commitment to improvement and being as "good as they can be". For example, a judo coach suggested "X's commitment is second to none. She is always working to improve herself, and is voracious in seeking out new ideas to give her players the extra edge" while another judo coach commented "X is very self-critical, but it seems to be realistically so. He takes the positive and learns from the negative in any setting." Alongside this, a desire to work with and learn from other coaches or specialists was highlighted as a key characteristic of role model coaches. An athletics coach said "X has got some really good ideas on conditioning…some are from when (athlete's name) worked with Y and he's taken what he thinks is useful." Another tennis coach went further and suggested "when (athlete's name) worked with a psychologist, X was always there, watching, listening and adding to her armoury."

Ability to Plan

Model coaches were seen as fervent goal setters, both in the long and short term. For example, a rugby coach said "X is religious in his goal setting. He sets targets and reviews his progress methodically against them. I think he even sets goals for his s****!" In working towards their goals, they were also seen as experts at planning, although perhaps less formally than some would like. Thus, early decision making about training and competition plans, an adaptability (coupled with the network to facilitate late changes), and the ability to change tack when necessary all emerged in sport-specific variants. Similarly, a weightlifting coach said "he knows what he is doing and why he is doing it…he then fights tooth and claw

to get what he feels he needs." A hockey coach also alluded to this planning, saying "there is always a Plan B…even C and D as well. When things go t*** up, X always seems to have something up her sleeve."

Effective and goal-directed athlete selection was also seen as a feature of the planning process of model coaches, although the nature and philosophy of this varied from sport to sport. For example, an athletics coach stated "X can spot long term potential a mile off, and he is extremely proactive to 'recruit' it. We all hate poaching but he does it very well" while a rugby coach admitted "X would consider not only the player's skills but also what he brought to the team…what role he could play, how he influenced the others." While there were some negative connotations, they seem very much specific to the different sports. For example, the poaching comment is from athletics and was not mentioned by the other sports.

Phase Two

The themes that emerged from the inductive content analysis on focus group data are presented in Table 2. What follows is a brief and selective summary of the generally expressed perceptions. Again, quotes are used to enable the reader to gain a better appreciation of the context in which the themes emerge from the data.

Communication

As in phase one, effective communication was continuously cited as a key quality in role model coaches with specific focus on "delivery" and "what" they do. In particular, the ability to provide a clear message and be easily understood was reported as highly desirable characteristic. For example, a golf coach said "I love the way X has got such a lovely easy delivery, it's very relaxed…I think that is such a big thing, very easy to listen to." When perceiving this capacity to "get their message across", participants appreciated the chameleon-like quality of role models in their ability to utilise and switch between a variety of methods and styles of communication. This was often discussed in relation to model

coaches being adept at catering for the diverse needs of participants. It was also reported that this was often done in a way that instilled calm in athletes; as such, models were viewed as being aware and in control of "softer" communication skills such as body language. A rugby coach explained "I think of X, he'll tell you the same thing 5 times in 5 different ways, and he's hitting everybody's needs." While a hockey coach suggested "X never seems to be nervous, he's just able put across his point and then as a result the players can then feel calm and look at what they are doing."

The data showed that role models were perceived as being forthright in their views with both athletes and colleagues. Participants viewed their models' honesty in "saying what they think" and making their expectations clear and upfront a key characteristic of an elite coach. A rugby coach suggested "I mentioned and talked about X…that was one of his big things, really clear on what he wanted in his club." Another rugby coach shared this view when discussing a role model's honesty with players when it came to team selection:

> The first thing X says to his players is you are not all gonna be treated the same way. They might have earned their stripes, can play badly and will get picked next week. You as a new player will play badly and you will be dropped, and you'll have to fight your way back in.

Participants also made consistent reference to models' ability to admit to their mistakes and limitations, not only with fellow coaching staff but also with the athletes themselves. A hockey coach said:

> One big thing with X was he was prepared to put his hands up and say "I've got it wrong"…and he wouldn't just share it with staff, he'd actually sometimes share it with his players and say "look we got this wrong, I've tried this or I've reacted wrongly to this I'll speak to you all and we'll look at something different".

Equally, the ability to engage and inspire was a highly valued characteristic of role model coaches. For example, a golf coach enthused "X was a great raconteur…he was just fabulous as a storyteller. You are inspired with things that he says and you think 'I'm going to use that myself'…" Another golf coach agreed with this view, saying "X is fascinating you know…he's a very inspirational guy. When we went on that course with them…he had us engaged for 2.5 hours…everyone came out of that room buzzing!"

The data also suggested that role models were very "egalitarian" in terms of their attitude toward communication with others. Models welcomed input and opinion to the coaching process from both athletes and colleagues. This was often framed in the context of the model finding value in their methods being challenged and questions being asked of "why" they did what they did. A rugby coach cited their experience:

> I've worked with coaches who would have come in and just bawled you out of the room…get on that pitch and do this that and the other…you'd have left that training session thinking I couldn't wait to get away from there…whereas with X it's all by agreement.

It was also consistently emphasised that models were willing to "share" knowledge and information with other coaches. For example, a rugby coach recounted how *"*X would come and he would sit there…bearing in mind they'd trained all day…he'd sit there all day and talk and talk and talk and share that knowledge." Similarly, a golf coach observed how:

> X almost had a constant forum with all of the guys who were teaching, so you are kind of exchanging ideas…some coaches are isolated and haven't got people to bounce stuff off and I think that is a bad thing.

Relationships

It was clear from the data that models were seen as experts at establishing and maintaining effective relationships with their athletes, coaching staff, and others. In many

cases, this was outlined in the context of the model possessing the qualities participants associated with a likeable and "nice" person, although this was often explained in a generic way. For example, a rugby coach commented "X was one of the nicest guys you'd ever meet…you wouldn't sort of sometimes associate him with having the dynamics of somebody that could be a head coach…but, because he was a nice guy that worked in his favour." More specifically, another rugby coach suggested "Whoever X runs into, he'll always spend a minute talking to them…and he knows what you do. You feel like he cares about the wider people involved in the game, and I think that's quite important."

A simple, but often stated characteristic was that of role models being "experts" at managing individual athletes. This was emphasised with a particular focus on an ability to cater for individuals' needs in order for athletes to reach their full potential. For example, a hockey coach argued "I think it's knowing how to handle individuals. Some people need a kick up the arse, some players need a cuddle…If you can do that then you can coach anybody." While a squash coach suggested that "X is not about being the answer to everything, but knowing the right direction to take that athlete…there is just a presumption that this player deserves their own brand of delivery because they are an individual with their own needs…"

Participants also consistently described model coaches as mentors for both athletes and other coaches. This was often viewed in terms of the model being a source of wisdom or advice for athletes as well as having an ability to challenge knowledge and enlighten more novice or inexperienced colleagues as outlined by a squash coach:

> You go 'oh I've got that now', and then X will just go "ah, but young one what about this?" and you go 'oh ya bastard, I didn't know about that', and then you know "… you understand this but do you understand that?" and you go 'ah!'

Knowledge base

The data highlighted knowledge in model coaches, both in terms of technical and tactical knowledge, and the sheer depth of this knowledge, as a highly valued characteristic. A hockey coach explained "the thing that attracted me to kind of be a disciple of X…was because of his technical knowledge. It was that technical knowledge that I got attracted to as a player." Another hockey coach stated:

> The way X sets his team up they play to different systems…nobody could work out how to beat his team…the way he just gets his teams to adapt to their style of play is just something that the others can't do. They cannot figure him out.

Likewise, a golf coach said "I know he's not everybody's cup of tea, but X is a very talented coach. He's got amazing knowledge of everything, body, the whole lot…" while another golf coach agreed "the thing about X for me is, his information is fantastic, his knowledge is fantastic…I think that is really important. You've got to have great knowledge." This view was also shared by a squash coach who admitted "X didn't fill you with passion…he just had a ridiculous amount of knowledge, and when I went to him, he kind of blew me away really."

Motivation

It was clear that participants viewed a passion for their sport and a general enthusiasm for coaching as determinants of success in role model coaches. A rugby coach observed "you can sense X's passion for the game…I think the players can quite easily suss out those that are a bit more robotic. He's like a fan or supporter!" while a golf coach commented "enthusiasm is a massive thing…all these coaches that we aspire to, they are all enthusiastic about what they do…they are passionate about what they do, and as a result, they get better at what they do." When highlighting that, in general, model coaches did not "do it for the money", a squash coach also stated:

> I think that's a key thing for X as well, do you genuinely in your bones just love the idea of being a coach. If a big offer came along to be a banker or something else then X wouldn't do it because he just wants to be a coach, it's what he likes.

The team sport participants (hockey and rugby league) in particular consistently reported that model coaches possessed a clear vision and philosophy that they were committed to working towards. Furthermore, role models were said to stick to this vision ruthlessly, often incurring criticism from others (particularly "outsiders") as a result. A hockey coach was typical in saying:

> X gets criticism but has kind of stuck by his guns and said "well this is what I believe in and therefore this is what my or our team believe"…it hasn't necessarily led to success, but there's a very clear way of doing things.

This "dedication to the vision" was seen as a key quality and it was suggested that model coaches are comfortable making "difficult" decisions in terms of playing and coaching staff when it is in the interests of the long-term vision. This was outlined by a rugby coach who said "when X took over he literally moved on the whole company. He kept the ones that he knew could add quality…would buy into his philosophies and move things forward, but real ruthless when it came to moving people on."

It was clear from the data that role models were seen as having served an apprenticeship as a coach, working their way through the ranks. Despite this, models were still perceived to be eager to improve and develop as a coach. As such, it was reported that models voraciously identify gaps in their knowledge and areas where they can learn more. A hockey coach argued that:

> X must be sitting at home every night on the Internet…swotting away the whole time because nobody "just knows it". Some of the stuff he's talking about…he'll say "I just

know it; it's just one of those things". And I think that's b******s, he's got no kids and he studies the game for fun!

In the case of golf in particular, it was also reported that models often sought out areas for improvement by observing and learning from other coaches, as one coach noted "a lot of them have travelled around and studied with the best coaches, X and people like him, they've gone around and really tried to sample in their younger days so many different opinions."

The role of innovation and "trying new things" in coaching was consistently seen as a particularly important feature of model coaches. Models were not seen to rest on their laurels or become set in their ways; instead they were viewed as constantly trying to "push the boundaries" in order to improve the performance of their athletes. Perhaps paradoxically, this was often viewed as a comfort with making mistakes and accepting short to mid-term performance decreases in favour of long term goals. A rugby coach said "I think that's being prepared to lose…willing to take a chance, which some people don't do…X is prepared to take a chance…he's prepared to adapt." A golf coach also felt strongly that "a great coach has got to be an innovator…where are the improvements going to come from if we're all just copying each other? The improvements come from the guy who is innovating...the crackpot who is trying things."

Delivers results

Finally, the ability to demonstrate performance results was considered important. This was evidenced both in terms of model coaches' and their athletes' track record of winning tournaments and medals at the highest level. One squash coach observed "he's almost brought a brand of coaching to the world…world numbers 1's and world champions, and lots of world top 20 players, and there's not many done that." Model coaches' methods were also perceived to achieve results, demonstrated primarily through their athletes' continuous improvement in performance. A rugby coach also suggested "X didn't always

start off at high profile clubs, but one thing the guy did manage to do was he got 110% out of every player he worked with. He made ordinary sides very competitive." These views were also shared by golf coaches, with one stating:

> X is very much of the opinion that the next shot has got to be better. He doesn't believe it's like six months and then you might half start to see a little bit of light at the end of the tunnel…within three balls he has everyone hitting it better.

Discussion

There were a variety of qualities reported by the coaches in the present study, notably however, participants appeared to focus on the apparent broad brush/outward facing behaviours and personality characteristics of their role model coach, as opposed to the ways in which s/he actually worked. In short, coach perceptions in both phases were predominantly associated with the "what is s/he like" or "what does s/he do" rather than the "how does s/he do it" which we would suggest forms the basis of coaching skill (cf. Abraham & Collins, 1998). This finding is perhaps not surprising, and matches the "great man" (no misogyny intended) approaches that typified early work in leadership development (Chelladurai & Carron, 1978; Gill, 2007). Of course, this finding probably holds both positive and negative implications for the coaches' behaviour and performance. It is however, and to say the least, a little one-sided in ignoring the processes of effective coaching whilst emphasising (we would suggest, disproportionately) the outward facing, image aspects. Consequently, it seems the results contradict earlier research (e.g., Abraham, Collins, & Martindale, 2006; Jones et al., 2003), which has evidenced apparent higher-level coach support for the more crucial importance of design, structure and impact of the coaching environment; in short, the modus operandi of "how" the coach works. Consider the perceptions of the coaches in the present study, for example, against the support apparent for design, structure, and environment from a smaller but more elite group of coaches in

Abraham et al.'s (2006) validation of a coaching schematic. We agree that there are contradictions but see this as a key finding of the current study; in short, what the samples of mid-level coaches consistently *didn't* use as part of their "value schematic" is perhaps as important as what they did.

The point here (and once again, note our caveat on the need for further research) is that the "body of the kirk" (i.e., the "average" coach) does not seem to acknowledge, or perhaps recognise what theory, and *some* of those at the top, think are the most effective and desirable components and characteristics that make coaches successful. For example, no coach in the current study referred to qualities representative of their model's decision-making processes (Cushion et al., 2003; Nash & Collins, 2006) or the problem solving procedures employed during the dynamic and complex process of coaching (Abraham & Collins, 2011a; Lyle, 1999). Similarly, there were few references to the pedagogy of the coaching process (i.e., methods of meaningful teaching and learning) or links made with the principles of skill acquisition (Abraham & Collins, 2011b; Cushion et al., 2012). Whatever the reasons for this, poor coach education, poor CPD or just entrenched views, it appears that demonstrably effective methods are overlooked, not encouraged, or not seen as relevant by the majority in this sample of sub-elite coaches. Significantly, social theory and previous research suggests that people are more likely to emulate the behaviour of those they themselves choose to value (e.g., role models) rather than people (e.g., coach educators) nominated for them (Christakis & Fowler, 2007). As a consequence, the informal communications, which have generated the impressions reported in the present study, seem to focus on personal characteristics rather than the craft of coaching. Or to put it another way, are coaches "learning" how to be liked as opposed to how to be effective?

As a result, not only are the coaches in the present study perhaps limited in their ability to self-develop, or be developed, towards higher status/efficacy, but it may also be that

any ambitious and upwardly mobile coach must "pass through unscathed" a social context which is, in some respects, not conducive to the ways in which s/he should develop. Specifically, many coaches seem to appoint and value their coaching role models on personality rather than technique. There are interesting similarities here with other professions that involve a "semi-permeable" barrier to intellectual development; the "canteen culture" within the police force is one such example (Onifade, 2002). Of course, the extent to which this split will also inhibit the effective progression of performers is another important consideration; an efficient and seamless performance pathway is hardly facilitated by attitudinal and behavioural bifurcation! The need for further investigation as well as educational and developmental initiatives to address this should be obvious; as we highlight here and elsewhere, the degree of challenge imposed by the degree of difference is likely to vary sport by sport.

On a more positive note, there are "perceived expert features" highlighted here which could be exploited as ripe for development now. If the majority see these competencies as desirable characteristics of top coaches, there will be a healthy "social fillip" to initiatives that address them. The ways in which some of these areas are best developed is worthy of consideration. For example, content ideas are extremely useful, especially so when they employ "analogy learning" (cf. Poolton, Masters, & Maxwell, 2006). Ongoing evolution of such approaches, coupled of course with the requirement to present and consider underpinning theoretical justification, would seem to be a good way to generate the levels of professional deliberation (Evetts, 2002) and exchange that, we suggest, typify high performing environments in many other professions (e.g., Finance, Shanteau, 1995; Medicine, Patel & Ramoni, 1997; Nursing, Husted & Husted, 2008).

These ideas notwithstanding, sport differences in levels of interaction and perception remain the crucial considerations in the effective design and deployment of coach

development. Clearly, providers must take time to embed themselves within the culture before deciding on the best ways in which to develop coaches (Butcher & Clarke, 2008). Additionally, however, genuine development should also look to remediate those environments that are not characterised by sharing and mutual reflection (Culver & Trudel, 2006). Whatever the limitation of the critical reflection process, there seems little doubt that "having access to knowledgeable and respected coaching peers is critical to the reflective process" (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001, p. 32). The fact that levels (or more probably usage) of access varies so much from social setting to social setting makes this an important factor for attention. These differences are reflected in so many constructs (for example, the crime of poaching specific to athletics) that the need for embedded and socially aware interventions, combined with subtle but explicit culture change is obvious. Add to this, the suggestion that there are some coaches whose "won't learn, won't change" attitude seems deeply entrenched (cf. Collins et al., 2012) and the complexity of the challenge is further clarified.

The findings of the present study suggest that the social milieu in which the interviewed developing coaches are embedded, which has been described as quite an effective force for change (Stoszkowski & Collins, 2014), may not be so effective for advancing coaching technique as opposed to character. As such, if the main source of encouragement for these coaches to improve was his or her peers, they might not necessarily receive very coherent, accurate or effective guidance. In fact, if the social milieu which a coach is embedded in is *not* conducive to effective and appropriate development, it seems reasonable to assume that it could be at least as likely to promote the spread of negative or less than optimal behaviours (Christakis & Fowler, 2007). The bottom line is that, limitations in this investigation notwithstanding, there are some clear global attitudinal changes that need to be engendered if coach development initiatives utilising social learning based methods are

597 to realise optimal change. Longitudinal data against a systematic socially based intervention
598 is needed to check these assertions and such study is currently underway.
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Table 1

Results of Phase One Inductive Content Analysis

Higher Order Theme	Lower Order Theme	743
Knowledge and experience	Knowledge base	744
	Experience as a performer	745
Communication	Clarity of expectation	746
	Clear instructions and information	747
	Portrays confidence	748
Motivation	Drive and sacrifice	749
	Commitment to improvement	750
	Desire to learn from others	751
Ability to plan	Goal setting	752
	Training/competition planning	753
	Athlete selection	754
		755

Table 2

Results of Phase Two Inductive Content Analysis

Higher Order Theme	Lower Order Theme
Communication	Messages are clear and intelligible
	Forthright with opinions and expectations
	Engages and inspires
	Egalitarian attitude
Relationships	Likeable person
	Attentive to the needs of individuals
	Acts as a mentor
Knowledge base	Technical and tactical knowledge
	Depth and amount of knowledge
Motivation	Passionate about coaching/being a coach
	Committed to pursuing a clear vision
	Eager to identify gaps/areas for improvement
	Thirst for innovation
Delivers results	Has won medals/championships
	Their athletes continuously improve