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Moving from the playing field and into the dugout: Exploring the contributions of the 2013 DSEP  
conference to our understanding of the psychology and sport coaching relationship

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## 28 **Introduction**

29 The coaching process is consistently described as complex (e.g. Fletcher & Scott, 2010).  
30 Indeed, the fluid and dynamic environments in which coaches often operate, contributes to  
31 the difficulty in defining the exact nature of what effective coaching is (Cote & Gilbert,  
32 2009). Whilst it is typically an endeavour associated with achieving a set of goals, more  
33 recently there has been increasing acknowledgment of understanding coaching from a social  
34 perspective (Jones, 2011). Indeed, the complex nature of the social interactions involved,  
35 often across a diverse range of environments, means it is not a role to which a predictable set  
36 of rules or procedures can be prescribed (Cushion *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, utilising these  
37 assumptions about coaching in this way may have limited our potential for a) thoroughly  
38 understanding coaching and b) guiding practitioners (Jones & Wallace, 2006). Given the  
39 many demands often associated with coaching positions, coaching might be best described as  
40 a process of ‘orchestration’ by which coaches are required to steer the complex interactions  
41 and ambiguous environments in which they operate (Jones & Wallace, 2006).

42 Despite a recent surge of academic interest in coaching, Jones (2006) suggests it remains an  
43 “ill defined” and “under-theorised” field with no real guiding conceptual framework as to the  
44 complexity of the coaching process (p.3). Whilst various models of coaching practice have  
45 been offered from several different theoretical perspectives (e.g. leadership, motivation), the  
46 focus of these models on one specific aspect of coaching limits the extent to which we can  
47 understand the process as a whole (Cote & Gilbert, 2009).

48 The importance of psychology in, and for sport coaching has been addressed by a number of  
49 different areas of research including those focussing on leadership styles (e.g. Chelladurai,  
50 1984), creating positive learning environments (e.g. Ames, 1992) and relationships in sport  
51 (e.g. Jowett, 2005) to name a few. The purpose of the present paper is not to provide a  
52 comprehensive review of the contribution of psychology to sport coaching literature, but

53 instead, to explore some of the relevant bodies of research that contribute to the main themes  
54 of the conference (psychology of performance; psychology for health and wellbeing and  
55 professional training) whilst also reflecting upon the ways the conference has contributed to  
56 our understanding of these themes from a coaching perspective.

### 57 **Theme 1: Psychology for performance**

58 Despite the multifaceted nature of many modern coaching roles, improving the performance  
59 of athletes might still be considered as a primary function of the coaching process (Lyle,  
60 2002). Indeed, coaches themselves have identified a number of ways in which they feel they  
61 affect the performance of their athletes during competition. As part of a large scale project  
62 examining the success and failures at the Atlanta and Nagano Olympic Games, Gould *et al.*  
63 (2002) interviewed coaches to examine the features they perceived to be related to levels of  
64 success. In addition to a number of external features, coaches reflected on their role in the  
65 competition process, identifying a number of factors under their influence including athlete's  
66 confidence, plans for dealing with distractions, and levels of team cohesion. In addition to  
67 playing a role in objective performance outcomes, the degree to which a coach improves an  
68 athlete's performance may also be an important determinant of the way in which coaches are  
69 perceived. Coussens *et al.* (2013) at the conference highlighted the role of performance  
70 improvement in determining the extent to which soccer players perceive coaches to be  
71 supportive. They concluded that whilst players tend to disagree on the coaches they perceive  
72 to be the most supportive, these unique preferences can be related to self-confidence and  
73 improved performance.

74 Whilst the role coaches play in improving athlete performance is integral, the performance of  
75 the coach has received relatively less attention. Despite the acknowledgement that coaches  
76 should be considered as performers in their own right (Gould *et al.*, 2002; Thelwell *et al.*,

77 2008b), relatively few studies address the needs and skills that might impact upon coaching  
78 performance and the methods by which they might be met or improved.

79 Providing some evidence in this regard, Gould *et al.* (2002) in their examination of factors  
80 that influenced performance at the Nagano and Atlanta games mentioned above, also asked  
81 coaches also identify factors that influenced their performance as coaches in the year leading  
82 up to competition, 90 days before competition and at the games. They found that whilst  
83 coaches reflected on a number of external constraints (externally imposed rules and  
84 regulations) and benefits (support from NGB's), coaches also highlighted a number of  
85 controllable aspects that contributed to their performance, particularly at the games. This  
86 included making use of the high performance coaching facilities, being able to deal  
87 effectively and decisively with conflicts that arose and interacting with sport psychology  
88 consultants. Specifically, coaches suggested that in addition to athletes working with sport  
89 psychologists prior to the games, being able to engage with sport psychologists themselves  
90 was important for their own performance. Gould *et al.* (2002) concluded that in order to  
91 successfully manage the stress and pressure of competition, like athletes, coaches would  
92 benefit from engaging in mental skills training.

93 Addressing this, several studies have sought to determine the psychological skills utilised by  
94 coaches. Using interviews based around 4 key psychological skills (imagery, self-talk,  
95 relaxation and goal setting) with 13 professional coaches, Thelwell *et al.* (2008a) found that  
96 all coaches employed some psychological skills use. Though they displayed a preference for  
97 self-talk and imagery, generally skills were used for a number of different purposes and at a  
98 number of different times and locations. Coaches have also been found to engage in routines  
99 both before and after competition that utilise psychological skills, such as mentally rehearsing  
100 the game plan, or engaging in certain activities to maintain their focus (Bloom *et al.*, 1997).

101 Furthermore, there might be a number of parallels between the psychological skills required  
102 by athletes and coaches for performance. Drawing from work examining self-efficacy in  
103 athletes, Feltz *et al.* (1999) suggested it is important to understand the sources from which  
104 coaches might attain ‘coaching efficacy’ which they describe as “ the extent to which coaches  
105 believe they have the capacity to affect the learning and performance of their athletes”  
106 (p.765). Conceptualizing a multidimensional model, Feltz and colleagues proposed coaching  
107 efficacy consists of four main dimensions; game strategy efficacy (belief in ability to coach  
108 during competition); motivation efficacy (belief in ability to effect the psychological skills  
109 and states of one’s athletes); technique efficacy (belief in ability to instruct skills and  
110 diagnose problems), and character building efficacy (belief in ability to influence a positive  
111 attitude towards sports and good sportsmanship). In turn, these dimensions are influenced by  
112 the extent of coaching experience/preparation, prior success, perceived skill of athletes and  
113 school/community support. More recent work to extend this model suggests that these  
114 sources might benefit from containing a greater level of specificity. Using interviews with the  
115 same pool of participants from phase two of the Feltz *et al.* (1999) study, Chase *et al.* (2005)  
116 suggest that extent of coaching experience/preparation could be further broken down into  
117 aspects such as knowledge to prepare the team, past experience in coaching, leadership skills  
118 and coaches development.

119 Research examining coaching efficacy has demonstrated that years of coaching experience is  
120 strongly related to coaching efficacy (Feltz *et al.*, 1999; Lee *et al.*, 2002) and that this can be  
121 increased by engaging in coaching training programmes (Malete & Feltz, 2000; Lee *et al.*  
122 2002). Evidence suggests that coaching efficacy impacts upon coaching behaviours and team  
123 satisfaction, and that these relationships can be mediated by gender (Myers *et al.*, 2005).  
124 Furthermore, there may also be some differences in the way these sources of coaching  
125 efficacy are used by male and female coaches (Myers *et al.*, 2005) supporting previous work

126 showing that some sources of efficacy information might be unique to female coaches  
127 (Barber, 1999).

128 Taken together these areas of research related to coaching performance highlight several  
129 important things. Firstly, that coaches are aware of the ways in which they influence their  
130 own athletes' performances and are also aware of the factors that influence their  
131 performances as coaches. Secondly, coaching efficacy can derive from a number of different  
132 sources and can impact performance by influencing coaching behaviour and satisfaction of  
133 athletes. Moreover, individual differences (in this instance gender) might mediate these  
134 processes. Drawing upon this individual difference theme, coaching performance was most  
135 directly addressed at the conference by Bailey and Irwing (2013) who sought to explore  
136 whether or not coaching performance could be predicted by personality variables. Using a  
137 range of subjective (self-rated job performance) and objective measures (coaching level,  
138 salary and promotions), they examined the impact of 13 personality facets. They found that  
139 whilst there was no relationship between objective measures and personality, 'self-efficacy'  
140 and 'adventurousness' accounted for 29% of the variance in self-rated job performance,  
141 suggesting some preliminary support for the role of personality and individual differences in  
142 coaching job performance.

## 143 **Theme 2: Psychology for Health and Wellbeing**

144 The role of coaches in supporting the health and wellbeing of the participants they coach has  
145 received an increasing amount of attention (Cote *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, more emphasis has  
146 been placed on the value of coaching holistically, even if this has subject to more of an  
147 abstract analysis than actual support (Cassidy *et al.*, 2004). This more humanistic approach to  
148 coaching practice, with its emphasis on coaching the individual as a whole, has served as an  
149 important platform for work exploring the role of the coach in developing and promoting

150 health and wellbeing in athletes. Significant research in this area has focussed on the role of  
151 the coach in the creation of appropriate learning environments drawing upon the frameworks  
152 of achievement goal theory (c.f. Duda, 2007) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan,  
153 2000) which were both areas strongly represented at the conference.

154 One symposium designed to address this topic explored the research taking place as part of  
155 the European wide PAPA (Promoting Adolescent Physical Activity) project, designed to  
156 evaluate the impact of coach education programmes that encourage the development of more  
157 adaptive motivational climates for young people. In doing so, the team have developed a  
158 number of new measures, including the multidimensional coach created motivational climate  
159 scale (Appleton *et al.*, 2013) that draws upon both achievement goal theory and self -  
160 determination theory, and a multidimensional measure designed to capture children's well  
161 and ill being (Bracey *et al.*, 2013). Preliminary findings suggest some success of the  
162 intervention to date.

163 Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and the meeting of psychological needs  
164 continues to be a strong theme in the creation of effective coaching climates, particularly in  
165 relation to the role of autonomy supportive and controlling coach behaviours. Taylor &  
166 Turner (2013) addressed the issue of controlling coaching behaviours by studying the impact  
167 of perceived coach controlling behaviours on immune function. By measuring saliva samples  
168 (more specifically secretary immunoglobulin A or sIgA), they were able to demonstrate that  
169 increases in perceptions of coaches psychological control and intentions to drop out of  
170 hockey were associated with increases in sIgA levels, which may be indicative of an  
171 immunological stress response. Addressing the role of both controlling and autonomy  
172 supportive behaviours, Healy *et al.* (2013) demonstrated that both behaviours are important  
173 for developing adaptive goal motivations and moreover both can independently predict  
174 indices of ill and well-being. In addition, mediating factors within these processes were also

175 explored. Examining the relationship between autonomy support and wellbeing, Cronin and  
176 Allen (2013) demonstrated that personal and social skills may serve to mediate the  
177 relationships between coach autonomy support, self-esteem and positive affect.

178 Several studies examined the role of coaching styles on issues surrounding health and  
179 wellbeing. Shanmugam, *et al.* (2013) using a vignette scenario demonstrated that negative  
180 coaching styles may impact upon athletes' vulnerability for eating pathology. Moreover, they  
181 also demonstrated that gender may play a part in this, showing that females were likely to be  
182 influenced by both male and female coaches, whereas males were influenced only by male  
183 coaches. Specific coaching styles were also addressed in relation to the physical and  
184 psychological effects they may promote in athletes. Curran (2013) explored the role of  
185 conditional regard (guild inducement, praise withdrawal) and structure (rules, limits, support  
186 and feedback) on the youth soccer players' physical and psychological exhaustion. Using  
187 questionnaires across the course of the season, they found that structure negatively predicts  
188 exhaustion at low conditional regard, whereas structure positively predicts exhaustion at high  
189 conditional regard. They concluded that when structure is perceived to be conditionally  
190 regarding, higher exhaustion is likely in youth sport participants, and thus this should be  
191 avoided. Building upon a well established body of work in coach-athlete relationships (cf.  
192 Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007), Davis *et al.* (2013) explored the role of the coach-athlete  
193 relationship in the wellbeing of young disabled athletes and found the quality of that  
194 relationship is associated with athletes' emotional wellbeing.

195 Coaches may also have a significant role to play in supporting the health and wellbeing of  
196 athletes when they are unable to compete. Cunliffe (2013) examined the role of coaches in  
197 times of injury, specifically addressing athletes' perceptions of coach involvement in injury  
198 rehabilitation. Themes emerging included the coaches' use of soft skills, communication and  
199 trust, relationship dyads and athlete responsibilities. When coaches used empathy,

200 understanding and effective communication skills, this helped athletes maintain their  
201 motivation to rehabilitate.

202 Perhaps understandingly, when it comes to the role of the coach, much of the conference  
203 material was focused on the ability of the coach to develop or maintain the health and  
204 wellbeing of athletes, particularly youth athletes. However, the factors that impact upon the  
205 health and wellbeing of the coach have received relatively little attention. Research indicates  
206 that coaches experience a wide range of stressors (Frey, 2007; Levy *et al.*, 2009; Thelwell *et*  
207 *al.*, 2008b) and that these can manifest themselves through both psychological and physical  
208 symptoms, particularly in competition (Hudson *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, coach burnout has  
209 been identified as a significant issue for sport coaches (Fletcher & Scott, 2010). Whilst not  
210 exclusively about the health and wellbeing of the coach, one exception at the conference  
211 included research examining how coaching stressors might influence behaviour that impacts  
212 upon the coach athlete relationship. Specifically, Scholefield *et al.* (2013) highlighted that  
213 coaching stressors identified in interviews with 6 elite athletics coaches, included pressure,  
214 expectation, conflict, and coaching responsibilities. These were seen to have significant  
215 impact upon aspects of the coach athlete relationship, in negative ways (withdrawing from  
216 athletes, changes in communication and body language) and positive ways (increasing  
217 positivity and motivation).

### 218 **Theme 3: Professional Training**

219 Whilst the third conference theme focussed around the professional training of sport  
220 psychologists in particular, there are a number of pertinent themes within coaching literature  
221 that parallel some of the issues highlighted.

222 Increasingly it has been recognised that coaches learn how to coach in a number of different  
223 ways including formal, informal and self directed learning experiences and that this largely

224 appears to be an ad hoc blend of opportunities, highly dependent upon the individual  
225 (Cushion *et al.*, 2010; Irwin *et al.*, 2004). In fact, research indicates that coach education  
226 programmes can be limited in their impact on coach learning, and whilst coaches feel they  
227 satisfy needs in terms of delivering sport specific skills, they lack the ability to fulfil a  
228 number of other coaching needs, including education about sport psychology (Nash &  
229 Sproule, 2012).

230 Whilst the proliferation, and understanding, of sport psychology is likely to vary across  
231 different sport contexts, coaching knowledge and understanding of how to implement  
232 psychological skills into coaching activities, even in mass participation and lucrative sports  
233 like football, has been found to be somewhat limited (Pain & Harwood, 2004). With this in  
234 mind, coaches might benefit from increased education in this area to improve their practice.  
235 An example of such an educational approach utilised by Hardwood (2008) included hosting  
236 coaching workshops that both educated coaches in the important psychological features for  
237 performance and encouraged coaches to engage in discussion about how they might  
238 incorporate such skills into their coaching practice. At the conference, this body of work was  
239 represented by several presentations reflecting on the efficacy of coaching interventions  
240 designed to enhance the learning environment for young participants (Quested *et al.*, 2013)  
241 and to improve aspects of mental toughness in adolescent rowers (Mahoney *et al.*, 2013).

242 In addition to the psychological skills coaches may wish to develop in their athletes, the  
243 psychological skills possessed by coaches and how they learn these warrants further  
244 attention. Whilst some research has explored the use of psychological techniques (such as  
245 self-talk, imagery and pre-performance routines) in coaches (Bloom *et al.*, 1997; Thelwell *et*  
246 *al.*, 2008a), there is also a need to examine the role sport psychologists can play in the  
247 education of such skills. Giges *et al.* (2004) highlight that like athletes, coaches are often  
248 expected to perform in highly pressurised environments, often under a high degree of public

249 scrutiny. Moreover, their success can often be determined by factors outside of their direct  
250 control, such as how their athletes perform. They suggest that effective skills for coaches to  
251 develop include the development of self awareness in terms of their own needs, and help in  
252 the learning of strategies to overcome what they perceive as barriers to their own effective  
253 performance.

254 Although there appears to be a paucity of empirical literature addressing coach learning, the  
255 limited research in this area appears to indicate that experience and observation of other  
256 coaches tend to form the basis for much of coaching knowledge, yet it has also been  
257 recognised that coach education often fails to draw upon this knowledge (Cushion *et al.*,  
258 2010). Drawing from educational work, Cushion and colleagues suggest that this knowledge  
259 could be enhanced by engaging in mentoring and critical reflection.

260 Reflective practice has been identified as purposeful way of developing critical self  
261 awareness and provides a useful mechanism through which coaches can monitor and improve  
262 their own practice (Gilbourne *et al.* 2013). Indeed, when drawing upon the learning  
263 experiences of elite coaches, Irwin *et al.* (2004) summarised that coaches have higher quality  
264 learning experiences when engaging with mentors that promote reflection. Despite a limited  
265 amount of domain specific reflective practice literature for coaching, it is clear that the  
266 concept of reflection has begun to permeate, becoming more visible in higher education  
267 coaching courses and National Governing Body qualifications (Cropley *et al.*, 2012), though  
268 many feel there is some way to go in this regard (Gilbourne *et al.*, 2013). Research  
269 establishing a diversity of methods in encouraging reflective practice appears to be  
270 promising. Carson (2008) suggests that the use of video in reflection can help inexperienced  
271 coaches better understanding their strengths and weaknesses that might be otherwise  
272 overlooked using traditional methods. In addition, Douglas & Carless (2008) highlight the  
273 potential value of using storytelling to stimulate reflective practice.

274 Discussions around reflective practice issues at the conference, though specifically related to  
275 reflection in sport psychology, highlighted a number of pertinent issues that might be  
276 important considerations for the coaching domain. For example, in examining the reflective  
277 practice literature in sport psychology, Huntley *et al.* (2013) suggested there is a lack of  
278 consensus of what reflective practice is. Moreover, they highlighted this body of research  
279 appears to be lacking in methodological and cultural diversity, in that much of the research  
280 takes place in the UK and is dominated by qualitative designs. Conference presentations also  
281 highlighted issues surrounding the importance of developing a thorough understanding of the  
282 principles underlying reflective practice (Cropley *et al.* 2013), the appreciation of contextual  
283 features within reflection (Mellalieu, 2013) and the impact reflection might have not only on  
284 practice, but also on theory development (Devonport & Lane, 2013).

285 The literature discussed in the context of this paper, whilst not comprehensive, reflects upon  
286 the important relationships that exist between psychology and sport coaching, including  
287 theoretical concepts and practical application. Though some of these areas might be best  
288 described as ‘seedlings’, the conference demonstrated that generally this is a body of  
289 literature that is embracing the sunlight and beginning to blossom. Nevertheless, it appears  
290 that there are some important areas of this relationship that warrant additional ‘watering’,  
291 particularly in relation to the coach themselves. Whilst gaining the perceptions of athletes as  
292 the end users of coaching is undoubtedly important, greater understanding of coaching  
293 performance, health and wellbeing, and coach education might be further enhanced by  
294 shifting this perspective from the playing field and into the coaches’ dugout.

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