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# Enhancing the Youth Sport Experience: A Re-examination of Methods, Coaching Style, and Motivational Climate

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It is commonplace to have youth sport coaches who take time out from their busy schedules to coach a particular sport. Many of these coaches put a significant amount of time and effort into their sport, although proper training may be minimal, time and effort are appreciated. Unaware of effective teaching/coaching methods, many youth sport coaches create a practice and game environment that are similar to what has been observed within the realm of elite athletics or traditional physical education classes. Elite athletics and traditional physical education classes utilized games which allowed those with better skills to dominate, while everyone else sat on the sideline. Dodge ball is a perfect example of this scenario. That is, when hit, the player stands on the sideline and waits for the next game. This results in a minimal amount of time participating in physical activity for the low-skilled students while emphasizing the *outcome* (i.e. winning / losing) of a game.

Professional, intercollegiate, and high school athletics are similar to traditional physical education in that the focus on *outcome* creates significant amounts of down time and decreased motivation through implementation of lengthy instructional sessions, ineffective motivational speeches, and inefficient drill design. In a winning-oriented or competitive sport atmosphere, there is, arguably, nothing wrong with focusing on winning. Yet, within youth sport the overemphasis on outcome and the lack of effective instruction both have a dramatic influence on interest, enjoyment, motivation, and skill acquisition (Coakley, 2007). Take the following example:

A youth sport soccer coach designs a drill to practice the skill of kicking. There are 16 players on the team listening to the coach talk about the proper kicking technique, which lasts between 5-10 minutes. Once done talking, the coach has each player practice the skill one at a time, while stopping the action and providing frequent instruction. Once the coach provides each player with instruction, the team forms a single file line. The first

player kicks the ball into the goal, goes to the back of the line, and awaits the next turn...

This scenario is fairly common in youth sport where players stand around, physical activity is minimal, and few opportunities exist to practice and learn the skill. Coaches have good intentions; but, this is not the most efficient and effective way to meet the needs of today's young athletes. What needs? When asked, young boys and girls reply that they are motivated to participate in sport (1) to have fun, (2) be with friends, (3) learn new skills, and (4) to be active (Coakley, 2007; Ewing & Seefeldt, 1996; Gould, Feltz, Horn, & Weiss, 1982). These needs are very similar to the concepts students learn in physical education (Lumpkin, 2006). As such, it appears logical and appropriate to utilize various modern-day physical education methods to effectively coach today's young athletes.

Today's physical education emphasizes such concepts as skill development, tactical knowledge and motivation to participate (NASPE, 2004). These concepts can be transferred to the youth sports setting, to enhance the coaching techniques of the novice and veteran coaches. Simply put, if more youth coaches spend a majority of their time focused on movement activities and enhancing motivation in which youths continuously perform and successfully complete an activity, skill level and enjoyment will improve. This approach appears to be underutilized by youth sport coaches. There are many methods, techniques, and coaching styles that can be used to enhance skill development and improve motivation. It is the role of the coach to continuously evaluate his/her coaching-style to meet the diverse needs of each athlete. This article will focus on reflective practices that youth sport coaches can use to improve their effectiveness across multiple youth sports.

There are a few things to remember regarding the needs of youth and the reasons youth participate in sport. First, children play sport for fun (Gould et al., 1982). Other reasons for participating in youth sport include being with friends, learning new skills, being active, and achieving success (Coakley, 2007; Ewing & Seefeldt, 1996). As such, meeting the needs of each athlete requires a variety of coaching methods and styles in order to create an atmosphere that, not only addresses these needs, but enhances motivation and aids in skill development. The techniques for evaluating and developing individual coaching skills should focus on coaching style and individual reflection.

## *Coaching Style*

Generally, youth sport coaches coach the way they were coached. That is to say, they learned how to coach from their past experiences as an athlete or by observing various role models through the media. Too many coaches at the high school level and above tend to be authoritarian, utilizing a direct coaching style of instruction. The style used with athletes between the ages of five and 12 should be different from those of

older, more competitive athletes, as the needs of these athletes are different. As children enter their teenage years, socialization into the adult sport system is the norm. Athletes become more interested and better able to comprehend the adult concepts of competition and elite performance (Coakley, 2007). Youth, however, report other reasons and needs for participating in sport that are different from adults (Coakley, 2007; Ewing & Seefeldt, 1996; Gill, Gross, & Huddleston, 1983; Gould et al., 1982). As previously stated, youth generally participate in sport for the following reasons: (1) to have fun, (2) to learn new skills and improve existing skills, (3) to become physically fit and active, and (4) to be with friends. It is important that adults in charge of programs help youth meet these needs.

In order to improve upon the methods currently used to help children meet these needs, youth sport coaches should incorporate a variety of coaching styles that allow athletes to expand on their abilities. This would improve leadership and creative capacities while also improving skill acquisition, interest, and activity level. To do this, coaches need to begin using more indirect teaching styles. The following are selected teaching styles which can effectively align with coaching (Mosston & Ashworth, 1994).

*Command style.* This is the style most commonly utilized by coaches. It is very authoritarian with the coach making all decisions and the athletes following the decisions and practicing the dictated task on cue. The format for this style includes a routine talk time in which the coach explains a skill or drill, then athletes perform while the coach can observe and be the sole critique in the evaluation. Command style has its advantages which are related to maintaining discipline, organization, and achieving precise performances. Coaches should use this style (1) early in the season and (2) when athletes lack discipline as to achieve conformity, form boundaries, and instill discipline.

*Practice style (station learning).* This style provides for individual rehearsal of a skill or activity with feedback provided by the coach. The decision making and responsibility for development shifts more toward the athlete during this style which allows for the development of creativity, leadership, and intrinsic motivation. Using this style, the coach presents the stations and the skills. Athletes then separate into groups and practice the various skills. At certain intervals, athletes rotate stations and begin the next skill. The objectives of this style are to develop independence and learn to practice skills and provide self evaluation. This style requires athletes to be accountable for their learning, while allowing significant one-on-one feedback from the coach.

*Inclusion style.* This style is suited for athletes who vary in terms of skill development (as is the case on many youth sport teams). Some athletes tend to be better than others and therefore dominate the activity, while others may rarely participate, or frequently experience unsuccessful performances. The coach's

role is to (1) make the decisions regarding the skill to be learned and (2) select the activities in which to foster this learning. The athlete's roll is to survey the task, select his / her ability level, practice the task, and make the necessary adjustments to progressively improve upon the initial skill level. For example, if coaching a little league baseball team in which the athletes are learning to hit a player-pitched ball for the first time, some will be very good at this, some will make contact occasionally, and some cannot hit the ball. A coach could have three stations and athletes could choose their station based on skill level, and progress accordingly. The first station could be hitting from a "T" for those who struggle with a pitched ball. The second station could be a coach-pitched ball. The third station could be player-pitched. Again, the athletes choose their appropriate level and progress as they improve while increasing participation and success. As stated, the purpose of this style is to accommodate performance differences and provide more opportunities for all athletes to participate and succeed.

*Divergent style.* The purpose of this style is to increase an athlete's creativity and learning responsibility. This style makes it possible for athletes to create their own answers and go beyond the normal boundaries in which they learn a skill. In the divergent style, a coach can ask the athlete to find various ways to complete a task. For example, "find four different ways in which you can score a soccer goal", "show me three ways in which to pass this basketball around a defender", "Run several pass routes that involve stopping and starting". All demonstrate the divergent style and require the athlete to make decisions, practice a skill in different ways, and maintain interest and enthusiasm, which in turn increases intrinsic motivation.

#### *Coaching Reflection*

Reflection requires the coach to continuously evaluate his/her instruction to find out what went well and what did not go well. Furthermore, reflection requires coaches to take a step back, look at themselves, and see what changes need to be made in order to meet the diverse needs of the athletes. In terms of youth sport, coaches can ask themselves questions and utilize strategies which (1) increase activity time, (2) provide opportunities for athletes to make correct decisions, (3) provide appropriate feedback, and (4) develop a climate which fosters individual motivation.

#### *Increase Activity Time*

In general, youth sport coaches have knowledge of sport based on their sport experiences and observations which were more than likely attained by observing or participating at an advanced or elite level. Therefore, many of these experiences may not be best suited for youth sport. Techniques of modern-day physical education, however, provide significant learning and activity benefits for youth and have many

commonalities with youth sport. Various physical education methods are conducive to the development of interests and skills within youth sport. Seidentop and Tannehill (2000) developed an observational tool for teachers to determine how much time students, or in this case athletes, are engaged in the related activity. For this to occur, the athlete must be actively engaged in the task that is related to the content goal. When coaching in youth sport, it is important to keep all athletes active and involved in the skill being practiced as there is a relationship between time on task and skill development (Siedentop & Tannehill, 2000). When coaching youth it is important to remember these helpful hints:

- Keep players active and design practice so that there is little or no standing around ("down time"). This can be accomplished by designing tasks which allow for games or groups that utilize smaller numbers. Athletes do not need to stand in long lines waiting for their turn.
- Minimize verbal instruction by condensing important points related to task focus (i.e. components of a skill or strategy). Include the use of visual demonstrations. This will allow the athlete to hear and see the necessary aspects of the task while saving valuable practice time.
- Once a coach has provided short and concise instruction, utilize appropriate feedback specific to the task and provide error-correction. Try not to use general statements such as "good job", although encouraging, add a specific concept such as "good job following through with your kick." This can enhance interest, learning and development for each athlete.
- Do not make lengthy speeches. Motivational speeches and long meetings are for more elite populations.
- Be organized and prepared. Develop a practice plan which focuses on what you want your athletes to learn. From this practice plan; design activities, tasks or drills that help each athlete develop.
- Plan smooth and quick transitions between tasks. Spend your thinking about your next drill and setting up equipment during practice to reduce functional practice time. Plan ahead.
- Chaos does not equal learning. Learning occurs in an organized environment. "Busy, happy, good" (NASPE, 1992) may look effective and appropriate from the parents perspective because everyone is moving, but athletes are not receiving appropriate instruction and thus do not learn and will in turn lose interest.

#### *Athletes Making Correct Decisions*

Measuring the number of appropriate and successful responses made by athletes is critical for enhancing learning (Siedentop & Tannehill, 2000). A response is successful when it has conformed to the expectations of the coach and appropriate when the main elements of the skill were performed well. Research suggests the following generalizations:

- Design drills that allow players to be successful a *majority* of the time. Success breeds interest and skill development, but success all the time makes it difficult to accept criticism or change. A good rule of thumb is to allow athletes to be successful between 60%-80% of the time.
- Create practice activities that are similar to game situations. Design tasks with the sport context in mind. For example, youth volleyball players may need to work on their ability to successfully complete a forearm pass. A forearm pass is usually used to move the ball up to a setter. Understanding this concept, coaches should veer away from having athletes hit forearm passes against a wall. Instead use a setter as a target.
- Include all athletes in activities, having them begin at a comfortable skill level and continually progress. This *inclusion style* creates an environment highly conducive to success and skill development (Byra & Jenkins, 1998). Furthermore, when athletes develop a social connection among teammates and coaches their level of motivation will be enhanced (Coakley, 2007; Deci & Ryan, 1985)
- Utilize TARGET techniques (described later in this article) to increase leadership and decision-making abilities. The use of TARGET places the responsibility to lead and learn on the athlete not the coach.
- Use specific accountability measures to achieve higher success rates. For example, a coach can reward or praise an athlete when he or she accurately and successfully meets the task goals or provide negative consequences when the measure is not achieved.
- Test athletes on the important skills and provide them feedback about their results. Athletes learn best when they get multiple opportunities to practice the specific skills on which they will be tested (Silverman, 1985).

#### *Provide Appropriate Feedback*

Although it appears logical that feedback to athletes should be directed at the main elements of the task being practiced, this does not always happen. Providing appropriate feedback is difficult for young coaches to master. Feedback typically focuses on the critical elements of performance, those emphasized when the skill was introduced. Feedback, when

communicated appropriately, helps achieve a balance between reinforcing appropriate responses and correcting errors. Additionally, there are various types of feedback that should be used to enhance appropriate responses.

*General positive* feedback can be used to support the effort of athletes and create a positive learning climate. General statements such as “nice job”, “good effort”, and “great shot” are examples. *Positive performance feedback* can be used to provide specific information about what was done appropriately. Examples include, “way to keep your head up when dribbling”, “nice job of keeping your knees tucked this time”, and “very good bat speed that time”. It is important that coaches utilize negative feedback at times. *Negative performance feedback* communicates to an athlete that performance is unsatisfactory and should be followed by a statement regarding the reason for the unsatisfactory performance; such as “Do not cross your feet during this drill” and “Don’t drop your elbow”. *Prescriptive* feedback provides information to an athlete regarding how to improve performance. For example, “next time keep your eye on the ball” and “make sure to keep your back straight and head up” are examples for this type of feedback. It is important that coaches use a variety of these verbal cues to communicate information to young athletes in a way that allows them to be receptive, thus creating a positive learning experience. Limiting the use of feedback can impede the potential to learn and negatively influence interest and skill acquisition.

Occasionally coaches prompt an athlete to focus on one element of performance, and after a successful response by the athlete, the coach then corrects another error instead of reacting positively to the original response (known as the “correction complex”; Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986). Below are examples of athlete responses and suggestions for appropriate feedback:

- Athlete’s response is correct and quick: Support positively with brief reactions that do not disturb the flow of the activity.
- Athlete’s response is accurate, yet hesitant: Support briefly with positive praise to ensure confidence and add any specific technical information to increase the speed of the response.
- Athlete responds incorrectly demonstrating a lack of knowledge of the skill: Give skill-specific feedback and request continued effort. Take time to re-teach the skill if necessary.
- Athlete responds carelessly with a lack of effort and / or attention to task: Get the athlete’s attention through firm verbal commands, correct the error, and prompt better effort and concentration. Provide consequences for athlete if behavior continues.

### *Fostering Athlete Motivation*

Teaching styles have an impact on motivation, more specifically, motivational climate. Motivational climate is an instructional environment which is designed to support an athlete’s need for success, which in turn enhances one’s level of motivation. An optimal motivational climate is crucial in the teaching and coaching professions. This climate is one that enhances an athlete’s interest, intrinsic motivation, and learning. Coaches must be able to create a learning environment that is conducive to maintaining interest, motivation, and participation. Building trust, providing choice, emphasizing responsibility, creating a challenging environment, and providing athletes with opportunities for success are components of this climate. Research on motivational climate suggests that manipulation of this climate may influence competence, mastery, motivation, and learning (Ames, 1992; Perlman & Goc Karp, 2007; Treasure, 1997).

There are a variety of teaching styles and methods that alter motivational climate. One such method, TARGET (which stands for strategies for improving motivational climate that involve Task, Authority, Recognition, Grouping, Evaluation, and Time), is commonly used within education (Epstein, 1989) (Table 1). Research indicates that implementing a climate which supports a youth’s personal success is associated with a variety of positive outcomes which includes increased effort (Xiang, Bruene, & McBride, 2004) and intrinsic motivation (Cury, Biddle, Famose, Goudas, Sarrazin, & Durand, 1996). Understanding the connection between coaching and teaching using TARGET may provide a means for enhancing the motivational climate within a sports setting.

Table 1. TARGET principles and explanation

	Personal Growth Climate
Task	Tasks involving variety and diversity are offered to students
Authority	Students are given leadership roles and are allowed to make decisions on tasks
Recognition	Recognition of accomplishments is private and self-referenced
Grouping	Students work in cooperative, mixed ability groups
Evaluation	Evaluation is self-referenced and based on personal improvement
Time	Time requirements are adjusted to personal capabilities

As a coach, developing a motivational climate should focus on asking yourself the following questions:

1. Am I providing enough variety in tasks? Is there room for each athlete to challenge themselves?

2. Do I listen to my athletes and use their input to help enhance my coaching?
3. How do I recognize athlete success? Does this focus on personal growth or competition?
4. Do I group athletes by skill or heterogeneously? Does this align with what I want my team to learn?
5. How do I know each athlete is developing? Can I prove this to myself and/or their parent or guardian?
6. Do I provide enough time in practice for an athlete to learn and be successful?

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of a youth sport program is to provide a quality product that meets the needs of the athlete. It is difficult to effectively and efficiently meet these needs via programs and coaches that utilize performance-oriented methods, direct / authoritarian techniques, and few variations in coaching styles. The use of certain physical education teaching styles can help youth programs meet needs and improve skill level. Modern-day physical education has shifted to utilizing methods that enhance learning via increased activity time, opportunity for correct responses, diverse teaching techniques, and methods that promote a personal growth climate. It is these methods that enhance learning, increase interest, and improve intrinsic motivation. Research supports the successful use of these methods in a physical education setting (Siedentop & Tannehill, 2000). These methods are likely to be very productive in a youth sport setting as well, as the needs and activities of youth within physical education and sport are similar.

The purpose of this article was to introduce modern-day physical education methods to the realm of youth sport. Just as physical education has utilized these techniques to improve quality instruction, youth sport (due to similarities in activities and needs of participating individuals) can utilize them as well to improve instruction. Youth sport coaches can decide for themselves what methods to employ. Increasing a coach's repertoire of methods would provide better instruction, delivery of information, and provide more choices for coaches to improve the quality of learning and overall experience for their athletes. It is recommended that these methods be utilized by youth sport coaches and that further research be conducted within youth sport to examine the efficacy of these methods.

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