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COACH'S WORK, KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND PERSONALITY

*I have learned a lot from my teachers,
much more from my colleagues, but the most from my pupil.*

Rabbi Jechuna

Key words: most important principles of training, fencing and other combat sports, coach's work and personality, coach's leadership styles.

ABSTRACT

The author presents his views on coaches' work, knowledge, personality, practical capabilities, educational influence and leadership styles. His views are based on 75 years of lasting activity in fencing as a competitor, coach, referee, activist, researcher and author. His experience and knowledge can be valid and useful not only in fencing, but also in other sports with open sensory-motor skills of cognitive-motor type which place great emphasis on tactics (combat sport, games, team games). He stresses the importance of certain principles: principle of unity of theory and practice, knowledge and practical capabilities; principle of specificity and positive transfer of skills; principle of individualization, team cooperation, and coach's leading position. The author criticises the idea of the so-called champion profile. It is obvious that best athletes, winners of world championships and Olympic Games, although they have certain common traits, do differ considerably in many aspects. The author presents his views on different styles of coach's leadership. He expresses his view that the best coach's leadership style is friendly and co-operative style. He also expresses his views on importance of sport enjoyment.

A COACH'S SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE, TASKS,
AND THE ESSENCE OF HIS WORK

*Teachers are greater benefactors
to children than parents*
Pope Sixtus II (5th century)

A coaches' work is extremely versatile – conducting training, teaching sensory motor skills and tactics, developing pupils' physical fitness and motor co-ordination as well as personality. The importance of the various skills and abilities of a coach depends, to a large degree, on where he

works. In highly competitive sports, the primary emphasis is on achieving high results in competitions. In recreational sports, the emphasis is on fun, health, active rest, and maintaining a good level of general fitness. In schools and youth sport centres, the primary objectives are ensuring versatile development of children and youth, ensuring their high level of functional and adaptive capabilities, providing sport enjoyment, and giving the young a sense of self-confidence and competence as well as optimising their level of arousal. To achieve these objectives, the coach must constantly try to maintain his personal fitness,

develop his performance skills, enrich his knowledge of sport, psychology, physiology, methodology of training, etc. Of course, the coach should always strive to educate and influence his pupils positively.

Certain coaching skills and methods are common for all sports and some are different and specific to a specific sport. In figure skating or acrobatics, for example, the coach's main objective is to teach many different sensory-motor skills, full of finesse and expression with very precise execution. In track-and-field events and other sports where physical (energy) fitness is of primary importance, the coach must first develop energy abilities and one specific closed motor skill (technique of execution). In combat sports and games, energy abilities and motor co-ordination serve as a basis for rich technique, tactics, and psycho-motor abilities (psychological processes closely connected with motor performance). Here open motor skills, tactical abilities, various qualities of attention, speed and accuracy of perception, and speed of decision are important.

A single unique coaching philosophy does not exist. High results are achieved by coaches with different personalities, different temperaments, different methods of training and different leadership styles. There are, however, certain common traits among the most successful coaches:

1. A wide, general and specific knowledge which is constantly being improved and widened. Application of various branches of sport science, physiology, psychology, and other basic subjects.
2. A high level of technical skills, which ensures a high level and efficacy of the practical teaching of sensory motor skills.
3. A high level of ability to convey the knowledge, practical skills and abilities to pupils; a strong command of methods of perfecting energy and co-ordination abilities; sensory-motor skills and profound knowledge of methodology.
4. Management and leadership abilities.
5. Ability to educate, inspire and motivate the pupils; here the most important is the coach's personal example. Of paramount importance is the unity between what the coach says, what he does and his attitude toward sport, work, and his pupils.
6. An innovating approach, constant perfecting of one's own abilities, seeking new knowledge,

watching and noticing changes occurring in sport and sport science.

7. Ability of planning, programming, and organising the process of training, controlling its results, precise and penetrating observations of competitions, applying the important principles of training (principle of specificity, transfer of skill, individualisation, sport enjoyment, etc.). Ability to conduct exercises in an interesting and colourful manner. Implementing the interest and love of their discipline of sport among athletes. Documentation of training and competitions.
8. Effectiveness in co-operating with officials, other coaches, school authorities, psychologists, journalists, parents etc.
9. Sharing his knowledge and experience with other coaches and instructors, trying to develop his own branch of sport, writing and publishing textbooks, reports, essays, and instructions, on the subject of his sport. The last component is very often underestimated and yet it is very important indeed. Preparing a report or article forces the coach to analyse various aspects of training and competitions. Great fencing masters in the past and nowadays have written very valuable textbooks.

A COACH'S MOTIVATION

Athletes first, victory second.

James Counsilman

In coach's professional activities, one may distinguish many different motives (rivalry motives, motives of social approval, financial motives, etc.). There are, however, three main groups of motives which one has to distinguish and take into consideration:

1. Achievement of the highest possible results in competition by his pupils.
2. Assuring the pupils' feeling of fun and enjoyment, optimal level of arousal, motor activity, feeling of competence and sport enjoyment.
3. Assuring young athletes' versatile development, education, developing pupils' independence and self-efficacy. Taking care of health and psychological, social, and intellectual development.

All the three groups of motives are very important in all kinds of physical education and sport activities but motives under 1 are obviously most important in high level competition sports; 2 – in sports for youth and children and educational sports; 3 – in physical education in school (cognitive-motor education).

IS THERE ONE UNIQUE, IDEAL COACH'S PROFILE?

Every great coach walks his own way

B.J. Yesipov

The answer to this question is, definitely, NO. I would suppose – like Yesipov – that every great coach chooses and walks his own path. Coaches of very different personalities and temperaments, using quite different methods of training and different styles of leadership achieve good results. Great coaches are not devoid of certain weak points. They achieve high results, not because they do not have some weak points, but because of great development of their strong points and possibilities. One can give many examples of famous coaches who achieved very high results in various branches of sport and whose views and methods were quite different. The striking example of different views and methods and achieving very high results are two famous Soviet fencing coaches Vitali Arkadyev and Ivan Manayenko [3].

It is generally accepted to assess a coach's quality by his pupils' results in competitions. My opinion is that a great coach is one who:

1. Ensures his pupils achieve great results in competitions (one should not, however, overestimate the value of victory; important as it is, victory is not the only factor in sport activities).
2. Properly educates his pupils and develops their personalities.
3. Tries to develop his branch of sport, introducing new knowledge and new methods.
4. Shares his knowledge and skills with others, teaches younger coaches and instructors, and presents his knowledge and experience in the form of books and articles.

In spite of many marked differences between various great coaches there are certain features and qualities which are common to all of them:

1. Great love of his sport and creative passion.
2. Implementing new knowledge and new methods.
3. Taking advantage of the knowledge of other sports but not copying blindly.
4. A strong personality with a powerful influence on his pupils. One should realize, however, that a coach teaches and educates his pupils not only by exercises and words, but also – and this is very important – by who he is. A tremendous influence on pupils is exerted by the coach's personality: diligence, punctuality, knowledge, sense of humour, behaviour and interpersonal relations.
5. Perfect acquisition of the technique of his sport, inspiring demonstrations, and an interesting, versatile, and colourful manner of conducting exercises.
6. Self-assurance and self-confidence; a belief in the rightness of his views and efficacy of his methods but, at the same time, an open approach to other views and methods.
7. The gift to convey his knowledge and abilities to others.
8. A wide general interest (in spite of increased focus on his own branch of sport); a good coach may be a maniac, but not a monomaniac.
9. Great talent in teaching, desire and ability to convey his knowledge and experience to others, both in the form of practical exercises and in writing books.
10. Great creative energy, perseverance in activity, and enthusiasm for his work.

LEADERSHIP STYLES

Only he who sacrifices himself relentlessly to his coaching profession, who possesses talent and the ability to work on himself through constant enrichment of knowledge, and just a little bit of inspiration from God, may become a good coach and educator.

Antoni Piechniczek

The variety of different coaching profiles is reflected, among other things, in different leadership styles. One may distinguish the following coaching leadership styles:

1. Dictatorial style – an extreme form of formal and directive styles – the coach behaves like a dictator: he does not explain anything or care

about the pupils' opinions and feelings; he simply gives orders. He applies negative reinforcements, often treating his pupils instrumentally.

2. Directive style – the coach distinctly plays the part of the superior and leader. He teaches, gives orders and the athlete listens and follows the orders, but it is not as severe as in the dictatorial style.
3. Formal style – the coach and athlete co-operate, concentrating on the achievement of consecutive training tasks.
4. Co-operative style – may be applied even with young pupils; the coach directs the course of training but he explains his decisions and takes into account the pupils' feelings, doubts, questions and opinions; he stimulates student initiative and independence.
5. Friendly style – may be applied with adult, intelligent athletes; there is friendly co-operation and a marked emotional linkage.

One may achieve good results applying various styles of leadership (see Table 1), but definitely the most efficacious and most educational are the co-operative and friendly styles.

COMPETITION PROFILE AND INDIVIDUALISATION OF TRAINING

*Fencing is much a mind game as a physical test.
Even though you face one another through the
mesh in the mask, your confrontation with
opponents is eyeball to eyeball, with all the mental
pressure this entails.*

Terrence Kingston

I do not support the very fashionable theory of the so-called, "champion profile". I think that great athletes, Olympic medalists – like great coaches – although they have many similar traits, may and *do* differ in many respects (extroversion-introversion, temperament traits, technique and tactics, offensive and defensive types, various somatic traits, etc.). My opinion is that:

1. Training and competitions – like theory and practice, like cognition and action – should not make watertight compartments. An athlete in training must see certain situations which occur in competitions and in a contest he must recognise certain situations experienced in the course of training.

2. In planning and conducting training, one must take into account what actually happens in competitions – which actions are most commonly used, which are most efficacious, what style of fencing, etc., is prevalent and most successful.
3. Apart from modeling the training on a competition profile, one must take into consideration the athlete's qualities, dimensions of his personality traits of temperament, technical and tactical style, etc. What is good for an extravert (e.g. sharp criticism) is very bad for an introvert. What is good for the "warrior" type may be bad for the "technician" type, etc. [2, 4].
4. The entire process of training ought to be based on a knowledge approach and not a procedure approach. This means that one must know perfectly the characteristics of a given sport, choose suitable tasks, proper forms and methods, and accordingly, choose the appropriate training methods and training loads.
5. In the long-reaching plan of training the athlete must overcome the following "difficult situations":
 - a. Learning a given amount of sensory motor skills and abilities.
 - b. Transferring these skills and abilities from exercises into training bouts.
 - c. Transferring skills and abilities from training bouts into small competitions.
 - d. Transferring skills and abilities from small competitions to big and most important competitions.

The smoothness and ease with which a fencer transfers his skills and abilities from point A to point B depicts the efficacy of his process of training.

FINAL REMARKS

*Time and quality of work will provide better results
than selection based on any champion profile; we
don't select champions, they select themselves by
effort, passion and determination to achieve the
highest results.*

Janusz Bednarski

In their activities, coaches must avoid constant repetition of the same exercises and the same way of doing things (monotony causes

Table 1. Extreme leadership styles in coaching

| | Dictatorial Style | Co-operative and Friendly Style |
|---|---|--|
| The essence and main characteristics of leadership style | The coach makes all the decisions on his own, without consulting anyone. He does not explain his intentions or motives; he does not explain his methods of training; he does not discuss with his pupils the goals and tasks in the process of training, in a club or training camp. The athletes obey his orders and execute them. | The athletes co-operate in creating general training plans and choosing tasks for consecutive training stages. Not only are they informed about what they have to do, but they have a certain influence on the coach, who listens to their questions, doubts and proposals. The coach wants the athletes to understand precisely the essence and goals of all exercises to be able to assess the quality of their performance and application in competition of learned actions. The athletes co-operate in directing the process of training. |
| Coach's approach | The coach concentrates only on rivalry, competition and successes (the latter he treats as his own). | The coach, appreciating the value of competition and results, tries, at the same time, to develop athletes' personalities, their upbringing and education. He is interested in an increase of his pupils' abilities skills and knowledge. |
| The salient feature of the coach-pupil relationship | The coach treats his pupils instrumentally; their results serve solely to fulfill the coach's ambition and to gain certain benefits (recognition, social status, prizes). | The coach treats his pupils as partners, taking into consideration their feelings and views. He takes care of their development, emotions, satisfaction, progress and results in competition. |
| Coach's perception of the athletes | According to McGregor's "X" theory. | According to McGregor's "Y" theory. |
| Empathy | No empathy. | A lot of empathy; co-operative and friendly relationships. |
| Most important factors of achievement motivation | A very high level of success motivation; overwhelming emphasis on very intense effort; aggressive attitudes in competition (opponent is your enemy; the ends justify the means). | Task and self-improvement involvement; feeling of independence and responsibility; fascination and interest in the chosen discipline of sport; optimal (not mania-like) level of motive of success. The opponent ought to be treated as a partner and colleague, not as an enemy. |
| The psychological basis of leadership style | The leadership style is based on psycho-analytical psychology and behavioural psychology. | The leadership style is based on cognitive psychology – appreciating and stressing the social humanistic values of sport; also taking into account emotions and emotional intelligence. |
| Level of difficulty and range of application | This style is easy to apply – much easier than the co-operative style – especially when dealing with aggressive and not very subtle athletes. Certain elements of this style might be applied with children and very young athletes in cases of poor discipline, tactless behaviour, especially during training camps and when dealing with large groups. | This style is quite difficult to apply. It requires from the coach a good deal of experience, knowledge of pedagogy, tact and patience. The most effective style when dealing with intelligent and cultured persons. The coach develops positive dimensions of personality and endeavours to cultivate sublime approaches in the athletes. |

fatigue, loss of interest, poor performance, and lack of motivation), blind copying of others, cliché actions and movements, actions and movements which have no application in competition, “functional fixation”, failing to notice changes of rules, technique, tactics, and ways of refereeing, and methods of training.

In connection with the contents of Table 1, it is necessary to explain, even very briefly, McGregor’s “X” and “Y” theories. D. McGregor classified a supervisor’s attitude towards subordinates (e.g., a teacher to pupils, a director to employees, head of a medical ward to nurses, a coach to athletes, etc.) into two categories, which he called Theory “X” and Theory “Y” [5]. Theory “X”, from the point of view of the coach, presents a very negative picture of human-beings, while theory “Y” presents a very positive and optimistic picture. It is obvious that, depending on the theory to which he adheres, the coach will either choose a dictatorial or cooperative style of leadership.

Table 2 presents the most essential points of McGregor’s “X” and “Y” theories. As I have mentioned above, after studying McGregor’s theories, one may conclude that a dictatorial coach perceives his athletes according to “X” theory, whereas a cooperative and friendly coach, perceives his pupils in accordance with “Y” theory.

Personally, I think that, apart from the coach’s dimensions of personality, traits of temperament, pedagogical views, knowledge, and even working conditions, a very important

influence on the choice of a style of leadership is exerted by the three following interconnected features:

1. Whether the coach’s motivation is solely connected with fulfilling his own needs (recognition, domination, profit, competence, etc.), or whether he equally takes into account the athletes’ needs (recognition, competence, achievement, arousal, affiliation, friendship, material benefits, etc.).
2. Whether the coach’s views on human nature and his attitudes toward his pupils, are in accordance with McGregor’s “X” or “Y” theory.
3. Whether, generally, the coach’s attitude towards other people – including, of course, his pupils – is positive, friendly, constructive, helpful, respectful, cooperative, etc., and if he has interest in their well-being.

I am inclined to think that a typical dictatorial coach tries, above all, to fulfill his personal needs; treats his athletes instrumentally and perceives people in accordance with theory “X”. Nota bene: Some time ago I was very surprised to notice that a very famous former Soviet fencer, several times world champion, now as a professional coach did not obtain very good results with his pupils. When I expressed my surprise about this fact, another Russian coach remarked, “The explanation is very simple – he does not like people”.

Table 2. Theories “X” and “Y” of the perception of human nature by superiors

| McGregor’s Theory “X” | McGregor’s Theory “Y” |
|--|--|
| People naturally dislike work and effort, and avoid them as much as possible. | Physical and mental efforts are as natural and pleasant to people as rest and play. |
| One needs to force people to work – by controlling, checking, supervising, directing, and threatening them. | People can direct their own lives and work, themselves; they are able to check the fulfillment of the tasks with which they identify themselves. |
| The average human-being prefers to be directed and controlled, externally; tries to avoid responsibility; and has no ambition. | The average human-being, in favourable conditions, not only willingly accepts responsibilities, but actively seeks them out. |

In this article the most important components of coach's work are presented in a very concise manner. I described the progress of coach's work knowledge, abilities, and motivation more precisely and with more details in a few of my recently published books: *Understanding Fencing – Unity of Theory and Practice*, SwordPlay Books, Staten Island 2005; *Nauczanie techniki sportowej* (Teaching sports technique), COS Warszawa 2004, and *Taktyka i psychologia w szermierce* (Tactics and psychology in fencing), AWF Katowice 2007.

I would like to conclude this article with the words of a great coach and author James E. Counsilman: *The coach wants the athlete to identify himself with the coach but the most effective way is for both to identify with a common goal* [1].

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