Identifying Excellent Coaching Practice along the Sporting Pathway

Research Briefing No.2: The Youth Coaching Environment

July 2012

This briefing will be of interest to anyone who works within the youth coaching environment. It features extracts from a larger report produced for sports coach UK by the University of Stirling. More information and links to the full report can be found at the end of this briefing.

This briefing is produced as part of the Excellent Coaching Practice Project. It is designed to stimulate debate and ideas on excellent coaching practice rather than produce an agreed definition of excellence. As such it should be read in the spirit in which it was intended.
1. **Summary of results**

The research found that excellent coaching practice within the youth coaching environment:
- Leads to learning that is fun.
- Is guided by a clear ‘big picture’ of athlete progression.
- Develops solid basic skills and decision making.
- Emphasises progression in the complexity of skills.
- Uses competition and game-like play for fun and learning.
- Develops positive coach-athlete relationships where athletes have input and ownership and coaches are interested, approachable, and fun.

Coaches working with youth athletes would:
- Plan for sessions, blocks of sessions, the season, and beyond.
- Encourage athletes to take ownership of their development.
- Convey enthusiasm and a genuine desire for athletes to be the best they can be.
- Develop interactive instructional techniques such as explanation, demonstration, discussion, observation, positive constructive feedback, and reflection.
- Provide time and space for performing and learning.
- Be flexible and adaptable to meet athletes’ needs and rate of progression.

Coaches working with children developed their skills by:
- Practical experiences.
- Informal discussions with and observations of other coaches.
- Formal coach education courses.

And were facilitated by:
- A desire to learn and improve.
- Engaging in reflective practice.
- Working with other coaches in the same environment or across environments.

2. **Recommendations for coach development**

Recommendations for coach development within the youth environment included:
- Strategies for encouraging bigger picture thinking in youth development.
- Mentoring experiences with a practical focus.
- Developing coaching development communities within schools/clubs/regions.

3. **Recommendations for future research**

Recommendations for future research in this area included:
- Examining the process of developing flexible and adaptable coaching practice.
- Understanding coaches’ decision making processes in training and competition settings.
- Examining how to develop reflective practice in developing coaches.
- Understanding coaches’ mindset in relation to their coaching practice.
4. Detailed analysis by theme

4.1 Coaching outcomes

The young athletes in the study were unanimous in suggesting that enjoyment was the important outcome of excellent coaching practice. This was so they would be motivated to continue to engage in the sport: “You want to turn up. You don’t think I am going to skive... Because you enjoy it. Everything is enjoyable.” (YouthAthleteF1). The coaches echoed this sentiment endorsing that excellent coaching practice should lead to sessions that were fun for the athletes, however, they elaborated on this suggesting that they should also lead to learning and improvement for the athletes, that this could involve hard work but that this learning should be fun. One coach explained it this way:

I think fun, the ability, particularly at the young age, to make whatever the young players are learning fun because that way you are going to keep people in the sport but also the ability to pick out key skills and develop them so youngsters feel like they are making improvement. (YouthCoachF1)

Excellent coaching leading to the development of solid basic skills, confident athletes, and getting the best from the athletes were also seen as important outcomes of excellent coaching practice. These coaches felt that the best coaches should be working with younger athletes to ensure that athletes developed high quality skills early in their playing careers. YouthCoachF1 said:

I mean where should your best coaches be? Your best coaches should be with your beginners because that’s where they start developing their skills... we are developing good skills... as early as we can so trying to avoid getting into bad habits and then it is difficult to change.

4.2 The Bigger Picture

For coaches working in the youth coaching environment the bigger picture meant having a clear overall programme for development whether that be through a school or club system or across the whole player development pathway. This programme should outline the progressions in skills and abilities but should also be flexible so that coaches were able to adapt to the development needs/stages and progressions speeds of their athletes. YouthCoachF1 explained:

We have a programme which says here are the fundamental skills we want them to do at this age and as they step we will build on it and take it forward... But there is flexibility... you have to have that because I don’t know how quickly players are going to develop. If they are moving quicker than planned then we have got to move with them.

An important aspect of this programme was that it enabled coaches to ‘see’ where their work was heading, what they were aiming for. Knowledge of the skills and principles being delivered at the national level was important for this understanding of the ‘bigger picture’ of athlete development. One coach stated: “If you spent time with the youth squads, and then you spent time with the seniors and the finished product, when you went back down you knew what you wanted to make at the end.” (YouthCoachM1)

Another aspect of ‘the bigger picture’ theme that was considered to reflect excellent coaching practice was working with athletes to balance expectations over training volumes, and other aspects of their lives such as school work, other sport commitments, and social commitments. One coach explained:
We are constantly battling the volume of what we do because they get pulled in lots of directions... it is unfair to ask them to make these decisions because they just want to keep everyone happy... So you have to look after them and say no you are not going to that session today. (YouthCoachF2)

4.3 Coach-Athlete Relationship

Youth athletes agreed that the coach needs to be approachable, friendly, and fun. Someone who talked to them and got to know them as individuals, someone that they could speak to about anything, who made time for them and genuinely wanted to see them succeed. One athlete explained: “I wanted to perform well, I wanted to do it for [coach] because she does so much for us and you want to do it for her.” (YouthAthleteF3).

The coaches agreed that spending time with each athlete, taking an interest in them as people, and encouraging input, ownership and responsibility for their development in hockey were important features of excellent coaching practice when working in the youth coaching environment. YouthCoachF1 described her approach in this way:

I think I just work hard to be able to make sure that I spend time with every single person in the team at some point... being able to get the best out of the player and the team because I have tried to spend time with them.

4.4 Planning and Organising

The athletes felt that coaches should ‘turn up prepared’ and demonstrate that they are putting as much effort in as the athletes are expected to put in. The coaches also indicated that planning and organisation were important skills that contribute to excellent coaching practice. All the coaches discussed having a season (or longer) plan as well as plans for blocks of sessions and individual session plans. Furthermore, a process of reflecting on sessions, games, and the whole season was important to inform their planning. YouthCoachF2 described her management skills in this way:

I maybe do a block of four weeks of attacking skills and a few weeks of defensive skills so try to treat it in blocks so you are not jumping from one theme to another so you are building up the theme....I would keep the common theme but at the same time address the issues that came out of the weekend [games]. Working with the younger groups I might forget about the issue at the weekend and continue with what I planned and look at it more as a whole... avoid letting one game taking me away from the path that I set out because they are still young and they are just developing their game. As they get older and they have a basis of a good game then I would probably look at it and be more reflective on the games.

All coaches felt this level of planning was important to ensure continuity across sessions and that athletes made progress through the season. As one coach said:

I would still want to see some of those threads washing through,... the continuity of working on certain things we are not going to panic and fire fight. Otherwise you will finish the year and how much have you moved the group on? (YouthCoachM1)
However, all the coaches were also adamant that flexibility and adaptability during sessions and across sessions was critical to excellent coaching. For example, one coach discussed how he ‘built in’ flexibility so that he could adapt the session in accordance with how the athletes were responding to the session:

I think we try to cover less, don’t tie yourself down by saying Tuesday has to be hitting but say hitting is going to be something we work on and there are a variety of ways we can do that. Don’t be quite so precise on it, we can maybe do something else today if it is not working and come back to it. Especially with kids, you get days that you do all the best work and it just doesn’t work so be smart adapt and change or call it quits and have some fun, leave the serious stuff, we have now until Easter to work on it. (YouthCoachM1)

When talking about their training sessions athletes agreed that their sessions were fun and never boring and as a result they always looked forward to going to training. Several of the aspects of training that the athletes felt reflected excellent coaching practice were incorporating fitness work into hockey drills rather than doing fitness separately, progressions in the difficulty of the tasks through the session, clear links between games and training both with regard to content and also intensity, and inclusion of competitions that again encouraged them to work as they would in a game. One athlete commented:

When you bring match play into training, like 2 v 1s, 3 v 2s, that is good. It lets you incorporates all the skills that you have learnt into it without being totally serious. (YouthAthleteF3)

The coaches also reinforced the importance of progression and periods of game-like intensity and pressure. This content is emphasised in the following comments:

Absolute key is progression. If we do the same thing the whole time then they will just be bored and they won’t be bothered so we need to make sure that we keep adding to it and taking that on so they are aware that they are being pushed. (YouthCoachF1)

I try to avoid information overload. Start off by letting them see what the skill looks like so give them a demonstration so they have an idea of what the whole skill looks like and what they are striving to achieve and then I would break it down into simple parts and ask them to go away and practice these with no pressure on them. Give them time to practice on their own and allow them time to get feedback from themselves, their partner or me. So it a relaxed stage so they don’t feel they have to perform, they can just focus on the technique. Once they build it up I would look to put it into a bit more of a pressured situation before I would put them into a game situation. (YouthCoachF2)

The way to work with that age group is 70 to 80% intensity for a long time and then now and again we turn on the lights and say right for 20 minutes we are going to do this flat out. (YouthCoachM1)

Although progression was considered critical, the coaches also recognised that when working in the youth environment they needed to balance progression and continuing to challenge athletes with spending ‘enough time’ on basic skills. As one coach commented: “So we need to do things a lot longer with the youth players and the kids want to move on so the challenge is to make it interesting or different or revisiting it.” (YouthCoachM1)
4.5 Working with young people

In different ways each coach believed that excellent coaching practice was about setting the stage for learning by being enthusiastic, engaged and ensuring that the athletes were not scared to try things. YouthCoachM1 described his view in this way:

kids need to be in an environment where they think they can flourish... I think it comes down to being engaged with the kids... genuinely engaged and the big thing for me is enthusiasm... you set the tempo, you decide the speed we are driving at and if you can’t be bothered then it is not going to go very well. Being physically engaged, in the middle of it, I hate seeing coaches on the edges of the pitches shouting. You have to be in the thick of it and when you are in the thick of it then it is great. The enthusiasm and knowing your players and engaging with them are important. All you have to learn their name and use it three times and they will love you.

The athletes referred to the sort of coaching they did not like. This included coaches who were overly competitive and reacted to athletes’ mistakes by not speaking to them, taking them out of the game, or giving physical punishments. They also did not like coaches that shouted a lot or provided mostly negative comments.

The coaches indicated that excellent coaching practice should encourage athletes to have input and take ownership and responsibility for their development and their performance. For example, even the younger athletes in this age group could be involved in setting targets for what they wanted to improve on over the season. One coach explained her approach:

Our 17 and 18 year olds as adults, it is much easier to sit down with them and set goals and they can take ownership with that whereas the younger age need a lot of guidance on it but it is something that we can still do. (YouthCoachF1)

The coaches worked to create an environment where athletes felt comfortable to ask and answer questions. This was considered critical to ensure they were developing thinking, creative athletes who understood what they were doing and could make decisions in play situations. The coaches often adopted a guiding role in this process allowing time for learning to occur. YouthCoachF2 this example from her experiences:

If they are used to me doing everything and then they will expect me to do that in a game as well whereas I want them to make decisions... I try to get them to discuss scenarios so what if a team were playing three at the back what do you do? So they know what to do and if it happened in a game I would want them to react to what they see rather than me calling do this... If they have not reacted then I would give them a help. Maybe say what do you do if they are four at the back or how many defenders do they have? So question and answer rather than me instructing them so they know why they are doing it rather than doing what I say... It is difficult as a coach because you recognise something but you need to hold back a little to see if they recognise it for themselves.

The coaches had differing opinions about whether coaches needed to work differently with girls and boys. One coach had primarily worked with girls only so was unable to make comparisons. The other two coaches recognised that girls and boys interact quite differently amongst themselves, however, one of these coaches did not think this changed the way she worked with the athletes:
It does not make a difference because I still believe that if you are positive with the boys that will continue to develop. It may be that you can be a little bit harder on them but I don’t think my coaching style is any different with the boys and the girls. But I do recognise that there are differences in how they interact. (YouthCoachF1)

The other coach was adamant that you needed to work differently with boys and girls. For him the difference was in relation to the amount of information athletes desired. He explained:

...girls need much more information than boys, they need much more of the picture... the girls need it earlier, boys can be just about to step on the pitch and you can give them some information. That would spook female athletes, they would need that before the team meeting... Boys you can tell them straight off, Charlie you are not centre back today and he would say ok, you would never do that with females. (YouthCoachM1)

4.6 Session Delivery

The athletes’ comments on delivery focused on coaches not shouting, being able to provide clear explanations and breaking a “skill down into the basics but also make it more complicated” (YouthAthleteF2). The coaches described that using a variety of delivery methods was a feature of excellent coaching practice. For example, they used:
- explanations, demonstrations, interactive board work, and discussions
- provided information in short, focused pieces
- created drills that had clear links to game play
- provided time and space for learning to occur
- used competitions and game-like play for fun, challenge and to promote learning
- individualised their delivery
- checked for understanding and learning.

Several of these features of delivery are illustrated in the following quotes:

It might be that I get an older player to come along and have a demonstration. So I might say this is one of our Scottish players or best players in the school and they come along and do a demonstration of a fancy skill they can do and that can inspire the other kids. (YouthCoachF1)

We almost want to do things over a longer area, tight skills is more senior level, you have less time and space as you get better. A bigger area they have more time to do things, if they mis-trap they have 3 or 4 paces to get control of it. I think too many people working with youth cone off area and make pitches too small. (YouthCoachM1)

One of the problems we have is doing a skill in isolation, say a 2 on 2 and we say how we want you to beat these 2 players is by this and then we put down 4 cones and they do it up and down the pitch and they do it perfectly. Then we go play a game and firstly they don’t realise because it is not coned off so they don’t recognise now is the time to do it. (YouthCoachM1)

Also putting them into fun games so maybe some conditioned games where they have to do certain things or sometimes we do team races or relays if we are focussing on a certain skill so to get that element of competition. (YouthCoachF1)
I would say that they have to get it wrong first, don’t step in, let this become really obvious and then correct it. Plus part way through the process hopefully they will correct it themselves and surely self correction is better... Particularly at youth level we need to give them a lot more time before we correct them. (YouthCoachM1)

4.7 Intervention Skills.

The athletes felt coaches needed to be able to provide clear explanations, notice when they did something well, and when something needed improvement coaches should provide encouragement, constructive feedback, and opportunities to discuss and work on it so that they could learn. This is illustrated in the following quotes from two of the athletes:

He explains it really well and everyone knows what they are doing. He will show us what to do and he will show us an example. (YouthAthleteM1)

When you are on the pitch and you do something wrong but the next time you do something good and the coach says really well done, that means so much. (YouthAthleteF1)

The coaches described clear instructional processes, a focus on reinforcing good things and what athletes needed to do rather than what was wrong. A number of the intervention skills that are important for excellent coaching practice were summarised by one coach in this way:

Excellent practice is being able to observe, pick out things for each individual, give them key points, get them to work on it and then at the end of it give them feedback that they have done something well so that they are motivated, they are desperate to come back because they are learning. YouthCoachF1

The coaches also discussed the importance of observation as part of reflection-in-action which enabled them to adapt sessions as they went. One coach said: “sometimes it is really worthwhile to step back from the session and observe it... Sometimes if you are right in the middle of it you can’t really see what is going on.” (YouthCoachF2). Another coach identified what he was observing during this process and what he would do:

Firstly, you are watching the technical execution and you can see when things are physically breaking down or not working and then you can adapt time and space to make it easier. The other thing that maybe comes with experience is the physical demeanour, body language and attitude of players, calling positive, encouraging each other as opposed to slouchy shoulders or you go next... If it was technical you would try to adapt before changing because it may be the layout, you may just need to take a pass out or something so with a tweak we can make it fly. If it is attitude then we need to think what is wrong with the group, have we done too much over the weekend, have we given them a break, has someone had a fight in the changing room. At that age they love playing hockey, they just want to play so it has to be something to make them not want to do it so when you pick up those vibes then your man management comes in to work out what the hell has happened. (YouthCoachM1)
5. Learning and development in the youth coaching environment

For coaches working in the youth coaching environment learning and development was captured by four themes: knowledge, development experiences, approaches to self-development, and work environment.

5.1 Knowledge

Two of the coaches were teachers and felt that this background provided them with useful skills that transferred to coaching. One coach commented:

As a teacher developing pupils in PE, developing their performance, analysing their performance are skills you need when you are coaching. As a teacher getting the best out of your class, getting the best out of each individual pupil, making sure they progress and that is coaching as well. (YouthCoachF1)

Athletes recognised and valued coaches’ knowledge base and experience. They indicated that this was an important aspect of the coaches’ background that influenced their confidence and trust in the coach. The coaches did not specifically mention the importance of a knowledge base but they all clearly had developed this through their time as athletes and coaches. One coach mentioned writing down all the drills she had done in training when she was an athlete and using this as a resource for her coaching.

5.2 Development Experiences

All the coaches mentioned learning from coach education courses and workshops, however, the two most important sources of learning and development were through informal interactions with other coaches and practical experiences of coaching. Sometimes these two were combined when coaches had worked with other, sometimes more experienced, coaches. The following quotes illustrate their experiences:

I learnt a lot from going to the level one, two and three coaching courses but I actually don’t think you learn about your coaching until you are out there doing it. I think you learn a lot from the people you coach with. I am not saying I didn’t learn a lot from these courses and I did but I think I have learnt far more from making mistakes. (YouthCoachF1)

In theory you could cover the same sorts of things inside but when you do it on the pitch and see the guy do it right and understand it then it is fantastic. (YouthCoachM1)

5.3 Approach to Self-development

The coaches all demonstrated an openness to learning and opportunities for development. However, learning and development was not a passive process, the coaches were actively engaged. They engaged in formal and informal opportunities and continually reflected on their coaching practice. The following quotes reveal coaches approaches:

I learn off other people all the time, different ideas, reflect on the approaches I like and try to replicate that... It is about not getting stale, challenging yourself. If you stick with the same thing you would get bored and that would reflect in the players... Being resourceful, going on the internet, you can learn off anybody. Bouncing ideas off people... it is about being open to ideas even though it is something which is not quite so familiar. (YouthCoachF2)
If you think about a lot of your pivotal moments in your coaching career... [a] ‘door’ has been there but you have to choose to walk through it. (YouthCoachM1)

So there will be times when I have gone through my coaching and thought I am not getting it right with this team so it is more by doing that I think I have developed. (YouthCoachF1)

5.4 Working Environment

The coaches felt that being part of a collaborative, reflective working environment was an important aspect of excellent coaching practice. This environment was characterised by regularly working with other coaches, good communication between coaches, sharing ideas, and learning from others. Of particular importance was experience working with different coaches, athletes in different age groups, both genders, different ability levels, including national level squads. These activities enabled coaches to continue to learn and develop their coaching practice. It also enabled them to ‘see the end product’, to understand the pathway, the principles, skills, and standards for the athletes to aspire to and to inspire the coaches. At a more specific level this collaborative working environment enabled coaches to convey consistent messages to athletes and collaborate with others coaches of the same athlete(s) in identifying and working on specific areas of importance for individual athletes. This could be hockey-specific improvements or balancing expectations and demands in the athletes’ lives. YouthCoachF1 described her work environment in this way:

Another thing that is important when you are in a school or a club or a district is there has to be good communication between the coaches. That ability to share ideas, that ability to say what I am trying to develop is we are slow on getting in on rebounds so let’s look and let’s all talk together. I think regardless of the level of the coaches you can always learn from each other... I think we do it quite well here because quite often what we do is put two coaches on one team and then for another term we change the coaches so you the opportunity to work with other people. Then we might after a session or a match all get together and say what went well, what didn’t. I am always looking to say how did it go? What sorts of things are you needing to work on? YouthCoachF1

6. About the research

This research was conducted by the University of Stirling on behalf of sports coach UK. The fieldwork was undertaken with Scottish Hockey and involved interviews and focus groups with coaches, participants and parents along the sporting pathway (children, young people, adults, talent development, elite).

The purpose of the research was gain an in-depth understanding of the coaches’ and participants’ views on excellent coaching practice.

You can read the full report on the sports coach UK website http://www.sportscoachuk.org/resource/identifying-excellent-coaching-practice-along-sporting-pathway