The responsibility of a coach is not just to prepare athletes for competition but also to help them through the action. Research with Olympic athletes has shown coach behaviour during competition can have both positive and negative effects on performance. New research with successful coaches has identified what coaches can do during competition. The results suggest a theory of orchestration as a useful approach to understand coaching during competition.
Research with Olympic athletes shows that coaches can have both positive and negative influences on performance. Positive influences came from trust, good crisis management, decisive and fair decision making, commitment to the athlete and good planning. On the other hand, negative influences came from not keeping things simple, over-coaching, spending too much time with athletes, unrealistic expectations, and conflict.

So coaches have an impact. But what about when the action actually starts? In part, it depends on the sport as, in some sports, the coach has more direct influence on the action than others. Team sports, for example, may allow opportunities to change formations, substitute players or even call time-outs to give new advice. But what about sports where the athlete is very much on their own?

New research with coaches sought to answer this question by interviewing 19 Olympic and Paralympic track and field coaches who, between them, had coached athletes to 11 gold, four silver and four bronze medals. What emerges from the interviews fitted with the theory of coaching as orchestration.

Coaching as orchestration suggests a combination of structure and flexibility. Although working towards a broad set plan, the coach is also accepting uncertainty and improvisation, and dealing with new situations that develop as circumstances change. This is a good definition of any sporting contest and explains why orchestration appears so appropriate for coaching during competition.

The central features of orchestration are steering rather than controlling, structure within flexibility, and close often unobtrusive monitoring. For Olympic athletes, this translated into the coach having a good plan, adapting tactics when necessary and being able to cope with distractions or situations as they arise.

As described in other research, this is very much ‘behind the scenes string pulling’.

At first, this idea of quietly pulling the strings in the background may sound like the coach is manipulating their athletes. But in this new study, the researchers concluded the approach was mutually agreed between coach and athlete, and based on a desire to let the athlete ‘get on with it’. The strong relationship between coach and athlete undoubtedly helped, as did the fact the study involved experienced elite athletes who knew what they wanted and needed.
What the research found

To discover how successful coaches acted during competition, the researchers interviewed eight track and field coaches. These coaches had amassed over 30 Olympic or Paralympic appearances between them, and their athletes had achieved a total of 19 medals.

The coaches felt most of their work was completed prior to the event, and when the day of competition came, it was a case of letting the athlete get on with it. However, there were still a number of things the coach did or managed on the day.

The researchers broke these down into six themes:

- athlete-focused supportive environment
- preparation and planning
- observation, analysis and intervention
- athlete psychological preparation
- coach psychological preparation
- management.

Athlete-focused supportive environment

At this stage, the coaches believed any coaching had to be led by the athlete. As one coach described it, it is supporting rather than leading. This is one of the signs of an expert coach, in that they can step back and avoid letting their own ego get in the way. As one coach commented:

> It is up to the athlete. It is their competition, it is their life, and what happens is for them. It is not about the coach.

This ability to step back was something many coaches had to learn with experience as it is not easy for anyone to be so involved in a process and then have to retreat.

A clever idea from one coach to help create the athlete-focused environment is to get the athlete to tell you what the game plan is, rather than giving instruction. Other ideas included treating the competition as just another day, but just as importantly, coaches also behaving as if it is just another day. This shows the importance of coaches being aware of their own behaviour and how it impacts on athletes – even body language is something that needs to be considered here.

Preparation and planning

While most of the hard work is done prior to the event, the coaches also planned for what was going to happen on the day – a tactic that should reduce the chance of the athletes receiving any surprises at the last minute. Typical things coaches would do in this area included rehearsing elements such as travel, pre-performance routines and ‘big event’ conditions. This final point could be anything from simulating noise to introducing other athletes into what was usually a solo training day. The idea was to establish a ritual that the athlete would have gone through numerous times before the day of competition.

Importantly, all these preparations should be jointly developed by coach and athlete, and generally worked back from the time of competition. As one coach explained:

> We created a run sheet for the day. We work out what time the event is, what time the call room is, what time we have to start to warm up, what time we need to be at the warm-up track, what time the bus is etc – all of those things.

Observation, analysis and intervention

Monitoring athletes on the day of competition was very much ‘out of the corner of my eye’, in line with the need to be unobtrusive and let the athlete get on with it. The coaches felt that if you were intervening and coaching on the day, then you hadn’t done your preparation properly. By this stage, coaching should be very limited and only if something was not right or the athlete asked.

Even if the coach did intervene, any feedback needed to be concise, accurate and reinforce key messages. Keeping it simple was essential.

Comments from coaches again show the need for the coach to step back and let the athlete get on with it:

> There are some things a coach wants to say, but that is not what the athlete wants to hear. You need to understand what the athlete requires.

It is this ability to know when, and when not, to intervene that one coach was talking about when they said:

> That’s when you, as a coach, become a bit of an artist.
Athlete psychological preparation

Prior to the event, a coach has to make sure the athlete is mentally ready to compete and then, on the day, keep them on track. For the coaches, this meant supporting and building the athletes’ confidence, making sure they were not distracted and, whenever possible, taking the pressure off them.

Again, the notion of unobtrusive monitoring comes into play as the coach needs to check on their athletes’ mental state without too much probing, which may create anxiety in the athlete. Also, the coach needs to stay back and know when to intervene.

As one said:

Be supportive, positive. Be aware of what the athlete needs, not what you think the athlete needs and/or wants, which can be slightly different.

Finally, coaches have a strong role to play in how they portray themselves and, as one coach suggested, should show confidence that will transfer to the athlete.

Coach psychological preparation

For the coach to show confidence, they, like their athlete, need to be psychologically prepared. The coaches who were interviewed recognised how their emotions could influence their athletes. As one said:

There is enough tension without the coach being stressed as well.

For the coach, it was a matter of managing emotions, looking confident and staying focused. Strategies they used for this included breathing techniques to stay calm, talking to other coaches, walking a lap to keep calm, talking to themselves or just taking time out for themselves.

A typical day is best summed up by one coach:

On the day of competition, my day is equally as planned out as the athletes’. I don’t have any interference from what is going on. I will phone home in the morning. There is no further interference. I try to be in control, not showing any nerves, being as confident as I can, and that is part of the plan, and that is also part of training.

Management

The final theme is one that is possibly unique to coaches in a high performance environment – that of managing the environment and support staff. Their role is to make sure athletes follow plans and routines but also that support staff have clear roles. Anxiety in support staff could just as easily transfer to the athlete so this is an extra concern for high level coaches. It is for this reason that coaches in high performance environments will often describe themselves as like CEOs of a company.
Learning from the research

Throughout this research article, you could see how orchestration is a useful way to describe what a coach does during competition. Most of the hard work had already happened in training, and now, the coaches were trying to steer rather than control their athlete. To do this, they took a step back and let the athlete get on with it. They monitored what was happening out of the corner of their eye, and when they did intervene, it was with limited, concise information. Game day is not the time to start coaching.

To achieve this requires good psychological preparation by both athlete and coach before the event so they are in a position to just let things happen and react when appropriate. The lesson from this research for any coach is in the preparation — to take time to think about anything they can learn from these findings.

The researchers are keen to stress that their results cannot be applied directly to other settings — this is elite sport, and in other sports (especially team sports), the coach may have more direct influence. However, there are some key points that any coach at any level might want to consider:

- Don’t let your ego get in the way of your coaching. How often do you step back and let the athletes get on with it? Trust in your planning and in your athletes.
- Have you thought about how your behaviour influences your athletes or players? This can be both what you say and how you act.
- How do you know when to intervene and when to stay silent? From these elite coaches, the key question to ask is: ‘Is this really what the athlete needs, or should I just keep quiet?’
- If you are going to give feedback during competition, keep it simple and concise. Why not ask your athletes how they prefer to receive feedback and what level of detail they find helpful?

References

If you are interested in finding out more about this area, this summary is based on the article below:


Other interesting articles are suggested below:


