Until now, humour has received very little attention in sports coaching research. A new paper from researchers in Norway aims to change all that by highlighting just how useful humour can be when understood and used correctly. But be warned – using humour is a balancing act.
Picture the scene – an elite-level coach is delivering a training session to her team just days before the most important game of the season. As she’s explaining the tactics for different scenarios, she makes a joke about the players losing a day of their holidays for every mistake they make during the game.

While the players laugh, they don’t really think about whether the coach’s joke was just an example of her personality shining through or a strategic use of humour designed to remove some of the strain of preparing for elite competition.

New research with elite coaches shows the benefits of using humour; as well as how fine the line is between positive and negative outcomes of its use.

Introduction
Existing research from non-coaching settings illustrates how using humour is a balancing act. In one sense, it can be a very useful tool for strengthening relationships and groups, but care should also be taken to ensure it does not become divisive.

The researchers identified from working contexts how sharing a joke and laughter has been shown to be a signal of common ground, helping individuals feel a greater sense of belonging to a group. They also noted the substantial pedagogical research that shows how teachers’ use of humour can impact positively on students’ learning.

And arguably of most benefit to coaches, the team referenced research that has shown humour to be particularly useful for relieving stress, tension and pressure – three things elite athletes must overcome to reach optimum performance.

While these are all desirable outcomes, the researchers also identified how humour can be used as a tool of power; with potentially significant negative impacts for those on the receiving end. They noted the fine line between ‘laughing at’ and ‘laughing with’, which, if crossed, can easily lead to those being laughed at feeling excluded from a group. Using humour to display superiority in this way can quickly lead to friction and unrest, something coaches at all levels are extremely keen to avoid.

The sections that follow summarise the coaching results to help you understand how to negotiate the humour balancing act.
The researchers found that all the coaches saw a place for humour in elite-level sport. They found it particularly useful for breaking up the seriousness, monotony and repetition governing elite athletes’ lifestyles. They saw humour as a counterbalance to this seriousness, where laughing can create a relaxed atmosphere and give athletes respite from pressure and stress, as well as an opportunity to replenish their energy. To this end, the coaches were keen to encourage humour in the group to ensure time spent together was enjoyable and not only focused on hard work.

To develop this atmosphere, they would aim to be humorous in their own communications with athletes and encourage the ‘funny’ athletes to create funny situations; for example, by playing practical jokes that would lead to retaliation from their teammates.

However, the coaches were well aware of the very thin line that governs when to be funny and when to be serious.

Most of the coaches involved in the study strove for a mix of humour and focused seriousness in preparation for competition.

Yet when game time arrived, a different set of rules applied. Representing the country in front of a national audience was not the time for being funny. Nor was it, for some coaches, useful for athletes to joke around when they should be totally focused.

While there are many coaches who probably agree with this view, others took a different view. They preferred some athletes to joke around at this time as a coping mechanism, as this would help them overcome the intense stress of the situation.

Ultimately, the key to managing the balancing act is to know your athletes and the environment you are in. This will ensure humour is used at the appropriate time and in appropriate ways.

As well as studying when and how these elite coaches wanted humour to be used, the researchers looked at the importance of who applies humour and how this can affect group dynamics.

By allowing certain people to be humorous, including themselves, coaches were able to set clear hierarchies within the group. In situations requiring intense focus, like just before a game, the coaches would portray a more serious image to enhance their authority. When in more relaxed situations, coaches used humour to decrease the distance between themselves and the athletes, thus appearing more human in the athletes’ eyes.

One of the coaches also highlighted the importance of having a ‘clown’ or two. That is someone with an inclusive sense of humour who does not take him/herself too seriously. This coach said a good clown is one who can direct humour at any individual in the team and, in the process, take the edge off any tensions and potential conflicts between teammates.

For example, the coach noted how some of his team were highly religious, whereas others were atheists. Having a clown who could joke with both groups about religion ensured the topic never led to any differences of opinion.

Again, the balancing act becomes apparent. The researchers found a fine line between being appreciated as a clown and being laughed at as one. They noted how inexperienced players behaving in similar ways could be reduced to merely a clown, hindering their development and inclusion in the group.

This again demonstrates how using humour in coaching is a tightrope that you must tread extremely carefully to ensure the whole group experiences the desired positive outcomes.
Learning from the research

Although this study was concerned with elite international-level coaches, the following learning points may be useful for coaches at any level and in any sport:

• Humour is a balancing act for coaches – there is a very fine line between humour being inclusive and divisive. Make sure individuals are ‘laughed with’ and not ‘laughed at’.

• If you know your players as individuals and know the environment you are in, you will be able to ensure humour is used at the right times, in the right ways and by the right people for the benefit of all.

• Humour can both enhance your authority as a coach and help you get closer to your players – use humour when communicating to close the distance and be more ‘like one of them’. Conversely, if you eliminate humour from certain situations, like just before a game, you will demonstrate your authority to the group.

• Encourage ‘funny’ players to be funny, particularly those with an inclusive sense of humour who can joke about anything. This can break up seriousness and help develop a stronger group dynamic, as well as negating the likelihood of conflict in the group between players with different views and opinions.

References

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


Other more general reading includes:


