

Coaches' Competitive Decision Making: Implications for Player Development

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Coaches are both teachers and game-time managers striving for victories. These two roles can at times appear at odds with one another and challenge the coach's ability to make wise game-time decisions. Striving passionately towards the explicit goal of winning games and championships can prove to inhibit a player's development. Likewise, the coach that fails to appreciate the value of "playing to win" at certain levels of competition does not best serve athletes. During competition it is important that a coach wisely manages the tension between "coaching to win" and "coaching for learning." In order to successfully balance these decisions, one must reflect on the developmental needs of young and older athletes, understanding what leads to athletic excellence. The following article presents a developmental model for understanding coaches' competitive decision making when working with athletes from childhood through adulthood. Player development and game time coaching is an imperfect process, this model should assist coaches in making well informed choices and allow the coach to trust that short term sacrifices lead to long term successes or that there is a substantial benefit to the athletes when outcome based decisions are made.

It would be nice if coaches were only teachers. The playing field is certainly a classroom and coaches are the pedagogues who walk the sidelines. Coaches are teachers... and they are also managers. While these two roles are not necessarily in conflict, managing athletic teams to victory can appear to be in discord with intrinsic teaching motives. The role of teacher is to educate, nurture, and empower athletes providing opportunities for personal growth and development. These are objectives that are easily accomplished in practices, yet decisions and behaviors of coaches during competitive situations are often at odds with educational ideals. The cacophony of coaching philosophy and strategic decisions created by competitive situations do arise because winning matters. Unlike in the classroom where teaching new skills is the task at hand, time on the playing field has at least two overt objectives: 1. Develop athletes and 2. Win games and championships. The level to which each of these is pursued is determined by three factors. First, the coaches' philosophy and personality, next, the sports organization's objectives, and lastly, and most importantly, the players' desires and developmental needs (Chelladurai, 1990; Gardner, 1990). When these three factors are weighed and considered in unison a balance between teaching and winning is struck.

While it might not be politically correct to confess, the outcome of sporting events does matter. It matters to coaches, players, sports organizations, and fans. This reality puts the intrinsic ideals of development and equal opportunities at odds with extrinsic passions and pressures. Scoreboards and standings make winning an explicit goal for any coach that paces the sideline and any athlete that steps

onto the field (Balague, 1999). Furthermore, not only is victory an explicit objective of most competitors, but it is human nature to strive for success. Successful outcomes of games are one way in which players and coaches validate their efforts and see themselves in a positive light. The desire for positive self perceptions is both human and healthy (Brown & Rogers, 1991; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1982). For these reasons, the quest for desirable sporting outcomes shape coaching behaviors and decision making. Nonetheless, this does not suggest that it is wise or necessary for coaches to make solely "results based decisions" at game time.

The journey to excellence spans approximately one decade (Ericsson, 1996). As important resources during this period, coaches must be adept at developing their athletes during routine practices and during competitive situations. Sport science and pedagogical research has shown us that it is critical to focus on intrinsic motivators such as skill development and self-referenced goals if optimal athletic development is to be achieved (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In essence, although the outcome of games matter, an athlete focusing only on winning games rarely benefits performance or skill development. Additionally an approach that has a sole focus on winning, risks creating an environment of alienation (Hyland, 1990). Alienating competitiveness is a threat to team cohesion and furthermore opposes the goal of sport: two competitors lifting one another towards athletic excellence.

Balancing "coaching to win" and "coaching for learning" is a developmental issue. Decisions focusing on "coaching to win" are behaviors that are focused primarily on assuring that a team or athlete achieves successful outcomes in the athletic arena (i.e. winning). Examples of such forms of coaching are a soccer coach only giving playing time to his eleven most talented players or a tennis coach that encourages the youth tennis player to put the ball in the court by any means necessary even if it means neglecting proper technique. Alternatively, "coaching for learning" is focused on opportunities for all players and views competitions as venues for learning sport, competitive, and life skills. Such coaching actions strive for equal playing time for all players and reinforce the use of sound techniques and strategies, before applauding goals or assists. While it is appealing to think that a coach can either "coach to win" or "coach for learning," the reality of player development during competitive situations is significantly more complex. It is necessary for coaches to understand that age and skill level are two key factors in balancing their game-time decisions. It is clear that with younger and more novice athletes the majority of coaching

decisions should focus on participation, competitive opportunity for all, fun, and learning. Contrary to this, adult, professional athletes (highly skilled) do not require excessive nurturing during game-time situations, but rather should expect coaches to make game-time decisions that focus on achieving victories and championships. While these extreme ends of the developmental spectrum make competitive decision making relatively straightforward, coaches' choices become much more unclear as the years progress from the socialization into sport to the highest levels of professional competition. The ultimate challenge lies in the reality that this developmental period that balances development with athletic results spans from early adolescence into early adulthood (see figure 1). As early as age ten athletes begin to firmly understand the concept of winning and losing and self-identify with their competitive outcomes (Balyi & Hamilton, 2000; Balyi & Hamilton, 2001). Furthermore we are seeing an ever increasing professionalization of youth sports (Coakley, 2001). Young athletes have opportunities to travel the world for competitive experiences and more entrepreneurial coaches and leagues are putting their mark on the youth sport landscape. With this influx of competitive opportunities and, perhaps more tellingly, financial investments, performance outcomes become a measure of success that parents and entrepreneurs look to for validation of programs and investments. Coaches, parents, sports organizations, and ultimately the athletes themselves benefit greatly when a firm grasp is held on appropriate competitive decision making during athletes' developmental years.

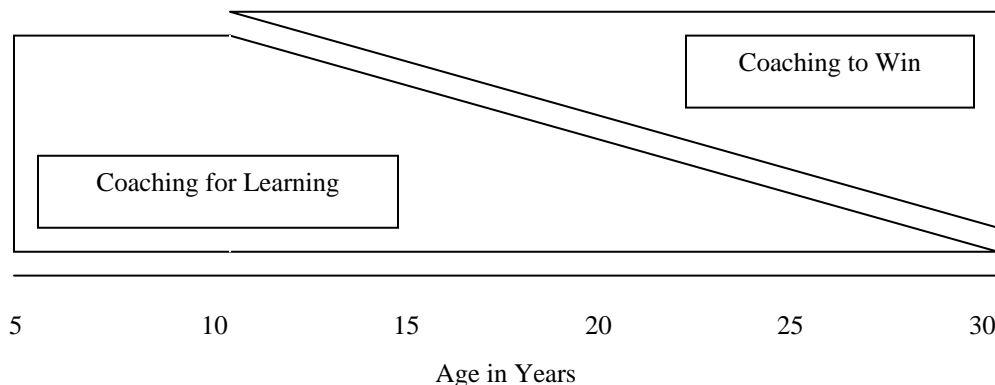


Figure 1: A Model for Understanding Coaches' Competitive Decision Making

This coaching conundrum lies in the imperfect reality of human and athletic development. Experts have often highlighted the reality that chronological age and biological age do not develop together in neat linear fashion (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005; Hamilton & Balyi, 2001). An athlete might be physically mature enough to compete at certain levels, but not ready cognitively. Similarly, it is important to note that normal life development does not always correspond neatly with the demands of athletic development. Paradoxically, excellent athletes are often asked to perform at adult levels prior to becoming an adult, yet when an adult, expected to compete with childlike enthusiasm and creativity (Naylor, 2001). . Balancing these developmental conflicts are factors that differentiate average coaches from excellent coaches. Jowett and Timson-Katchis (2005) highlight this reality in their study of national level swimming programs where it was clear that good coaches are responsive and flexible to both social and competitive situations and the unique needs of each athlete. The “mental flexibility” necessary of good coaches is well summed up by the philosopher Christopher Philips (2004) when discussing the thoughtfulness required in making virtuous decisions, “There’s just no way to skirt the hard work of determining what to say, and how to say what one needs to say, in every unique situation” (p.50). In order to develop players in a timely manner, coaches must do the “hard work” of providing thoughtful feedback and leadership in the many unique competitive situations that arise throughout a season.

Coaches are further challenged in this decision-making process by the increasingly cluttered world of sporting opportunities. Between socialization and elite competition the sporting landscape has taken on many forms (Coakley, 2001). In particular, the ever increasing organization of the youth sport landscape has taken three distinct forms: 1. recreational, 2. sport and life skill development, and 3. professional model. While these sub-divisions might be clear to an outside observer, these breakdowns are much less clear to those coaching and playing within them. Certainly all will cite fun and learning to be at the core of any program or league, but the execution of these ideals is often questionable. In theory they make sense, but the means of fulfilling them while keeping all stakeholders (organization, parents, players, fans, etc.) satisfied is a great challenge.

Teaching, Supporting, Managing Athletes to Excel

The first step in wrapping one's mind around wise decisions during each game or match is to take a long term perspective towards athlete development. Present moment competitions are emotional and

easily seen, however athletic development is a process of many years of intensive training, competing, and learning. Although sports and ages differ slightly in their developmental needs, long-term vision about an athlete's training and eventual specialization is essential to insure success (Balyi & Hamilton, 2000; Bompa, 2000; Kraemer & Fleck, 1992). Long-term perspective forces coaches, athletes, and parents to be patient and often sacrifice short-term results. Regardless of the opportunities available to young athletes and their apparent physical readiness, Bompa (2000) reminds us that one important goal of athlete development from childhood to middle adolescence is to avoid the negative stresses associated with overtraining. The achievement of athletic excellence requires approximately ten years of purposeful training and resting of the body and the mind (Ericsson, 1996). This is important for coaches and organizations to keep in mind when approaching decisions during competition.

Figure 1 highlights that there is no psychological, developmental, or technical need for coaches to make extrinsically oriented decisions when coaching athletes younger than ten years. In his analysis of Olympians, Cote (1999) found that it was not necessary for athletes to even begin formal competitions until ten years of age or older. While suggesting that athletes do not begin to compete until the age of ten is likely unrealistic in this day and age of proliferating sporting opportunities, this research further highlights the unimportance of wins and losses during youth sporting events. In fact, it is imperative to not only be cautious rushing young athletes into competition, but also in encouraging them to specialize in a sport too early. While it would seem to make sense that the earlier an athlete takes a sport seriously, the more likely he or she is to succeed long term, there is much evidence to contradict this thinking. After studying chess champions it was found that the starting age for participation, practice, and competition is not a factor in achieving excellence (Elo, 1986; Krogus; 1976). Yes, athletics is different than chess because of the physical demands and windows of opportunity for motor development, but there is evidence that excessive participation at early ages leads to overuse injuries (Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness, 2000). In light of these realities, it does not make sense for coaches of young athletes to make game time decisions based on the desire to win games. Giving gifted athletes extra shifts in ice hockey or asking young tennis players to compete in tournaments ever weekend each month does not benefit the athlete from a developmental perspective, in fact such decisions could be detrimental to long term successes as an athlete. Furthermore, it is important to remember how enthusiastically distracted children are during their lives.

Young athletes have a very short attention span (Bompa, 2000), leading to a short memory for the outcomes of game and competitions. Basic skills, tactics, and fun need to be the competitive foci of coaches of young athletes, they are the necessary foundations for development.

Around the age of ten, it is fair to say that competitive opportunities “matter” in the development of an athlete. Still there is no developmental evidence that suggests that a regular diet of winning benefits the striving athlete. At the time of pubescence (around 10-12) both boys and girls begin to gain a great understanding of themselves in relationship to others as well as significantly increasing their abilities to think conceptually (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Erikson, 1980). It is this cognitive growth paired with the passion for sport that makes these years an important time to embrace competition. In both retrospective and longitudinal examinations of Olympians, youth tennis players, and Soviet national team athletes this age range for beginning to embrace competition is well supported (Cote, 1999; Nagorni, 1978; Wolfden & Holt 2005). Bompa (2000) suggests that this is a time where “challenges” on the playing field are important for player development. He uses the word “challenge” deliberately. While it might sound idealistic, the outcomes of winning and losing during these years has minimal influence on predicting and producing athletic success in later years. This is a stage in athletic development where one’s physical skills might lead a coach to believe they are capable of sporting accomplishments beyond their years. Anatomical age and cognitive age are rarely in perfect harmony at this stage in development. This is a time when athletes truly begin to grasp the concepts of competition and strategy (i.e. youth soccer games have evolved from looking like a rugby scrum to a genuine soccer game with teamwork and strategy). With this in mind it is important that coaches take advantage of this teaching window by encouraging athletes to learn how to employ the strategies necessary for success on the field. Yes, it might be possible for one or two “gifted” athletes on a team to score goals, make saves, or put points on the board by using their athleticism and forgoing proper strategy, but coaches enthusiastically rewarding and reinforcing such behaviors can be costly to player development. “Challenge” is essential during this stage of athletic development, coaches striving to develop athletes must allow it to happen and allow athletes to learn from all competitive opportunities regardless of what the scoreboard says.

The lack of a need for a “rush to victory” by coaches is further illustrated when one considers optimal times for specialization in sports. With the exception of the sports of figure skating, gymnastics,

and women's diving (these are sports where flexibility, artistry, and a small figure benefit performance – all things associated with youth), there are very few instances when an athlete should begin to focus on only one or two sports and take on an intense competition schedule prior to adolescence (approximately age thirteen) (Bompa, 2000). The consequences of early specialization are best illustrated in a longitudinal study of Soviet athletes conducted by Nagorni in 1978. This study suggested that specialized sports programs should begin at the ages of fifteen to seventeen. The analysis found that athletes that specialized at younger ages did achieve many accolades and peak performances at the junior level of competition (under eighteen), but never duplicated such achievements in senior level competition. Although this study was conducted in 1978, it is fair to say that it still applies when considering athletes in the twenty-first century. While opportunities for intense competition at the youth levels have proliferated over the past twenty-five years, humans have not evolved significantly either genetically or cognitively. A coach or athletic program that increases the intensity or the importance of athletic competitions prior to adolescence does little to benefit the athletes' long term development.

Post athletic specialization, winning does matter and personnel decisions that will lead to this outcome must be considered by coaches. It is essential that athletes continue skill and strategy development, but it becomes more important with age that athletes become cognizant of and capable of attaining successful outcomes (i.e. wins) on the playing field. Competitive stresses become reality during high school and elite junior competition. The collegiate selection process is moving forward and athletes are striving to make regional and national teams. Furthermore, while it is a continual lesson in competition, the intensity of junior competition provides opportunities for athletes to learn the values of winning and losing alike. This reality that both learning goals and competitive outcomes are important when working with adolescent athletes exemplifies the art of coaching. It would be easy to make the majority of one's coaching decisions based on how to win games, but it would sacrifice both individual athlete and team development. High school athletic competition is not the end point of an elite athlete's career, therefore a coaches teaching during competitions must continue. Upon examining the model presented it is clear that much more than fifty percent of a coach's decisions should be made with player development in mind rather than the outcome of a competition. Perhaps this important balance between winning and learning is best highlighted when examining collegiate sports.

Vallee and Bloom (2005) in their examination of collegiate athletic programs found that a primary coaching objective was to develop the whole athlete. Even in the high pressure world of intercollegiate athletics, successful collegiate coaches are found to make a significant amount of decisions by considering the athletes long-term athletic and personal development in mind. Joe Paterno, the legendary Penn State football coach, is a perfect example of this philosophy believing that a coach is first and foremost a teacher (O'Brien, 1999), responsible for teaching skills, tactics, and character. It is his belief that it is these things that will carry a team through both victories and struggles successfully. Even in this era of high profile collegiate athletic competition, it is reasonable to expect a coach's game time decisions to be evenly balanced between development and a win-oriented mentality. It would be naïve to think that outcomes of games are not important and a consistent balance of win-orientation and developmental focus persists throughout every season however. In this day and age, there is a tension between collegiate sports and educational values (Shulman & Bowen, 2001). Sports programs at all levels of collegiate competition consume significant portions of collegiate budgets and coaches and athletic administrators are responsible for "showing" that this money is well spent. Shulman and Bowen (2001) in their research have shown that it is difficult for any school to be free of the pressures to win on the playing field and win in the battles of recruiting student-athletes. Major conference division one athletics as well as small division three colleges take their sports very seriously. Pressures to win are great, yet it is important to remember that the college athlete is an unfinished product with much need of nurturing and opportunity to fulfill athletic potential. It is fair to suggest that the collegiate coach that enthusiastically "coaches for learning" during the regular season and preseason games, while employing more win-oriented tactics during conference and post-season play has successful teams and athletes more often than not (Gwozdecky, 2006). High levels and higher stakes of competition challenge a leader to have a strong coaching vision and to thoughtfully navigate the competitive season.

In post collegiate competition it is clear that "coaching to win" becomes a priority. Nonetheless, one would be remiss if the developmental needs of young professional or Olympic athletes were neglected. Few major league organizations worry terribly about the win/loss record of the minor league affiliates. They are greatly concerned with the development of players in their system and their readiness for future

successes at the major league level. This is illuminated by Gendron (2003) in his explanation of the goals of American Hockey League (the National Hockey League's minor league system) teams:

1. To have players ready to join the [NHL franchise] on a "just-in-time" basis
2. To develop players who will be useful to the [NHL franchise] in future seasons
3. To win, developing winning attitudes and the expectation of winning performance among players

This highlights the reality that even coaching at the highest levels of sport requires a balance between "coaching to win" and "coaching for learning." Elite athletes are measured by their ability to score goals, play strong defense, and ultimately win games, but these concepts must be balanced with the ultimate goals of teams and the organizations of which they are a part. In minor league sports, success is not only having a winning team, but teaching players to be ready to help their major league franchises win championships.

At the highest levels of sport and as athletes near the end of early adulthood the model of Coaches' Competitive Decision Making suggests that the role of coaches as teachers is minimal. Athletes have reached the stage of performance excellence and coaches are ultimately measured by their wins and losses. This does not however suggest that athletes' learning has come to a halt. Maintaining current levels of performance is important, but Ericsson and Lehmann (1996) note, "continued successful learning is necessary for experts to achieve a level of performance higher than their current level." This idea suggests that a coach's "coaching for learning" behaviors should not diminish as greatly as suggested by the model. Rather than this being the case, teaching of new sport skills and strategies to highly experienced athletes rarely comes from coaches at this point in an athlete's career. At this stage, continued learning and athletic longevity is often driven by an athlete watching and modeling their peers (Bandura, 1997; Naylor, 2001). Social learning is powerful throughout a competitor's life, but after having achieved expertise and upon entering middle adulthood it becomes particularly powerful. At this stage of an athlete's development a coach should certainly provide opportunities for athletes to observe and interact with one another, but should focus game time decisions on putting the personnel necessary for assuring victories onto the playing field appropriately.

It is clear that through an athlete's early adolescence to adulthood, coaches must wisely balance "coaching to win" with "coaching for learning." Ideally, coaches are teachers first and foremost, putting efforts, focus, and good strategy before the outcomes of games. From a developmental perspective this is always the best side to err, however the competitive nature of sport and growth of athletes makes "playing to win" a necessity at certain levels, during certain times of the season, and at certain periods of player development. A wise coach balances these factors to ensure long term athletic success and team successes. An unbalanced approach to competitive decisions has consequences in the development of champions.

Risks of Focusing Solely on Outcomes

Patience matters in the development of an elite athlete. It has been illustrated that prior to adolescence the focus of coaches ought to be the development of new skills and learning of athletes. Making the outcomes of athletic events the primary focus of sporting events can significantly inhibit an athlete's development and potential. Mallet (2005) cautions that "high performance sport that focuses on winning and monetary rewards associated with winning has the potential to undermine self-determined forms of motivation and shift the locus of causality from the internal to the external." An athlete that believes that successes and failures on the playing field are due to reasons outside of themselves, feel little autonomy in their abilities to improve and succeed on the playing field. A coach that leads by focusing on extrinsic rewards decreases athletes' feelings of competence, ultimately leading to a reduction in efforts, confidence, and enjoyment (Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, Tuson, Briere, & Blais, 1995; Salguero, Gonzalez-Boto, Tuero, & Marquez, 2004). The coach that develops an environment that focuses on skill development, defines success by efforts rather than outcomes, and respects each athletes thoughts and feelings will create athletes that are autonomous, intrinsically motivated, and feel competent (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Mallett, 2005).

Risks of Focusing Solely on Development/Process

While it is generally accepted that focusing on the development of athletes on and off of the playing field has only positive benefits, neglecting to pay attention to the outcomes of sporting events does have drawbacks. Process oriented feedback alone is not the most effective teaching strategy (Schmidt & Young, 1991), knowledge of outcomes also enhances the learning process (McCullagh, 1993; Weir & Leavitt, 1990). In competitive situations, the overt goal of sport is to defeat opponents – particularly

opponents of similar skill levels. It is important in the learning process to hold athletes accountable for being able to put the ball in the hoop, make defensive stops in big games, and win tournaments. Outcomes are one valuable form of feedback during the learning process (Naylor & DelMastro, 2001; Horn & Amorose, 1998). In fact, coaches that rely too heavily on providing training and instruction can impact an athlete's sense of autonomy (Hollembek, J. & Amorose, A.J., 2005). Historically, only process oriented feedback has been highlighted as being beneficial to an athlete's perceptions of competence. While such information is critical for persistence, enjoyment, and long term success, it is important not to overlook the breadth of cues that determine an athlete's perceptions of competence.

Developmental Decisions are Performance Enhancers

While it is appealing to look at all game-time coaching decisions as either learning based or winning oriented, the issue is not that clear cut. Coaching for learning certainly influences the outcome of games and seasons in the relative short-term and can benefit an athlete or team's development over many years. Forgoing the impulse to only play the best athletes on one's team during a competition can lead to more victories and more championships. Decisions that on the surface appear to hurt a team's ability to win ultimately may make individual players and teams stronger. Playing "second string" players regularly early in a season certainly makes them better prepared for the playing time they are likely to receive during the post season because of injuries to "star" players or due to their own skill development over the course of a season. This thought process highlights the "inevitable tension between short term and long term goals" that faces leaders (Gardner, 2000). Sacrificing short term victories for preparation of an entire team for post-season and championship play is important at all levels athletic competition.

Throughout the competitive decision making process it is important for coaches to recognize the importance of experiential learning in all players' athletic development. At the root of the development of expertise is challenge (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). Regardless of the outcome of a competition, the athlete that feels challenged learns the most, develops in a timely manner, and enjoys the process. Giving a gifted young athlete extra playing time in order to assure a team victory, does little for the athlete's development – it is not challenging for this athlete to excel over her peers. Conversely, the gifted athlete who has to support lesser skilled teammates from the bench, lift them up through cooperative means during play, and perhaps even, lose a competition is challenged and taught the most. Out of such

instances, teamwork, leadership, and winning and losing alike are learned. Differently, lesser skilled athletes that are spared the stresses of competition in order to preserve a victory, does little to prepare these players for future competitions. A coach can instruct and drill athletes immeasurable amounts, but none of it is a substitute for just letting athletes “play.” Hollembeak and Amorose’s (2005) finding that a coach’s training and instruction behaviors can be negatively related to an athlete’s sense of autonomy highlight this reality. Great leaders in society understand that stepping out of the way and taking on a permissive form of leadership helps followers develop initiative that will lead to future successes (Gardner, 1990). Great coaches understand that allowing athletes to struggle with healthy challenges makes champions.

Successfully developing athletes, nurturing the developmental needs of youth, and winning games is an artful process. Coaches must be patient, coaches must be good teachers, coaches must have a sound coaching philosophy, and coaches must be reflective. Player development and game time coaching is an imperfect process. The model of competitive decision making presented here is a useful guide, but certainly one that does not exempt a coach from the hard work of considering what to say and do in each situation on the playing field. It is a model however that should assist a coach in making well informed choices and allow him or herself to trust that either short term sacrifices lead to long term successes or that there is a substantial benefit to the athletes when outcome based decisions are made. Coaches have the wonderful opportunity to be teachers that will be remembered for a lifetime by athletes, yet they also face both perceived and real pressures to be victorious on the playing field. Successful coaches are athlete-centered with a passion for player development and an artful balance of the thirst for victory and need to provide all athletes with competitive opportunities at game time.

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