

Athlete Centered Approach to Coaching

“Athlete-Centered Approach” to coaching... YIKES! I can hear some of the “old-school” coaches who might read this column letting go of an exasperated sigh and rolling their eyes reading this headline. Hang in there with me...don’t turn the page yet! Like many of you, I consider myself a coach with old-school values. However, I have set aside some of my tactics to explore and “try on” some new methods of coaching.

This article does not encourage you to transition from being an old-school to a new-school coach, nor does it try to convince you to be a “players’ coach.” Many of us old-schoolers look down on those “players’ coaches” because we think those coaches let the players do what they want to do and think that “players’ coaches” act as best friends instead of serving as an authority figure and mentor. Many believe that players’ coaches are soft, weak-minded and allow their players to disrespect them. If this is the perspective that you take, you probably are not going to embrace this article, and, you likely possess what Dr. Carol Dweck (2006) refers to as the “Fixed Mindset”: unchangeable. Or if you are open to the possibility that this new perspective might provide you with another tool to use in your coaching tool box, you might have what Dr. Dweck refers to as the “Growth Mindset”: you believe you can change and grow through application and experience.

This article will discuss how to empower your athletes, using an athlete-centered approach to coaching, and, it will review a recent article in coaching science while providing practical applications for coaches who seek a shift toward a more athlete-centered coaching.

Article Review:

de Sousa.A. and Oslin, J. (2008). A player-centered approach to coaching. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance* Aug 2008, 79, 6, p. 24-30.

De Souza and Oslin’s (2008) article on “Player-Centered Approach (PCA) to coaching is based upon the work of Lynn Kidman (2001; 2005). While this article did not collect empirical data to support its effectiveness, it does provide an effective description of PCA, including practical applications in transition from a “Coach Centered Approach (CCA) to PCA.

PCA emphasizes giving players autonomy for decision making with the clear intention of empowering athletes to make choices, develop higher levels of motivation (individually and as a unit) and, learn how to develop solutions designed to enhance their performance. Kidman’s work suggests that PCA can lead to increased player engagement; better communication; improved competence and motivation to perform. The authors encourage the use of -games and questioning to help develop athlete awareness and understanding.(Mitchell, Oslin, & Griffin, 2005).

Example Exercise applied to Basketball

In our basketball practices, we would often use a drill named “4-on-4 small area passing” to encourage being strong with the ball, squaring up to your defender and pivoting. In this game, we used one half of the court with volleyball lines as boundaries. Players were not allowed to dribble, put the ball over their head or turn their back to the defender. Players were required to square up, pivot, keep the ball low and be “strong” with the ball in order to make

a good pass to their teammates. We did not use the basket – the object of the game was to make five consecutive passes without turning the ball over. If the ball was turned over, the offensive team had to start again. Defensive players were allowed to pressure the ball, and we encouraged very aggressive defensive play since the offense could not dribble.

This game challenges players to devise solutions to be successful moving the ball around under pressure. When the offense would turn the ball over, we simply would ask:

- “How did the “no-dribbling rule affect your body position?”
- “What do you have to do in order to be successful in solving the problem?”
- “What worked, what did not work and what would you do differently next time?”

Asking questions encourages athletes to become involved in their own improvement, performance, decision making, and problem solving. Players are often more motivated by playing games instead of drilling in practice, and, by establishing challenges such as “4-on-4 small area passing” and using properly framed questions after the game, players learn to take responsibility for their own performance and an active role in the learning process. The implications include the athlete’s acquisition of techniques they might not otherwise learn, an engaged learning process, and use of a collaborative process geared toward team success.

Applications for Coaching Practice

In a psychology of coaching course, I once suggested to one of my graduate students that he consider involving the players in some of the decision making in his practices. That coach (who relied on a classic coach-centered approach) responded with skepticism and doubt by saying, “What I am I supposed to do, just let them do what they want to do?”

I understood his uncertainty: “Letting players do what they want to do” is not what the Player-Centered Approach is about. I understand why coach-centered coaches perceive PCA to be another way to merely “roll the ball out” and let players do what they want to do. Coaches are often fired for not controlling their athletes (Scantling & Lackey, 2005). Therefore, why would we risk our coaching jobs when it is easier to be at the center of practices?

As coaches, if we are concerned about our athletes’ overall development as young people, we know that they must learn to perform and make decisions on their own during competitions. In order for them to grow, they must make mistakes and learn from them (just as we must do as coaches!). Providing an environment where athletes can make decisions, fail, and learn from their mistakes and grow is exactly what we should be doing in athletics! But don’t try to implement such shifts overnight.

Transitioning from coach centered- approach to a player centered approach takes time and planning. Coaches who wish to adapt their coaching style should consider that players will likely struggle with the transition and have difficulty becoming involved in certain aspects of decision making. De Souza and Olsin (2008) suggest the following guidelines for transitioning from CCA to PCA:

1. Provide a positive (safe) environment;
2. Encourage player input;
3. Make time for it to happen.

One key to developing a stronger player-centered approach is encouraging and receiving feedback from athletes. At first, some athletes may feel reluctant or intimidated to provide input. Coaches should expect this hesitancy and plan for it. Players who are resistant to talking in front of other athletes or coaches should have opportunities to provide input by writing their thoughts on a brief questionnaire to be submitted anonymously after practice. If players struggle to provide feedback, then allow time at the start of the next practice to regularly review the process and assess how the process is being integrated. This requires planning and patience! Coaches should also build time into their practice time for players to have “strategy time-outs” – where only players discuss their challenge and suggest strategy, techniques or tactics to solve the problem. Coaches should resist their urge to help. Set specific time limits (maximum 2-3 minutes) for discussion.

Finally, Kidman suggests using questions that promote higher order thinking: Using “how and why” questions encourages more critical thinking-similar to what we do in classrooms!:

- “How could we improve our passing angle?”
- “Why do you think you turned the ball over?;;;
- “What could you differently next time to improve”.

To encourage solutions focused on learning specific technique, consider using lower order questions such as “what”, “where”, or “when”. These questions encourage lower-order thinking which can support technique development:

- “What part of the foot do you pivot with?”
- “Where would have been a better place to pass that last ball to make a better play?”; and,
- “When would you use what you learned in this small sided game in competition?”

Initially, it is recommended that coaches take some time to plan questions before practice. As this skill of questioning becomes more habitual, coaches will incorporate them more naturally. Replacing an old habit (“coach-centered coaching”: “telling”) with a newer habit (“player- centered coaching – “questioning”) takes time and thought. Have patience with yourself and expect your old habits will surface more often than you would like...at least for a while!

The following table lists some guidelines for transitioning from a “Coach-Centered Approach” to a “Player-Centered Approach” to coaching.

TRANSITIONING FROM CCA TO PCA	
More Effective Strategies	Less Effective Strategies
ADD PCA TACTICS GRADUALLY Plan one or two questions each practice that you use instead of “telling” your players what to do.	COMPLETELY TURN OVER PRACTICE TO YOUR PLAYERS PCA is not about “letting players do what they wan to do...gradually allow questioning, responding, and player’s problem solving to develop.
PLAN GAMES WITH SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES IN MIND	IMPLEMENT GAMES WITHOUT OBJECTIVES

Start with what you want to see and work backwards in creating “games” and challenges for your athletes (e.g. see “4-on-4 small area passing” described above).	“Making 100 3-point shots in 5 minutes” only encourages fast shooting...give some thought to what you want to accomplish and work backwards...maybe even ask for your players input on games to create to meet your coaching objectives!
BE PATIENT IN ALLOWING PLAYERS (AND YOU) TO LEARN Allow time for silence, and resist the urge to break it-asking players for their input will be uncomfortable at first-because mostly they have been used to us telling them what to do.	DISCARD YOUR NEW TACTICS BECAUSE PLAYERS (AND YOU) ARE NOT ADAPTING QUICKLY Your initial discomfort with changing over to a new style will likely result in you urge to tell players what to do...resist that urge and have patience with the process of learning!

If you are a coach who possesses a growth mindset, then PCA will likely appeal to you. If you are a coach with a fixed mindset, then PCA is likely not for you. However, one of the ways that we can avoid coaching burnout is by learning new tactics and implementing them. Mid-career coaches can take some of these concepts and apply them to their coaching. Attempting to add new tools to your coaching toolbox can be re-refreshing, invigorating, and can re-energize your coaching! Less experienced coaches might not be as comfortable with these strategies until they have some time on the practice floor with their own teams. After we experience some frustration when our players are not being accountable as we would like them to be, less experienced coaches may be more likely to try something new! As coaches, we ask our athletes to improve every summer in the weight room and on the floor. Do we not share the same responsibility for our own coaching self- improvement? Challenge yourself to try some new approaches to your coaching: empower your athletes by adapting a player-centered approach to coaching!

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