

What do you coach?

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How can 'what do you coach?' be a trick question? I once answered 'rugby league' — to which the smart Alec's reply was 'surely you coach the kids, not the sport!' Even though this was meant as a bit of light-hearted fun, the comment offered some food for thought.

Obviously, coaching covers both the acquisition of skill and the personal development of each player. Too often, the publicity about who is a 'good' or 'bad' coach centres only on the record of recent wins and losses. However, if you reflect on whom it was you admired most as a coach when you were young, you will probably focus on the person who nurtured you the most. The person who understood you, had time to listen, helped you recognise right from wrong and was quite strong about what they would accept as appropriate behaviour. Players who respect and admire their coach will be ready and willing to perform as well as they can for them.

After thinking about your own positive childhood experiences, it may be worth reflecting on whether you are a coach of both your sport and your players. What role do you play in ensuring good behaviour prevails in your team? Athletes will be watching you and learning from your attitudes and behaviours, whether you are aware of it or not. So consider whether you are a positive role model for your athletes.

Coaches must be always mindful that they play a lead role in developing the 'good sport' culture as well as in ensuring fair play and developing leadership qualities in their sport. This is a far greater commitment than in any other life endeavour I can think of outside of the home and the school!

The coach who focuses only on the technical and the tactical aspects of the sport may pay the price of waning interest. These days, most coaches focus on training, playing skills and tactics, but recognise that they also have to be an entertainer, social worker, big brother or sister, minder and all-knowing confidante to the players in the team.

However, more thought needs to be given to supporting the coach in this role. While many sports teams will engage strength and conditioning assistants, physiotherapists, masseurs and psychologists to ensure their athletes perform on the track, court or field to their physical potential, they are now also starting to address proactively character-building and life-skills issues in order to assist athletes to realise their 'life' potential.

Coaches must commit time and energy at training to discuss issues such as playing within the spirit of the rules, or understanding what it means to be a positive role model, or why it is important to treat everyone with respect. Coaches must also recognise that athletes want to learn how to deal with the social and sporting issues that arise through their sporting experiences. When they are able to make honourable decisions and take responsibility for their actions, they have come of age as athletes.

Coaches today, as they have always been, are considered to be leaders who have an enormous influence over the development of their athletes' sporting and social skills. There are numerous examples of talented individuals and teams who have faced criticism and problems due to poor decisions made both inside and outside of the sporting arena. Who is responsible for providing guidance to these athletes? There are coaches who are recognised as having sustained long-term success by adopting a holistic approach with their athletes and working with them to instil positive principles and values. This has so often led to greater-than-expected results on the playing field and, more importantly, also left a legacy for sport and the Australian community.

While most coaches agree that it is important to have 'well-rounded' athletes, those who do not allocate sufficient time, or know how to approach complex social issues, end up leaving it to someone else to deal with. Everyone in sport must acknowledge that hard issues must not be ignored. Sometimes we may not have the skills to deal with a particular crisis and an expert may need to be called in to assist, but everyone has a role to play in teaching and reinforcing the principles of fairness, respect, responsibility and safety. All coaches have this leadership responsibility ... so make a resolution — do not add to the problem by ignoring your duty. Rather, be a powerful part of the solution!