

Coaching Generation Y

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We live in an age where we all chase 'best-practice', whether in sport, the corporate sector or the community at large. Much is written by the world's 'leading lights' on this subject and many people look for their words of wisdom, often supported by dubious research and sprinkled with the 'new-speak' jargon of today, to help them through daily life. Typical are the new breed of 'life coaches' who hold the audiences attention by high quality oratory while emptying their wallets with the sale of the 'new' answer to life's puzzle. I fully understand that what I attempt to set out here is probably verging on heresy, uncalled for under the spotlight of modern day coaching methodology and certainly not backed up by any research. To be honest I don't care. I am doing what my Dad did and his father before him – I am speaking my mind as an 'old-fart' that the current generation of athletes, coaches, scientists and administrators will probably ignore as the ravings of a 'has-been'.

Nicole Jeffery wrote an intriguing article in the Australian in early 2007 entitled "Coaching the Why Generation" where she outlined the changes in our current generation of developing athletes. This generation, apparently, are bringing different needs and values to the table and as such we, as coaches, should understand and accommodate them in their needs. Offering different coaching methods and structures, appeasing their need for 'quick training and competition results' and getting them involved in the decision making because the "new breed will not accept that the coach is always right" were statements in the article that illustrate the psycho-social changes we all face. This new generation are 'outcome-focused' and therefore need to know all the reasons for why they are doing things in their training; especially, and not surprisingly, those parts of training that are uncomfortable and inconvenient.

Sports science has been the major consumer of physical and financial resources in all national sporting strategies around the world. This arm of the sports development world has given us wonderful guidance in 'best practice' in the biomechanical, physiological and psychological aspects of high performance attainment. Without doubt this section of the sporting community has made us all question our assumptions and certainly given us a heap of measurements to put into our daily coaching practice. We can, or are expected to, measure just about everything from RPE's (Ratio of Perceived Exertion – how tired are the poor dears?) to how far and at what velocity did they run today using Global Positioning Satellite data. Today's coach must be supported by an army of data gathering staff to collect and interpret all this information – a far cry from the early days of my coaching when a pencil and piece of paper sufficed.

I am just completing my 40th year in coaching. I have experienced the trials and tribulations of this profession from my days as a teacher through to the heady heights of Olympic finals and Championship winning football finals. I have embraced sports science, the computer age and all the waffle that goes with establishing those previously mentioned National Performance Strategies (the reams of 'warm and fuzzy' words, the copious diagrams and flow-charts etc). I think that I have reached the stage of having to finally own up to the fact that I have grave misgivings about where we are heading in all this.

When did we all give in to this 'welfare state' stuff where the athlete is concerned? When did we appease the weak-minded or the athlete that simply wants something for nothing or will only commit if the reward is high enough? When did we stop holding them accountable? When did we as coaches stop doing it because we loved it and gave up on the lengthy apprenticeship we all must serve before being paid for it?

My problem is that I still have in me some of the traits that I learned from the adults that surrounded me as I grew from childhood to being an adult. All the adults around me in my formative years were my life-teachers, my mentors in behaviour and values. They had been

forced to endure the unspeakable Hades of war where their fortitude and courage were tested on a daily basis. They were stoic and resilient and in the post-war period they suffered from a lack of just about everything that we take for granted today. We were, or are, the 'baby-boomers' and those of us who have not completely capitulated to the slothful, greed driven, easy living needs of today may still have something to contribute.

If this 'Y' generation are as described then we seem to have two ways to approach them. We can either appease their weaknesses or we can retain a grasp on some of these fundamental traits of human-kind that have seen us survive hardship.

It is only a decade ago that I was heavily involved with the Brisbane Broncos Rugby League Club and I reflect on this period of my professional life as an illustration of the changes that have accelerated us towards this potential mediocrity. At that time the playing staff held down full-time jobs outside their sport. Many of them spent the day in physical labour as plumbers and concreters or at the docks scrubbing down the hulls of ships. They would turn up for training, on time, covered in the dust and dirt of their daily grind. No RPE's for them, no complaints from them either. They got on with their work and gave us the very best they had every session, every week and every year. They got some rest when they had earned it. No ice-baths, hot & cold showers, massage or special classes of this and that to consume all the available training time – they kept at their trade minute by minute, day by day, week by week in a relentless pursuit of the winning formula. Don't get me wrong, sports science has unearthed some fabulous examples of recovery methods and I have used them all with significant success. The key issue is that the athlete had better be 'pushing out the envelope' to earn these recovery methods. I see too many athletes 'recovering' from some very unimpressive levels of fatigue. I see athletes 'tapering' from a taper because someone is concerned about their well-being and refuses to take them to the very edge of their physiological, psychological and structural limits. The Broncos Championship winning squads of 1992 and 1993 contained men who overtly displayed fortitude and stoicism, never cried 'foul' when life got hard and expressed respect, discipline and a willingness to sacrifice.

I had been appointed with one phrase that still burns in my memory, "put some 'steel' into them." My interpretation was that as well as the football speed, strength and endurance components, coupled with some decent injury prevention plans that had to be delivered, and delivered better than any of our opposition; the minds of these guys had to be strengthened to be able to overcome both physical and emotional adversity. After all, if you want to be a champion these traits will be sorely tested throughout the campaign. The idea was to give them physical and emotional resources way above what they would experience in a game. Whatever intensity the opposition brought to the table we had to know that we had reserves that they could never match. The game had to become the easiest part of the week by setting emotional and physical standards so high that we were never at our limits, ever.

Don't for one minute think that I had all the answers to this challenge. I had no text book to turn to or physiological scoring tables to check against. This was 'seat-of-the-pants stuff' where I applied the known theories of training and periodisation to the distant echoes of greatness those previous generations had displayed. A hero is not a celebrity, or someone who wins a contest in the sporting arena. A hero is someone who does something extraordinary, against all the odds and with maximum sacrifice. I took the standards that I had been exposed to as a child as a guide to 'what was possible' for the Broncos. The bar was set high, the road was a relentless exposure to the real interpretation of attitude, commitment and discipline and the players were to be challenged in all aspects of their lives.

In some cases my job was a lot easier than that of my counterparts today. Many of the young men in our charge were hungry for personal and team success, driven by a deep desire to win and carried little or no 'baggage' that might keep them from their dreams. The 'baggage' I refer to are things like, "What's in it for me?", "Is there an easier way?"

Of course I tried my best to give them the best balance of training that was well periodised and well thought out but the key issue was to find out how they could develop their 'mental

toughness', the ability to overcome adversity, and for them to accept that whatever dreams they had about winning would have to be earned – and the price would be high, very high.

We can all train athletes hard, that's not difficult to do. If it was just a matter of giving them horrendous numbers of reps and sets at a high intensity then anyone could do it. The key is to train smart and hard and to know when to take a mighty step forward and when to back off. Here I was in the hands of the players. Don't get me wrong – I hardly ever asked them for an opinion – I watched closely for all the tell-tale signs of 'too-much' or 'too-little'. Put simply, I got to know them as individuals, to understand when they were giving up due to being weak-willed or when they had really had enough physiologically and psychologically. I put the edge of the physiological envelope lower than the edge of the psychological envelope. These guys had to take it psychologically, just like my Dad and his fellow battlers of the 1940's and 50's. They 'couldn't die doing this' was a typical response to the oft heard cries of complaint and submission.

Put another way, I was unfair to them – for a reason. Every missed target, every missed rule, every smart comment, every 'collapse with feigned exhaustion', every 'tactical limp', was met with a firestorm of reaction. Repetitions and sets of exercises were started again, sessions were started again from scratch, those that gave up were sent home in disgrace to 'never darken my door again' or 'get him out of my sight'. Unfair, unjust, yes, but this scheme always found their weak traits. They could either quit on themselves or the team or find the fortitude and stoicism to get through it. They had no protection from this onslaught; they could not turn to a Players Association to get them off the hook, or go bleating to coach Bennett.

In today's 'welfare' environment none of this would work. Complaints are met with benevolence and charity. People are appeased on their way to mediocrity and they drag a load of other 'do-gooders' with them. We continually shift our social standards and accept less and less as being acceptable. Laws are written for appeasement, agencies resourced for mediocrity and society capitulates to the bleating of the weak.

Championship winning or winning in life, whether doing this as a family, an athlete or in the corporate sector will demand that you survive at the very edge of your psychological, physiological and structural envelope. I believe that these traits are trainable. Maybe it is time to re-visit some of the methods in the light of the current "I want" generation. Why can't we test out their mettle rather than appease them? Why can't we expect good behaviour, punctuality, respect? Why do we continue to list all the reasons why an individual can't achieve something instead of challenging them to do what they think they can't do?

Sports science has given us the tools to help us decide when an athlete should reduce or adjust training so that the training system can be precise. Great, I have tried all this stuff and it works. What I would like to also see as a tool is something that indicates when the athlete should take a 'leap of faith' into the unknown, whether this is to do with the psychological or physiological aspects of training. Stop finding all the reasons to "back-off" training and give them the tools to go to the dark places that their talent will take them. In other words what are they willing to give-up or sacrifice to improve their current status? What psychological or physiological 'shock-level' are they willing to experience as the payment for their success.

We often use the words attitude, commitment and discipline as the underpinning requirements of any successful person. The trouble is they are only words and we often award the individual with the trappings of these words without them really earning them. We devalue these words but more importantly we fail to see that they should be used as a result of consistent, repeatable ACTION. I see coaches handing out these words to athletes who try to lead two lives – one life, the shallow simulation of attitude, commitment and discipline when in the training environment and the other one completely the opposite when outside the training environment.

Long Term Athlete Development

Over a decade ago Istvan Balyi and his colleagues presented us all with a series of theories and systems that surround the developing athlete. Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) has become the watchword of nearly every sporting organisation around the world. Each has written a document pertaining to their interpretation of the theories. These 'blue-prints' all look the same and state that physical literacy is the cornerstone of all athlete development. Unfortunately little is available to the coach in the field to actually apply these physical literacy principles. As a guide the following equation is presented:

$$\text{FSS} + \text{FMS} = \text{Physical Literacy}$$

Put in more understandable terms for the Mum & Dad coach (99% Of our coaching wealth) this means that the basic sports skills of running, jumping, throwing, kicking, catching and striking (FSS) need to be underpinned with a movement efficiency that allows them to be executed. These are the fundamental movement Skills (FMS) and include such things as balance, coordination, structural strength, structural stability and structural flexibility. It doesn't take a genius to work out that these FMS's are the building blocks of just about everything to do with a human being's personal space. Whether applying them in a sporting environment or simply surviving the ravages of time and ageing, these qualities, particularly the latter three, are vital for our well-being. The problem is that the more sedentary our community becomes, the less we seem to need any of them and a downward spiral towards muscular-skeletal inadequacy follows.

In the old days – those distant times when we all played in the yard, spontaneously ran, jumped, threw, kicked and hit things – we developed these FMS's on a daily basis and they became part of our arsenal to take forward into our working lives in adulthood. There were even some instances where a school student would actually walk to school and home again at the end of the day (note the significance of the daily lives of school children in Africa and the propensity of the adults to dominate middle and long distance running). It seemed that the worst thing that happened was that we wore our best shoes out, ripped the knees out of our trousers and dirtied our best clothes during these marathon episodes of physical activity. It also seemed that we were all continuously exposed to competition and had to learn the outcomes of winning and losing without much tantrum, sulking or other psychological disturbance that we would take forward into our adults lives to later be used as an excuse for some unacceptable behaviour or social ineptitude. The host of times that I lost a championship 'Kick the Can' game on the green outside our Prefab didn't give me a sense of loss or any psychological burden that I would take forward into my adult life.

Getting us to bed at a reasonable time seemed a less fraught time for our parents as most of us were too physically tired to stay awake. Not much energy for the often malicious behaviour seen in today's bored generation.

Jump forward 5 decades and we exist in a world of National Performance strategies with millions being spent on Institutes, Academies, professional coaches, bio-mechanists, physiologists, nutritionists, psychologists and any other pseudoscientific sports related 'new careers'. Talent Identification, Talent Confirmation and Talent development are the new structures through which the future Olympian will have to pass on the way to their 'Kick the Can' destiny.

One thing that our new 'scientifically based, athlete centred, coach driven' world gives us is information about the young athlete. We can now measure all sorts of things – Max V02, Maximum Velocity, Lactate Production and Tolerance, Psych-Social status, Decision Making Speed, Peripheral Vision efficiency, Reaction Time etc, etc. I confess to having used them all in some shape or form as an attempt to look for and develop that special 'diamond' of sporting talent. In the last decade, as I grew to be a fully fledged member of the 'old-fart' brigade of coaches, I began to see a trend in the young athletes busying themselves on the road to stardom. I decided to see what their general movement efficiency looked like. Now

don't get me wrong, this was not a decision born of some desire to 'publish or perish' in the new world of the Human Movement degree qualified coaching fraternity. It was a reaction to the poor levels of skill, the incessant injury frequency and the tragic loss of so many aspiring athletes after the age of 16.

I didn't have the time to set up a scheme of tests that were totally valid or reliable for the rigours of the scientific world. I simply wanted to see if these aspiring players had the physical credentials to do all the sports specific stuff they were being asked to do in the Talent Identification process they were in. I had experienced coaching more than a dozen Olympians as well as a championship winning football team and it was pretty clear that to win anything at that super-elite level, these young things would have to be taken, often kicking and screaming, to their physiological, psychological and structural limits. Done carefully and slowly over at least a 10 year period this often foreboding destination is not as hard as it may seem. As long as we progress them based upon their own individual timetable of maturation, take our time not to burn them out with too much competition along the way and ensure that they are not carrying some critical limitation forward, they have a chance. It's a pity that none of these crucial elements appear in today's 'fast-tracking', 'winners at all ages' focus delivered by the current crop of teachers, coaches and administrators.

With a couple of like-minded colleagues I set out some crucial, non-sophisticated tests for the current crop of wannabee's – for example:

- "Stand on one leg, bend at ankle, knee and hip and hold it for 10 seconds (a Single Leg Stance position)"
- "Stand on two feet, stick your butt out and sit half way down (a Squat)."
- "Stand on one leg, stick your butt out and sit to half way down (a Single Leg Squat)."
- "Grip that bar and pull yourself up as many times as possible (a Pull Up)."
- "Take giant steps and walk for 10 metres, bending deep at both knees each time (a Walking Lunge)."

The test battery has grown to about 50 of these basic movements, some done statically, some done dynamically, some measured by time, some by numbers completed and many of them by the coach simply looking for balance and coordination. The results were amazing, or frightening, whatever point of view you were looking from. We established that an exercise done efficiently, with the entire body working in exactly the right way at exactly the right time would score 5. We tested athletes across 24 different sports from the age of 8 to 18 and the same results kept on surfacing. The athletes were not 'physically literate'. They may have been in representative teams or competing across a range of sports for their school or named in high performance talent squads but not many of them could stand on one leg or do more than 5 Push ups or do a Walking Lunge without collapsing at some stage of the movement.

When we examined their training environment the reasons were clear. They were spending nearly all their time preparing for the next contest, involved primarily in competition specific exercise. Someone forgot to do the stuff that glues all this together; they need the physical competence to do the technical stuff and the technical qualities to do the tactical stuff – in that order.

When we ask a Field and Court sport athlete to do such things as side-stepping or swerving during a drill we are challenging their infrastructure to 'produce, reduce and stabilize force' at the same time that we demand that all this is done in a 'multi-joint, multi-plane and multi-directional' setting. Their entire kinetic chain (all the body parts from the tip of their toes to the top of their head) is linked in this – one part can't do something all on its own. In the

case of side-stepping or swerving if the athlete can't be effective on one leg, what hope have they got to do well in the sprinting, stepping, jumping, kicking drill they are exposed to?

I think the following statement sums up where we are right now. We all look for some special system, plan, technology, spell, potion or gadget that will give us the required 1% edge on the opposition when in reality our winning edge is buried somewhere in the other 99% of our work – the basic stuff (modified and adapted from Vern Gambetta, 2007).

I have read many national performance documents in my time and each one has a section on 'development'. When I scrutinise these writings I gain a degree of confidence because on many occasions the author implies that their sport has the 'best' development program. I am usually treated to the mathematical equation that includes the number of registered participants, the number of facilities being built, the special 'high performance' models being created and last but not least a list of the major competitions available for the participant. Looking a little closer at the real world (the playing field, the gym, the court, the session, the lesson) usually makes me walk away with a sense of unease.

I see young athletes, barely in their teens, on a crusade of winning their local, regional or national championship. Nothing else matters to the coach in charge, everything is geared to 'winning at all costs' and often the status of the coach in their particular micro-world of sport is enhanced by the number of age-group champions they produce. While they charge ahead chasing their own particular 'holy grail' of sport (the regional U/12 Championships or the World Youth Championships) they are given the responsibility of choosing the poor mite who is going to get the glory for them. We currently exist in the world of Talent Identification, a scientific approach of the late 20th Century that allows us to assemble our very best young things and prepare them for outcome based contests. The rules are usually the same as those in the adult world, the competition schedules also very similar, and coaching methodology is taken straight out of the adult world and simply watered down in some shape or form.

Who are we kidding? The world of competitive sport in the 12-16 age groups is dominated by the lucky soul who happened to be born a lot earlier than most of the others in the same chronological age group. In young males the 'best' athletes in this age group are usually those who shave three times a day. To quote a leading Australian High Performance Coach in an address to up-and-coming coaches, "Don't think that it is your coaching talent that creates the improvement from 12-16 years. It's a matter of growth and hormones – size is the dominant factor."

In all this argument my mind drifts to the late developer, the poor soul who was born at the very end of the school year they abide in. They are 6-9 months behind in all the growth and development factors that each has to negotiate and they have to operate under the same rules. Contest outcomes are the death-knell to this group of children even though in their own way they may display sound physical competence, agility, balance and coordination. They are young people crammed full of potential, just as eager to take part and probably with the same dreams as the 'gorilla' they have to compete against. Sad thing is that by the late teens everyone is pretty equal in development and maturation, life has a way of evening out the process and 'lo and behold' we reach the start line for elite performance development (18+ years) and we have either burned-out the early maturer or crushed the late developer.

This may be less traumatic for those sports that have huge participation (Soccer in the UK, Rugby in New Zealand) because the sheer weight of numbers seems to help. A Premier League Soccer club in the UK only needs to develop 2 or 3 players each year from the thousands in their development programs to perpetuate the current system. Why should they question their operation – it works – they can get either a first-team player or a transfer income from the small number that makes it.

Why should the USA consider a smarter and fairer development system in, say the 100m Track sprint? If, by some catastrophe they lost their top 10 male 100m sprinters, their numbers 11, 12 and 13 will probably still make the Olympic final so who cares?

It is hard to blame the unsuspecting coaches all the time; after all they have never been told any of this in the courses they have had to attend to gain their coaching qualification. For example in the Australian Track and Field Coaches Association Level 1 course there is a section on Growth and Development. Great – but all the other stuff is about the rules of competition, and technical development, nothing about the building blocks of the sport – physical literacy.

Okay, enough rambling. Let us put the two themes together: the appeasement of the current generation Y and the total lack of concern for the growth and development stage of the young athlete. To me this is like mixing 'nitro' with 'glycerine' – its going to get very messy!

Not only does generation Y want instant gratification and to be rewarded with little price to pay but we as adults add to this potentially lethal mixture by imposing our own idiotic systems and strategies including the 'winners at all ages' syndrome.

The answers lie somewhere in the 'attitude, commitment and discipline' areas of both the young athlete and the adult coach. For the athlete, you had better get used to some pretty difficult situations if you want to be different from the rest of the herd.

For the athlete, attitude is everything and you will need to display something called consistency if you are to succeed. You won't be able to live one life as an athlete and the other as a social butterfly. You will need to be tough on yourself 24/7 and not only when it is convenient. Remember you are already being driven to and from school and training, given the best equipment and designer clothing, surrounded by scientists et al to watch your every move, being coached by someone with loads of letters after their name. It is all there for you to take advantage of if you have the right attitude. I recall a Queensland Academy of Sport induction day when the new generation of scholarship holders and their Mums and Dads and coaches would meet the QAS staff for a warm reception and welcome. There they all sat, Olympic dreams in their eyes, listening to information they would need to understand and accept. My experience told me that out of the 40 or so athletes sitting there only one would make it to the stratosphere of high performance. Rather than capitulate to the 'warm and fuzzy' stuff I came up with what I really felt:

"This is not a welfare organisation!" "This is not a charity!" "You had all better bring something big to the table – not one time but all the time!"

Went down like a lead balloon!

Commitment is the same. Commitment means sacrificing something dear to you to achieve your goals. Often this is a permanent sacrifice not one of those pseudo-sacrifices ("I sold my Mercedes for a BMW"). It really means giving something up, something that is inconvenient and very uncomfortable to do. In current football teams I see players giving their dirty boots to someone else to clean – usually the Director of Kit Technology – the kit-man. Why can't they clean their own bloody boots or change the studs themselves?

Discipline starts at those forgotten qualities of respect, punctuality and simply doing the things that you don't want to do.

For the coach the attitude, commitment and discipline is slightly different. Attitude includes the coach having a philosophy that cries out "Duty of care!" 'Care', as seen in treating the developing athlete as just that, a unique individual with their own timetable of maturation that needs to be respected. 'Duty' to see the long term job through with patience and forethought. The commitment part is exemplified by the coach needing the resilience to

never waiver from their destination even under the immense provocation from the system to find winners at all ages.

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