

Athletes Doing it for Themselves: Self-Coaching Strategies of New Zealand Olympians

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Abstract

Self-coaching in sport (athletes coaching themselves) is a little understood concept that has not been researched or written about by academics to any great extent, although practitioners have made some contribution to the literature. In an effort to define self-coaching more clearly and to understand what athletes do when they self-coach, questionnaires were posted to the 97 members of the New Zealand 1996 Summer Olympic Games team. Also, 36 semi-structured interviews were held with Summer Olympic Games medal winners from the 1956 to the 1996 Olympics. As a result, a definition of self-coaching is proposed as well as strategies that New Zealand Olympians have implemented to enhance their self-coaching experiences in their search of excellence.

Introduction

For most athletes the need to be responsible for their own coaching will arise at some stage in their sporting career. Although a large number of both developing and elite athletes are engaged in 'self-coaching', an important and prevalent dimension of coaching, it is seldom discussed nor recognised as a legitimate coaching process. The literature, mainly popular and not academic, does not provide a definition of self-coaching or describe researched strategies, but does intimate that some athletes undergo a process whereby they are responsible for their own sporting destiny. This research has defined self-coaching as the responsibility for performance-enhancing and self-fulfilling activities, independent of a formal coach. In New Zealand, many athletes do not have

access to the guidance of a full-time coach and thus are responsible for their performance outcomes. They sometimes self-coach not by choice but by default.

Among the authors who have acknowledged or referred to the term self-coaching, Greenwood (1986) considers self-coaching as problem solving, that is, observing results, and working out how to improve them. Cunningham (1986), in *American Rowing*, does not define the term but describes how one who observed and listened to his boat [sic] would learn a great deal from it and, in effect, be self-coached. Whitmore (1994), who utilised the term self-coaching in the business and not in the sport environment, describes its usefulness for the practitioner as helping to "clarify their needs and make their best decisions" (p.2). Stringer, in

Whitmore (1994), also refers to self-coaching in the business sense as a "performer-centred approach, completely in line with a participative management style promoting the ethos of ownership equals commitment" (p.105).

As there is not a common definition for self-coaching in the literature or one understood universally, a working definition was developed as follows: "the facilitation of performance enhancing and self-fulfilling activities, independent of a formal coach or mentor"¹. Athletes may call on a coach, mentor, observer, or technical advisor for input when, or if, required.

Specific researched self-coaching strategies are not clearly identified either in the literature but a range of strategies are described in some of the "how to" or "self-help" books for a variety of sports. For instance, *Softball, Slow and Fast Pitch* is not titled or described as a self-coaching text but is essentially that, offering strategies for a softball player to improve their game and skills. The purpose of this book is "to assist all softball players of any age, ...to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary...suggestions are included to foster improvements in performances" (Kneer and McCord, 1995, preface). They suggest watching the "experts" play, reading about the game, and goal setting as valuable developmental strategies.

Newman (1986), a track athlete and former editor of Canada's national coaching magazine *Coaching Review*,

¹ This working definition evolved from reading the available literature and from discussions with elite athletes, coaches, sport administrators and academic colleagues.

discussed self-coaching from his personal experiences when in his youth he did whatever he thought was required to get in shape for racing. He finished ninth out of a field of 3000 in a cross-town race and attributes his success to his self-designed and unwritten training programme executed four times a week: I think I always believed I needed a coach - an assumption to which I still adhere - only now I have found my best coach to be myself. I don't pretend that this situation is entirely desirable, but I've come to recognize that I coach myself as well or better than the large majority of coaches I see (Newman, 1986, p. 46).

He offered sport science and management related strategies for self-coaching:

- keep a training diary to monitor performance and reactions to the training programme;
- periodic blood testing to prevent, monitor or identify overtraining, potential overtraining or an inadequate diet;
- develop and commit to a programme for the entire training and competitive season;
- set realistic and achievable training goals; and
- integrate recovery time and vary training activities to revive motivation and enthusiasm.

Moortgat (1996) who experienced self-coaching as a developing tennis player offers yet another strategy. He was not sure of his actions but he initiated an approach to his self-coaching in the following manner:

When I was 16 years old, I started keeping a log of what I did on and off the

tennis court. I had no real idea of what I was doing, I was just basically writing down how many hoppers I served, set scores, what worked, etc. I wanted to be able to look back and document just how hard I was working. I continued this log through college and on the satellite circuit - never really having a plan, but just writing everything down

Training to be a dancer is similar to training for tennis or any other sport. Martha Graham, a dancer who created her own artistic forms, diarised her dance experiences in notebooks, published as *The Notebooks of Martha Graham*. She recorded her dance experiences learning from each diary entry just as Moortgat did. Graham's notebooks, analysed by Gardner (1993), included such items as dance step sequences, diagrams or drawings, and quotations such as:

...the notes accompanying Night Journey begin by describing some of the opening movements, both in language and in terms of steps. The instructions are quite literal: "Runs with tip 3X l - r - l; two darts and turn to stage r..bourre turn to stage r. left hand holding right elbow" (p.294).

Gardner (1993) speculated that Graham developed as a dancer through her notebooks, and through observation and experimentation of her own body either alone or in front of mirrors or friends, and then eventually audiences.

Much can be learned from observation and 'giving it a go'². A swimmer (S-10) in Bloom's 1985 study did exactly this: "At thirteen I started to get into sport as

a science. I started reading health books. I started watching stroke-technique films. I would watch films for an hour everyday and then go out and try to do it" (p.166).

Hall (1997), a self-coached Olympic laser yachtsman, supported observation as utilised by Graham and the S-10 swimmer as useful tools to help sailors. He suggested taking a day off from sailing to watch others sail: "There is a tremendous amount to be learned from watching a day's racing or even a whole regatta. Afterward, ask the fast sailors why they set up the way they did, or what the wind seemed to be doing that day" (Hall, 1997, p.24). He also suggested reading books and discussing simulations of permutations and tactical situations of sailing using model boats.

Greenwood (1986) promoted yet another strategy, reflective questioning, to enhance an athlete's comprehension and development of self-coaching. He believed the coach's whole approach can reinforce or inhibit the opportunity to learn to self-coach. A coach can reinforce self-coaching by asking questions that the player can answer and inhibit it by imposing answers without explanation. For this reason, Greenwood believed that players are their own best coaches.

However, the lack of guidance in the form of strategies can be problematic for many self-coached athletes seeking excellence. Speaking of misfortune in the 2000m double scull finals at the 1996 Olympics, New Zealander Philippa Baker uttered a post-mortem. "We've done a lot on our own and I don't know if people realise how difficult it was winning those world championships" ("Poor final for sad",

² A New Zealand colloquialism for experimentation or trying something out.

1996, Atlanta '96 p.III). Likewise, New Zealand coxless pairs rowers David Schaper and Toni Dunlop trained without

We were a bit concerned initially because we had a couple of months by ourselves. It was really hard because we had never trained like that before. You normally always have your coach there to motivate you and check that you are making technical changes. We started off being a bit lazy and then realised that we had to get hard on ourselves.... It has been a big learning curve on taking the responsibility for our own training (Sanders, 1997, p.5).

Self-coaching has also been experienced by non-New Zealanders. Linda Leaver, an American figure skater turned coach, spent the last five years of her skating career uncoached. Her coach was ill and his recovery stretched into years. She said, "There are hundreds of things I learned from that experience. It taught me to understand the principles behind skating, much more so than if I'd had someone standing there saying, 'Do this, do that'" (Leaver cited in McKee, 1994, p.29). But, Leaver did not believe self-coaching is conducive to excellence and wondered how much further she could have gone if her coach had been with her. Leaver seems to have an inner conflict as in one voice she says she learned immensely from the experience but in the next she doesn't support the idea as being conducive to gaining maximum sporting excellence.

In order to investigate this phenomenon of self-coaching in more depth, a study consisting of self-administered questionnaires and semi-structured interviews was undertaken. The purpose of the study was to define self-coaching and

their coach. Speaking of the situation Schaper said,

identify those strategies used by New Zealand Olympians to assist self-coached athletes achieve excellence in their sporting, and potentially personal, lives.

Method

Participants

The eligibility criteria for this study was based on membership on the 1996 New Zealand Summer Olympic Games team or winning an Olympic medal for New Zealand. A 52% response rate was received from a questionnaire posted to the 97 members of the 1996 Olympic team from 11 Summer Olympic sports (New Zealand was represented in 15 out of 26 sports). Semi-structured interviews were also recorded between the researcher and 36 Olympic Games medal winners from between the 1956 and 1996 Olympics. These athletes came from the sports of archery, athletics, badminton, canoeing, cycling, equestrian, field hockey, rowing, shooting, swimming, and yachting.

Questionnaire and Interview Construction and Protocol

A questionnaire and interview format were designed to elicit perceptions from Olympic athletes about their experiences and ideas on self-coaching. Both tools were piloted on New Zealand World University Games team members and only minor changes were made. Both were structured similarly with sections investigating background demographics, general information on coaching experiences and then more specific information on self-coaching experiences. Participants were also given the opportunity to supply any further information

on self-coaching that they felt had not been previously addressed.

Procedure

In accordance with the requirements of the 1993 Privacy Act, the New Zealand Olympic and Commonwealth Games Association posted the cover letter and questionnaire to each of the 1996 Olympic team members and an interview information sheet and consent form to all Olympic medal winners. The cover letter and interview information sheet detailed the parameters of the research providing the purpose of the research, the right to withdraw, confirmation of privacy and confidentiality, and information about the use of the research results.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was both quantitative and qualitative. For analysis of the questionnaire, the closed questions were coded and then analysed via the SPSS computer package and the open questions were categorised and analysed via content analysis. With the permission of the interviewees, audiotape and detailed note taking recorded the interviews. These audiotapes were transcribed verbatim, including the researcher's questions and comments, and their accuracy confirmed by the interviewees who suggested minimal changes. This process protected the interviewee from misinterpretation, and provided a full record of the dialogue. The researcher, to ensure familiarity of content, reviewed the interview and open questionnaire response transcripts and then highlighted key phrases for analysis. The variety of responses provided was reduced for coding purposes without losing the voices and ideas of the respondents. Following this, the summary of the interview responses was posted to the interviewees

for concept mapping (a Q sorting technique) to ensure that reliability of the categories had been achieved. The variety of interesting results, together with some relevant literature, enabled the construction of an effective definition and the creation of a list of potentially useful strategies for implementation by self-coached athletes to achieve excellence.

Results and discussion

Rates of self-coaching among respondents

From the 1996 Olympians, just less than half (43%) said they self-coached, just over half (52%) said they sometimes self-coached, while less than one-tenth (7%) said they did not self-coach. From the medal winners almost half (47%) said they self-coached (of which around one-third said they self-coached with the assistance of an outside advisor), almost half (47%) said they sometimes self-coached, and again less than one-tenth (6%) reported that they did not self-coach.

With such a high level of self-coaching activity it is the obligation of academics and practitioners to define and explore strategies for self-coached athletes to employ. Even in situations where an athlete has intermittent access to a coach, athlete empowerment and self-responsibility should be encouraged. The resulting potential growth may carry over not only to excellence in their athletic endeavours but to all aspects of their life.

Definition

Questionnaire and interview respondents were not provided the working definition of self-coaching so as not to bias or

influence their response. Instead, an open-ended question was posed as, “how would you define or describe self-coaching?” The most common questionnaire responses included: ‘athlete makes decisions on training’ (38%), ‘someone who thinks they know it all’ (34%), ‘taking ownership’ (30%), ‘critically analysing your performance’ (27%) and ‘coaching yourself’ (22%). It is surprising that ‘coaching yourself’ did not have a higher frequency. Very few respondents (only 9%) reported ‘having no outside assistance’, which again is unexpectedly low.

My experiences and observations when working as Chef de Mission with New Zealand World University Games athletes and New Zealand Paralympic athletes led me to expect that these two descriptions would have been noted more often. When self-coaching was discussed with these athletes, they would say they were coaching themselves, meaning self-coaching, insinuating the terms were the same and therefore interchangeable.

The interviewee replies were more aligned with the anticipated responses for a definition of a self-coaching. A large number of the respondents (58%) suggested ‘training yourself by setting your own plans, goals and training and then reviewing them to get the best out of yourself’. Almost one-third (28%) suggested ‘the ability to be self-analytical or self-critical’ with the next closest responses (17%) being; ‘without the outside help of a coach’; ‘coaching yourself’; ‘the athlete takes control of everything’; or ‘being a coach yourself’. A few respondents considered self-coaching to include athlete empowerment that is, letting the athlete take re-

sponsibility for their progress and activities. For instance, Greg Dayman, a 1976 field hockey gold medallist, said:

...the elite level is about trying to get more out – more of the players coaching themselves...the players themselves need to basically know as much as the coach and be able to make decisions for themselves on the field. In other words, they need to be in control of the total picture otherwise they are not going to be able to make those kinds of decisions (8 April 1998).

As a result of the responses reported here, the working definition developed early in the research was revised to read: “the responsibility for performance-enhancing and self-fulfilling activities, independent of a formal coach”. Only two alterations were made which were replacing the word ‘facilitation’ with ‘responsibility’ and deleting the words ‘or mentor’ which followed the word ‘coach’. These changes were prompted by suggestions made by many respondents that self-coaching activities are the responsibility of the athlete. However this does not preclude a self-coached athlete from calling on a coach, mentor, observer, or technical advisor for input when, or if, required. Many of the respondents said that it was extremely important to have an outsider assist them at various stages of their training.

Strategies

Based on the popular literature, a list of potential strategies was compiled and included in the questionnaire. These strategies can be found in Table 1 below.

Questionnaire respondents, the 1996 Olympians, were asked which of these

strategies could be used to enhance self-coaching. The interviewees, past Olympic medal winners, were asked in an open-ended question, “what are strategies that could enhance self-coaching?” The most highly selected strategy (96% of the questionnaire responses) was to learn from their mistakes. Chris Gregorek, an All-American 1500 metre runner and now coach, supported this. “Runners should learn not only from

their successes and triumphs, but also from their failures” (cited in Wischnia, 1998, p.51). There may be better ways for athletes to prepare to self-coach than to learn from their mistakes. For instance, if they did their “homework” and followed guidelines (steps) implementing certain strategies then progress could be made more quickly than by learning from mistakes. None of the interviewees mentioned this particular strategy.

Training diary	Use of mirrors
Video analysis	Training partner
Peer feedback	Competition diary
Self-analysis	Self-awareness
Self-management training	Mentor feedback
Self-coaching workshops	Self-reflection
Talk to more experienced athletes	Long-term planning programmes
Learn from mistakes	Specialist assistance
Modelling other athletes	View other elite athletes in same discipline
Books, journals, magazines	Discussions with other athletes

Table 1 Potential strategies for self-coaching.

A training diary was ranked a very close second (89%) in the questionnaire but the interviewees ranked it much lower (37%). Möeller (1993), a disabled athlete who discussed her perspective to training programme design, emphasized that she did not keep a training log but felt it was a very important strategy as it would help the athlete, and the coach, to evaluate and control the effects of training. Hall (1997) concurred that one be used to debrief and analyse training or competition: “The more you use a notebook, the faster you will learn in a lasting way from your experiences” (p.24). The questionnaire respondents

rated a competition diary much further down the scale (64%) which the interviewees did not even consider. It might be assumed that they considered training and competition diaries to be one and the same. Also frequently reported by questionnaire respondents (87%) were self-analysis, discussions with other athletes, and talking with more experienced athletes. The interview respondents had a minor variation to these last two responses, to talk to other athletes to find out what they were doing and to take what works best for you, giving it a similarly positive rating (94%). To talk to athletes

who ‘have been there’ can be a valuable learning opportunity. Yachtsman Chris Timms, a 1984 and 1988 gold and silver medallist respectively in the Tornado class, spoke of how he and his teammate learned from other world class athletes.

There are two priorities in yacht racing: one was learning how to sail a boat, the second was making a boat go faster. Our answer to that was always ensuring that we were surrounded by the fastest people that we could find - the fastest people on the planet. We cultivated that when we went offshore. We cultivated friendships with top Europeans and top Americans - we were fraternising with them. We became personal with the guys who were good at it and we'd learn from them. What to buy, what gear to have and how to work it and how to acquire it - that was the key. I suppose you could say in a sense, the performances we got were a rub off from competing with these other guys. If you go out there and sail for three weeks with the world champion, if he goes twice as fast as you do, you can bloody soon work out the techniques to stay with him. And that is the way it was all the way through (12 March 1998).

Long-term planning programmes (84%) and the use of a training partner (82%) were also popular recommendations from the questionnaire respondents. American Joan Nesbit, a 1996 Olympic 10,000 metre runner, saw great value in a committed training partner:

It may seem odd to hear a coach say this, but I think a really great training partner is more important for a runner than a coach. Any training system can work out fine if a runner is committed to it, but sometimes that commitment is the

difficult part...That's where a training partner is so valuable...A great training partner stimulates and motivates you. You can learn from each other and both raise your level of performances (cited in Wischnia, 1998, p.52).

The interviewees (37%) did not consider a training partner as a very beneficial strategy. Eighty percent of the questionnaire respondents believed self-awareness to be a positive strategy. Viewing athletes in the same discipline was suggested by not quite three-quarters of the questionnaire respondents (71%) while viewing athletes in other disciplines was far less popular (42%). Reading books, journals and magazines, and researching the Internet were placed relatively high (67%) whereas nearly all (97%) of the interviewees reported this strategy as highly useful. Mentor and peer feedback or specialist assistance in the form of observers, mentors, or coaches were all placed relatively high in the questionnaires (65%) and the interviewees indicated similar support (69%). The questionnaire respondents ranked video analysis well (60%) but an extremely high percentage (86%) of the interviewees suggested it as a strategy that they would use and generally suggested it first.

A number of strategies emerged from the data, which are supported by the literature. As a result of this study, three changes were made to the initial list. The questionnaire respondents put forth a new strategy of observation and experimentation. The interview respondents altered a listed strategy on the questionnaire, ‘long-term planning programmes’, to one a little more specific, ‘setting a realistic training programme’. They also provided two

new strategies, testing via sport science tools and watching other athletes, which were not reported in the “other options” section in the questionnaire. A comprehensive list of potentially effective self-coaching strategies includes:

- learning from your mistakes;
- using a training diary;
- observation and experimentation;
- reflective analysis;
- reading and Internet research;
- video analysis;
- setting a realistic training programme;
- testing via sport science tools;
- using a training partner;
- viewing and talking to other athletes; and
- using outside observers, mentors or advisors.

These strategies are reflected in the researched definition of self-coaching. By implementing strategies for which the athlete alone is accountable, performance may be enhanced and excellence achieved. Not all strategies are going to suit all athletes as seen in the various response frequencies given in both the questionnaire and interviews. While any one of these strategies is better than none at all, a combined selection is probably more effective. The items are not mutually exclusive and depending on the athlete, the stage of the athlete’s career, the time and place, and the environment or situation, a different mix may be selected at any one time.

Conclusion

In the review of the literature, especially academic, it was difficult to find material written directly about self-

coaching. The popular literature, however, held some information about the authors’ personal experiences. Hall (1997), one of the few practitioners who has written and experienced self-coaching, was highly supportive of self-coaching in sailing and believed the only person who can help an individual improve in their sport is that individual. Not all are as confident of self-coaching as a tool however. Leaver’s comment about her self-coaching experiences may point to an ambivalence towards self-coaching. When self-coaching there is no one to blame for the performance output except oneself, as according to the researched definition, (the responsibility for performance-enhancing and self-fulfilling activities, independent of a formal coach), the individual is responsible for one’s own personal destiny. It was noted by Hall (1997) that athletes must be honest with themselves to identify and cure any weaknesses they have. If they do not have characteristics such as self-confidence, discipline, motivation, self-belief, dedication, and determination (Bradbury, 1999) trying to self-coach may in fact lead them to inner conflict. Ambivalence may also be related to widely held attitudes that someone who self-coaches is ‘someone who thinks he or she knows it all’ and who is considered arrogant or egotistical. These individuals may not call on an outside observer, coach or mentor when required and may lack in the characteristics noted above. However, overall the feedback on self-coaching is positive. In New Zealand self-coaching is a realistic situation and this research is much needed to help elite athletes on their pathway to athletic, and potentially personal, excellence. The researched strategies - learning from your mistakes;

using a training diary; observation and experimentation; reflective analysis; reading and internet research; video analysis; setting a realistic training programme; testing via sport science tools; using a training partner; viewing and talking to other athletes; and using outside observers, mentors or advisors - are a step in the right direction to help self-coached athletes achieve much sought after excellence.

Finally, the purpose of this study was not to draw conclusions about the suitability of self-coaching for elite level athletes in search of excellence. Further research is

required to present more data to support or negate this notion. However, in New Zealand many athletes are assuming the role of a coach and coaching themselves, with no agreed definition or strategies to aid this endeavour.

This paper has begun to address this lack, by proposing a definition of self-coaching and identifying a set of research-based strategies which are considered to be effective by successful New Zealand Olympians. Application of the findings from this research will assist elite athletes to achieve sporting excellence.

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