Stepping on Up: Guidelines for Self-Coaching

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Abstract
Self-coaching in sport (athletes coaching themselves) is a little understood concept. A review of literature from both the sport and business environs provides minimal coverage. Bradbury (2000) defined self-coaching as "the ownership and practice of self-development and organisational activities oriented towards enhancing performance and goal achievement" (p.229). Clearly delineated steps or guidelines are not evident. Results from self-administered questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 1996 New Zealand Summer Olympians (97) and previous Olympic medal winners (36) respectively provide interesting data for discussion in an effort to identify steps to enhance this experience. Respondents' voices and reflections on their self-coaching experiences support the results. In some circumstances athletes have no option but to self-coach while others do it by matter of preference. It is an obligation of academics and practitioners to explore this concept with the aim of establishing practical guidelines to aid athletes in their search of excellence.

Introduction
Self-coaching in sport is undertaken by virtually all athletes at some stage of their athletic career. Although a large number of developing and elite athletes are engaged in self-coaching, an important and prevalent dimension of coaching and performance enhancement, it is seldom discussed or recognised as a legitimate processes. The academic literature does not provide guide-lines or steps to enhance self-coaching, but does suggest that some athletes undergo a process whereby they are responsible for their own sporting destiny. In New Zealand many athletes do not have access to the guidance of a full-time coach and thus are responsible for their own performance enhancement and self-coach not by choice but by default.

This lack of guidance for 'self-coachers' can be problematic. Speaking of their 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" (Niumata, 1996, Atlanta '96 p.III). Likewise, New Zealand coxless pairs rowers David Schaper and Toni Dunlop

trained without their coach Steve Gunn.

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.B5).

In order to investigate this phenomenon of self-coaching in more depth, a study consisting of self-administered questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and a concept mapping exercise was undertaken. The purpose of the study was to identify steps to enhance the performance of those athletes who self-coach.

Specific detailed self-coaching steps or guidelines are not offered in the academic literature, but Gallwey, (1986); Greenwood, (1986); Hall, (1997); Whitmore, (1994); and Zepke, Nugent, and Roberts, (1996) present a skeleton of guiding steps in the popular literature to assist an athlete to develop their own specific self-coaching plan. These steps can be summarised as identifying strengths and weaknesses; reflecting on skill performance; identifying areas for change; implementing a plan of action; experimentation; situational analysis; and posing questions for the athlete to answer.

Many athletes can identify their final goal but cannot visualise the steps to get them from their current point to where they would like to be. A systematic "business-like" process would no doubt be beneficial and was recommended by a few of the interview respondents. This "process" can be explained using the analogy of a road map. Speaking of the situation Schaper said: The scenic route, the direct motorway route, or the unplanned "tiki" tour[1] route will all arrive at "some" point. Depending on which route is taken, the end destination may not be the intended one, the arrival may be too late, or too much energy may be expended in getting there. A structured plan comprising this is where we are now, this is where we want to go and this is how we are going to get there, would be much more effective; especially if the idea was to get to the final destination (goal) in an expedient and efficient manner.

The jacket cover of Lawrence and Scheid's 1987 book, *The Self-Coached Runner II,* states "Here is the first book designed specifically...[to teach] you how to coach yourself". The introduction continues, "...designed to act as your coach and to train you to coach yourself" (p.xiii). The stated emphasis of this book is to teach people how to teach themselves, yet no guidelines are provided for this to occur. Pre-set training programmes are provided, similar to a cafeteria menu for readers to pick and choose from, but direction on how to write or develop their own is not given. Other written material also makes similar claims but does not substantiate it.

Hodge, Sleivert, and McKenzie (1996) are an exception and reveal that the aim of compiling their book, S*mart Training for Peak Performance,* is "to provide you [the athlete] with the 'tools' to design your own training programme [in a systematic manner] in order to achieve peak performance" (p.140). They stated, "You need to identify clearly what a peak performance looks and feels like for you - paint the picture..." (p.7).

This is the first step that the researcher has identified for the elite athlete. Once the

[1] A New Zealand colloquialism for a meandering trip.

athlete is self-aware and understands their philosophy towards goal achievement then a vision of what it takes to achieve his or her identified goals and a plan of action aiding the athlete to reach peak performance can be developed. Attention and effort are focused on the set goals, which then provide a feedback and evaluation mechanism for the athlete.

Moortgat (1996), while a developing tennis player, faithfully recorded his training in a diary. He did not have a training plan or plan of action. If he had had a plan of action to complement his diary, he may have been able to review and evaluate his activity and find it to be more beneficial. He says:

…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 wanted to be able to look back and document just how hard I was working. I continued this log…never really having a plan, but just writing everything down (Introduction).

Newman (1986), a track athlete and former editor of Canada's national coaching magazine *Coaching Review*, discusses self-coaching from his personal experiences when in his youth he did whatever he thought was required to get in shape for racing and enhance his outcome. 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. He offers what he terms strategies for self-coaching, two of which may be interpreted as steps or guides:

- develop and commit to a programme for the entire training and competitive season; and
- set realistic and achievable training goals.

Both Moortgat and Newman did not have written or planned training programmes. Many of the interviewees expressed this as well. It would be interesting to note whether Newman, Moortgat and the interviewees may have improved their performances if they had followed the above steps and those presented in this article.

Hall (1997) writes that self-coaching can be learned and improved like any other skill.[2] He identifies four major aspects to self-coaching, which could be interpreted as steps. They are:

- the ability to recognize weaknesses;
- the ability to identify the cause and design ways to address those weaknesses;
- the ability to efficiently manage time for maximum productivity in practice;
- the ability to recall practices and races to examine what went right and wrong (p.22).

He suggests that a sailor (or an athlete) can be overwhelmed or discouraged when identifying and prioritising their weaknesses and it might be difficult for them to be honest with themselves. This quality is critical for self-coaching to be effective (Bradbury, 2000). Next it is necessary to focus and analyse the cause(s) of the weakness(es). Reflective questioning, as Greenwood (1986) and Zepke et al (1996) suggest, can be quite beneficial by asking 'why' when analysing each skill or activity. Developing questions for you yourself to answer will help review and remedy the weakness(es), which is important for the necessary changes to be made. Hall also considers time management quite important so the athlete can efficiently

[2]The use of the term "skill" is debatable as the author believes self-coaching is a concept comprising many aspects.

allocate time to spend on improving each weakness. The last step, training and competition debriefing, can assist in planning for the future by asking questions, which start with "we could've tried…what if…should we…" (p.24). Hall is one of the few practitioners who has written specifically on self-coaching. He is highly supportive of self-coaching and believes the only person who can help an individual improve in their sport is that individual.

Greenwood (1986) and Zepke et al (1996) provide support for reflective questioning. They identify steps such as make observations about the training, identify areas for improvement, implement them, and continue observation for reflection upon further changes. These steps are similar to those outlined in the coaching models of Côté, Salmela, Trudel, and Baria, (1995); Fairs, (1987); and Worthington, (1980). As noted, many authors suggest steps but many are from practical personal experiences and not researched ones.

Method

Participants

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

Interview and Questionnaire

Construction and Protocol

A questionnaire and an interview format were designed to elicit perceptions about Olympic athletes' 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 similarly structured with sections investigating background demographics, general information on coaching experiences and then more specific information on self-coaching experiences. Participants were then given the opportunity to supply any further information on self-coaching not previously addressed.

Procedure

In accordance with the requirements of the New Zealand Privacy Act (1993), the New Zealand Olympic Committee posted the covering 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 covering 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. 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.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was mainly qualitative. The questionnaires had both open and closed questions. The closed questions were coded and then analysed via the SPSS computer package and the open questions were categorised and analysed. 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 to ensure that reliability of the categories had been achieved. The variety of interesting results, together with some relevant literature, enabled the creation of a list of potentially useful steps to assist athletes when self-coaching.

Results and Discussion

Rates of self-coaching among respondents

Of 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. Of 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 six percent reported that they did not self-coach. With such a high level self-coaching activity it is the obligation of academics and practitioners working in the coaching and performance enhancement fields to explore guidelines for self-coached athletes to employ.

Even in situations where an athlete has access to a coach, athlete empowerment and athlete self-responsibility should be encouraged. The resulting potential growth may carry over not only to their athletic endeavours but to all aspects of their life. Members of New Zealand's 1976 Olympic gold medal men's hockey team support this. Barry Maister spoke of his coach:

...he taught us to be self-critical and therefore to be – to take responsibility for our own training...He would often say, "what are you doing wrong" as a first question, and so we very clearly got self-critical, self-analytical and we learned to take responsibility for our actions...it wasn't just to please him, it was a self-internal thing...I still abide by it today (18 February 1998).

Guidelines

All of the steps described in the introduction stem from the personal experiences of the writers. Two objectives of the 1998 study were to establish whether elite athletes used similar steps and to then uncover additional ones. The questionnaire respondents were provided with a list of 9 potential steps and were asked to rank each step from 1 – 9 with 1 being the first step and 9 the last. An "other options" section was provided for them to add more steps if they wished. As an open-ended question, it was more difficult for the interview respondents to answer especially those who participated in Olympic Games previous to 1984. Some interview respondents had actually followed a planned process while others approached self-coaching haphazardly or had never really thought about it. This was the situation of many of the Olympians who competed in Games previous to 1984. The interview respondents put forth many ideas, most saying the same thing as the questionnaire respondents, but using different wording.

TABLE 1: Questionnaire respondent's ranked potential steps for self-coaching.

Proposed Steps	Mean	Questionnaire Respondents' Ranking	Author's Ranking
Identify a vision	1.93	1	3
Set goals and objectives	2.89	2	4
Identify a personal philosophy	3.02	3	2
Develop a plan of action	4.05	4	5
Develop self-awareness and self-knowledge	4.34	5	1
Assessment of your performance	6.32	6	7
Observe and self-reflect	6.36	7	6
Make changes/corrections	7.52	8	8
Reassess your performance	8.50	9	9

The questionnaire respondents provided minor ranking variations to the order of the potential steps as noted in the last two columns in Table 1. In accordance with the interviewees, they felt a vision of knowing where you wanted to be, was a first step. The interviewees expressed this in terms of completing a situational analysis by determining where you were, where you wanted to go and how you were going to get there. There was also agreement on the second step of setting goals and objectives to achieve the vision. The questionnaire respondent's step three, identify a personal philosophy, and step five, develop self-awareness and self-knowledge, did not arise in the interviewee responses. Step four, develop a plan of action, appeared as the interviewees' step three, to write a progressive plan and identify strategies to achieve goals and objectives. A minimal amount of the interview respondents considered implementing the plan as a separate step. The low support for this as a step may be due to it being assumed that it would automatically happen when the plan was developed.

In the potential steps presented in the questionnaire, the author felt the questionnaire respondent's step five, develop self-awareness and self-knowledge, was step one and their step three, identify a personal philosophy, step two. It was felt that the athlete should understand themselves and their philosophy towards their sporting endeavour before they could identify their vision. Their self-awareness, knowledge of

the self, and their personal philosophy would impact what their vision would be and how they would set out to achieve it.

The questionnaire respondent's steps six to nine were ranked the same as the author's but with step six and seven reversed. The mean ranking of the questionnaire respondents' step six, assessment of your performance and step seven, observe and self-reflect, were 6.32 and 6.36 respectively indicating only a slight difference in the ranking.

The interviewees did not provide detail for the remaining steps presented in the questionnaire but did suggest analysis by questioning, discussions, reflection and assessment and reassessment of skills to initiate corrections and improvements, basically combining steps six to nine. A few of the interviewees considered the outside assistance of a coach, mentor or advisor but the questionnaire respondents did not, even though they highly recommended this as a strategy for self-coaching (Bradbury, 1999). The questionnaire respondents also did not suggest year-end review as a step. This may be because it was not suggested in the nine potential steps and that it was felt to be inherent in steps six to nine.

The idea of accountability and reviewing the plan at year-end was little mentioned. This is definitely a requirement for self-coaching. In response to a question asking the interview respondents to explain their training regime, many of them included an evaluation or year-end review of their training but yet did not often propose it as a step for self-coaching. Andrew Lindsay, a 1996 Olympic archer, commented on his training review and analysis.

It's like an annual report. We made this much money, I shot these scores, and I think to myself that's a really good score, lately my scores have been really high. I write down all the positive things first, and then I wasn't happy with how my concentration was, or I wasn't doing a certain thing right, and I'll work on it (13 June 1998).

Craig Barrett a 1996 Olympic race walker who collapsed from exhaustion within sight of the 50 kilometre race finish line and gold medal at the 1998 Commonwealth Games, supported Lindsay's approach.

I do a lot of my training by heart rate…I'll monitor my sessions, I'll analyse how the session went, I'll make comparisons all the time, so I'm very, I'm just analytical I guess, by nature that's the way I work. And I'll take a very methodical approach…It's kinda over the top in comparison to what most people would do…I set an achievable goal, what's my objective for the season…at the end of the year sort of treat it like I'm in a business…I've got to be accountable to people…did I achieve my goals… (5 June 1998).

It is interesting to note that the interviewees were not provided with a list of potential steps whereas the questionnaire respondents were and the steps are very similar. The interview respondents were asked to provide their steps in the order they felt necessary to follow as outlined in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Interviewee's Steps to Self-Coaching.

Interview Responses	Ranking
Identify where you are, what you want to do, where you want to be	1
Set goals and objectives to get the big picture	2
Write a progressive plan and identify strategies to achieve goals and objectives realising your own strengths and weaknesses	3
Discuss, ask questions, analyse to think how to do it better	4
Identify weaknesses and then strategies to correct performance and make improvements	5
Implement the plan	6
Have an outside observer critique and evaluate what you are doing	7
Accountability: year-end review to see if goals and objectives achieved	8

In support of the above results some of the interviewees expressed their attitudes succinctly. Brant Woodward, a 1996 clay target shooter whose goal was to win an Olympic medal, spoke of his attitude towards a set plan.

What I'm finding, especially over the last few months…had a slump in form and I'm trying to sort it out, and pushing hard…So I'm sort of seeing that for me to achieve what I need to achieve, I'm finding now I've got to get more and more regimented about the process I put in place. While a lot of it up to date has probably been a bit more of what one might say loose, as far as no set procedure, I'm seeing that I'm getting into a procedure where I'm making myself actually train a lot more. Not only at range training; if I can't get there then what I do, every moment I have spare, I'm thinking about how I'm going to approach this next training session. What I'm going to do, what to achieve, writing those things down, becoming I suppose very sort of, a lot more organised about it. So when I go out to the range this weekend, I'll be going there with a particular purpose to be working on a particular aspect, and the aspect that I believe is holding me back…And as I shoot, at the end of each round, I'll be reflecting a little bit on why did that work or why didn't that work. Even if you have had a bad day training, you've got to be able to walk away with some positive aspect (17 April 1998).

Paul MacDonald, double gold medallist in the 1984 Olympics and gold, silver and bronze medallist in the 1988 Olympics, agreed that training programmes should be more formalised but was a little tentative about it.

It scares me that it (programme development) has become so regimented now. I think it's a tool you need, and that a lot of that can be done mentally. We get very much into the programme of setting goals and little goals and all the correct things that you have to do. And putting them down on paper, but sometimes it becomes so formalised that its scary…For some athletes it definitely needs to be done. Other athletes would do it naturally. Occasionally you have just got to get out there and thrash yourself (9 April 1998).

In contrast, Ann Hare, a 1996 athletics Olympian and a professed self-coacher

religiously planned and supported the formalised, regimented process.

The last two or three years of my career I was coaching myself. I would actually sit down and write a plan so that I had, what the goals were, how they were spaced, whether it was practical to do them, whether I had to maybe treat one as a minor goal, you know, just going through that whole goal setting process. And then I would write out how I wanted my training to be structured around those events. It was always a method of working backwards, I was always taught to work backwards…then work out what the actual training sessions were going to entail…once I'd done all that I would actually get my coach, who really was an advisor at that stage, just to come and have a look at it and he'd sort of, 9 times out of 10, there would be nothing that he would change (17 April 1998).

Sharon Ferris, a 1996 Olympian in the Europe class, works similarly to Hare supporting and reflecting on the planning of her self-coaching. Programme planning is very much Sharon's life. Everything she does or thinks is aimed at her Olympic dream and she trains 24 hours a day in search of that dream.

I've got a big wall chart that has every month, every regatta I am doing, every training, what days I can have off, what days I can do this, doctors' appointments, how many hours I am going to train, right up to the end of 2000. For analysis and revision I have a diary, and also in that programme I have, "three weeks before, choose mast and sail that I will compete with" in such and such regatta (5 May 1998).

Conclusion

Many New Zealand athletes are assuming the role of a coach and coaching themselves without any steps to guide this endeavour. This paper has suggested research-based steps or guidelines to enhance their performance through self-coaching. These steps were re-worded slightly from those in the questionnaire and those gained in the interviews to aid in comprehension and implementation by the end users. They are as follows:

- identify a vision
- set goals and objectives
- situational/experimental analysis
- develop a plan of action incorporating strategies for goals/objectives achievement
- identify feedback mechanisms for performance assessment
- monitor and review
- identify control mechanisms for performance reassessment.

These steps or guidelines offer the elite athlete a structured business-type plan to aid them in preparation for self-coaching. The steps are clearly delineated and easily followed. By implementing self-coaching strategies (Bradbury, 1999) self-coaching experiences can be enhanced.

Application of the findings from this research may assist New Zealand athletes and athletes world-wide to achieve a higher level sporting excellence. Self-coaching is not applicable only to New Zealand. Other athletes who participate to achieve their optimum potential may have to deal with situations by self-coaching not by choice, but by default. Self-coaching steps may guide them in this search of excellence.

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