



## COACH DEVELOPMENT

### Late Winter Coaching Reflections

**Submitted by:** Gerry Dragomir, FCPA, Chartered Professional Coach



I can say that I have coached participants at all levels of development, all genders too. I've coached team sport and individual sport. I've coached Olympics and Special Olympics. I've coached summer and winter sports. I coach even when it's not sport.

Every late winter for summer sports and late summer for winter sports, I spend some time looking at what will be different this season. Perhaps you do as well. This winter I'm looking at my whole career, which has spanned 45 years. I'm looking at my whole career because I've recently changed my coaching role quite radically and I need to figure out how this new role will work.

I started out **coaching a sport**, because that was the way that I was taught. That was also the way that I was coached for the 15 years prior to taking on a coaching role. Some of the teams that I was on were successful, sometimes and I improved, so it seemed like the right way to go.

Athletes were one of the many things that you worked with to successfully **coach the sport**. Athletes were an incidental part of the whole process, just one of the many variables you needed to manipulate. You chose the athletes that you wanted to work with based on which had the best qualities for executing the sport, much like you would choose any other appliance. The athletes were between 8 and 12 years old and so were mostly compliant with this approach.

Fortunately, I could not help but pay attention to the athlete part of the coaching mix. Over a few seasons (I'm a slow learner) I noticed that I could get way better performance and the athletes and I could have way more fun if I switched to **coaching the athlete**, rather than coaching the sport.

**Coaching the athlete** turned out to be a lot more work than I thought. When coaching the sport, the athlete development program is a fixed system/process and the athlete is coached to fit the system. This is a very popular method in any environment that has high volumes of participants and relatively low volumes of coaches (think school systems, or maybe your sport club or league). However, the method had some significant limitations when trying to apply it in a performance-based context because it is a compliance-based system and not a performance-based system.

Coach performance, in relation to the athlete, requires a high technical skill level (knowing your subject matter) and it also requires the capacity to understand the athlete, the ability to then “speak the athlete’s language”, the creativity to be able to adapt the system to the particular strengths and perspectives of the athlete, and the willingness to do the work in the face of skeptical peers/superiors. The reasoning above explains why a fixed development system can’t accommodate an athlete-focused development process. An athlete-focused development process requires a much higher performing coach.

**Coaching the athlete** took me a long way toward my goal of making a positive difference. I was able to gain a life-long appreciation for how difficult it is to understand other people. We have some really bad habits and slovenly behaviours that allow us to accept really crap performance as exceptional. We can talk ourselves into believing just about anything if we think that doing so is in our best interest. We’re quite messed up when it comes to working with people. Once I was thinking along these lines it seemed like there was both a time and a need for a change.

(Insert nearly a decade of personal development and psychological study) The change turned out to be **coaching performance**. How is this different from either of the other 2 options? What’s different, is that the first 2 involve doing something to the athlete. **Coaching performance** involves doing something with the athlete. It’s more of a partnership than a hierarchical relationship. It’s true that, in all cases, the coach has higher skill development. It’s true in most cases that the coach has greater physical and mental developmental maturity than the athlete. It is never true that the coach has greater understanding of the athlete than the athlete. That can never be true (neural transplants notwithstanding). Each party brings an element of capability that the other can’t provide. I see that as an equal partnership.

As an equal partner, the coach must understand that this may bring functionality down to the level of a 4-year-old. However, which is more reasonable to be able to achieve, the coach relearning how the 4-year-old perspective works, or trying to get a 4-year-old to behave like an adult. This turns out to be a scalable concept as I experienced in my coaching career. The function of the partnership exists at the level of the athlete. It even works when the tide is turned, and the coach has a lower capability on both sides of the partnership. This type of situation exists only at the absolute peaks of performance. This is the arena where the full dynamic potential of being able to meld multiple different capability perspectives into a single performative unit can be observed. It’s more fun than it sounds.

And so, this new coaching role, that I mentioned way above (in case you forgot), appears that it will require yet one more change of dynamic principles to make the change that I need to make. While I haven’t ever gotten a catchy name for the new thing until well after the change has been made. This time I think that it is different. It’s time to start calling my shots. I’m thinking of **COACHING the sport**. I’m no longer directly working with athletes on a daily basis. There is a lot of learning to document and impart. I have 2 thoughts on this; what does this look like and is it going to be as difficult and resource-heavy as the last two changes?

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