

BE THE COACH YOU WANT TO BE

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There are no rules or clear pathways to become a great coach. There are no laws that say you should do this or you should do that. There is no set or established plan that you must follow to become a good coach or a great coach. John Wooden did it his way, Bill Walsh did it his way, and Pat Summit does it her way. So how do you figure out how to become a good coach, a better coach, or a great coach? How do you become the coach you want to be? Is there a special course to take, or a special book to read? We often read biographies about the great “guru” coaches of some sports and they all seem to be different. Some have tried to learn everything they can about their sport, or are great “historians “ of their sport, some have studied great leaders in business and military history and employ those same tactics in their career and sport. Some are not the greatest tacticians, but are great people managers. Some might have even just been in the right place at the right time... but if they became great coaches they were more than just lucky. From my experience working with and observing some leading coaches there are certain predictable abilities and characteristics that the great coaches have in common. They can be summarized into several different categories, including (but not limited to) knowledge and education, attitude, planning and character. We all know some coaches who know a lot about the game but have questionable character and integrity. We all know some coaches who have planned and managed their career to perfection, but are not the leaders in knowledge (beyond x’s and o’s) of their sport. Some are great recruiters or talent scouts... but lousy teachers. There are no “rules.” Nothing is mandatory in this business, but if you want to be the best you can be, here are some guidelines.

KNOWLEDGE AND EDUCATION

You don’t have to have a “PhD” in your sport; but if you want to be the best, you should seek to know as much about the sport as you can. Respect the sport and the fact that there is a body of knowledge to understand about any sport. If you treat your sport and coaching as inconsequential, then you won’t be taken seriously. Take as many formal courses as you can. If your sport offers coach education course seek them out and take them. If your sport doesn’t have formal courses, explore the International Federation for your sport ... sometimes they offer coach education courses. If you can’t find courses in your own sport, look for coach education courses in other sports. In fact, once you have taken all the coach education courses in your sport it is a great learning experience to take coach education courses in other sports.

Cross-fertilization works wonders for innovation and creativity and setting yourself apart from your peers. Look everywhere for coach education material – books, DVDs, videos and so on. The more you know the better you will be. And think beyond your sport. Look for courses on leadership, communication, time management in other areas beyond coaching; skills in other industries transfer well into coaching and vice versa.

EXPERIENCE

Nothing beats “having been there done that”. But you can’t always start out with the head job and get all the experience you need at once. Volunteer as much as you can for as many different situations as you can. Find the coaches you want to be around or the situations where you need more experience and volunteer. Take stats, shoot video, put up the nets and shag balls. Do

whatever it takes to get some experience. Any time you can be around top coaches (and athletes) is time well spent ...as long as you have a plan and make good use of the time.

PLAN IT AND MAKE IT WORTHWHILE

Volunteering is good in itself. But plan it and make it worthwhile. Don't just volunteer to "spend time." Volunteer to learn ...it's an investment in your career if you plan it and work it. Make a list of the strengths you want to cultivate, or the weaknesses you want to strengthen. Volunteer in situations that will help you get better in that area. This might include things like: improving time out communication strategies, managing star athletes, understanding the application of medicine and science better, dealing with volunteers/parents or any number of other areas. Figure out what you need to do and know, and where you can get it. When you are volunteering take notes, observe what happens around you and ask questions. But remember, the objective (or at least the learning objective) when you are volunteering is not to change the coach you are working with or take over the program...it is to learn what to do or not do when it is your turn and to develop your own personal coaching character and style.

PUT YOURSELF IN THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT

Volunteering is one way to put yourself in the right environment; however, not everyone can always find the time to do that. If you can't find a way to volunteer, find a way to be around the best people. Who is the best coach in your league, your city, or your State? Make plans to be around these people, whether it is in the same competitions, or whether you just go to their competitions and observe how they operate. Invite them to come and talk to your team or school or club. And don't just limit yourself to the best coaches. Find a way to be around good people and experts in other fields. Observe how they operate. How they deal with people? How they meet challenges and handle setbacks?

ESTABLISH A PERSONAL PATTERN OF LEARNING AND IMPROVING

Most of the things I mentioned above revolve around establishing a pattern of learning. You should take every opportunity to observe and learn from the best (and the worst) coaches. As a coach you will be at literally hundreds of competitions over time. Focus on your game and your own teams while you are in competition; but after that is over; spend some time observing other coaches at work. You can even get a lot out of watching college and professional coaches on television. Observe how they react to success and failure, how they react to adversity (bad calls by officials, bad decisions by athletes etc) on the field, how they interact with officials. Reflect on their behavior and reactions and visualize what you would do and how you would react if (when) you were in that situation.

As well as observing other coaches, how about observing your self? I have said in previous articles in the Olympic Coach magazine that coaches are spending more and more time filming and analyzing their athletes (and their competition). This is great; but how about turning the camera on yourself for a while. Ask a friend or another coach film you at work ...either in a practice or competition situation (preferable both) and observe how you operate. How do you communicate with athletes? What is the balance between positive and negative feedback? How do you function in time outs? What is the ratio between activity and verbal instruction in your practices? How do you spread your interaction between all the athletes on the team in competition and training? There are a thousand things to observe and that is not the focus of

this article. The point is, how are you learning? How and what are you learning from the great coaches and what are you learning from yourself?

LISTEN TO YOUR ATHLETES AND PARENTS

Don't be afraid to seek input and feedback from athletes and parents....at the right time. Don't ask them how you rate as a coach 10 minutes after you have lost the league championship. Structure it. At the beginning of the season when you lay out the season plan, your philosophy and expectations for the athletes, team and parents, explain that one of your goals is to improve your own skills as a coach. Let everyone know what you hope to achieve as a coach and let everyone know that at certain times in the season you will be seeking their honest feedback about how you are doing and what areas you need to improve...just like you would do with your athletes (it wouldn't hurt parents to do an in-season and post-season review of their performance as well – but that's another story). Some coaches will argue against this strategy because they think that athletes and/or parents will give negative reviews because you have lost games, didn't get enough playing time, or because they have hidden agendas. This might be the case sometimes; but ask yourself how could you possibly evaluate yourself and improve your skills if you avoid honest feedback from two of the most critical stakeholders in your profession. If you structure feedback sessions or "report cards" so that they seek honest feedback with examples of strengths and weaknesses you will filter out the "disgruntled" athlete or parent and get to your true evaluation.

WHAT DOES YOUR NETWORK LOOK LIKE?

Not many coaches make it "to the top" by themselves. Most of the best ones have at least one mentor. Most of them spent a lot of time around coaches when they were growing up as either a child of a coach or as a young athlete. Most of them have a strong support team behind them. Make sure you identify people whom you admire and can learn from and seek them out as mentors. Most good/great coaches, who are leaders, value what they do and are proud of their profession and love their sport. They often love the chance to mentor others who have the same love of coaching and commitment to learning as they do. Take advantage of it. If you ask someone to be a mentor and they say no...don't give up, keep looking until you find someone who will help you. It works both ways; don't be afraid to be a mentor to someone else. Being objective and reflecting on someone else's performance can sometimes open your eyes to yourself. And don't forget that your mentor(s) can come from outside sport and coaching.

THE BOTTOM LINE....

The bottom line is that most great coaches don't go from novice volunteer coach to a "great" coach instantaneously. They work hard, they sacrifice and sometimes they take chances. In all cases, they love the game and they respect the sport and the profession. They make a commitment to learning and excellence. Every opportunity is a learning opportunity. They have standards and a coaching philosophy and they don't compromise.

Being a great coach doesn't mean winning the World Series or the Super Bowl...you can all be great coaches at your respective level....but you have to plan it and work it. It won't happen by itself. It starts right now...at your next practice, your next competition, the next book you read, the next video you watch. What are you waiting for?