

Athlete-Centred Coaching in University Sport: A Foucauldian Analysis

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The purpose of this study was to investigate how, and to what extent, athlete-centred coaching practices were utilized in a university sport context. This project was informed by sociocultural coaching research that has demonstrated the potential negative consequences of disciplinary coaching approaches and in what ways, if at all, an athlete-centred coaching approach can address some of these concerns. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight varsity head coaches and then analyzed through a Foucauldian lens. The findings suggested that the successful delivery of athlete-centred coaching in university sport is made difficult by ingrained power relations and forms of knowledge which have traditionally made the coach the primary decision maker.

Keywords: coaching, athlete-centred, Foucault, discipline

Recently, athlete-centred coaching has emerged as a framework intended to improve athletes' ability to solve problems and make decisions by promoting greater athlete autonomy (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Miller & Kerr, 2002). While many sport psychology scholars have touted athlete-centred coaching approaches as a form of 'best' coaching practice, a number of sociological-informed coaching scholars have suggested that the complex realities of coaching make the implementation of many athlete-centred practices challenging (Denison, Mills, & Konoval, 2017; Jones, 2006; Nelson, Cushion, Potrac, & Groom 2014). According to Barker-Ruchti and Tinning (2010), in coaching contexts with a strong disciplinary legacy, where athletes tend to be closely monitored and controlled, the idea of providing athletes with greater autonomy can be difficult to imagine. This led Denison, Mills, and Konoval (2017) to ask: Is adopting an athlete-centred approach even possible without also disrupting the effects of discipline?

This study aimed to build on Denison et al's. (2017) concern by addressing the following questions with respect to coaching at the university level: In what ways, through specific actionable practices, do coaches understand and implement athlete-centred

approaches? In what ways, if at all, do these specific practices depart from sport's strong disciplinary framework and legacy? And finally, what challenges or pressures do coaches face in attempting to implement athlete-centred approaches in the context of a university sport season?

In what follows, I first trace the development of athlete-centred coaching as a specific coaching style along with the shortcomings I see with its various intentions from a Foucauldian perspective. I then outline my data collection procedures followed by a discussion and analysis of my results, before concluding with some suggestions that I believe can offer coaches interested in adopting an athlete-centred approach greater opportunities to enhance their athletes' experiences, as well as their performances.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Despite the common belief that sport participation is inherently positive, research has shown that the potential benefits of sport participation are highly context dependent (Coakley, 2016; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Weiss, 2016). In particular, researchers have identified that when winning is overemphasized by coaches the beneficial outcomes of sport can be diminished (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Lombardo, 1999; Miller & Kerr, 2002). In an attempt to address the potential problematic effects that can arise when coaches focus primarily on winning, more athlete-centred approaches to coaching have recently received greater attention.

Athlete-centred coaching is a holistic approach to coaching that promotes the long-term development of an athlete's ability to analyze, problem solve, and make decisions (Lombardo, 1999). Athlete-centred coaches encourage athletes to become self-aware and self-sufficient, with the intention of facilitating learning rather than strictly dictating and controlling athletes' behaviours (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). Through this approach, athlete-centred coaches attempt to optimize the physical, cognitive, psychological, and social benefits of sport participation by providing athletes with greater opportunities to shape their development (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Miller & Kerr, 2002).

Also important to consider with respect to athlete-centred coaching, is that coaching is a social process highly dependent on context, and complicated by various interpersonal relationships and power relations (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac., 2009; Cushion et al., 2003; Cushion, 2013; Potrac et al., 2000). In this sense, while athlete-centred coaching approaches intend to depart from directive-centred instruction into a learning partnership between coach and athlete, many existing social, cultural and political pressures can push coaches to maintain their traditional practices even if they

are open to changing them (Cushion, 2013). More specifically, as a number of coaching sociologists who have turned to the work of Michel Foucault (1995), such as Barker-Ruchti and Tinning (2010), Denison (2007), Gearity and Mills (2012), and McMahon, Penny, and Dinan-Thompson (2012) have shown, the emphasis on order and efficiency evident in most traditional coach-centred approaches are reminiscent of other areas of social life identified by Foucault including the military, schools, prisons, and hospitals.

For example, in a typical classroom space is tightly controlled through what Foucault (1995) termed the *art of distributions*, “wherein pupils can now be supervised, judged and classified according to their abilities...to eliminate confusion and neutralize the inconveniences” (p. 142). Likewise, time for Foucault is closely regulated through the *control of activity*, wherein an act, such as military drill, is broken down into segments to ensure its precision. In this regard, time penetrates the body so that “the rhythm imposed by signals, whistles, orders imposed on everyone temporal norms that were intended both to accelerate the process of learning and to teach speed as a virtue” (p. 154). Activities within large social institutions are also specifically and intentionally segmented, according to Foucault, based on difficulty and bringing individuals towards a “terminal state” while also determining their rank in what he called the *Organization of Geneses*. And ultimately, the *Composition of Forces*, Foucault determined, brought all of these techniques together to ensure that their collective force produced an individual who could become an efficient and predictable member, or cog, of a highly-functioning and multi-segmented machine.

These disciplinary techniques, as Shogan (1999) identified in her early mapping of Foucault’s (1995) analysis of discipline onto sport, are clearly evident within many coaches’ normal or everyday practices. For example, attend any coach’s practice and one is likely to see countless examples of the organization and control of space, time, and movement in order to ensure a productive and efficient practice based on the coach’s expectations and the specific knowledge and beliefs they hold.

While such order and control can be very useful and make athletes and teams into winners, this process also carries with it a number of unintended consequences that can severely hamper athletes’ experiences. Chief among these effects, according to Foucault (1995), was the imposition of ‘docility’, a state whereby athletes become passive and obedient, and as such are less likely to ever question or challenge their coach’s authority and control over their development, even when invited to do so. And this point is especially important because despite the presumption many coaches have that they are coaching in athlete-centred ways because they are providing their athletes opportunities to speak up and make decisions, so pervasive is discipline’s effects and legacy that their athletes rarely take up these opportunities in a genuine way and instead continue to defer to their coach’s authority and expertise.

Despite these reservations about the efficacy of athlete-centredness, I do not want to rule out the potential benefits of an athlete-centred approach. In fact, the intention of athlete-centred approaches to promote athlete involvement and autonomy are related somewhat to the problems associated with strong disciplinary coaching practices. And while coaches are likely to support the ideas of athlete autonomy, engagement, and empowerment espoused by various athlete-centred initiatives, sociocultural research suggests that the disciplinary context of high-performance sport can complicate the implementation of such practices. It was for this reason that I wanted to interview university coaches given the emphasis placed on winning in this context in order to better understand the possibilities of athlete-centred coaching as a approach to support a more holistic way of developing university athletes.

RESEARCH METHODS

In guiding my study's design, I was particularly interested in how university team sport coaches have come to understand what athlete-centered coaching means to them and how they have translated this understanding into their coaching practice. Importantly, team sports differ significantly from individual sports, as coaches must account for players' abilities to coexist and work together towards a common goal. While sports such as track and field or swimming do include elements of teamwork, my study focused on sports where competition involves several athletes working together simultaneously.

Participants were recruited based on purposeful, criterion-based sampling, as "information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (Patton, 2002, p. 30). The eight coaches who participated in this study were both male and female, and were all the head coach of a men's or women's team sport within the context of Canadian university sport.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews provided a platform for the coaches to share their understandings and experiences (Markula & Silk 2011). Moreover, open-ended discussion enabled an interaction between each coach and myself as the researcher (Markula & Silk, 2011). Each participant completed a single, in-depth, face-to-face interview that lasted between 60 to 120-minutes conducted in a semi-private location such as their office or a coffee shop where an uninterrupted and purposeful conversation was possible. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by me as the researcher.

My Foucauldian-based interview guide and analysis procedures, which were derived from previous athlete-centred coaching literature as well as recent coaching research conducted from a Foucauldian perspective, allowed me to locate each coach's

experiences with athlete-centred coaching within the historical, political, and social contexts of sport more broadly and university sport more particularly (Markula & Silk, 2011).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through the process of analysing my interview, I identified three themes that most evidently addressed how university coaches do and do not understand and utilize athlete-centred coaching approaches. The first of these three themes addresses how coaches have come to learn about athlete-centred coaching, and how they define what athlete-centred coaching means as a method to improve their athletes' performances and experiences. Under my second theme, I considered the ways in which coaches used athlete-centred coaching approaches outside the playing arena through various forms including leadership groups and processes of forming team values. The third theme addressed how coaches utilized athlete-centred coaching in their sport training sessions.

Coaches' Understanding of Athlete-Centred Coaching

While the coaches in this study had varied and unique backgrounds leading to their coaching philosophies, how these coaches articulated their understanding of athlete-centred coaching was remarkably similar. Every coach highlighted the importance of placing the athletes at the forefront of their decision-making process, but also referred to several other points of emphasis. Jason, Dave, Erik, and Sean identified the importance of developing well-rounded people, an holistic facet of athlete-centredness which accompanies sport performance. Jason identified the importance of viewing sport as a vehicle for learning. "For me, athlete-centred coaching is designed for an athlete to develop in multiple ways which will serve them for the rest of their life. Our whole program is set up for that." Jason suggested that sport performance was a by-product of values and behaviours which transcend the sporting arena. Similarly, Sean defined athlete-centred coaching with reference to the holistic development of the athletes.

How am I making sure my athletes are getting socially, emotionally, athletically, what they need out of their sport context. If I'm doing my job they'll be happy, well-adjusted people enjoying their sport and performing the best they can.

Defining athlete-centredness as an emphasis of the holistic development of athletes closely mirrors the intentions of the model to optimize potential physical, cognitive,

psychological, and social benefits of sport participation (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Miller & Kerr, 2002).

While coaches like Jason presented success as a by-product of the values emphasized through holistic coaching, other coaches were more explicit in highlighting the links between athlete-centred coaching and performance. Mary stated that athlete-centred coaching was key to producing motivated athletes.

At that time, especially in our sport, the primary method of motivation was fear and intimidation. There was a sort of new way coming through educational psychology and into sport where there may be a different way of doing it so that people can be self-motivated. So at that time the attention started coming to the individual, and the buzzword of being athlete-centred came in.

The shifting emphasis that Mary described does not only relate to the intention to motivate, but also alludes to the potentially problematic effects of traditional coaching through “fear and intimidation”. Interestingly, Mary framed athlete-centredness as a “buzzword” and a means of promoting self-motivation, rather than a holistic philosophy which counters the problematic effects of old-school coaching. Similarly, Blake highlighted the importance of motivation in defining athlete-centred coaching. By giving the athlete more control and input into what they are doing, athletes “buy into decisions, and you’re more invested than being told what to do.”

Although defining an athlete-centred approach as an important part of athlete motivation and empowerment, both Blake and Mary were quick to point out that their programs needed to be “athlete-centred but coach driven” (Blake) to avoid the “athletes running the asylum” (Mary). This caveat is an interesting perspective that is unique from the more holistic conceptualization of athlete-centredness outlined by Jason and Sean, and furthermore connects with Foucault and Khalfa’s (2006) work on madness and the birth of asylums. Foucault outlined how asylums developed from positivism as a way of exerting control and organization in order to manipulate the physical manifestations of ‘madness.’ Through mechanisms like observation in order to foster “self-restraint”, Foucault proposed that rather than a form of freedom, the asylum was a “positive operation that enclosed madness in a system of rewards and punishments” (p. 487). Mary’s language indicated that, rather than true freedom and empowerment, her continued exertion of control may more closely resemble the use of athlete-centredness as a systemic tool to produce a result.

Rather than a philosophy intended to produce universal growth, Mary and Blake framed the purpose of athlete-centred coaching as a tool to facilitate athlete motivation. Avner, Denison, and Markula (2019) described how university coaches used the

construct of fun in a similar way, as an instrument through which to improve performance and motivation. While other scholars have promoted the increase of “fun” or enjoyment in “challenging the win at all cost mentality” of the professional model of sport (Bigelow, Moroney, & Hall, 2001; Mastrich, 2002), Avner et al. (2019) problematized the way in which coaches strategically and selectively used fun. Rather than undermining traditional practices that tend not to be fun, “these uses of fun operated to support dominant disciplinary training practices that previous Foucauldian-informed coaching scholars have shown to be problematic” (p. 57). For instance, an athlete not having fun was characterized by coaches as “not having the ‘right’ mental make-up to play at the highest level of the game” (p. 44). In this way, ‘fun’ was employed by coaches to naturalize traditional training practices as difficult or monotonous. Similarly, athlete-centred coaching may be used selectively by coaches to empower their athletes when it is easy to do so and stakes are low.

Empowerment Away from the Playing Field

The coaches interviewed in this study identified several different strategies to increase athlete responsibility away from the playing field. Among these, the three most notable included allowing athletes a voice in forming and enforcing team norms and values, the use of captains and athlete leadership groups, and the process of relationship building between coach and athlete. While most of the coaches expressed a straightforward intention to improve both the athlete experience and their athletes’ performances through these tactics, the structures and procedures utilized were more complicated. In several cases, the athlete-centred strategies these coaches used to ‘empower’ their athletes were characteristic of more traditional, disciplinary forms of coaching. A common thread throughout this theme was the importance of hierarchy and structure, tools which coaches utilized to ensure that they maintained significant influence on their individual athletes, and programs as a whole.

To varying degrees, coaches identified the importance of athletes setting the tone for the team in terms of values and norms. For instance, Sean structured a formal exercise where the team set expectations for behaviours related to practice, academics, relationships, and social life. Because of the athletes’ involvement in defining expectations, Sean expressed that the enforcement of consequences when these expectations were not met became easier. “It’s their team. So, police your team room, make sure things are running the way we want to live based on the values that we’ve all agreed upon.” In this case, athletes were empowered through their active participation in not only the formation, but also the enforcement of values which normalize team behaviour. Despite the intention to empower, Foucault (1995) wrote that “normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to

determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another” (p. 184). Foucault suggested that the process of normalization is in itself disciplinary, making it difficult for coaches attempting to strike a balance between the intention of empowerment and the formalization of norms and values.

Mary also described the process of value formation and the importance of these structures.

We pretty much know how we do what we do, and a lot of it is not necessarily passed from the coach to the newer athletes, but from the older athletes. If there is a change in what we do, that’s where you’d see me being athlete-centred... Any time you change routines or norms it can be really disruptive.

Mary went on to say that although she has the final say, when making a change to the established norms of behavior, it is important for her to consult with her athletes as “probably 90% of the decisions I make I want their opinion on”.

While Mary stated that consulting with her athletes prior to making a change was athlete-centred, several facets of this practice more closely resemble traditional disciplinary structures. The normative “what we do” described by Mary can homogenize and restrict behavior (Foucault, 1995) rather than empower athletes. Rather than true empowerment, these athletes are influenced to make decisions which fit within the normative expectation of the team culture. What the team does influences athlete choice, and rewards behavior that does not disturb the status quo.

That is not to say that this normative structure is not useful or necessary, as Foucault (1995) posited that discipline is productive. As demonstrated in his examinations of areas like the military, Foucault showed that discipline contributes to efficient, predictable behavior which is valued in these settings. Mary placed a tremendous amount of importance on the stability of this normative structure, pointing out that athletes can depend on predictable routines and that any change can be “stressful and traumatic.” The importance of this predictability, and Mary’s reservations about implementing changes that destabilize the status quo, are addressed by the effects of discipline that Foucault (1995) described. As he stated, “discipline fixes; it arrests or regulates movements; it clears up confusion; it dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways; it establishes calculated distributions” (p. 219). So although Mary verbalized her athlete-centred intentionality, the translation of the normative structure implemented in her program may be counteractively disciplinary, and carry unintended consequences that do not contribute to the ultimate goals of an athlete-centred approach.

The role of hierarchical observation in maintaining predictable, enforceable, normative behavior is integral for team sport coaches because of the difficulty in communicating with a large group. Dave expressed this when discussing the unique circumstances of coaching a large group.

It's important for us to have that leadership group because they become my eyes and ears, and they also become our voice. If the structure, or the machine is working well, then the captains are bringing the team needs to you and they're sharing and echoing the coaches' ideas, but also challenging the coaches in some ways.

Even while acknowledging the importance of athletes challenging coaches, Dave asserted the importance of hierarchy in ensuring efficiency while alluding to the machine-like logic of traditional approaches to sport coaching, language which closely mirrors Foucault's (1995) description of disciplinary power in the 19th century, wherein "the human body was entering a machinery of power that explored it, broke it down and rearranged it" (p. 138). Through this process, the coaching tactic of hierarchical leadership may, in reality, act as "a mechanics of power" (p. 138) through which behavior is regulated. This machine-like logic runs counter to an athlete-centred approach, where the goals include empowering athletes and encouraging creativity and decision-making,

Interestingly, Mary also discussed how empowering her captains depended on the context of the season. While throughout the year, these athletes were given responsibilities such as organizing team meals, Mary did not believe that this responsibility was appropriate when the pressure to win was highest. "I think taking the control from the athlete is liberating because they don't have that weight on them." It is notable that despite intentionally empowering her athletes off of the court, fears of decreased performance under pressure motivated Mary to take back control. "I think it's humanistic to do it. How can we minimize regression by freeing them?" Mary's language of "freeing" the athlete is actually the opposite within an athlete-centred context. Taking back control from previously empowered athletes suggests that, despite acknowledging the potential benefits of such a philosophy, Mary does not entirely buy in to the demonstrated benefits of such an approach. Kidman and Lombardo (2010), identified this tendency.

The idea of success as athlete learning, enjoyment, performance or growth is often overridden by a 'winning at all costs' attitude which ignores athletes' needs and sabotages the pursuit of excellence with the result that sport participation degenerates into a means to an end. (p. 39)

Rather than relying on an athlete-centredness as a philosophy, this logic treats athlete empowerment as an acceptable approach for a coach to take but certainly not when the stakes are highest.

The complications and pressures coaches experienced in utilizing athlete-centred philosophies were not unique to strategies away from the playing field. The third and final theme highlights the ways in which these coaches attempted to empower their athletes in practice, and how more disciplinary coaching techniques reappeared in various playing and training contexts.

Athlete-Centred Coaching on the Playing Field

Athlete-centred coaching on the playing field was similarly complicated by the different contexts of university sport. The coaches identified several strategies that they employed in attempting to encourage athletes to make decisions, and ultimately to improve their performance. However, in nearly every case the implementation of these tactics was tempered by a need to adjust in relation to context. Most frequently, coaches identified a need to take back control from the athletes when the pressure to perform was highest.

The idea of maintaining control while still attempting to empower athletes was a difficult balancing act for coaches. Mary pointed out that the utilization of athlete-centred tactics may open the coach up for criticism based on leniency, or an appearance of lacking control.

There's an illusion that because you are athlete-centred... I think I'm a humanistic coach, that you're soft. You still have to be in charge. I would never want anyone to think I'm not in control. I'm in control. They know who the boss is.

Although acknowledging the potential benefits of an athlete-centred approach, Mary suggested that her athletes were acutely aware of her authority and influence. The maintenance of control, and particularly the appearance of maintaining control, was an important part of using athlete-centred tactics. Despite an acknowledgement that athlete-centred coaching is beneficial, pressures to maintain control affected the perspective and behaviours of these coaches. "Society does not expect coaches to be facilitators; the stereotypical coach is loud and commanding, has an obvious presence, knows everything or at least acts that way and knows how to make decisions, is organized and has a 'take-charge' personality" (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010, p. 40).

Sean identified a change in his coaching practices as a result of the negative unintended consequences of controlling coaching practices. Prior to the change, Sean tracked and displayed his athletes' workout sessions outside of scheduled practice times

in order to ensure that the athletes were completing their work. However, the effects of this practice on his athletes was problematic, prompting him to make a change. “The public display... it just got weird internally. I stopped posting all of that. I think they got a little self-conscious”. Continuing, Sean said that the tactic of tracking and displaying workouts ultimately “shamed” athletes, rather than positively reinforcing behavior as he initially intended. Several disciplinary techniques could contribute to the problems Sean identified as resulting from this practice, including the normalizing gaze and its homogenizing effects, hierarchical observation as a reinforcement of disciplined behavior, and a public examination (Foucault, 1995). Through these techniques, an athlete is deprived of their own ability to make decisions, and is rather formed into a predictable, efficient member of the team because of the social processes which reward normalized behavior.

Among the potential drawbacks of these controlling measures is docility, wherein individuals become “cogs in a system” whose capacity to become active and engaged subjects is compromised (Foucault, 1995). The behaviours Sean identified as “self-consciousness” or “shame” could result from the docile-inducing disciplinary forces of observation and control. Foucault (1995) described docile bodies as those “in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions, or obligations” (p. 136). The imposition of discipline “made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility” (Foucault, 1995, p. 137). Through this process, athlete behavior can be policed while individuality, creativity, and decision making become devalued. While these effects contribute to predictability and efficiency, the negative consequences of discipline on the individual athlete contradict the purpose of athlete empowerment initiatives. Sean’s recognition of the unintended consequences of his coaching tactics, as well as his willingness to make a change, represent an athlete-centred approach that, although unintentionally in this case, could be informed by Foucauldian-informed sport sociologists such as Denison (2007).

While the idea of control addressed the athlete-centred approaches on the playing field generally, several coaches delved into further specifics. Dave discussed a conversation with two of his captains regarding the type of drill work they thought was most beneficial in practice. Rather than strictly structured tactical work, the athletes preferred small area games, where play is free flowing and “principle based”. Dave discussed these two drill structures as somewhat of a dichotomy, wherein small area games provided an opportunity for free-flowing, explorative learning, but tactical work was highly directive and structured. Although he does provide input in both formats, he describes tactical work as “let’s get the reps in and make sure they’re as close to perfection as possible in my mind.”

It is perhaps unsurprising that athletes prefer principle based, free flowing drills in part because of the potential to create docility in highly disciplinary contexts. In striving for “perfection”, Dave stated that he was more likely to step in and provide direct feedback. Through the strict monitoring of space, time, and movement, the discipline of tactical coaching embodies the “mechanics of power” wherein the body can be controlled “not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines” (Foucault, p. 138). Unlike more open, principle-based drill work, the direct feedback a coach provides in this setting is more likely to closely monitor and enforce normalized expectations of space, time, and movement. Foucault (1995) showed that the “composition of forces” exerted through these methods of discipline treat the body as a machine, producing predictability and efficiency. However, this process does not effectively address the intention of athlete-centred coaching to empower athletes and increase decision-making.

Dave thought that this type of coaching was necessary, but tried to maintain a balance with athlete-centred tactics geared towards athlete decision-making. However, when the team was slower than expected in achieving success at a given skill, more direct tactics remained the most frequently utilized. “At the end of the day we’re never going to be perfect and we’ll have ups and downs. I try to have an understanding of that. If it’s an ongoing issue then I might change and become a little more directive as a result.”

Blake also identified time as an important factor related to when he might abandon open-ended questioning for more directive coaching techniques. “I know that the theory and everything says the best thing is to ask them the question and let them discover that. You try to do that when you can. Sometimes it’s a time issue, or sometimes they’re just not getting it.” Going so far as to acknowledge that “it’s probably not the best coaching”, Blake still found himself reverting to direct, coach-centred practices because of the pressure to achieve performance outcomes as quickly and efficiently as possible. Despite both knowledge of the potential benefits of athlete-centred coaching, and an intentionality to empower athletes for the benefit of both their individual development and the team’s performance, traditional ‘old-school’ coaching tactics repeatedly took precedence for these coaches.

The use of video as a coaching tool was also frequently identified as a means of empowering athletes and encouraging decision-making. Mary described changing her practices in a particular drill, wherein an athlete performs a skill for a minute straight. Previous to the change, the coach provided feedback during and after the drill, however as a means of encouraging athlete autonomy, the athletes now watch their repetitions on video delay.

They used to rely on the coach to tell them what the quality of their set was. I used to have complete control over it because I would tell them whether it was good or not, but now it's shifted more for them to tell me what they saw.

While this change is intended to increase athlete responsibility and decision making, the use of video has also been criticized as disciplinary by sport sociologists. While it is true that the process of analysis and the provision of feedback is shifted away from the coach, the structure of surveillance created by self-analysis can still contribute to athlete docility. Taylor et al. (2017) have suggested that by analyzing video, the athlete is subjected to the normalizing gaze and is disciplined not only by the coach, but through the internalization of normative behavior within their sport. The disciplinary power enacted in this practice is not wielded by the coach, but is rather relational, wherein the expected behavior is reinforced and normalized through video surveillance. In this way, the “athlete-centred” approach of athlete self-analysis through video “is actually more about making athletes obedient and responsible not critical, questioning, independent and creative” (Denison, 2017, p. 8). Without coaches further examining the disciplinary underpinnings of these “athlete-centred” coaching tactics, it is unlikely that the alleged benefits of such practices will be realized.

Finally, coaches explicitly identified the importance of performance results late in the season as a factor inhibiting their use of athlete-centred coaching. While athlete-centred tactics were frequently used as a tool in low-stakes settings, coaches frequently reverted to more disciplinary, ‘coach-centred’ approaches when the pressure to win was highest. Blake suggested that while there was a time for explorative learning as a means of empowering athletes and encouraging decision making, the pressure of playoffs and the need to perform well led him to change his approach.

Now we get two weeks of preseason. That would be the period of time for open learning, where we let them try things. But if you're coming up to playoffs, OK I've got these 3-4 things that need to get done, so you're more directive and coach-driven.

While Blake recognized that athlete-centred ideals are potentially beneficial, they did not seem to be the primary driver of his decision making, as the control he was able to exert through more directive tactics was more relevant to his priorities, namely winning and performance.

Ruth echoed Blake's sentiments in discussing an open-concept, explorative learning opportunity she utilized to develop her team's strategy following a kick-off. In the drill, the athletes were given the opportunity to repeatedly play-out the scenario with

minimal structure provided from the coach in order to develop a more in-depth understanding of the tactical decisions available.

I'd like to go back to them and see what they learned. I'm hoping that they had some key takeaways to say 'this is what we could do' because they learned something from that moment. Ultimately in order to win in a big final, I think the tactics and holding people to task is more important.

Once again, although Ruth articulated the potential benefits of athlete-centred coaching, she preferred a more disciplinary tactical approach when the stakes were the highest. Kidman and Lombardo (2010) identified this tendency as a drawback of the "professional model of sport".

The financial and employment security of several individuals, including the coach, are dependent on athletes performing well and winning championships. In these circumstances the personal, cognitive/psychological and social development of the athlete is of lower priority than the more tangible performance goals. (p. 43)

While not truly a "professional" sporting environment, the difficulties university coaches identified in implementing athlete-centred coaching, and the reversion to more disciplinary approaches in high-pressure situations, indicates that this context much more closely resembles a professional environment than an educational environment.

The three themes presented in this section suggest the effective implementation of athlete-centred coaching tactics in this context is at best difficult and complicated, and at worst impossible. Social influences and power structures contribute to the reappearance of disciplinary coaching techniques which replace athlete-centred intentions as coaches maintain control in an effort to ensure their team performs at the highest levels. Rather than a true 'philosophy', athlete-centred tactics are used selectively when stakes are lowest in attempting to produce a particular outcome. As a result, the evidence provided in this study suggests that athlete-centred coaching may not be straightforward to successfully implement in the manner that many proponents have advocated.

CONCLUSION

This research project used a Foucauldian lens to investigate how university team sport coaches came to understand and utilize athlete-centred coaching in their daily practice.

In a field wherein traditional approaches have been highly disciplined, athlete-centred approaches to coaching aim to holistically empower athletes as a means of improving both their experiences and performances. The results of this study suggest that, rather than being aligned as initially anticipated, there was a considerable gap between the ways that coaches understood and implemented an athlete-centred coaching philosophy. As a result of this gap, well-intentioned practices which were aimed to empower athletes frequently maintained traditional methods of practice which were counteractively disciplinary and restrictive. For instance, the ‘empowerment’ of athletes through a hierarchical leadership structure contributed to a culture of homogenization and surveillance wherein behaviour was normalized. Rather than encouraging exploration and individuality, the power enacted by this structure permeated the group, incentivizing behaviour which fit within the norm.

My findings align with the position held by Denison et al. (2017) that within the disciplinary framework of high-performance sport coaching, the utilization of athlete-centredness and other empowerment initiatives may simply be rhetoric, rather than a philosophy which meaningfully disrupts many problematic traditional and taken-for-granted coaching practices. Furthering this notion were the repeated uses of athlete-centredness as a tool through which to create motivation. While coaches like Mary and Blake suggested that empowering athletes could increase athlete buy-in, these opportunities were employed selectively and strategically. Rather than a foundational philosophy underpinning their practice, these coaches used athlete-centred coaching opportunistically as a means of producing a particular result from their athletes. In this sense, the prevailing notion of coach control that runs through sport is not fundamentally changed. Athletes are not truly empowered, but are rather given responsibility and autonomy in particular settings when the coach deems this beneficial. Because the dominant formation of coaching practice was not subverted in the selective use of athlete-centred practice, it is unsurprising that potentially problematic disciplinary practices consistently reappeared.

While the coaches in this study expressed various difficulties, including the complications of coaching a team and varying levels of athlete experience, these findings suggest that the most obvious detractor from the use of athlete-centred coaching was the pressure to win. Although proponents of athlete-centred coaching suggest that encouraging athlete empowerment and decision making will increase performance, the coaches in this study struggled to continue the use of athlete-centred approaches when the stakes increased. Once again, this suggests that the dominant logic which maintains coach control has not been sufficiently undermined so that a true athlete-centred philosophy is possible.

As it relates to the specific settings wherein coaches employ athlete-centred approaches, it is noteworthy that these opportunities were more acutely developed and intentionally employed in settings away from the playing field. Coaches seemed more equipped to increase athlete investment by attempting to enable leadership and decision-making when these opportunities were not explicitly tied to performance. Although some structures maintained disciplinary traits such as hierarchical observation, every coach stated their intention to empower athletes through various methods of peer leadership and accountability. This widespread trend was much less pronounced when considering athlete-centred practices on the playing field.

Despite having problematized how athlete-centred coaching is currently understood and implemented in university team sport, there is much to be optimistic about as it relates to the development of athlete-empowerment initiatives and how they can positively affect effective and ethical sport coaching going forward. By attempting to empower athletes, improve decision making, and enact a more holistic approach to sport, athlete-centred coaching attempts to address the negative consequences of traditionally disciplinary coaching environments. What a coach may believe is in the best interest of their athletes, in part due to the prevalence of disciplinary practices in the entrenched coaching discourse, may actually contribute to athletes who lack creativity, experience burnout, and have trouble making independent decisions. That practices contributing to these outcomes appeared repeatedly throughout the study, despite coaches employing athlete-centred coaching approaches intended to foster creativity and decision making, only further highlights the need to think differently.

This is not to say that ethical coaching requires an abandonment of many long-standing ways of coaching, but rather that these ideas should be continuously problematized in order to better understand the effects they have on athletes and teams. Without a doubt, the expertise of a coach and the feedback they provide athletes are integral to the experience of sport. In order to coach ethically, however, a coach must carefully consider how and when they are providing structure, feedback, and direction, and what unintended consequences might be created through this process. Based on the results of this study, coaches are quick to uncritically seize back control from their athletes, or not provide the opportunity for empowerment at all.

Practically speaking, creating an empowered environment as a Foucauldian-informed coach would involve constant reflection, curiosity, and questioning rather than a passive acceptance and application of practices which are widely accepted. A departure from the traditional, linear logic of sport coaching would require consideration of the fluid, ambiguous social factors which affect sport performance. In the same way that athlete-centred coaching has recently entered the coach education curriculum, the further advancement of Foucauldian-informed coaching research into this area could

benefit future practice. By treating coaching as a social process requiring constant reflection, critique, and self-awareness, Foucauldian-informed coaches can account for the existing power relations in traditional approaches, and work towards truly empowering their athletes.

While at times educational, empowering, and rewarding, the challenging milieu of university sport can be equally damaging and frustrating. For coaches, navigating the challenges of this environment is complicated by myriad factors, including the team dynamic, the needs of individual athletes, and the pressure to win. Ultimately, by demonstrating the complicated processes contributing to the difficulty in the delivery of athlete-centred coaching, I am hopeful that the results of this study might help to encourage more informed, critical, holistic coaching practices. Rather than a trade-off, I am hopeful that coaching differently by considering social contexts and individual needs, and questioning approaches which have been taken for granted, can benefit not only the experience of the athlete and coach but also performance. By fundamentally changing the paradigm through which coaches approach their practice, coaches can strive for a more ethical and effective way of coaching.

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