

Behavioral characteristics of 'Favorite' Coaches:  
implications for Coach Education  
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**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper was to use athletes' and former athletes' memories of their favorite coach to improve coach education curriculum. Player preferences of coaching behavior can affect both their attitudes toward their sport experiences and team performance. By identifying positive coaching behaviors as recalled by athletes, coach educators can ensure that the curriculum in their courses reflects those preferences. University students enrolled in introductory coaching classes over a period of six years (12 semesters) were asked to list up to ten behavioral characteristics of their favorite coach in their athletic careers. Their responses were analyzed to determine specific examples of behaviors that defined coaches who were remembered as favorites. Comparisons were made with standardized measures of coaching characteristics in hopes of determining ways to improve the coach education curriculum.

**Behavioral Characteristics of Favorite Coaches: Implications for Coach Education**

Both researchers and practitioners agree the development of athletic talent is dependent upon quality coaching (Bloom, 1985; Cote, Baker & Abernathy, 2003). Likewise, the quality is often determined by how coaches behave in all aspects of their sport. Coaching behaviors in practice, at games, and away from the sport have strong influences on players (Murray, 2006) and can impact both players' performances and continued participation. Memories of athletes and former athletes can be very beneficial in determining the most valued behavioral characteristics of their coaches. The purpose of this descriptive study was to present composite memories of nearly 400 athletes and former athletes as to the characteristics of their favorite coach. Coding

methods established by Chelladurai and Saleh (1980) were used to classify coaching students' memories of the behaviors of their favorite coaches. Through this classification process, it was hypothesized coach educators could better understand preferred coaching characteristics of athletes, and develop, expand, or modify coach education curricula to produce more effective coaches (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2007).

As early as 1978, Chelladurai and Carron wrote that sport performance would be positively affected if coaches adapted their behaviors to comply with athletes' preferences. In the foundational work of the Leadership Scale for Sport (LSS), coaching behaviors were investigated as they related to players' preferences, coaches' perceptions, and actual coaching behaviors. This work resulted in extensive investigations of leadership behavior and preferred characteristics of coaches. Similarly, Hatfield (1986) noted that player satisfaction in sport is often a direct result of coaching behavior, not successful team performance. They further noted that positive coaching behavior was a key factor in many aspects of athletic performance. Later, Ansel (1990) found athletes and former athletes are powerful, yet often untapped resources for descriptions of coaching behaviors. Ansel (1990) felt since players experience coaching behaviors memories of athletes of their favorite coaches. The findings of this study can assist coach educators in the preparation of future coaches.

## Results

Students in introductory coaching classes provided positive behavioral descriptors (of their favorite coach from their athletic careers. For initial comparison, the participants' responses were divided by gender. Demographic characteristics of participants by genders are presented in Table 1.

The positive characteristics of both genders were sorted alphabetically, coded by themes and re-sorted based on the aforementioned five dimensions of Chelladurai and Saleh (1980). Approximately one-half of the behavioral characteristics were classified as belonging to the social support dimension.

Dimensions *	Males	Females
Social support	48%	48%
Training/ instruction	29%	32%
Positive feedback	12%	9%
Autocratic behavior	8%	7%
Democratic behavior	3%	4%

Social support characterized by concern for the welfare of individual athletes, positive group atmosphere & warm personal relations with members.

Training/instruction aimed at improving athletic performance by emphasizing and facilitating hard & strenuous work; instructing them in skills, techniques & tactics of the sport; clarifying the relationship among members & instructing & coordinating the members' activities

Positive feedback that reinforces an athlete by recognizing and rewarding good performance.

Autocratic behavior involves independent decision-making and stresses personal behavior authority.

Democratic behavior that allows greater participation by the athletes in group goals, practice method, games & tactics.

Table 1

That dimension is characterized as a coach showing concern for the welfare of the individual athlete, providing a positive group atmosphere and providing warm personal relationships with players. Examples of the most common raw descriptors in this dimension were caring (or cared), understanding, friend, respectful, supportive, fun, enthusiastic, fair, role model and honest. The second most mentioned dimension was the more traditional, training and instruction. About 30% of the responses were categorized as being related to this area that is characterized by improving athletic performance through hard work, skills development, practice in techniques and tactics, and instructing and coordinating other athletic activities (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980). Examples of the raw data from this dimension are knowledgeable, competitive, intense, organized, and smart, worked us hard, and had high expectations. Positive feedback, autocratic behavior and democratic behavior were the last three dimensions with about 10% or less of the responses in each area. While making up a minority of the traits, educators should acknowledge that they do play important roles. Male and female participants were very similar in their results (Table 2). The five dimensions for both genders ranked in the same order; social support first with nearly 50%, then training and instruction at about 30%, positive feedback about 10%, and autocratic behavior and democratic behavior, each at less than 10%. Based upon these results, there were little if any gender differences in the behavior of favorite coaches.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to use written responses of athletes and former athletes to determine the behavioral characteristics of coaches remembered as their favorites. From this information, coach educators could ensure that specific information related to the formation of positive (or favorite) behaviors of coaches would be included in the class. Approximately one-half of the behavioral characteristics of favorite coaches were classified as belonging to the social support

dimension. That dimension is characterized as a coach showing concern for the welfare of the individual athlete, providing a positive group atmosphere and providing warm personal relationships with players. Reinbot (2004) stressed the importance of the social environment of an athletic team. He defined a social atmosphere as one that is autonomy supportive, The Physical Educator emphasizes improvement, and is socially supportive. Positive social settings maximize the satisfaction of athletes' basic needs that, consequently, foster their well-being. Coaches can satisfy the need for autonomy, they wrote, by giving athletes' choices and options, providing rationale for requested behaviors, and encouraging self-regulation. At the same time, coaches should provide the information needed to solve problems, learn a new skill or strategy, thus promoting athletes' sense of competence. If accomplished, that coaching method developed athletes' self referenced improvement and increased their efforts in practice or competition. Finally, coaches should address the need for relatedness by accepting, caring for, and valuing players as people and not just performers. The second most mentioned dimension was the more traditional, training and instruction. About 30% of the responses were categorized as being related to this area that is characterized by improving athletic performance through hard work, skills development, practice in techniques and tactics, and instructing and coordinating other athletic activities (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980). Of course, coaches' knowledge of their sport, often described as the Xs and Os, is important. However, knowledge is not enough. Xs and Os are not enough. A coach must exhibit the necessary teaching skills to accompany that knowledge. It is important for also note that, demanding, hard-no s e d, competitive coaches can be both effective and perceived as favorites, but only if they exhibit those traits in a positive social environment. Teaching young coaches to accept that combination can be a daunting task. Traditionally, the new coach, fresh from her/his playing days, wants to concentrate on the Xs and Os and ignore or avoid the more mundane

tasks of organizational teaching skills. In addition, the same new coaches often do not possess the empathy for what it is like to be a beginner in the sport. The coaches often expect players to have the same levels of skills and motivation they possess without accepting that no athlete begins their participation with advanced skills or intense intrinsic motivation. Based upon these findings, coach educators should carefully examine the content on which their curriculum is based. In educating new coaches, curricula should stress that coaches can demand dedication, commitment to teamwork and hard work, while stressing technique and tactics if done in a positive environment. In those environments, athletes want coaches who care for them both on and off the field of play. From an educational perspective, more time should be spent with the beginning coach on how positive environments are created and maintained. Positive feedback, autocratic behavior and democratic behavior were the last three dimensions with about 10% or less of the responses in each area. While making up a minority of the traits, coach educators should acknowledge that they do play important roles. Gardner, et al (1996) and Weiss (1991) found coaches could promote higher levels of task cohesion for their players by using specific strategies. The authors found that motivating behaviors by coaches such as positive feedback, persona l coach/ athlete relationships, support and dedication had implications on team behavior, cohesion and morale. They concluded that since there are numerous other uncontrollable reasons for team separation (offense/defense/special teams; starters/non-starters, etc.), coaches should not contribute to the reduction of team unity by exhibiting negative behaviors (Gardner, et al, 1996); Weiss, (1991).

## Summary

Obviously, one of the more important roles of the coach in competitive sport is to improve athletic performance (Martens, 1987). To achieve that goal, the coach must not only be technically and tactically sound, but engage in behaviors receptive to the athlete. To complicate this issue, a coaching behavior that is positive for one athlete may be an ineffective approach for another. Similarly, specific behaviors by the coach may be more productive for certain outcomes than others (Tinning, 1982). The coach/player relationship is a very influential factor in sport (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). In their research, the quality of the coach/athlete relationship was pivotal in the athletes' satisfaction, motivation, and performance. In addition, coaches' behaviors and the coach/athlete relationship influenced the athletes' intrinsic and self-determined extrinsic motivation through the athletes' perception of autonomy, competence and relatedness. According to the authors, coaches could improve many aspects of athletic welfare and performance by providing opportunities for choices, emphasizing task relevance, explaining reasons underlying rules, acknowledging athletes' feelings and perspective, giving athletes an opportunity to take initiative, providing non-controlling competence feedback, avoiding controlling motivational strategy, and preventing ego involvement in their athletes. They concluded with three determinates of these coaching behaviors were personal orientation, coaching context and athletes' behavior and motivation (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Conroy and Coatsworth (2007) also recognized that coaches play an important role in the motivational climate and development of young athletes. They stated that coach education could be developed or revised to focus on the most effective behavioral strategies for supporting athletes' autonomy and enhancing motivation. In conclusion, it is apparent that coaches' behaviors are pivotal to many aspects of sport. An autocratic or controlling leadership style has the potential to destroy the athlete-coach relationship (Mallet, 2005) thus affecting both

player performance and satisfaction. However, promoting a healthy coach/athlete relationship often results in high quality sport performances and positive affective outcomes. Just as the competitive coach strives to improve athletic performance, the coach educator strives to improve the performance of emerging coaches. Even when only considering the development of athletic expertise, Cote, Baker and Abernathy (2003) found that positive experiences with a coach and enjoyment of an activity were as important as successful performances in motivating young athletes to select a specific sport for long-term participation. The challenge to the coach educator is to sell this concept to the novice coach. Coaches should be aware that preferred coaching behaviors of athletes influence both athletic performance and motivation. According to Chelladurai and Canon (1978), if a coach adapts his or her behavior to comply with the athletes' preferred behavior, the athlete may be more readily inclined to repay the coach through an improved performance. Coaches do not have to sacrifice hard work, commitment, or improvement in tactics and technique to achieve a positive social environment. However, the combination of those desired behaviors might require basic changes in existing coaching behaviors. The responsibility of the coach educator is to identify the methods to introduce these concepts to novice coaches who, too often, engrained with performance and winning as the only determinates of athletic success and player satisfaction. One method would be to use findings such as presented here as examples of why there is much more to coaching than Xs and Os.