

Coaching Strategies to Manage Youth Athlete Behaviour in Football

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ABSTRACT

One of the most important objectives of sport coaching is the creation of a positive learning environment in which athletes can develop the technical skills required for success as individuals and as a team. Problems relating to athlete misbehaviour during practice sessions can impact upon the quality of the learning environment. The purpose of this study was to observe sport coaches to determine the effectiveness of strategies used to manage athlete behaviour. Twenty-eight youth football coaches were observed in a coaching setting to identify the behaviour management strategies used to manage their athlete's behaviour. The findings demonstrated that coaches incorporated a limited number of behaviour management strategies. Results from observations indicated that coaches used consequent strategies to control athlete behaviour with an over-reliance on verbal, as opposed to non-verbal strategies. Furthermore, the data demonstrated that coaches utilized more intrinsic rather than extrinsic behaviour management strategies. The study suggests that coaches need to utilize a wider range of strategies to manage athlete behaviour to allow athletes opportunities to optimize their sporting potential.

Keywords: Athlete, behaviour management strategies, positive coaching environment, sport coaching

INTRODUCTION

Historically children have always engaged in physical activity during play time, however the past century has seen a major increase in organised sporting programs for youth

(Visek et al., 2015). When guided by caring sensitive and informed coaches, children can experience positive developmental gains and cultivate a healthy attitude to physical activity (Bailey et al., 2013). Recent research (Partington & Cushion, 2013; Partington et al., 2014) has focused on the use of systematic observation strategies to identify the coach's emphasis on training form and playing form within a coaching session. While the outcomes of this research

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have provided an understanding of the types of activities coaches implement to improve athlete performance, they have failed to recognise periods of inactivity during a training session, interventions used by a coach to manage transitions between activities and general athlete behaviour. Accordingly, there is still much to be revealed about the behaviour management procedures that underpin effective coaching - how to provide a supportive environment for athletes, how behaviour management procedures are carried out in practice, and ways of evaluating the effectiveness of behaviour management strategies.

A significant number of young athletes are entering sporting teams and recreational environments unable to cope with the demands of the learning environment and display inappropriate behaviours (Kerr et al., 2016). Thus, Kerr and Stirling (2015) and Lavay et al. (2015) emphasised that sports coaching required a strong behaviour management underpinning to ensure supportive environments were created for athletes. In order to manage athlete behaviour effectively coaches are required to use different strategies during each phase (warm-up, body, cool-down) of the coaching session, and both antecedent and consequent strategies should be employed.

Research conducted to date has endeavoured to identify and highlight specific behaviours or models of coaching behaviour (Chelladurai, 1993; Hall et al., 2016; Low et al., 2013; Smith & Smoll, 1984). As coaching involves many facets, research in the field needs to move beyond

simple surface level analysis of instructional behaviours and coaching techniques to the development of coaching strategies to manage athlete behaviour during periods of inactivity and when transitioning between activities. Discipline is a key responsibility of coaches as behaviour problems are considered one of the major obstacles to successful coaching (Kerr et al., 2016). The coaching environment, in which the space is open and the athletes are not constrained, creates more unique difficulties in managing inappropriate behaviour than in the classroom setting (Keegan et al., 2010). Coaches who implement inappropriate behaviour management strategies are at risk of negative consequences including inappropriate athlete behaviours which may result in athletes not reaching their full potential (O'Connor et al., 2018). Therefore, creating a positive environment with effective behaviour management strategies is a key responsibility of the coach.

The purpose of this study was to observe sport coaches in a coaching setting to identify the effectiveness of the strategies used when managing athlete behaviour. The findings would assist coaches in the selection of effective strategies to improve their communication and control in the coaching environment.

METHOD

Participants

Twenty-eight football coaches were observed in a coaching setting. The participant selection process involved the researcher

contacting the sporting organisations seeking permission to access the coaches. Forty coaches were initially approached and provided with a participant information and consent form. From the forty coaches initially contacted, twenty-eight responded they were willing to be involved in the research. The coaches who volunteered to be observed were responsible for the training and development of football players ranging from 8 – 12 years. All coaching candidates observed were male and ranged from 25 – 46 years.

Procedure

Two researchers observed the coaching sessions while interacting with the coach at certain stages to seek clarification of specific instances. The researchers did not interact with the athletes or participate in the training activities. The two observers sat independently of each other and positioned themselves in an unobtrusive location on the field whilst observing the coaches and taking anecdotal notes of the behaviour management instances. Each time a specific behaviour management instance was observed, it was recorded on a coding sheet. The training sessions varied in length from 45 minutes to one hour and were conducted during the competitive football season. Athletes attended two training sessions and competed in one competitive football game per week against teams from other clubs.

All participants involved in the research study followed a similar format when conducting training sessions, which included three distinct phases: a warm-up; body; and

a cool-down. Following the observations, checks for inter-observer agreement were conducted to ensure the accuracy of the data. The anecdotal notes of each researcher were collated and tabulated.

Data Analysis

In the current study, data analysis and interpretation were an integrated and continual process. When analysing the data, three main strategies were employed: 1) collation of the data; 2) identification of open codes throughout the data; and 3) interpretation of the data. Coding techniques were used in the data analysis which allowed for the identification of categories throughout the data. Coding was used as a method of data collection and analysis involving a review and meaningful examination of the anecdotal notes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Primarily, the objective was to create basic categories which required the researcher to minimise the difference between comparative groups (Glaser, 1998). In this study, coding of data commenced immediately following collection. The objective of open coding was to produce emergent categories and their properties which were applicable for amalgamating into theory.

RESULTS

This section considers the commonalities that exist between the coaching behaviour management instances during each of the three phases of a coaching session - warm-up, body of session, and cool-down. For this purpose, this section is organised under the

following headings: behaviour management commonalities in the warm-up, body of the session, and in the cool-down. At any stage during the observations if the coach used a behaviour management strategy this is referred to as an 'instance'.

Behaviour Management Commonalities in the Warm-Up

There were 112 observed behaviour management instances in the warm-up phase of the coaching sessions, of which only 25% (n=28) antecedent strategies were included, compared to 75% (n=84) consequent strategies. Table 1 provides an overview of the instances observed during the warm-up phase and highlights the strategies implemented by the coaches to address behaviour management instances.

During this phase, as highlighted in Table 1, there was an even distribution of both positive and negative outcomes. Forty-seven percent (n=52) of the instances were followed with a positive outcome (resulted in the athlete following instructions and exhibiting the desired behaviour) and 53%

(n=60) with a negative outcome (resulted in the athlete ignoring the coach's instructions and exhibiting inappropriate behaviour). Most of the strategies were implemented via the use of verbal communication with only 28% (n=32) non-verbal strategies observed, with 50% (n=16) of these a mixture of verbal and non-verbal. Furthermore, of the 112 observed instances, only 25% (n= 28) were antecedent strategies. Another commonality identified from the data analysis of the warm-up phase was the coaches' use of strategies with an intrinsic dimension. Of the 112 instances observed in the warm-up phase of the coaching sessions, 64% (n=72) were strategies that included an intrinsic dimension, whilst 36% (n=40) demonstrated an extrinsic dimension.

The data analysis conducted on the warm-up phase of the coaching session has highlighted the importance of antecedent strategies with an extrinsic dimension as a method of establishing expected behaviours throughout the coaching sessions. This analysis has also identified the extent to which these coaches rely on verbal communication strategies.

Table 1
Observed instances during the warm-up

Instances	112 Behaviour Management Instances Observed
Antecedent/Consequent	28 antecedent 84 consequent
Positive/Negative	52 positive outcomes 60 negative outcomes
Verbal/Non Verbal	80 verbal strategies 32 non verbal 16 verbal and non-verbal
Extrinsic/Intrinsic	40 extrinsic 72 intrinsic

Behaviour Management Commonalities in the Body

Most of observed behaviour management instances were observed in the body of the coaching sessions. As outlined in Table 2, a total of 172 behaviour management instances were observed during this coaching phase. Of the 172 observed behaviour management instances, there was an even distribution of outcomes, with 48% (n=84) positive outcomes and 52% (n=88) negative outcomes. The majority of the strategies used by the coaches during this phase were verbal in nature. Like the observational instances during the warm-up phase, the percentage of instances during which the coaches used strategies with an intrinsic as opposed to extrinsic dimension was notable, with only 34% (n=60) of the instances demonstrating an extrinsic dimension. In summary, the number of behaviour management instances which were observed during the body of the coaching sessions were much greater than observed in the warm-up phase of the coaching session. This marked increase is assumed to be due

to the instructional nature that encompasses the body of a coaching session. Despite a significant emphasis on consequent verbal strategies, an even mix of positive and negative outcomes was observed.

Behaviour Management Commonalities in the Cool-Down

The most frequent commonality evident during the cool-down phase of the coaching session was the lack of observed behaviour management instances. In comparison to 112 and 172 instances that occurred respectively during the warm-up and body of the coaching sessions, only 44 behaviour management instances were observed during the cool-down phase. Most of the observed training sessions contained minimal instruction, with the coaches incorporating a fun concluding game for the athletes. The quantity of instances that occurred during the cool-down was only 15% of the total number of instances in all three of the coaching phases. The observed instances during this phase are outlined in Table 3.

Table 2
Observed instances during the body

Instances	172 Behaviour Management Instances Observed
Antecedent/Consequent	20 antecedent 152 consequent
Positive/Negative	84 positive outcomes 88 negative outcomes
Verbal/Non Verbal	128 verbal strategies 4 non-verbal 40 verbal and non-verbal
Extrinsic/Intrinsic	60 extrinsic 112 intrinsic

Table 3
Observed Instances during the cool-down

Instances	44 Behaviour Management Instances Observed
Antecedent/Consequent	8 antecedent 36 consequent
Positive/Negative	16 positive outcomes 28 negative outcomes
Verbal/Non Verbal	28 verbal strategies 12 non-verbal 4 verbal and non-verbal
Extrinsic/Intrinsic	12 extrinsic 32 intrinsic

Of the total observed instances only 18% (n=8) of the 44 were antecedent strategies as opposed to 82% (n=36) consequent strategies. A high proportion of negative outcomes were observed in the cool-down phase, with only 36% (n=16) positive outcomes as opposed to the other phases of the coaching session, which had a relatively even distribution of positive and negative outcomes. The final commonality between the coaches during the cool-down phase was the explicit number of observational instances which involved verbal strategies with an intrinsic dimension. It should be highlighted that this high occurrence of verbal strategies with an intrinsic dimension was a common occurrence across all phases of the observed training sessions.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings from this research identified that coaches incorporated limited behaviour management strategies in their coaching practice. Specific behaviour strategies that were observed do however have strong correlations to effective strategies

for classroom behaviour management. These include removing and discussing the problem behaviour privately with the athlete (Rogers, 1995) and removing or isolating the athlete from the activity (Rogers, 1995). The results from the observations indicate that coaches use minimal antecedent strategies (setting up rules and expectations prior to an activity), as many of the strategies were consequent strategies used in response to athlete inappropriate behaviour. Specific antecedent strategies identified during the observations include the establishment of rules and boundaries, however this was not common practice. On the other hand, consequent strategies were put in place once the inappropriate behaviour had occurred, an example being discussing the problem with the athlete and removing the athlete from the group. From a total of 328 observed behaviour instances during the field observations, only 17% (n=56) were deemed as being antecedent strategies, as opposed to 83% (n=272) consequent strategies. Links have been made between research conducted by behavioural theorists

regarding the inclusion of antecedent strategies (Canter, 1990) and the practice of the coaches in this study. The links imply that the absence of antecedent strategies (e.g., Canter's establishment of expectations) have resulted in a high occurrence of observed instances deemed to have a negative outcome (inappropriate behaviour displayed by the athlete). For this purpose, sport coaches need to place more emphasis on the establishment of rules and expectations to reduce inappropriate behaviour displayed by their athletes.

Further findings highlight the coaches' over-reliance on verbal behaviour management strategies. According to many behavioural theorists (Canter, 1990; Jones, 2000; Rogers, 1995; Skinner, 2002), the implementation of non-verbal communication is an effective means of managing behaviour (e.g. using a whistle to get the attention of the athlete). Non-verbal communication is identified as an effective method of halting inappropriate and avoiding verbal reprimand. However, the findings of this research indicate that coaches placed a substantial emphasis on verbal strategies as a technique for managing inappropriate behaviour. From a total of 328 observed behaviour instances during all phases of the coaching sessions, 72% (n=236) were verbal strategies.

The data suggest that coaches incorporate more behaviour management strategies into their practice that are intrinsic in nature as opposed to extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation was employed by all coaches through all phases of the coaching sessions

during the field observations. From the data of the observed behaviour instances, 66% (n=216) were deemed to be intrinsic. Despite this, extrinsic motivation is commonly used for conditioning human behaviour and is an effective strategy for managing athlete behaviour. Rewards and verbal reinforcers can be used initially to establish behaviour expectations (e.g. praising the athlete for doing the right thing or having an award at each training session for 'best on field'). This strategy of using extrinsic motivators is identified as particularly effective for coaches when building rapport with athletes. Coaches do however need to be aware of the overuse of extrinsic conditioning which, should be perceived as one of a range of strategies for managing athlete behaviour.

Behavioural theorists (Canter, 1990; Jones, 2000; Rogers, 1995; Skinner, 2002) indicate a range of strategies are required for effective behaviour management. Specific examples of effective strategies may include: verbal (e.g. verbal praise – "well done for putting the balls away"); non-verbal (e.g. clapping a student when they have done the right thing); intrinsic (e.g. emphasis on athlete enjoyment during training); extrinsic (e.g. trophies or reward system); antecedent (e.g. establishing rules prior to an activity); and, consequent (e.g. giving an athlete a warning that they will miss out on the activity if they keep acting inappropriately). Results from this research highlight that coaching practices included a limited range of behaviour management strategies, with 90% of the strategies verbal, 75% of the strategies intrinsic, and 80% of the strategies

consequent. To ensure coaches provide a positive environment for their athletes in which effective behaviour management is conducted, coaches should incorporate a wide range of strategies, rather than relying on consequent and verbal approaches. Coaches should select methods that require the least intervention but are still effective in achieving the desired behaviours. Managing behaviour is a practical, hands-on activity, similar to coaching (Sports Coach UK, 2009). Therefore, coaches need to determine the techniques that are most beneficial for themselves and their athletes. This win-win scenario allows athletes to develop to their full potential and coaches to receive a rewarding and satisfying experience – a situation that both groups will wish to repeat in future training sessions.

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