

## **Coaching in disability sport: from practice to theory**

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## **Introduction**

Understanding the complexity of coaching in disability sport remains a pressing concern. While interest in disability sport continues to grow there is a relative lack of insight into coaching in this context, particularly research which illustrates a ‘grounded’ perspective on practice. As a result, coaching in disability sport is critically under-theorised, and we know comparatively little of the nature of coaching in different disability sport contexts (Townsend, Smith & Cushion, 2016). There have been longstanding calls to understand coaches’ learning and development in disability sport (DePauw, 1986), and as a result there is a small, but growing, body of literature which has begun to explore the unique considerations of coaching in disability sport. Such considerations include the informal and unstructured nature of coach learning (e.g. McMaster, Culver & Werthner, 2012; Duarte & Culver, 2014; Taylor, Werthner & Culver, 2014; Taylor, Werthner, Culver & Callary, 2015), the lack of disability-specific coach education (e.g. Cregan, Bloom & Reid, 2007; Douglas *et al.*, 2016; Douglas & Hardin, 2014), and the complex and multifaceted role of coaches in disability contexts (e.g. Tawse, Bloom, Sabiston & Reid, 2012; DePauw & Gavron, 1991), all of which invite and encourage comparisons with the narrative presented below. More recent research however, has challenged the lack of critical insight in disability coaching research (e.g. Townsend *et al.*, 2016), arguing that the research is characterised by a normative focus that downplays the inter-connections between disability and cultural contexts such as sport. The lack of consideration of disability is an important theoretical ‘gap’, as Smith and Bundon (2016) argue, having a grasp on how disability is explained and understood is vital for individuals working with disabled people in any context, especially in coaching where practice is fundamentally shaped by our working understanding of disability (cf. DePauw, 2000). It is the purpose of this chapter, then, to encourage practitioners and researchers to examine their understandings of disability in the first instance, as a basis for developing coaching practice. What follows are reflections from Derek Morgan, Head Coach of the England Learning Disability Cricket squad, but, first, some context about the team.

## **Practitioner Commentary**

### *Coaching Context*

Involvement in the England learning disability squad means that players are classed as having a ‘moderate’ learning disability. An intellectual disability is characterised by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behaviour as expressed in

conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills (Buntinx & Schalock, 2010). In order to be profiled to play international disability cricket, the players have to provide evidence of a learning disability onset pre-18 years of age. This is usually evidenced in the form of a statement of special educational needs. Furthermore, the players have to present with an IQ of 75 or less and undergo an 'adaptive behaviour assessment' by an educational psychologist, in which they should show significant limitations in social functioning. The profiling of players to play international learning disability cricket is governed by criteria proposed by The International Association of Sport for para-athletes with an intellectual disability (INAS). This 'classification' system ensures that impairment is present and that it functions as a limitation on sporting performance. Of the fifteen athletes involved in the national squad, a number of players have co-occurring autism spectrum disorders. In addition, many of the players present further complex needs such as mental health issues (e.g. depression and anxiety), obsessive compulsive disorders, and other non-associated conditions. The players are not full-time athletes. Training is limited to weekend camps, which typically run across two days, once a month, throughout the winter. The team are recent 'Tri-Series' champions, remaining unbeaten in international fixtures against Australia and South Africa in 2017.

At the risk of sounding a little clichéd, reflecting on the past 7 years with this squad I feel that the initial constraint that I had on taking this role was my perception of disability coaching – that is, negative preconceptions of the environment and the people who inhabit it. Throughout my time with the team, my personal learning journey has been very much framed by a process of 'trial and error'. Indeed, in my journey through coach education, I have had no formal training in disability sport, with the exception of *ad hoc* workshops related to adapting and modifying practice. Throughout numerous discussions that I have had in recent years I have repeatedly arrived at a similar conclusion, which is that I have gained and taken from the experience far more than any other coaching environment. I am indebted to the players and support staff that I have shared these experiences with. Throughout this experience I have been exposed to a rich source of feedback, both formally, informally, intended and at times unintended, this has contributed dramatically to raising my self-awareness as a coach and has challenged me to reflect in depth on my practice.

I would consider that the most valuable experience as a result of coaching in disability sport has been the exploration of my personal values and recognition of how I previously attempted to shape coaching environments. At the outset, I had my own personal view of what playing international sport and representing your country meant and the lengths a player should

strive for to justify a place within a performance programme. Unsurprisingly this often-created friction and frustration when attempting to apply these expectations and methods to coaching in disability sport. A major turning point came when I finally took the opportunity to consider from a player's perspective what it meant to be part of a national squad and actually what are 'their' motives for engaging in this programme. Fundamentally I have broadened my view of 'success' to now reflect a more holistic understanding whereby we celebrate the previously insignificant moments of, for instance, someone raising the challenge within a task, someone having the confidence to speak in a group setting, someone passing a driving test or gaining an academic qualification - these are all moments that we recognise and celebrate in equal measure alongside winning on the pitch. Furthermore, a key component of coaching in disability sport is recognising the unique relationship between the players, parents and coaching staff. Many players arrive into our environment highly dependent on family and close friends for not only social and emotional support but also more practically transport, travel, communication and planning arrangements to attend training and fixtures. Therefore, we try to maintain a clear dialogue between the players, the parents and the coaches. This is both an enabler and a constraint of the environment and requires the careful management of the relationship as a management group with their parents and family support unit.

At the outset, the immediate challenge I encountered with this squad was the need to inspire the players to be motivated to challenge themselves, to expose themselves to environments and experiences that are outside of their 'norm' and to be reassured that as coaches we will not be judgmental of the players perceived 'failures'. A key part of the training environment is a raised expectation of the players, combined with an environment of challenge which encourages and indeed expects failure, alongside a support system required for the players. We are not afraid to challenge players with tasks that they will find difficult or even impossible to execute initially as we are confident that we can provide a supportive environment and have applied significant resource to developing players' resilience to such challenges. In this sense, I am fortunate to work with a multi-disciplinary coaching and support staff, providing players with personal development and lifestyle, nutrition and hydration, physiotherapy and strength and conditioning support. Whilst conventional advice would recommend avoiding situations or specific drills that cause anxiety and frustration we have confidence that remaining positive with the player, especially when things aren't going well for them in these situations, has significant long-term value. If we consistently concentrate on

the things they are doing well and praise heavily the attempt this contributes to raising their self-esteem and confidence.

The nature of the players' impairments can and does impact on the coaching process. Importantly, the players' ability to communicate effectively, regulate emotions, confirm understanding, share feedback and to plan and evaluate their performances are often significantly impaired. Often, the players we work with have low self-esteem and low self-efficacy. However, whilst the players - by definition - have a 'learning disability' they are not learning incapable and unlocking their passion for and belief in their ability to learn is a considerable challenge in coaching, but potentially the most significant point in shaping the coaching environment. In practical terms, growing and developing players' ability to communicate, reflect accurately on their performance and plan ahead are priorities that are addressed through communicating with players on numerous platforms. These include informal conversation, formal 1-1's with coaches and support staff, written presentations, or use of social media. This enables the coaching staff to increase contact time with the players and reinforce the key messages we try to embed. Developing the players' ability and willingness to communicate for themselves and accepting the responsibility to do so cannot be undervalued and is a primary objective of integrating players into our environment and contributes heavily to their desire to learn and progress.

The opportunity to train regularly is something that is essential to support sustained development in any sporting sphere, but from my experience it is magnified in an environment where players can face challenges associated with memory and information retention. Therefore, in practice, the opportunity to experience high volumes of repetition often are essential to skill acquisition, therefore this plays a primary role in delivery at training camps. It is essential to remember that athletes with intellectual impairments can and do learn the skills and techniques required, however experience tells us it can take longer than anticipated. Consequently, the rate at which progress can be achieved will often not reflect mainstream environments. To create an optimal learning environment, in my experience high volumes of repetition, based on principles of play as opposed to technical detail, and wherever possible embedded into a game context offers us and the players the most desirable practice environment. At a practical level, instructions are simplified and direct with key terms referred to repeatedly to reinforce their relevance to the practice. Connecting practice to the 'game' is hugely relevant to this environment, providing players with a frame of reference where they can link skills and practice to competitive game situations.

As coaches, we challenge ourselves to be patient, regularly returning to practices players can execute and then rebuild challenges back into the task with emphasis on recognising the attempt and any progress achieved. This requires an openness and flexibility to practice, as players' concentration for long periods of time can be difficult. So too, demonstration often plays a valuable role to provide players with a model to work from. Therefore, we work hard as a coaching team to create a training environment with clear structure to break the day into digestible sections. This allows players to plan and prepare for each session but that also allows us to reframe challenges and practices, assess for learning and allows the players an opportunity to rest and recharge mentally for the next session. Traditionally coaches will collect feedback at the end of their session from their athletes, this is no less important for an athlete with a learning disability, as it will give them a chance to share any frustration or difficulties they may be having. To maximise the value of short, focused sessions, in my experience it is important that the briefing is direct, clear and consistent, and it is vital to keep this briefing to a duration that allows players to retain information. We are aware however that they may not speak out in a whole group session, so as coaches we seek to gather feedback throughout the session and less formally i.e. whilst collecting equipment, cool down or stretching.

In summary, the challenges that we face working in a disability sport environment are not removed from those experienced by many coaches in many other environments. My personal approach is to seek to create an environment centred around learning and personal growth. We look to recognise the social role the squad plays in the players lives and the contribution the skills developed in our environment make to their wider lives. We strive to facilitate players' learning rather than imposing it and the environment is founded on mutual respect where the expectation is to continually challenge one another and where players set and maintain their own personal and collective standards. If we can consistently concentrate on delivering this rather than concentrating on performance, then we are confident that the performance will follow.

## **Commentary**

Derek's narrative is indicative of many of the constraints and complexities of coaching in disability sport and serves as a useful illustration for researchers to connect with. Coaching in disability sport involves the application and understanding of cultural frameworks regarding the nature of disability. Though not always explicit in coaching discourse and practice, these

'models' of disability represent cultural resources and frameworks that coaches draw upon in their practice and help to capture and explain how coaches understand the athletes they work with (Townsend *et al.*, 2016). Thus, while the use of the models of disability is not intended to provide a definitive theorisation of disability, they help place disability into its micro-context (Thomas, 2007) and their use enables coaches to reflect on their beliefs, attitudes and practices towards disabled people.

Indeed, as we can see from Derek's narrative, the complexity of disability sport can be captured and understood through the lens of disability studies. First and foremost, what is evident from the narrative is the inferential process of 'trial and error' which has framed Derek's learning. This is a persistent issue in disability sport, where coaching practice is based predominantly on informal and experiential modes of learning (Cregan *et al.*, 2007; McMaster *et al.*, 2012; Taylor *et al.*, 2014, 2015) framed by a process of socialisation (cf. Cushion, Armour & Jones, 2003). In disability sport, problems with experiential learning through socialisation is that coaching concepts can become taken-for-granted and viewed as 'right' or best practice (Townsend, Cushion & Smith, 2017), and reinforced by a self-referenced 'what works' approach (cf. Stodter & Cushion, 2017). Importantly, critical reflection – a key practice that Derek alluded to - is not always possible, as assumptions about disabled athletes can become trapped in a model of uncritical reproduction.

Whilst coach education is a crucial feature of coach development, coaches are generally not trained in the specific circumstances of many disability contexts (Bush & Silk 2012, Tawse *et al.*, 2012). More often than not, disability coach education provision tends to occupy a separate and distinct 'space' from 'mainstream' coach education (Bush & Silk 2012) reflecting the 'highly fragmented' nature of disability sport (Thomas and Guett 2014, p. 390). This means that the ongoing professionalisation of the disability coaching pathway is inhibited as coaches face a lack of structured, disability-specific coach education opportunities (McMaster *et al.* 2012, Taylor *et al.* 2014). This means that coaching knowledge and practices are often derived from informal and non-formal sources and coaches are left to self-medicate by taking knowledge generated outside of disability contexts and grounding their understanding in material and experiential conditions in disability sport, as evidenced by Derek's learning journey. Furthermore, research investigating disability coach education has shown how the process of coach development in disability sport often focuses overly on impairment, to such an extent that coach education positions athletes as 'problems' for coaches and coaching to overcome. Such a perspective is reinforced when coach education reduces disability to

‘adaptations’ or ‘modifications’ designed to increase coaches’ ‘confidence’ to work with disabled people (Townsend *et al.*, 2017), thus perpetuating exclusion in coaching despite inclusive lexicon.

The medical model has historically been dominant in understanding disability and positioning research (Smith & Perrier, 2014). The central focus of the medical model frames impairment as the *cause* of disability (Swain, French, & Cameron, 2003) and therefore the only limiting factor in coaching. From a medical model perspective, the disabled athlete is an object to be ‘educated ... observed, tested, measured, treated, psychologised ... materialised through a multitude of disciplinary practices and institutional discourses’ (Goodley, 2011, p. 114). Medical model discourses in performance sport promote a dominant consciousness where all problems are instrumental or technical problems to be solved and that coaching is fundamentally about improving sporting performance against the limitations athletes with a disability have. These practices are often so accepted that they influence, to greater or lesser extents, coaching frameworks that coaches draw upon. Indeed, Derek highlights how his initial ‘high performance coaching’ expectations influenced his practice, describing moments of tension before recognising and adopting a more athlete-centred approach. However, rather than positioning the athletes as a ‘problem’ – as in the medical model – social model discourses too are evident in the way that Derek reflected on the coaching environment and his personal assumptions and values related to coaching disabled athletes. In contrast to the medical model, social model discourses reconstruct disability as *entirely* socially constructed (Thomas, 2014). The social model turns a critical gaze towards society and is based on the premise that disability is the product of collective structural barriers that create exclusions and restrictions for people with impairments (Thomas, 2014). The social model provides a conceptual scaffold on which individual attitudes, beliefs and practices can be closely scrutinised and reflected upon. This, as Derek suggests, in his coaching practice, resulted in broadening a narrow view of ‘performance’ coaching in disability sport – as highlighted above - to encompass a view of ‘success’ characterised by recognising personal achievement, player independence and learning, and taking time to understand the players’ wider social contexts. Such a perspective is liberating, in that the players’ disabilities are located in the structures of coaching and outside of the individual (Smith & Perrier, 2014).

It is clear that the medical-social model binary can influence coaching environments, and it too has structured much debate within critical disability studies (cf. Goodley, 2011; Thomas, 2007). Thomas (1999, 2004a, 2004b, 2007), however, sought to rework this binary



toward a more *relational* perspective that understands disability as a product of social relationships (Smith & Bundon, 2016; Smith & Perrier, 2014) while at the same time highlighting the very real lived, experienced effects of impairment in social life. This model focuses on the various social mechanisms by which people with impairments can be disabled within sporting contexts. The focus of the social relational model therefore is on the social construction of disability in different contexts and its use helps to analyse the production of knowledge about disability where social relations comprise the “sedimented past and projected future of a stream of interaction’ (Crossley 2011, p. 35). Using a social relational model in coaching is useful as it highlights the unique construction of knowledge between coaches, athletes and the contexts in which they are situated. The model enables researchers to analyse the understandings of disability at individual, social and cultural levels (Martin, 2013) of coaching and coach education. Recognition and acceptance of the effects of impairment, as described in the social relational model, is an important factor for coaches to consider. Impairment can and does limit engagement in sport. Indeed, the psycho-emotional factors associated with disability that Derek identified such as low self-esteem, low motivation and low self-efficacy can be understood as a product of what Fitzgerald (2005) termed the paradigm of normativity within sport, where disabled people are defined insofar as they deviate from ableist ‘norms’ of sporting ability (Cassidy, Jones & Potrac, 2009). However, as Derek’s narrative suggests, impairment effects can only be ‘disabling’ in social formations which do not account for them – by recognising the disablism embedded in such normative expectations, he attempts to create an affirmative environment whereby athletes are celebrated for their ability to show progression and development. Furthermore, by attempting to shape a coaching environment that has high-levels of contact with the players and their support systems (e.g. families), create coaching sessions designed to facilitate player learning, independence and autonomy (Fitzgerald, 2005), and provide opportunities for feedback, the effects of impairment are considered, but are not the central focus of coaching. Using a social relational model here highlights how Derek attempts to give greater appreciation, recognition and power to the athletes in the construction of their sporting experiences (Richard, Joncheray & Dugas, 2015).

The social relational model is useful in highlighting the *relational* nature of both coaching and disability and is a helpful reflective tool for coaches to scrutinise their behaviour and practices. Nevertheless, the attempt to conceptualise coaching against a social relational framework is not always easy for coaches, particularly when considering the structural and cultural pressures that Derek faces, where able-bodied ‘performance’ ideas can be transposed

into disability spaces, causing a tension where medical model ideas can become established in coaching environments. For instance, a key feature of Derek's narrative focuses on coaches' personal characteristics; patience, flexibility and a willingness to learn feature prominently. As a result, experience and reflection has enabled Derek and his coaches to create an environment designed to challenge the players beyond their perceived capabilities, creating a coaching environment built on principles directly related to the coaches' working understandings of disability. While challenge can be progressive within a supportive environment, it must be tempered with a regard for the individual athlete and their impairment effects. This coaching process as described by Derek, though not overt and formal, shows how permeable coaching is to broader social and cultural understandings of 'disability', highlighting the unique considerations of coaching in disability sport, and underlining the fundamental use of the models in framing coach learning and constructing coaching practice.

This chapter has illustrated some of the complexity of coaching in disability sport, highlighting the practical issues faced, while attempting to map coaching practice against theoretical models of disability. In so doing, we have examined the tensions, opportunities and questions within disability sport coaching. First and foremost, the dominance of disability discourses in producing and sustaining many conceptions of coaching requires exposure, challenge and reflection as they can often become embedded in coaching consciousness. We hope that this chapter can stimulate reflective thinking and dialogue on coaching in disability sport, and act as a resource for coaches to connect their experiences to. At a practical level, the lack of disability-specific coach education and development is an area for both concern and possibility, and further developments are required to bring the process of socialisation into coaching under critical control (Eraut, 1994). Furthermore, while it has been suggested that sport provides a context that can challenge and influence the social understanding of disability (DePauw, 1986), coaching rhetoric is often structured by binary understandings or tensions between 'coaching the athlete' and 'coaching the disability'. As such, further research is required to understand the production of disability in different coaching environments, to build an understanding of the working principles that coaches utilise in practice. Finally, research that connects theory to practice is invaluable in developing a much-needed transformative agenda in disability sport coaching.

### **Implications for practice**

The following reflective points provide some guidance for coaches wishing to engage in disability sport, though as with all coaching approaches, should not be read as a prescriptive 'how to' guide, but are mediated by the sporting context, level of performance and individual coaches and athletes:

- Work *with* athletes, not *on* them.
- Recognise and accept impairment and adapt practice accordingly.
- Create coaching sessions that challenge and support in equal measure.
- Draw on multiple, integrated sources of knowledge to understand the athletes.
- Continually reflect on your beliefs and assumptions about coaching disabled athletes.

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