

Coaching: profession, vocation or business opportunity?

The demand for sports coaches in schools, commercial and governing body programmes and the Olympic legacy sector has meant more coaches are getting paid more often but are they getting more professional? The latest in the series of *The Leisure Review* coaching insight sessions brought together senior coaching voices to explore the issues.

With a room full of experienced coaches gathered to debate the issues of the professionalisation of sports coaching and keen to get on with the discussion of whether coaching should be considered a profession, a vocation or a business opportunity, Professor John Lyle wasted no time in getting straight to the point.

"The answer the question is absolutely simple: 'should be', 'yes it is' and 'of course'." He paused to allow everyone to apply these answers to the relevant clauses of the question and continued: "I'm supposed to be speaking for coaching as a profession. I believe it should be but have the view that it probably won't be."

Lyle admitted that his role as adjunct professor of coaching for the University of Queensland in Brisbane, a post he formerly held at Leeds Metropolitan University, made him ill-suited to the fifteen-minute presentation on the grounds that he was more used to three-hour expositions but his audience were well aware that his experience as a lecturer, author and former PE teacher made him particularly well qualified to air his views, which he did with admirable clarity and concision.

"Is coaching a vocation? Of course it is," he said. "Seventy per cent of coaching is teaching sport to young children. Professional opportunity? Of course. Look at skiing for example, where you present yourself to an instructor. There are also professionals now coaching in primary schools. But it is my belief that they are not talking about coaching. Coaching is something completely different."

Lyle drew the analogy of a first aider, whose two days of training may have made them competent to fulfil their role but did not make them a medical professional. Professional status for coaches should require the highest standards to match the trust, discretion and competence that define traditional professions. Professions are recognised as needed by society, fulfilling a role that is in the interests of the state, usually with a period of formal training to instil knowledge that others do not have.

While some within coaching might aspire to such status, Lyle was unsure of the impetus outside the coaching sector. "A profession is validated by society but is there a clamour for professional coaching outside this room? I don't see a great appetite to regulate coaches. The mark of a profession is membership of a professional body. We don't have that or even an agreed qualification."

In terms of professionalisation, the process of setting course for becoming a profession, Lyle suggested one might question whether the coaching sector is doing enough. There is a notion of professionalisation, which means coaching could act like a profession without being a formal profession, and organisational professionalisation, which is the creation of hierarchies and controls in the model of a traditional profession, but he argued that while there has been some movement in these directions the sector has stayed back from licensing, "which is the one that really matters".

Next up was John Driscoll, executive director at Sportscoach UK in charge of public affairs and communication and formerly principal national coach at the Royal Yachting Association. He quickly followed Professor Lyle's lead of being pointed in his argument. He started with the question of definitions and status.

"Twenty years ago we were wading through semantic sludge," he said. "We could continue but I'd like to move on." He offered a view of coaching in the UK

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in which there are now 1.1 million people involved in coaching, 70% of whom are volunteers. Only 3% of this total are full-time paid coaches but in the last five years 40% more people have become qualified to coach.

Addressing the headline question, Driscoll argued that while coaching ticks all three of the boxes it remains a vocation for the majority of volunteers. It is clearly a business opportunity but for relatively small number of people. Sportscoach statistics suggest that average pay for coaches is £19 an hour, a figure that for Driscoll makes sport more of a business opportunity for journalists and publishers, some coach developers and managers, and a small number of people who do a job that the national governing bodies of sport (NGB) cannot do. However, coaching is a very real business opportunity for those who take principles of sports coaching and apply them to business. In this environment, Driscoll explained with a hint of bitterness in his voice, the per-hour figures of payment are likely to be rather higher.

A recent Sport England survey of national governing bodies suggests that 13 of 15 sports reckon that coaching is in the second division of priorities. "This rings big warning bells," Driscoll said. "We know coaching is valuable but if NGB senior professionals don't believe coaching to be a priority then investment is going to decline."

From Driscoll's perspective the need to measure the impact of coaching will become increasingly important. While the fact that each of the home nations' sports councils has a coaching strategy may be encouraging, there is still some way to go. "We have to get better at measuring the impact of better coaching," he said. "For funders it is increasingly important to know what impact they are getting for their money."

Following Mr Driscoll, Andy Heald, national coach development officer with Premier Sport, was presenting coaching as a business opportunity realised. Heald's Premier Sport franchise alone has a team of 32 coaches and sees 150,000 children a week.

"That's where I'm coming from," he said. "We've seen a rapid growth because there's a massive need. We offer coaches a career path, which is what coaches want. We offer professional services to schools."

Premier Sport's focus, Heald explained, is engaging and inspiring children in sport. He suggested that "there is not much direction for sport in schools" in light of teachers receiving only six hours training for physical activity during their PGCE courses. Premier Sport, he argued, is currently filling that gap.

Heald argued that with lots of mixed messages going out to schools, particularly around the required qualifications to work with school children, this gap is likely to remain. He suggested that requiring a Level 2 NGB qualification is not the way forward, particularly when the multiskills awards are not available to Level 1 coaches.

"Premier Sport have a competency framework," Heald said. "There is a career in coaching if you're good at it but if you are good at it you tend to move up and away from coaching. We need to get to the point where coaches are not looked down upon when we go into schools, which does happen. The question is, how do we get there?"

The question-and-answer session brought the three speakers back together and gave the audience their head. Ideas, suggestions and information flew rapidly back and forth, taking in such subjects as minimum operating standards, why teaching sport to children is not coaching, the need for coaches to provide "remedial coaching" to young performers, the balance between the 'what' and the 'how' of coaching, the balance of total coaching hours delivered by paid and volunteer coaches, continuing professional development for coaches (including "If you've not got time to do CPD you've no right to call yourself a coach"), appropriate qualifications and much more.

Refreshed by Nottingham Trent University's high-quality coffee break facilities, delegates carried over the spirit of enquiry, argument and counter-argument into the final session of the afternoon. Norman Randall explained the principles of open space technology, outlined the "rule of two feet" and invited everyone now sat in the deftly arranged circle to come forward with the topics they would like to discuss with their peers. After a few seconds of hesitation the topics rained down and headings for debate papered an adjacent wall. Bringing together some similar topics, four groups formed to discuss: meeting the needs of the market and the future direction of coaching; how to measure occupational

professionalism and to what extent can coaches behave professionally; whether coaching is a profession or a grouping of related pursuits; and whether there is a demand or a need for an effective voice for the coach, perhaps with chartered status as a goal.

The feedback from these groups, brief and pointed as they were, were a reflection of the timescale rather than the quality of debate but it was clear that these issues had been discussed vigorously and passionately. On the subject of market need and direction, the conclusion was that coaching was not meeting the needs of its market and more needed to be done to make sure it was. The group felt that the future direction of coaching and coach education is being dictated from above to the detriment of the general standards of coaching. The group exploring measuring professionalism offered the view that measurement of professional standards and outcomes was essential if coaching is to become more effective and achieve better recognition. The subject of a profession or group of professions concluded that there needs to be much more input from the wider coaching sector if coaching is to develop along professional lines. Some definitions of coaching would clearly be required but the question remained regarding who would make the move to provide a coherent and concerted voice for coaching. This took the feedback neatly into the last group, which concluded that, while there was not an overt clamour within or without coaching for a professional coaching body, the aspirations of coaches and coaching, not least as expressed by this open space session, would seem to require some sort of focal point to offer a voice for coaches. It was noted that many of the "current landscape partners don't want it", which was felt by more than one individual in the room to be justification for pursuing it.

With the afternoon formally drawing to a close, there was discussion of how the views expressed in the open space session might be used to influence wider debate. Mick Owen, managing editor of *The Leisure Review* and the afternoon's de facto chairman, suggested that these views might usefully represent an audit of the current state, and current views, of the coaching scene and that the report of proceedings to be carried in *The Leisure Review* would take the debate outside the room. Owen assured delegates that *The Leisure Review* was keen to serve the debate on the future of coaching, not least via a growing number of Insight events scheduled for later in the year and other planned coaching events, and would endeavour to take the issues raised to those in positions of influence within the sports coaching structures.

***The Leisure Review*, July 2011**

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