

Sport Psychology: Another Cuckoo in the Coaching Nest

This paper draws on a ten year sabbatical as a fulltime coach and many years of working within a university sport and exercise department to reflect on changes in the nature and centrality of the coaching role as a result of the gradual scientisation of both coaching practice and coach education. It is not the intention here to propose a return to some romantic vision of traditional coaching practices or to suggest a dichotomy between science and coaching but merely to highlight how the creation of professional boundaries in both sport psychology and coaching led inevitably to the marginalisation of craft knowledge.

During the nineteenth century a reductionist approach to the body increasingly employed machine models to explain physiological questions and to integrate anatomy, mechanics, physiology, and psychology, into a rational structure for the study of human performance.¹ At the same time a drive to increase industrial efficiency encouraged a systems model which emphasised standardisation, specialisation, and macroefficiency.² The development of coaching throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had strong connections both to the perception of the body as machine, and to the principles of industrial efficiency. The sporting body became contained, remade, and resculptured,³ as striving for improved performance resulted in the constant expansion and optimisation of training.⁴ The disciplinary instrument of delivery was the coach who maintained surveillance over the athlete as his body was reshaped into an acceptable form. The term 'coach' can be broadly interpreted as the individual responsible for training others for athletic contests and the position has been long been part of the Westernised sporting scene, although the role assumed different trajectories in Britain and in America where coaching emerged as a specialised, technical profession, and principles of scientific management were used to teach strategies and train athletes.⁵ As college status came to rely on the performance of athletic teams in the early twentieth century, coaches developed relationships with academics working in science and medicine, and adopted industrialised approaches to team organisation.⁶

By contrast, British coaching practice, the focus for this paper, remained rooted in the traditions of the previous century when many paid coaches designated themselves as 'Professors', a term denoting their status as expert practitioners. Realistically, coaching operated much more as a trade or a craft than a profession and this may still be nature of coaching two thousand years after Pindar referred to the coach as the *tektion* (carpenter or builder) of the athlete.⁷ Such terminology would have been easily understood by nineteenth century coaches for whom the pattern of craft training was current and for whom specialist knowledge was normally conveyed, orally or by practical demonstration, through kinship groups and community.⁸

¹ Rabinbach, A. (1990). *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 52.

² Vertinsky, P. (1991). Old Age, Gender and Physical Activity: The Biomedicalization of Aging. *Journal of Sport History*, 18(1), pp.69-76.

³ Tomlinson, A. (2003). Speculations on the Body and Sporting Spaces: The Cultural Significance of Sport Performance. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 46(11), pp.1577-1587.

⁴ Pfister, G. (2001). Sport, Technology and Society: From Snow Shoes to Racing Skis. *Culture, Sport, Society*, 4(1), pp.76-77.

⁵ Coakley, J.J. (1994). *Sport In Society: Issues And Controversies*. Mosby, St.Louis.

⁶ Westby, D. L. and Sack, A. (1976). The Commercialization and Functional Rationalization of College Football: Its Origins. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 47(6) p. 627.

⁷ Harris, H.A. (1964). *Greek Athletes and Athletics*. Hutchinson & Co. Ltd p.179.

⁸ Rosenband, L. N. (1999). Social Capital in the Early Industrial Revolution. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, xxix(3) pp. 435-457.

In contrast to the increasing interest in science being made by their American counterparts, English coaches maintained their predominantly craft approach. These coaching cultures, acting through tightly connected communities of practice, grew out of a form of cottage industry led by local experts whose methods were perpetuated, in turn, by their close confidants. Sam Mussabini drew up training and racing schedules for the 1920 double Olympic champion Albert Hill who broke the British mile record that had stood for twenty-nine years. When Mussabini retired, Hill took over his coaching role and passed on his methods to Sydney Wooderson who set a British mile record of 4:04.2.⁹ Harry Andrews worked with Alfred Shrubbs who later coached at Oxford University. Coaching craft was also transmitted through family ties. Frederick Beckwith's career as a swimming coach is one example of the role of the organic intellectual in stimulating local interest in his sport and of the interactions that took place between coach, family, and other connected individuals. The operational nature of these small, non-regulated, and self-contained communities, led to criticism for encouraging the perpetuation of 'fads' but it also gave considerable scope for innovation and Sinclair concluded that such men had created new knowledge and that those in occupations such as medicine should pay more attention to it.¹⁰

These coaches were never required to legitimise their actions with a theoretical underpinning and when Victorians referred to their sporting activities as 'scientific' this implied either a systematic process of training or the employment of skill. Athletic preparation depended upon the accumulated wisdom of successful coaches, men whose experiential learning had taught them important lessons about a range of psychological issues such as race preparation, individual differences between athletes, and the affect of nerves on performance. Mussabini noted that nerves would always get hold of the athlete, no matter how fit he was, while Andrews emphasised that just because an athlete was nervous he was not necessarily 'chicken-hearted'. However, to 'funk' just before the race worked against the athlete and the coach should alleviate this by talking to him about anything except the competition.¹¹

The implication for the coach of this connection between mind and body was that training needed to incorporate aspects of psychological preparation. Walsh emphasised that during training, the coach should 'draw out the powers of his pupil by walking against him, taking care not to dishearten him', partly by allowing him to win.¹² Mussabini recommended that the coach persuade the athlete that he is doing well, by using a white lie where necessary, and each man must be encouraged to view race day as a red-letter day, which 'in after life he will be able to look back upon with real satisfaction, having enrolled his name in a niche of fame'. Runners should ignore the 'fairy tales always put about concerning the powers of certain entries or the wonderful trials they have performed'.¹³

Coaching texts from the 1920s and 1930s emphasise just how comprehensive this practical psychological was among coaches and athletes. Squash champion Amir Bey noted the importance of understanding one's opponent, advised that players should not brood over bad

⁹ Bryant, J. (2005). *3:59.4 : The Quest to Break the 4 Minute Mile* p. 227.

¹⁰ Radford, P. F. (1998). The Good, The Bad and The Ugly, *Sociology of Sport Online*, <<http://physed.otago.ac.nz/sosol/v1i1/pfr.htm>>

¹¹ Mussabini, S. A. (1924). *Track and Field Athletics*, London: W. Foulsham and Co. p. 93; Andrews, H. (1903). *Training for Athletics and General Health*, London: C. Arthur Pearson pp. 85-88.

¹² Stonehenge. (1857). *Manual of British Rural Sports Comprising, Shooting, Hunting, Coursing, Fishing, Hawking, Racing, Boating, Pedestrianism and the Various Rural Games and Amusements of Great Britain 2nd Edition*, London: G. Routledge and Co. pp. 444-447, 449-450.

¹³ Mussabini, S. A. (1913). *The Complete Athletic Trainer*, London: Methuen and Co. pp. 98-112; See also Faries, R. (1897). On Training in General, *Outing* XXX (2) May pp. 177-179, who was giving advice, from his book *Practical Training for Contests, for Health and for Pleasure*, that would be familiar to contemporary coaches.

decisions, since this destroyed concentration, and highlighted how spectators affected.¹⁴ His coach, 'Oke' Johnson, recalled working with Bey to overcome his tendency to become irritated when things were not going his way.¹⁵

I came to the conclusion that the 'rough stuff' was the only right stuff to employ, and...I thought of every low trick I had ever seen or heard of. When playing...I would scrape up the ball second bounce and loudly claim that it was legitimately up. I deliberately called the score wrong, but always in my favour. I frequently got in his way on purpose and pushed him roughly in the back without provocation. I hit him hard with the ball whenever I had an opportunity, and, on occasions, I hit him with the racket itself...he began to realize the point of it all, and...his sensitiveness became hardened to the inevitable rough and tumble of a man's game like squash.¹⁶

Coaching had a long tradition in rowing and this was reflected in observations made by Meldrum in 1932. In the third week of training, athletes could become 'comatose or jumpy by turns' at which point the coach could be 'more useful as an unofficial psychologist than as a rowing expert' by inducing confidence without irritating the men.¹⁷

Little, if any, of this coaching advice was the direct result of collaborations between coaches and scientists,¹⁸ although the 1911 Dresden International Hygiene Exhibition had provided an impetus to launch 'the sport sciences'¹⁹ and the growth of the Olympics had further stimulated scientific involvement. At the 1913 Olympic Congress delegates discussed the psychological characteristics of exercises, team selection and training, and the development of courage and self-confidence. Rousseau observed that elite sportsmen employed 'autosuggestion', positive self talk,²⁰ a practice that was credited to American Olympic trainer Michael Murphy.²¹

This growing interest in sport psychology followed the recognition accorded to the parent discipline. The elevation in the status of science in the nineteenth century had prompted psychologists to promote their work and the general acceptance of psychology as a science attests to their success in establishing the public identity of the discipline.²² By 1921, psychology was represented by a professional organisation, professional journals, and university courses,²³ and it was attracting attention from college coaches interested in its competitive potential. Glenn Warner at Stanford was known for his innovations as a football strategist and a research study was undertaken with Walter Miles recording the reaction of linemen to an auditory signal. Warner apparently decided that the data were not helpful and

¹⁴ Amr Bey, F. D. (1934). *The Art of Squash Rackets*. London: Chapman & Hall Ltd pp. 89-102.

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 106-107.

¹⁶ Ibid. pp. 108-109.

¹⁷ Meldrum, R. (1932). *Coach and Eight*. London: Country Life Limited New York: Charles Scribner's Sons pp.109-112

¹⁸ Hoberman, J. M. (2005). *History of the Science of Human Performance in Sport* <http://www.sportsci.org/encyc/drafts/History_sport_science.doc> (Accessed 8/8/2005).

¹⁹ Beyer, H.G. (1912). The International Hygiene Exhibition at Dresden. *Popular Science Monthly*, 80, pp.105-128. In 1913, *The Lancet* reported that "a committee had been appointed to collect information and to inquire into the question of athletics with a view to putting games on a scientific basis"; however, it would several decades before any such concerted effort occurred in Britain.

²⁰ *Revue Olympique*. (1912). Congrès de psychologie et de physiologie sportives, (Congress of sport psychology and physiology) Lausanne 1913, April 76 pp. 51, 54-55; Müller, N. (1994). Twelve Congresses for a Century of Olympism, *Olympic Review* 321 pp. 321, 333-337.

²¹ Kornspan Alan S. "The early years of sport psychology: the work and influence of Pierre de Coubertin." *Journal of Sport Behavior* 30.1 (2007): p77(17). 77+. Note 5.

²² Daniels, G. H. (1967). The Pure-Science Ideal and Democratic Culture. *Science* 156, pp. 1699-1705.

²³ Fuchs, A.H. (1998). Psychology and "The Babe". *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 34(2), pp.153-154.

there is no evidence that Miles was invited to work with the team again.²⁴ Between 1925 and 1931 Coleman Griffith headed a laboratory at Illinois where he analysed the psychological factors in athletic competition.²⁵ Griffith, who corresponded with the leading coaches of the day, argued that sport psychologists should teach novice coaches the psychological principles used by experienced, successful coaches. In 1932, however, the laboratory was closed partly, it has been suggested, because Griffith lost support from Robert Zuppke, the football coach, who failed to see improvement in his teams as a result of Griffith's research.²⁶ Griffith subsequently had a spell as sport psychologist with the Chicago Cubs in 1938 when he was hired to study players in order to discover the psychological profile of a champion baseball player but, to the apparent amusement of players and coaches, his quest proved fruitless.²⁷

In Britain there were some public discussions following the Great War about the advantages of a more formal approach to psychology in sport. In 1918, British Olympic Committee member Theodore Cook advocated Pelmanism as a means of training the mind in the 'highest forms of sport' and proposed that the same amount of training should be given the mind as the body.²⁸ One newspaper correspondent observed in 1924 that, because mental training was becoming increasingly important, a new profession was opening up for psychological trainers,²⁹ and in 1929, Lowe and Porritt argued that a psychologist could contribute to skill development in athletic throwing events.³⁰ Psychology was also tried by football clubs in the 1930s. The Reverend M. Caldwell, chaplain to two large London mental hospitals, was described as an expert in practical psychology who gave lectures on 'psychotactics' and he was employed by Arsenal, Brentford and Sheffield Wednesday.³¹

The development of sport psychology was not restricted to the Westernised world. In 1946, the Soviet Communist Party passed a resolution 'to win world supremacy in the major sports in the immediate future'.³² Communist ideology emphasised the power of science to bring about human transformation³³ and Puni formalised the discipline by launching a sport psychology department in 1946. In 1952, the Soviet team appeared at the Olympics for the first time and the sport sciences, including sport psychology, were credited for contributing to their success.³⁴

Soviet performances stimulated worldwide developments in sport psychology and as it became a disciplinary subculture, structural control followed. Professionalisation in science had appealed to Victorian gentlemen because it conferred on the scientific enterprise an

²⁴ Baugh, F.G. and Benjamin Jr., L.T. (2006). Walter Miles, Pop Warner, B. C. Graves, And The Psychology Of Football *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 42(1), pp.3-18

²⁵ Fuchs, A. H. (1998). Psychology and "The Babe". *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 34(2), p. 156.

²⁶ Gould, D. and Pick, S. (1995). Sport psychology: The Griffith Era, 1920-1940. *The Sport Psychologist*, 9, pp. 341-405.

²⁷ John Kremer and Aidan Moran Swifter, higher, stronger The history of sport psychology *The Psychologist* 742 21(8) August 2008 p. 740; Gould, D. and Pick, S. (1995). Sport Psychology: The Griffith Era, 1920-1940 *The Sport Psychologist* 9, pp. 341-405

²⁸ Sir Theodore Cook *Manchester Guardian* Sep 24, 1918 pg. 3 Pelmanism; Sir Theodore Cook *Manchester Guardian* Oct 8, 1918 p. 7 Pelmanism

²⁹ *Manchester Guardian* Oct 14, 1924; pg. 7. By a correspondent.

³⁰ Lowe, D.G.A. and Porritt, A. E. (1929) *Athletics* Longmans, Green and Co., London. p. 272

³¹ Carter, N. (2001). "Meet the New Boss; Same as the Old Boss": A Social History of the Football Manager, 1880-C.1966 (University of Warwick, Unpublished PhD Thesis)

³² McIntosh, P. (1982). Motivation of Olympic athletes *Olympic Review*, October, 180, p.567. Lecture given during the 22nd IOA Session.

³³ Riordan, J. (1994). Russia and Eastern Europe in the future of the modern Olympic movement. *Critical Reflections on Olympic Ideology: Second International Symposium for Olympic Research*, pp. 1-3.

³⁴ Ryba, T. V., Stambulova, N. B. and Wrisberg, C. A. (2005). The Russian origins of sport psychology: A translation of an early work of A. C. Puni. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 17, pp. 157-167.

unprecedented level of social prestige.³⁵ The professionalisation process involved restricting the number of legitimate outlets for scientific publications, since this consolidated elite authority,³⁶ and sport psychologists from the 1970s employed similar exclusionary mechanisms. In the UK, professional recognition began with the formation of the British Association of Sports Sciences (later BASES) in 1984. In 1988, BASES established a register of sport psychologists and by 1992 only accredited members were deemed eligible to be recommended as professional sport psychologists. That same year, the British Psychological Society created a sport and exercise psychology interest group, the Sport and Exercise Psychology Section was created in 1993 and this became a Division in 2005, by which time the BPS had seized control of the field subsequently publishing the *Sport and Exercise Psychology Review* and the *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology* in 2008.

Bernard Shaw defined a profession as 'a conspiracy against the laity'³⁷ and the professionalisation of sports psychology had long-term implications for the centrality of the craftsman coach and for the perpetuation of coaching practice as a learned trade. The degree of professional regulation which now operates internationally through the BPS and related bodies³⁸ reflects the tendency of professions to create arbitrary boundaries to separate themselves from competing occupational groups with the intention of maximising each member's share of the resultant social and economic rewards. Since high status is seldom conferred on an occupation that cannot boast exclusivity, professions limit the number of potential entrants and modulate the standards demanded in order to ensure that their monopoly retains its intrinsic value. For this reason, professions nowadays are often defended by establishing strong links to universities since formal education serves as a filter through which only a fraction of the population can pass.³⁹ Professional expertise is then defined in terms of the number of facts that are known and, although a subsidiary aspect of expertise is experience, the tacit knowledge of practitioners such as coaches is considered subjective and, therefore, inferior.

The professionalisation of sport psychology led inexorably to the marginalisation of coaches as coaching practice moved towards a highly constrained process, fuelled by the importance attributed to scientific expertise by coach educators ever since the late nineteenth century when American physical educational programmes focussed on anatomy, physiology, anthropometry, motor development, and psychology.⁴⁰ Academics in these disciplines subsequently established themselves as the gatekeepers of this specialist knowledge, despite the fact that many relevant principles were already being employed by a cadre of experienced coaches.

In Britain, the Coaching Task Force, established in 2001, addressed the 'low professional status of coaching in the UK' by proposing a UK Coaching Certificate, consisting of five qualification levels,⁴¹ an attempt to professionalise coaching through a meritocratic structure

³⁵ Waller, J. C. (2001). Gentlemanly Men of Science: Sir Francis Galton and the Professionalization of the British Life-Sciences *Journal of the History of Biology* 34 pp. 83-84.

³⁶ Bellon, R. (2001). Joseph Dalton Hooker's Ideals for a Professional Man of Science *Journal of the History of Biology* 34 p. 72.

³⁷ Elcock, (1986). *Local Government*, Methuen.

³⁸ John Kremer and Aidan Moran Swifter, higher, stronger The history of sport psychology *The Psychologist* 742 21(8) August 2008; Ian M. Cockerill August 2002 *The Psychologist* 15(8).

³⁹ Waller, J. C. (2001). Gentlemanly Men of Science: Sir Francis Galton and the Professionalization of the British Life-Sciences *Journal of the History of Biology* 34 pp. 88-89.

⁴⁰ Reilly, R.A. (1977). Luther Gulick and the YMCA training school curriculum 1887-1903. *NASSH Proceedings and Newsletter*, pp.30-32; Park, R.J. (1987). Physiologists, Physicians, and Physical Educators: Nineteenth Century Biology and Exercise, *Hygienic and Educative. Journal of Sport History*, 14(1) pp.50, 52-53.

⁴¹ UKCC (2005) <<http://www.ukcoachingcertificate.org/web/coaches/History.html>> (Accessed 17.08.2005)

dependent qualifications which reflects a cultural heritage. For the Victorian middle classes outside of the elite professional societies, exams both defined and illustrated social change and the late nineteenth century witnessed the relentless development of an examining society.⁴² The UKCC proposal is a logical inheritor of this process where quantitative knowledge, much of it science based, has become the prime directive rather than the pedagogical development of coaches.

The tendency to refer to athletes as 'performers' projects the modern image of athletes as products of systematic and rationalised programmes, regimented individuals who function as a result of scientifically organised preparation. Since this is assumed to be a quantifiable process, educators believe that it can be distilled to aspiring coaches as a set of prescriptive guidelines. Coach education programmes, designed with professional status in mind, now rely on a set of knowledge parameters in fields such as sport psychology, established by academics not by great coaches, which produces coaches who subsequently perpetuate this stereotypical and reductionist view of coaching. Aspiring coaches are educated to expect that science will supply them with the answers instead of trying to become more competent and self-sufficient by experimenting with new ideas as part of their daily practical coaching. Creative, imaginative coaches are marginalised, often being dismissed as 'mavericks', and there seems to be no scope left for the artistry, craftsmanship, and intellectual contributions of a Mussabini, an Andrews, or a Johnson.

However, to end on a more optimistic note, it is possible that remnants of these cultures may survive further standardisation since at certain levels of sport, and in some sports more than others, the importance of the organic intellectual's contribution to coaching through close-knit, localised groups, may well continue. At pre-qualification levels of coaching the local expert is still the key to initial coaching involvement, whether to a parent gradually immersing him or herself into local coaching traditions or to an athlete moving on to coaching and perpetuating or modifying his or her own coach's training methods. At elite levels, those coaches who have gone beyond the remits of the qualification process will share knowledge through a variety of information channels, normally with a group of like-minded individuals, and use their intellectual processes to initiate and drive innovations just as Beckwith did over a century ago.

⁴² Schwarz, L. (2004). Professions, Elites, And Universities In England, 1870–1970 *The Historical Journal*, 47(4) pp. 941–944; 956–957.