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Original Research

“Tell Me Something I Don’t Already Know”: Practical Guidelines for Sports Coaching Educators

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Abstract

Sports coaching is an expanding academic discipline, reflected in the increasing number of students choosing the subject at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Educators in kinesiology and the sports sciences, and more specifically in coaching programs, play a vital role in preparing students for the multifaceted demands of the profession. Drawing from our experiences teaching in higher education and practicing as coaches, this article offers five teaching suggestions for educators delivering university and national governing body coaching education programs. These guidelines aim to enhance teaching effectiveness and promote the development of well-rounded, reflective, and passionate coaches. Recommendations include: (1) Setting Standards and Boundaries, (2) Carefully Considering and Designing Assessments to Promote Reflection, (3) Ensuring the Material is Relatable to Students’ Experiences, (4) Being Mindful of the Level of Challenge, and (5) Making the Coaching Enjoyable. These recommendations are intended to support coach educators in the delivery and design of programs with the goal of producing high-quality, competent future coaches.

Keywords: Coaching, Education, Learning, Engagement, Teaching

Introduction

The role of a coach extends far beyond simply teaching technical skills and tactics (Nash et al., 2008). Coaches serve as leaders, mentors, counsellors, and educators, responsible not only for the physical development of athletes but also for their psychological well-being (Pearson et al., 2021). Coaching in the modern landscape is multifaceted and often challenging, requiring navigation of various stakeholders and pressures (Quick & Baghurst, 2025). This broad scope underscores the need for a rigorous, detailed, thoughtfully designed approach to training future coaches. Within the kinesiology/sport science field, and specifically in sports coaching programs, educators play a crucial role in preparing students to meet these demands by equipping them with both the theoretical foundations and practical skills necessary to excel (Manolachi et al., 2022). However, as this article details, *how* to educate student coaches is complex.

Developing “competent” coaches involves much more than teaching the X’s and O’s of sports. However, most coach education is geared toward teaching tactical and technical aspects (Baghurst, 2023), and other areas are often given only token consideration. Educators must foster critical thinking, reflection, and a deep appreciation of the humanistic aspects of working with athletes (Falcão et al., 2017). The challenge for coaches entering the workforce is that there are no one-size-fits-all solutions; instead, they must often “figure it out” themselves. This highlights the importance of students developing strong problem-solving skills during their studies. Extending this further, sports coaching educators should inspire students to develop their own coaching philosophies critically (Hochstetler, 2019). These



should be grounded in both empirical evidence and personal experience rather than just replicating the techniques they encountered as athletes (Camiré et al., 2012). This is essential in the movement towards and development of ethical coaching practice (Baghurst & Parish, 2023).

For some students, it is necessary to appropriately and supportively challenge their perceptions and beliefs about what constitutes “effective coaching” (Horn, 2008). Students invariably bring preconceptions shaped by their own athletic experiences, some of which may not be beneficial or accurate, and these must be addressed thoughtfully (Harrison Jr. et al., 2004). In practical terms, students have frequently arrived at our classes with the idea that the coaching they received as athletes was “good.” While this may be the case for some students, they rarely consider how all the athletes on their team might have felt, for example. Put simply, it is important to support students in developing a reflective mindset, one that moves beyond the assumption that their previous coaching experiences were necessarily positive and instead embraces a critical openness to the idea that certain practices may have been flawed or in need of improvement.

Currently, in both academic (i.e., higher education) and formal settings (i.e., National Governing Body certification courses), getting students to think critically may be challenging, as it is highly dependent on the course duration and the number of guided learning hours. For example, in our ongoing yet unpublished research, National Governing Body coaching courses that deem coaches “competent” upon completion typically range between 25 and 30 guided learning hours. Alarming, this demonstrates the difficulties educators face when delivering courses and developing critically reflective autonomous coaches in the limited contact hours that are available.

From setting clear standards for professional behavior to designing assessments that foster active engagement and reflection, the practical strategies outlined in this article support a student-centered teaching approach grounded in the realities of modern-day coaching. The overarching aim is to cultivate well-rounded, reflective, and passionate coaches who can positively impact both the profession and the lives of the athletes they serve (Baghurst, 2024; Quick & Baghurst, 2025). Crucially, the quality of educational content and *how* it is delivered shape not only future coaching practices but also the experiences of athletes (Neelis et al., 2020). For clarity, the term “student” throughout this article refers to individuals in academic settings and those participating in coach training programs. These recommendations are designed to prepare students for the demands of coaching while inspiring long-term commitment to the profession (Rynne & Mallet, 2017).

Recommendation One: Set High Standards and Clear Boundaries

Establishing clear standards and boundaries in the learning space sets expectations for how coaches should act and conduct themselves professionally (Moreno, 2020). These expectations include, among other things, professional behavior in class, appropriate and safe attire, and a conscientious approach to learning. Professional behaviors such as punctuality, active participation, respect for peers, and the ability to collaborate effectively reflect real-world coaching conduct. Clearly communicating these expectations is a valuable exercise. It also provides learners with an example of how they might set standards for their own program, such as through a player expectation agreement. Additionally, setting standards fosters a positive learning environment, which enhances student engagement and encourages richer dialogue.

Recognize that dictating expectations can be problematic for the educator, as there is no guarantee of “shared buy-in” from the students. Therefore, as a practical example, educators can ask the cohort to collaboratively develop a set of “learner agreements” at the start of the course. Learners can then initial the agreements to indicate their consent to abide by them. Finally, these can be placed on view in the classroom as a reminder of the shared agreement that the learners have agreed upon. Standards can be enforced more broadly in multiple ways, ranging from in-class behaviors (i.e., listening to peers, respecting others, and ensuring punctuality) to *in situ* attention to details when practically coaching (e.g., arriving ahead of time, record keeping, and thorough planning).

The recent shift in coach education classes to online platforms is worth noting. As a tangible example, the Football Association’s (United Kingdom) “Introduction to Coaching Football” is entirely online (England Football Learning,



2025). To some extent, this is a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. While there are some benefits to online coach training (e.g., greater reach, more accessibility, and reduced cost), there is certainly a place and need for face-to-face practical experiences (Kim & Lee, 2023). Students should be encouraged/required to dress appropriately for face-to-face courses, but it should not be a graded component of course completion (Baghurst, 2014). In some programs, participants may be provided with a uniform, especially if the course has an internship component. Wearing a sports uniform serves two purposes. First, it promotes safety and reduces the risk of accidental injury during physical activity. Second, it encourages active participation, as practical coaching sessions require students to act as “players” and engage fully. In turn, wearing athletic attire increases students’ readiness and willingness to participate (Wear et al., 2016).

Recommendation Two: Carefully Consider and Design Assessments to Promote Reflection

Effective assessment in sport coaching should extend beyond mere participation and actively encourage deeper reflection and engagement (Hägglund et al., 2021). Simply put, coaches and coaching students cannot truly learn unless they are physically and mentally present and receptive to feedback. While ensuring student attendance can be straightforward, often by including participation as part of the grading criteria (Baghurst, 2014), educators must design assessments that promote both active involvement and critical thinking (Golden, 2023).

Meaningful learning experiences arise when students engage actively with the material, connecting it to their coaching practice, think critically, and apply their knowledge effectively. Assignments such as reflective journals, case studies, and peer reviews encourage students to critically evaluate their experiences and explore topics relevant to their interests (Pavlovich, 2007). For example, students might write about a coaching session they conducted/observed and reflect on successes and areas for improvement. However, reflection is a skill that takes time to develop. Moreover, various models of reflection exist that serve different purposes (e.g., Saperstein et al., 2015; Schön, 1983).

For practical purposes, educators should offer a series of prompts (i.e., reflective questions) to scaffold students’ learning. Example questions (dependent upon the students’ level) could be “What did you notice?”, “What were you thinking at the time?”, “What was the impact of your intervention?”, and “What did you miss in the session that you would seek to change next time?”. In addition to these examples, coaching research includes knowledge elicitation methods such as stimulated recall (Chapman et al., 2024) and the Think Aloud Protocol (Quick & Lyle, 2024). Asking students to engage with these tools, often found in coach education literature, encourages critical thinking about coaching methods and facilitates learning from practical experiences.

Students can also benefit from reflective scaffolding (Farias et al., 2018), which helps them focus on key emerging issues. Furthermore, much of students’ learning comes from in-person attendance and interaction, which cannot be fully replicated or “caught up” later (Segalla, 2024). By promoting and facilitating reflective thinking through carefully designed assessments, educators encourage deeper engagement and help cultivate the introspective qualities essential for effective coaching (Hodgson et al., 2017). As a cautionary note for educators, activities such as reflection and critical thinking should be ongoing and continuous processes, not simply performed at the end of the course or module. Therefore, it requires the educator’s conscious and consistent effort to continually challenge and check that students engage in these cognitive activities.

When devising assessments, it is essential to clearly communicate the criteria for success in both practical and theoretical components. In sports coaching, assessments should evaluate not only students’ understanding of coaching theory but also their ability to apply that knowledge in semi-artificial scenarios (such as peer-to-peer practice) and real-life coaching situations (Hay et al., 2012). With the increasing accessibility and use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), it is important to consider the extent to which assessments require critical thinking and independent student thought. If an assessment can be completed using AI alone, it may not accurately reflect student learning or understanding.

In addition, it is important to note that evaluation of practical application should not be or only slightly based on attendance, effort, and participation, as has sometimes been reported in physical education settings (Baghurst, 2014; Williams & Lacy, 2018). Students should be evaluated on their skills rather than instructional requirements necessary to engage in the lesson’s aims and objectives.



Recommendation Three: *Ensure the Material is Relatable to Coaches' Experiences*

For students to fully understand and apply theoretical material, it must feel relevant to their current or future coaching experiences (Jones et al., 2011). This presents a challenge for educators, as students often begin a module with differing levels of knowledge and experience. Notably, students who have played sports at a high level (e.g., in college or high school) are likely to have more technical and tactical understanding. However, it does not guarantee that they are more reflective practitioners.

Most often, the training that we provide is not sport-specific. Such is the variety of sports; students are encouraged to learn the X's and O's independently from other coaches. We focus on deliberately connecting theoretical concepts to real-life coaching situations, which helps make learning more meaningful and applicable (Camiré et al., 2012). This can be acquired through group discussions, reflective logs, or reflections in which participants (personally or publicly) share personal experiences.

Coaching educators typically draw from a wealth of rich, reflective experiences (Quick & Baghurst, 2025). Sharing these with students (when done sensitively) can illuminate key concepts and demonstrate that even experienced coaches make mistakes. Indeed, Quick and Baghurst (2025) discussed how theory can and should be presented to practicing coaches (e.g., espoused theory vs theory of action and ethical decision-making continuums). For example, when discussing topics like sport psychology or athlete development, educators might reflect on real situations they have navigated and the lessons learned and solicit examples from students. This not only helps students grasp reflective processes but also serves as meta-learning and positive role modelling (Ribbers, 2023).

Many students already have a vision of their future roles. As such, educators should encourage them to anticipate the types of challenges they may face (e.g., ethical dilemmas) and use these as entry points for deeper reflection and engagement (Baghurst & Parish, 2023; Dohme et al., 2019; Hochstetler, 2019). Encouraging students to imagine themselves in these future situations fosters more intentional learning. In short, making material relatable ensures students can see the direct relevance of their learning, improving both knowledge retention and practical application. Case studies, for example, provide real-life situations that can be discussed and applied (Baghurst & Parish, 2023).

Recommendation Four: *Be Mindful of the Level of Challenge*

One of the most important goals in teaching future coaches is to ensure they develop their own coaching philosophies and techniques rather than uncritically replicating the practices of their former coaches (Cushion & Partington, 2014). To achieve this, educators must actively challenge students to think critically and engage with theoretical concepts in a meaningful way. This process can be uncomfortable, as it often requires students to re-evaluate methods they once viewed as effective (Quick & Baghurst, 2025). They may begin to question whether what they once considered “good coaching” truly aligned with ethical, effective, or evidence-based practice (Jacobs et al., 2014).

Rather than simply repeating familiar drills or copying past experiences (Kidman & Hanrahan, 2010), students should be encouraged to assess whether those approaches were appropriate for the athletes they served. In addition, they should be prompted to consider “What theoretical underpinnings support the practices of my former coaches?” Educators can support this development by designing assignments or activities requiring students to critique different coaching methodologies or construct evidence-informed approaches to athlete development (Turnnidge & Côté, 2017). For example, an assessment might involve first observing another coach delivering a session, then reflecting on which key aspects could appropriately be transferred to one's coaching practice, and why these elements would enhance or inform one's approach to coaching. This type of engagement fosters deeper critical thinking and allows for real change in students' coaching beliefs and behaviours.

Coaching must be understood as more than a “turn up and do” activity. It should be grounded in knowledge, theory, and critical reflection (Tinning, 2021). Therefore, students must be given opportunities to engage with relevant research from sports coaching and neighbouring disciplines, and to consider how theory can inform and enhance practice. However, from our experiences, engaging with academic literature can be challenging for many students and coaches.



This is typically because students do not see the relevance and applicability of the academic material. Nevertheless, it is a vital and rich source of information that should be used to question assumptions and inform practice. Therefore, it is important for educators to proactively support students in learning how to interpret academic literature critically. In addition, while providing students with selected articles to read and interpret is important, it is equally vital that they are shown where to look for existing research (i.e., academic sources, books, online platforms, National Governing Body websites, etc.). This approach is intended to foster greater independent learning and more accurately reflect how student coaches should continue learning after leaving the program. Last, we challenge academics to write so that those who are not academics can read and interpret content easily. In summary, framing learning in this way helps develop coaches who are not only reflective and analytical but also innovative and able to ask, “Does the evidence support what I am doing?” rather than relying on the familiar refrain, “This is how it’s always been done.”

Recommendation Five: *Make the Coaching Enjoyable*

At the heart of any coaching program lies the desire to inspire students to engage in and remain in the profession, a documented challenge (Baghurst, 2025; Ettl Rodríguez, 2018). The ultimate test of effective teaching in sports coaching is whether educators can ignite and sustain a passion for coaching in their students (McLean & Mallett, 2011). While many students begin a module full of enthusiasm, this energy can quickly wane under the pressure of multiple assignments and competing academic demands. As such, educators should aim to create an environment that fosters curiosity about their own practice (and that of others) and that celebrates exploration and inquiry. In doing so, educators can help students connect with the intrinsic rewards of coaching, such as supporting athletes in reaching their full potential. In practical terms, this can be achieved through the careful selection of engaging materials (e.g., current high-profile and realistic examples; Baghurst, 2023), by demonstrating passion and enjoyment as a coach, and by promoting sustainable coaching practices to help prevent burnout (Griffin et al., 2025; Kilo et al., 2016).

It is also crucial to emphasize that effective coaching is a lifelong learning process (Moreno, 2020). For many students, completing a sports coaching module or training is just the beginning of that journey. Therefore, educators should strive to demonstrate how today’s learning can shape tomorrow’s coaching practice, encouraging students to view coaching not as a completed achievement but as an evolving and ongoing commitment to growth and development.

Conclusion

Teaching sports coaching students presents unique challenges that demand educators to balance theoretical knowledge with practical application, foster critical thinking, and ignite a genuine passion for the profession. By establishing clear standards and boundaries, encouraging active engagement and reflection, connecting material to real-world experiences, challenging assumptions, and nurturing intrinsic motivation, educators can cultivate a learning environment that prepares students not just for the technical demands of coaching but also for its emotional and intellectual complexities. Ultimately, the goal of teaching in this context is not merely to produce knowledgeable graduates but to develop competent, reflective, and passionate coaches, individuals who are equipped to make meaningful, lasting contributions to the lives of athletes across all ages and levels of sport.

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Tim Baghurst is a Professor of Athletic Coaching and the Director of FSU COACH: Interdisciplinary Center for Athletic Coaching. His research focuses on coaching education and development, with specific interests in coaching ethics and coach health and well-being. He has had more than 125 peer-reviewed articles published in addition to many book chapters and several books, and he has been recognized with Fellow status by three professional organizations. He has worked with various athletic and coaching organizations at the community, collegiate, professional, and international levels. These include working with sports organizations affiliated with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), United States Olympic Committee (USOPC), International Olympic Committee (IOC), and National Basketball Association (NBA).

