

The Role of the Youth Sport Coach in COVID-19

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Over the past several months, the world has been faced with unprecedented times as nations, communities, and individuals have grappled with the initial shock and subsequent coming to terms with the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. With respect to sport participation, many athletes and coaches are trying to cope with new realities, which continue to evolve as “return to play” platforms are released, implemented, and revisited, guided by the varied responses of governments and public health leaders around the world.

In a news article published early in the pandemic (Wyman, 2020), high-performance athletes discussed their thoughts about this time, with one athlete noting that “(S)port isn’t everything” and in turn revealing the importance of athletes maintaining or developing other aspects of themselves. The statement offers some insight into the changing dynamic of sport. As researchers in the field of youth sport and positive youth development (PYD) through sport, we have been considering the impacts of this time on the present and future of youth sport programs.

The field of PYD through sport focuses on the growth of positive skills that can facilitate young people’s development inside and outside of the sport context (Gould & Carson, 2008) and several models have been presented to explain positive development through sport (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). Within the current pandemic context, significant alterations to *participation* (i.e., involving quarantines, self-isolation, and physically distancing) coupled with the absence of *performance* opportunities (i.e., competition) must be acknowledged. This leaves coaches in uncharted territory, as they paradoxically try to balance short-term foci ‘in the moment’, with the long-term aims of sport engagement that may at times seem inconsequential. While we do not have all the answers as to how to approach this complex situation, we believe that coaches can best navigate these circumstances by focusing on the short-term mandate of maintaining their athletes’ *interest* in sport, while simultaneously focusing on fostering two specific personal assets within their athletes: *confidence* and interpersonal *connections*.

Practical Approaches for Coaches

We recognize the diversity of contexts in which youth sport coaches operate (i.e., recreational, competitive, high-performance; seasonal, year-round; community-based, non-for-profit, private; volunteer, paid, etc.), as well as the countless challenges (i.e., individual, familial, financial, practical, professional, organizational) that athletes, coaches, sport programs, and administrators are encountering during this time. Our intent is not to prescribe specific ‘one-size-fits all’ roles for coaches, but rather, to offer our insights for consideration. We believe this time offers coaches a chance to reflect and be creative and look for ways to make sport more meaningful and relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. One online resource, Project SCORE (www.projectscore.ca), may be an option for coaches to use to reach these goals (Strachan et al., 2020).

Building/Maintaining Athletes’ Confidence

Within Project SCORE, the theme of confidence (highlighted in the *Coach’s Locker Room* on the website) is multifaceted. In particular, it is suggested that coaches: (a) empower

youth, to in turn build their positive identity and enjoyment (Strachan et al., 2009), (b) identify and recognize their achievements to increase their motivation (Petitpas et al., 2005) and (c) enhance their belief in themselves and their capabilities, through the vicarious experiences of others. Coaches can help athletes develop their confidence through these means, drawing upon the content delivered on the online platform.

In adapting Project SCORE content to the current COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., the absence or modification of personal interactions on the “field of play”), coaches can shift their goals and/or program to focus more on creating virtual meetings that allow athletes to stay engaged with their sports. To empower athletes, coaches may want to allow athletes to virtually lead a stretch with the team or describe and/or demonstrate a drill. Recognition of individual successes at this time is important as well; coaches may consider giving challenges for their athletes to complete and recognize individual accomplishments. Finally, to enhance youth athletes’ belief in themselves and their capabilities, coaches may share stories of other relatable athletes who have shown resilience overcoming challenges. This could be done through weekly virtual “story time” where coaches provide a link, passage, or even read from a (auto-)biographical book, and in turn engage athletes in a reflective discussion about how to develop confidence. These simple strategies might also allow athletes to maintain their interest and keep motivated. Coaches will need to consider how to reach all athletes in the program, keeping in mind level of participation as well as access to online platforms and other home family constraints. It is important that coaches’ actions are driven by athletes’ current *interest* rather than athletes’ anxieties or coaches’ expectations around *performance* when returning to sport.

Building/Maintaining Interpersonal Connections

Vierimaa et al. (2018) suggest “that while the development of sport skills and competence is important, it is not a requirement for the creation of an enriching youth sport environment” (p. 11). The authors continue by emphasizing that youth sport programs “should focus on facilitating quality social relationships among both youth and adults, as social relationships are considered one of the most influential elements of the youth sport environment” (p. 11). In the era of COVID-19, physical distancing has created a previously inconceivable challenge for coaches trying to create a connection with youth athletes; this connection, however, is critical to encouraging athletes and also maintaining persistence and involvement in youth sport, particularly in the short-term. Abruptly terminated seasons, less time for practices, and the lack of (or modified) competitions also have the potential to negatively impact athlete engagement. This decreased time spent in sport could have affect not only on physical skill development but team connection as well. Further, connections with peers/teammates might have been lost or strained during this time, while prolonged engagement with family (i.e., parents, siblings) during quarantines and community closures create an additional layer of interpersonal interactions that coaches should be aware of. Coaches should be aware of their unique roles as ‘other’ adults in youth athletes’ lives, while also considering if and how to engage with parents and siblings, to help maintain youth athletes’ interest in the sport.

Through Project SCORE, steps may be taken to develop and strengthen coach-athlete

interactions, peer relationships, as well as the parent connection. Coaches can organize ways for athletes to connect online through meetings and/or to celebrate occasions (i.e., birthdays for athletes, coaches, or other staff). Notably, coaches need not always be facilitators of meetings, but rather, they may provide platforms for athletes to connect in the absence of an adult - offering open and safe spaces for athletes to share experiences (e.g., coach-free, athlete-led virtual fitness sessions, warm-up, or cool-down sessions). Additionally, coaches may use this time to share stories about themselves to help foster more connection with their athletes, and on occasion, they may invite parents and siblings to also engage. While little research has explored the interpersonal connections between athletes and coaches through virtual contexts, extensive work in sport psychology and other domains suggests meaningful healthy relationships fostered through these platforms (Reid et al., 2015).

Conclusion

For the reasons above, we believe that the COVID-19 situation offers youth sport stakeholders a chance to redefine growth through sport and examine what is truly important for the development of youth. Coaches have the potential to influence young athletes' personal development, and subsequently, their long-term engagement in sport. Coaches should aim to maintain or enhance athletes' *confidence* and *connection* in the short-term, by maintaining *interest* and motivation. Online resources such as Project SCORE may help coaches refocus their efforts into developing athletes' personal assets. Youth sport programs can emerge from this time as a clear choice for the positive growth and development of the leaders of tomorrow.

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