

Swimming Coach Observation Analysis

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Abstract:

Performing a coach observation analysis is crucial because it can be used to predict the extent of athlete enjoyment and fulfillment in sport. I observed a USA swimming coach for two hours and fifteen minutes, and used the Coaching Behavioral Assessment System (CBAS) to keep track of major behaviors exhibited by the coach. The results showed that this coach participates in a great deal of positive reinforcement, and reinforcement with further guidance and instruction in the event that the skill or task was performed incorrectly; this coach was not observed using any punitive measures with athletes. This data suggests that the coach promotes an environment that reinforces high levels of effort, as well as efficacy, but does not directly promote, encourage or emphasize goals directly related to faster times and winning races. However, the CBAS observation was conducted on only a single occasion with this coach, and such limitations should be considered. Therefore, this study should be read as a single snap shot of one practice with regard to this coach's behaviors.

Introduction:

With youth sport participation rates growing consistently for decades, more attention is being paid to the involvement of adults in youth sports, specifically coaches. Both researchers and parents alike agree that the relationship between athlete and coach can have a paramount effect on the athlete. This effect can extend beyond the athletic setting, and into the athletes personal life, even to the extent of fulfilling a parental role (Smoll and Smith, 2002). Because coaches play such a large part in the athletic and psychosocial development of athletes, researchers

recognized the importance of being able to measure coach's leadership behaviors. In order to do this, researchers developed the Coaching Behavior Assessment System (CBAS) in order to observe coaches' behaviors during practices and competitions (Smith, et.al, 1997).

CBAS is divided into twelve categories, which are further divided into two major classes of behaviors, reactive behaviors and spontaneous behaviors. Reactive behaviors can be described as those that result from an action from an athlete or the team. A coach might display a reactive behavior as a response to a desired results, mistakes, or misbehaviors from the athlete or team (Smoll and Smith, 2002). Spontaneous behaviors occur with no preceding event from athlete or team to induce the behavior. The relationship between coach's scores on a CBAS provided strong evidence supporting the hypothesis that the coach's role is crucial. Smoll and Smith (2002) determined that coaches that provided high levels of positive reinforcement for desirable behaviors and responded to skill development and mistakes with encouragement had the most positive outcomes for the athletes. In contrast, coaches that behaved in punitive and hostile manners had a detrimental effect on the athlete's degree of pleasure with the sport, coach and teammates.

Using the coaching behavioral assessment data collection process as explain above, a CBAS was conducted at a swimming pool located at Hopkins School in New Haven, Connecticut, to determine the types of behaviors this coach engages in with the swimmers, and ultimately make an assesment of the effectiveness of this coach's efficacy.

Methods:

The participants in this study include coach Bob Pimer a former swimmer and a coach for over three decades, and thirteen swimmers, comprised of ten girls and thirteen boys. These swimmers are part of the senior group on the Hopkins Mariner Swim Team (HMST). HMST is a year-round USS competitive swimming organization; the senior group is the highest group of elite athletes ranging in age from 12-18. In order to be in the senior group, swimmers must pass a qualifying set to ensure that they are prepared to swim in this group. Practice is held at Hopkins School, in New Haven, Connecticut, where all but two swimmers attend school. The two swimmers who do not attend Hopkins School are home schooled. Hopkins School is an elite private preparatory school (7-12), and therefore the group of athletes is representative of a very high socioeconomic status. Of the ten girls, nine are of Caucasian descent, and one is Asian, and of the three boys one is of Caucasian descent, one is of Asian descent and one is of middle-eastern descent. The senior group practices Monday-Friday from 6:15 PM to 8:30 PM, Saturday from 8:00 AM-10:00 AM, and select individuals practice Tuesday and Thursday mornings from 6:00 AM-8:00 AM in addition to evening practice. Nine of the thirteen swimmers are in high school (grades 9-12).

The Coaching Behavior Assessment System (CBAS) is a protocol used for observing coaches and collecting data on the coach's behaviors displayed in practice. The coaching behaviors are split into two major classes, Reactive Behaviors and Spontaneous behaviors. These two classes are further broken down into individual categories specific to measuring positive and negative reinforcement

in response to desired performances, mistakes, and technical instruction. The observer will closely monitor the coach during practice, and keep a tally sheet of each occurrence of the behaviors measured by the CBAS protocol. Table 1 displays the specific behaviors measured within the two classes of measured behaviors.

Prior to observing the coach and collecting the quantitative data, it is important for the researcher/observer to collect qualitative data on the environment in which the practice will occur. I arrived roughly twenty minutes before the beginning of practice, and spent that time observing the athletic center the pool is housed in, and the pool deck environment as well. I took copious notes about the physical environment in which the practice took place, including what elements were present, the general light and atmosphere and ambiance of the environment, and implications of the environment I was observing. These field notes were later reviewed and described as a narrative describing the physical attributes of the environment as well as the general atmosphere of the practice environment in the results section of this study.

Results:

Qualitative Results:

The Hopkins Pool is housed indoors within the Hopkins Athletic center. It resides at the very end of the athletic center, down a long concrete hallway. Upon entering the pool deck from the locker rooms, you will walk a roughly twenty- yard tunnel onto the pool deck. Upon reaching the pool deck, there is a plastic sign that reads “Dedication, Pride, Commitment” with “Hopkins Swimming and Diving” printed underneath. The sign has been chipped and cracked, and it is had been taped and super-glued back together on several occasions. As I watch swimmer

emerge from the locker room and through the tunnel, each one slaps the sign before entering the pool deck; this is an initiation routine for the swimmers prior to every practice.

The pool deck is warm and inviting; it is well lit and cream-colored tiles compose the floors and walls. On the shallow side, a large digital time clock hangs on the wall. The pool is a standard twenty-five yard pool with six lanes separated by new maroon, white and grey lane lines. The backstroke flags are maroon with the lane numbers peeling away, and some of the flags are falling off, and they are not evenly spaced. The pool deck is open, with ample space for dry-land workouts, meetings, stretching, etc. The water glimmers a deep aqua blue and invites swimmers to jump in to its crisp cold. Several whiteboards adorn the pool deck, where workouts are written out. Traditional analog pace clocks hang on the sides of the wall at both the shallow and deep end, but the swimmers only use these clocks in the event that the digital clock is not working. The pace clock at the deep end of the pool is roughly ten seconds behind the clock at the shallow end. To the left side of the pool is a concrete balcony filled with benches for parents and spectators. Parents can be found watching practice, reading or watching younger siblings on the balcony for the duration of the practice. On this concrete balcony hang three metal pull-up bars, with three black and yellow TRX bands tied to them. Posted on the wall is a workout sheet of dry land exercises swimmers are to complete before the start of the swimming portion of practice.

All of the equipment (i.e. pull buoy, kickboards and fins) is found neatly organized in a storage closet on deck, with each piece of equipment placed in its

own large cage-like bin. Metal benches surround the perimeter of the deck, providing ample seating for athletes during meets. New maroon colored starting blocks are found at the head of the deep end, with foot chocks engraved with "Hopkins" in white. These new starting blocks replaced old worn down blocks that did not have the foot chock. The starting blocks are coated with a gritty overlay, to provide a high level of traction and prevent slipping. In contrast to the rest of the athletic center, which is composed of grey cinderblock and grey floors, and has a dungeon-like feel to it, the pool deck elicits a warm, welcoming feeling with bright lights, open space and high ceilings; overall it is an inviting atmosphere.

Quantitative Results:

Table 1 shows the observed behaviors of the coach as according to the CBAS protocol. The most common behavior the coach displayed was positive reinforcement and encouragement, and instruction. On nine occasions the coach coupled encouragement after a mistake with mistake contingent technical instruction. There were zero instances of punitive behaviors for mistakes, and the overall atmosphere was encouraging. This practice focused on many drills and techniques that were not necessarily prompted by mistakes observed in practice or competition, but rather geared more towards growth and the notion of the potential of exponential improvement of efficiency and efficacy in swimming skills. The coach could be seen watching athletes carefully as they perform the skills, praising athletes for effort, followed by detailed mistake-contingent instruction on how to improve the skill the next time around.

Coach: Bob Pimer Date: 11/13/15 Location: Hopkins Swimming Pool

Coaching Behaviors	Tally mark for each time this behavior was observed	Total number	Percent of total
Class I - Reactive behaviors		79	64
Responses to desirable performances		30	38
Reinforcement A positive, rewarding reaction (verbal or nonverbal) to a good play or good effort	////////////////////	25	32
Non-reinforcement No response to a good performance	////	5	6
Responses to mistakes		38	48
Mistake-contingent encouragement Encouragement after a mistake	////////	9	11
Mistake-contingent technical instruction Instruction or demonstration on how to correct a mistake the player has made	////////////////////	29	37
Punishment A negative reaction (verbal or nonverbal) after a mistake		0	0
Punitive technical instruction Technical instruction given in a punitive or hostile manner after a mistake		0	0
Ignoring mistakes No response after a player mistake		0	0
Response to misbehavior		11	14
Keeping control Reactions intended to restore or to maintain order among team members	////////	11	14
Class II - Spontaneous Behaviors		44	36
Game related		32	73
General technical instruction Spontaneous instruction in the techniques and strategies of the sport not following a mistake	////////////////////	27	62
General encouragement Spontaneous encouragement not following a mistake	////	5	11
Organization Administrative behavior that sets stage for play by assigning duties and responsibilities		0	0
Game irrelevant		12	27
General communication Interactions with players unrelated to the game	////////	12	27

Table 1: CBAS chart of observed behaviors

Discussion:

I observed an environment that was generally positive, light and encouraging. Athletes show up 10-15 minutes prior to practice and engage in stretching and discourse with the coach; coach will explain facets of the practice, ask athletes how their day at school was, etc. Based on this observation it is evident that the coach holds his athletes in high esteem, and in turn the coach has earned the athlete's respect and admiration. The data collected suggests he emphasizes proper technique and improvement, and provides constant positive reinforcement and refreshers when appropriate. He does not ignore mistakes, but instead addresses mistakes with encouragement, reinforcement (by identifying what part of the skill they performed correctly and what part was incorrect) and demonstrations. The data suggests that Coach Pimer promotes a motivating environment in which there is mutual respect between coaches and athletes. The coach gives positive encouragement and ample feedback for improvement, and the athletes are highly motivated to continue to refine their skills and show growth.

The coach was most responsive to when the swimmers either completed the skill impressively, or when they did not complete it correctly. In both instances, the coach displayed a positive affect with reinforcement, but in the case of the swimmer not completing the skill correctly (or only partially correctly) he took the time to explain, demonstrate and remediate. The coach watched each swimmer carefully, and never ignored any mistakes or improperly performed skills; he consistently addressed these concerns. The coach never displayed a negative reaction to a skill

performed at a less than optimal level, and never utilized any form of punitive remediation.

Based on the data collected by the CBAS observation, Coach Pimer creates an environment where the swimmers are highly motivated to work hard and improve their technical skills. Although these technical skills will lead to faster times, this was not the direct emphasis of the practice. At no point were faster times or winning races emphasized as a direct goal or desired result from the evening's practice. The swimmers responded positively to the coach's reinforcements and corrections; swimmers continued to refine their skills, and those that were not initially meeting expectations on a specific skill received positive reinforcement once they achieved the standard expected.

There are however limitations to the extent that this data can be analyzed. As stated previously, this study reflects a one time, two hours and fifteen minute snap shot of this coach's behaviors. In order to gain a larger picture perspective, and collect more data to support my conclusions, a longitudinal study would be most appropriate, in which the coach was observed using CBAS every practice day for a month. Doing so would yield a wealth of data that would represent a more accurate portfolio of this coach's coaching behaviors. Another limitation may arise from personal bias; I have worked professionally as a coach with the observed coach, and it is possible that personal bias can skew the analysis of the data. Therefore, it would be equally appropriate to have another individual (or several) analyze the data in a blind manner, to counter any potential personal bias in the analysis of the data.

There are several lessons that can be taken from research surrounding coaching behaviors, CBAS, and this study in particular. As coaches, we fill an important role in any athlete's life, and our ultimate goal is to have the athlete accomplish their individual goals with a sense of efficacy and enjoyment. Some coaches fill more of a role than others, to the extent that they fulfill a parental role that may be missing in the athlete's life. To whatever the extent the coach affects the athlete's life, coaches want to achieve the highest level of coaching efficiency and provide a nurturing environment for athletes, that promotes growth and development in sport. By observing coaching behaviors, one can pinpoint certain behaviors that are likely to support and or inhibit the larger picture goal of athletics. Data from CBAS and other coaching behavior observations can help coaches to curtail ineffective behaviors and exaggerate effective ones in order to produce an environment that is supportive of athletes and reflects a high level of athlete motivation. One implication that is supported by the data in this study is that constant positive reinforcement, both spontaneous and reactive, is a highly effective way to peak athlete motivation and persistence, while also working on athlete growth and development. Coach Pimer ranged in his encouragement, but it was the most prominent behavior he displayed throughout his practice. Another implication of this study is that the positive environment of the practice and high levels of athlete motivation can be attributed to not only constant and consistent positive reinforcement, but a complete lack of punitive and or punishing behaviors displayed by the coach in response to athlete's mistakes. The data collected in this study is consistent with data from other studies which include parent and athlete

feedback that conclude that the most effective coaching practices are consistent occurrences of appropriate positive feedback, and minimal to no instances of punitive, punishing behaviors.

Works Cited

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