

An Exploration into the Philosophical Approaches of Premiership Academy Coaches

DAVE RICHARDSON AND FRANKIE BURROWS

Although football coaches often articulate their Generic Coach Characteristics philosophy on the game, there has been little exploration of the impact of a coach's philosophy with respect to other aspects of football performance (e.g physiological, psychological, or technical aspects of football).

Coaching philosophy is an individual's or an organisation's statement of beliefs relating to both specific and general aspects of coaching. Exploring philosophy in the domain of coaching enables the establishment of values, beliefs, and ideas that affect player development along with other variables such as gender, age, experience, and external conditions. Philosophy is a factor that impacts on decision-making and can ultimately affect coaching practice, performance, outcome and progression.

In this article, the coaching philosophy of six 'Academy' coaches within The F.A. Premier League is explored and emerging themes that may influence coaching behaviour are identified.

Eliciting Coaching Philosophy

Six Academy coaches from three different Premiership clubs were interviewed. The interviews concentrated on each individual's personal coaching philosophy and experiences, and the implications these have on their coaching practice. Interviews employed an expert system approach (i.e. allowing the coaches to explore and articulate particular areas of expertise). All responses were treated with anonymity and professional integrity, hence the identity of the individual coaches and clubs is undisclosed.

Emerging Themes

The emerging themes were identified using content analysis (i.e. role and responsibility, player development, coaching style, origins and perceptions of coaching qualities) and are summarised below. The frequency of citations by coaches for each of the issues is identified, in parentheses, by the age group each coach worked with (e.g. 'U17, U10' implies that the under 17 coach and the under 10s coach cited a particular issue in their response).

Generic Coach Characteristics

The age of the participants ranged from 24 to 47 years with 3 to 14 years coaching experience at Academy (or equivalent) level. Two of the six participants had extensive professional playing experience (i.e. 5-10 years), two coaches had limited professional experience (i.e. less than 3 years), whilst the other two coaches had no professional playing experience.

Role and Responsibility

Predominantly, the perception among the coaches was that their role was to 'facilitate the development of individual players' (Under 10, Under 11, Under 13, Under 17) for first team contention rather than to produce a winning team. The coaches identified holistic player development, emphasising the importance of developing individual performance (i.e. physical, technical, psychological, and social development) rather than team outcome (i.e. winning). However, issues were raised concerning the coach's responsibility towards the performance and development of individual players. Moreover, the responsibility of the coach in relation to the responsibility of the player.

"When you see kids drop off you look at yourself and think...am I doing anything wrong? Can you work with them any differently? (Under 10)

Coaches should try to reflect on their approach before apportioning responsibility to the player(s) for lack of progress or poor

performance. It is inevitable that at some point the coach can no longer hold himself/herself solely responsible for the development and performance of an individual. The player must also assume a fundamental level of commitment and application. Thus, the coach must attempt to understand the holistic development of the player (i.e. physical, physiological, psychological and social considerations) before evaluating is/her and/or the player's progress.

Only two coaches demonstrated an awareness of the impact of their behaviour and status (i.e. as a 'significant other') on young players' values, beliefs, perceptions and holistic development (see "Insight" Volume 3, Issue 4, page 28). However, three coaches (Under 9, Under 10, Under 17) did cite the provision of 'social support' as an important role of an Academy coach. Social support was identified as developing a rapport with players in order to elicit potential problems (e.g. school, college, home and general well-being). This awareness reflects a person-centred approach by the coaches, which may be a result of the Academy status and the additional emphasis and support provided by the Head of Education and Welfare within the clubs.

Coaching Qualities

Five of the coaches made explicit reference to the importance of continually developing as a coach (see Table 1).

Continual professional development and embracing new ideas can be beneficial to the development of coaching practice. Kretchmar

The Ability to Continually Develop as a Coach	Coach (identified by age group)
Open-minded towards different approaches to coaching	U9-U16, U14, U17
Open-minded towards sports science ideas	U9-U16, U17
Importance of continuous development as a coach	U9-U16, U11, U13

Table 1 Coaches' responses to developing coaching practice.

(1994) argued that there must be scope for vision and foresight and the implementation of relatively 'untested' ideas in coaching. These practices should be based on informed decision making.

Some observers have reported that playing experience offers an important sense of perspective, however, little or no research has been undertaken to explore and explain this concept. The ability to demonstrate practical skills may be more important for coaches of younger Academy teams as they would be more involved in technical skill development. This was supported by the fact that two coaches of younger age groups (i.e Under 11 and Under 13) cited demonstration skills as important coaching qualities. There is ample evidence to support the view that a high level of playing ability does not automatically transfer into coaching (see "Insight" Issue 4, Volume 3, pp 28-29).

In sports such as swimming, experience, performance outcome measurements, and national recognition have been used as criteria to determine coaching expertise. These criteria knowledge, and thought processes that expert coaches use to achieve these outcomes. There may be a need to establish whether professional playing experience is necessary to coach at Academy level considering two out of the six coaches interviewed had not played professionally and a further two had limited professional playing experience (i.e less than 3 years). Table 2 summarises other 'coaching qualities' identified by the participants.

Player Development

Only one coach cited the importance of competitiveness in the development process. This under 11s coach obviously advocates competitiveness at an early age. The timing of

introducing competitiveness into young players is a contentious issue and has been identified in previous articles. Coaches and clubs need to consider the match between a child's level of growth, maturity and development (i.e social and psychological) with the level of task/demand and intensity presented by competitive sport (see "Insight" Volume 2, Issue 2, p 39). From this perspective, if competition is seen as a means to an end, then the end must be to maximise potential rather than just winning.

One coach believed that players must be committed to playing and developing into a professional footballer (Under 13). However, young players may have different ways demonstrating their commitment, which may or may not be noticeable. Moreover, for players to show commitment they must first believe in and understand what the coach is trying to achieve and the mechanisms employed to achieve it. Thus, the meaning and principles of the coach's goals should be set out and conveyed to the players. A summary of additional player attributes that can be enhanced by the coach is detailed in Table 3.

Coaching Styles

The main dilemma for coaches when selecting the appropriate coaching style is whether they select the style to suit the demands of the task, the needs of the players or the style with which they (the coach) feel most comfortable. Table 4 suggests that the majority of the coaches adopt a command style but can adapt their style to suit the needs of the players and their circumstances.

It has been suggested that the instructional requirements of the player should dictate the coaching style adopted. Ideally, the coach should develop a balance between adapting to the needs of the players and the situation without compromising the overall goal.

As coaching styles become more co-operative and less commanding, decision-making and thinking is relinquished and afforded to the player. The level of decision-making encouraged on the part of the player also depends on their age and stage of development. The choice of style, either consciously or unconsciously, will be strongly underpinned by the coaches' personal objectives and the objectives imposed by the coaching environment (e.g the club).

Origins and Influences on Approach

When asked to identify where their coaching philosophy and practice had originated, all of the coaches (n=6) alluded to the influence coaches (i.e Under 10, Under 17) identifying the traditions of the club itself. Three of the coaches (i.e Under 9, Under 10, Under 17) referred to being influenced by their

Other Coaching Quality Themes	Coach (identified by age group)
Understanding of child development (i.e social, emotional, cognitive and physical)	(U11, U17, U9-U16, U13, U17)
Communication, teaching and motivational skills	(U10, U11, U13, U9-16, U17)
Ability to have a good relationship with the players (i.e in order to maintain control and respect).	(U9-U16, U10, U11)
Knowledge of football	(U11, U9-16, U17)
Ability to plan and prepare effectively (Long term and short term)	(U11, U13, U17)
Honesty and consistency	(U11, U17)
Ability to communicate with parents	(U9-16)
Psychological qualities - confidence, intrinsic motivation	(U10)

Table 2 Desirable coaching qualities identified by the participants.

Other Player Development Themes	Coach (identified by age group)
Develop all-round technical ability	(U9, U9-16, U10, U11, U13, U17)
Promote effective team work	(U9, U11, U13, U17)
Embrace a sound work ethic	(U10, U11, U13)
Instilling confidence	(U11, U17)
Facilitate strength of personality	(U9-16, U10)
Promote good communication skills	(U9-16, U11)
Develop an ability to think for themselves	(U10, U11)
Facilitate development of decent human beings	(U11, U17)
Ensure sportsmanship	(U17)

Table 3 Player attributes which the coach can enhance.

Coaching Style Themes	Cited By (Age of Coach's Team)
Command style	(U9, U10, U11, U13, U17)
Adapt style to the needs of the players and situation	(U9, U10, U11, U13, U17)
Style which allows players to express themselves	(U9, U10, U11, U17)
Adapt style to the demands of the task and situation	(U9, U11, U13)
Co-operative style	(U11, U17)
Guided discovery	(U11, U9-16)
General adaptability	(U10, U11)
Question & answer	(U11, U13)

Table 4 Coaching styles adopted by the participants.

upbringing (i.e. playing experience and parental influence). Two coaches (i.e. Under 9, Under 13) identified foreign coaches, two coaches (i.e. Under 9-16, Under 17) identified other contemporary coaches and one coach (U9-16) reported being influenced by coaches in other sports and his teacher training background. The responses suggest that coaching philosophy is heavily influenced by practice that already exists within the club rather than the coaches' own personal objectives.

The issue here is whether the coaches are afforded the opportunities of 'open-mindedness' and continuous professional development, alluded to in Table 1, or whether they are constrained by a perceived need to provide results, which may be at the expense of holistic player development.

Implications for Practice

It is evident that coaching philosophy affects an individual's approach to coaching. An increased awareness in the origins and diversity of coaching philosophy may enhance an individual's practice and allows the coach to become aware of his/her own coaching principles. Coaches must understand the fundamental principles of coaching practice that underpin coaching philosophy (e.g. undertake an exploration of their own beliefs and practices and acquire a knowledge of themselves through self-examination and reflection). This should allow coaches to rationalise their approach, and consequently, be better equipped to make informed decisions in relation to the five aspects of coaching (see Figure 1). Ultimately, coaches should try to establish their own philosophy and practice in association with the needs of their club and their players.

Further Reading

Kretchmar (1994) *Practical Philosophy in Sport? Human Kinetics, Champaign, IL*
 Lyle, J (1999) *Coaching Philosophy and Coaching Behaviour In Cross, N., & Lyle, J (Eds), The Coaching Process: Principles and Practice for Sport. Butterworth-Heinemann,*

Dave Richardson is a Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Science at Liverpool John Moores University, specialising in child and sport development. He is presently researching the development of young footballers (especially academic responsibility) and has advised local schools in child and football development.

Frankie Burrows is a recent graduate from the Centre for Sport and Exercise Sciences at John Moores University Liverpool with a BSc (Hons) in Sport and Exercise Science specialising in sport psychology.

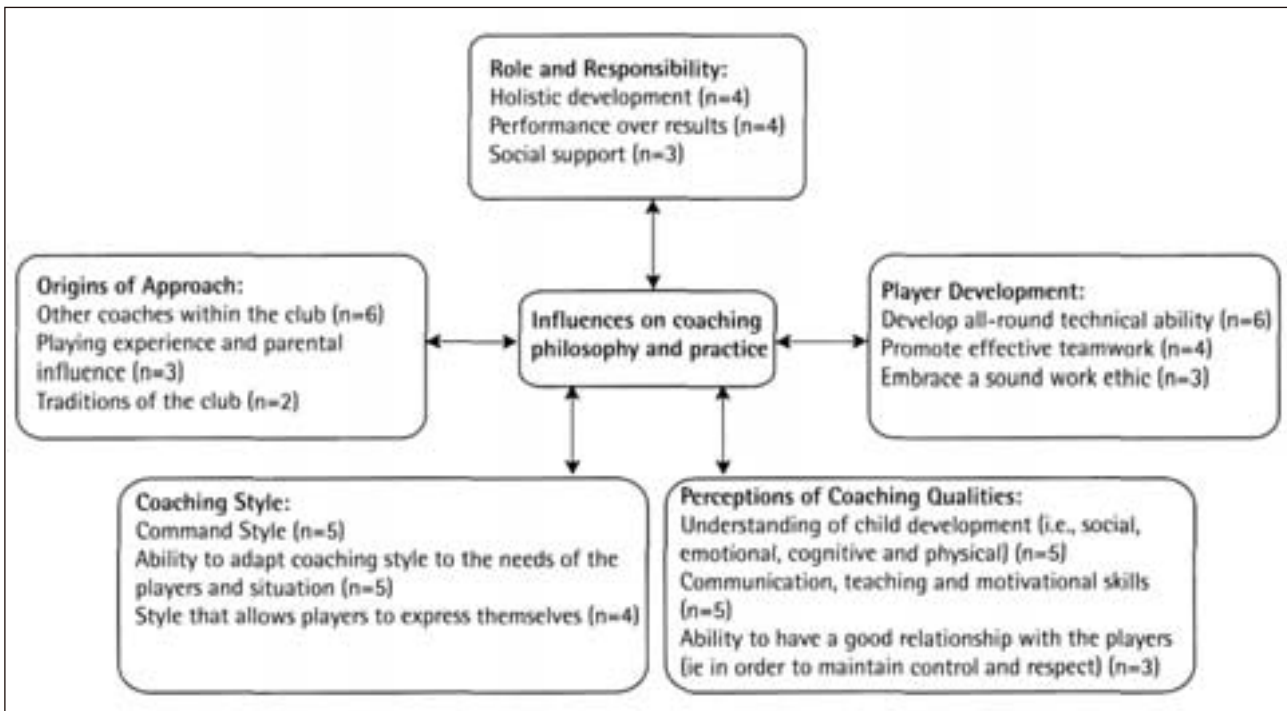


Figure 1 A summary of influences on coaching philosophy identified by six Premiership Academy coaches. The frequency of citations is highlighted in parenthesis.