

INVOLVE YOUR ATHLETES IN DECISION-MAKING

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A lot of articles in sport-related journals I have been reading lately have espoused the view that athletes should be included in decision-making processes. Business and organisational literature that promote the use of work teams being involved in their own goal-setting is coming from a similar approach.

The reasons behind allowing people to be involved in the decision-making process is to improve commitment and motivation. As a psychologist, I am always looking for clients to be motivated to make the changes they need and I know they are more likely to stick with it when it gets difficult if it was their idea.

Allowing athletes to be involved in decisions can occur at many levels. One example is the representation of player unions such as the AFL Players Association, and the Australian Rugby Players Association involvement in decisions regarding player rights. This player involvement at a national level helps to keep them involved and in control of their lives.

I expect that most of the coaches reading this article are not managing the AFL or the ARU, hence you may be interested to find out how you could reconsider your approach by increasing the amount of decision-making allowed to players. Below are a number of suggestions. Not all of these may apply to your team or athlete, but if you find one or two that you like, give them a go, and

afterwards, reflect on how successful it was and whether you should try again, implement it permanently to your style of coaching or try a slightly different way of allowing athlete decision-making to occur.

Suggestion 1

If you are trying to develop a particular skill and you know three drills that should help to develop it, offer the choice of drills to the players — it does not matter which drill they pick as long as the options you gave all end up developing the relevant skill. This suggestion may be particularly appropriate for juniors — my experience of this is that children will generally pick the one they enjoy the most and hence they attend to it for longer and enjoy their practice sessions more, and that can make the coach's job a bit easier.

Suggestion 2

Let the players (perhaps on a rotational basis) take the warm-up or stretching session at each training session. Let the players choose which stretches they do — it does not matter which stretches they do as long as all the correct muscle groups are covered at the end.

Suggestion 3

Let the players decide what they are going to do for training and game recovery (if you do something at all). They may have options related to what they want to do (walk/jog/stretch), drink (water/sports drink/soft drink/ juice/protein drink), and eat (lollies, pasta, sandwiches, muffins). Obviously, not all teams or athletes are going to have access to all these options but I am trying to give you a feel for how you could leave some decisions to your players.

Suggestion 4

Let your athletes pick a theme for the week based on what they think they need to work on. It may mean you, as coach, need to choose drills that fit in with the theme but often you can run with the plans you have and just let the athletes reinforce the theme to each other.

Suggestion 5

If you have a team, let the players decide the goals for the year, and some of the details about how they are going to get there. Many teams have a fines or punishment system for breaking team rules. While I am not a big fan of this type of system, it is one area

where players can have a large part in decision-making. In my experience the players will establish tougher rules than the coach will and are more likely to stick to them if they set them.

(On a side note, I think a better way to organise a system to encourage adherence is to establish a rewards system based on performing required duties and for exceeding them, rather than punishing non-adherence.)

This process may require a few hours and if it means giving up some training time then it is up to you (the coach) to decide if it is a worthwhile sacrifice (or it may be up to the players to determine if it is a worthwhile sacrifice).

Suggestion 6

Occasionally ask for players' opinions as to what they think they need to work on. In previous issues of *Sports Coach*, Belinda Jones has written about the performance profile as a way of players undertaking self-assessment. Asking for player input could be as formal as a performance profile but does not need to be. Remember, if you as a coach think your players need to work on a particular part of their game, it does not matter if they identify it in consultation with you as opposed to you telling them as long as you get a commitment from them to work on it.

Suggestion 7

An area of research and practice that AIS Psychology is investigating at the moment is the concept of learning styles. That is, how people learn best, either through verbal, visual or kinaesthetic modes. A simple

way of investigating this yourself may be to ask your athletes whether they would like you to explain things just with words, by writing on a board or sheet of paper, or by demonstrating or having a 'run through' of the drill/exercise. This way, athletes get to choose the mode that they learn and at the same time you may improve learning altogether. The likely outcome of this in a team situation is that you have a number of individuals in each group and hence you may need to explain things in three ways. This may make coaching a bit more work on your behalf but it may be worth it if everybody learns what you are trying to teach.

A few final comments

Most coaches, especially good ones, appear to be concerned with players' development as people, as well as with results. Often parents and coaches perceive that involvement in sport is an opportunity for people to learn life skills. Letting players be involved in a goalsetting process and decision-making opportunities are ways of actively promoting the development of life skills in athletes.

Players involved in setting their own goals and achieving them may feel a great deal of satisfaction and build self-esteem from their accomplishments. A coach that makes all the decisions and forces athletes to work by punishment may just teach a person to be subservient and erode their confidence.

I accept that for many coaches, leaving the responsibility for decisions up to players comes with a degree of fear based on what will happen if the players

make the wrong decision. This is a reasonable fear to have as you lose some of the control. I think this fear could be dealt with in a number of ways. First, ignore it completely and throw caution to the wind. Second, start in small steps and get comfortable with allowing small decisions first and then move to bigger ones, for example, start with suggestion 1, then try suggestion 2 and so on. Third, after decisions have been made, use the consequences of those decisions as a learning tool for yourself and your players to make better decisions in the future and to improve as players and people.

I would be interested to hear from anyone who tries to make a change to the way they coach by trying one of the suggestions above. If you can drop me an email and let me know how it went, it would be much appreciated. I can be contacted at schonfelda@ausport.gov.au