

Rethinking Head Coach Credentials: Playing Experience, Tertiary Qualifications and Coaching Apprenticeships

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Most coaches are retired former players, despite a growing body of evidence to suggest that being a great player is, in and of itself, no guarantee of coaching success. Why is this? What is the best pathway to the head coach role? Do tertiary qualifications add value? In contemplating these questions, five empirical generalisations are advanced, followed by three recommendations to improve the calibre of coaches in general, and cricket coaches in particular. At no point is it suggested that star players cannot make great coaches, nor that coaches with degrees are in any way superior to those without. The goal of the article is simply to challenge the status quo, to stimulate debate, and to influence practice and scholarship.

Keywords: coach pathways, proficiency, qualifications

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that the best players do not always make the best coaches. Canadian gold-medal [ice] hockey player Therese Brisson is of the view that recently retired hockey players seldom make ideal coaches for youth hockey—because even though they may know what to do they are not always effective in communicating this to others (Beilock, 2010). Psychologists Flegal and Anderson (2008) found in an experiment that expert golfers' putting accuracy deteriorated dramatically (almost 50%) *after* being asked to describe their putting technique. Indeed, skilled athletes often have trouble putting their actions into words. The corollary also applies—in that some of the best teachers were not very good students themselves (Hodgson, 2014). Playing is not coaching, much as studying is not teaching (Rynne & Cushion, 2017).

There is even a view that the better one becomes at something, the worse one's ability to help others learn that skill becomes. For example, golfer Ralph Guldahl won the U.S. Open in 1937 and 1938 and the Masters in 1939, then wrote a book (*Groove Your Golf*) only to never win another championship (Beilock, 2010). Of course, a few (very) talented players have gone on to become very successful coaches (i.e., top right quadrant in Figure 1). John Wooden was inducted into the NCAA basketball Hall of Fame as both a player *and* a coach, Steve Kerr (current Golden State Warriors coach) won five NBA championships as a player and three as head coach. In the Australian Football League (AFL), Ron Barassi, Leigh Matthews and Malcolm Blight were exceptional players and won multiple AFL premierships each (both as players and coaches). In soccer Franz Beckenbauer was both, as was current French world cup winning coach, Didier Deschamps. However, for these exceptions there still appear to more examples to the contrary—captured on some levels in Table 1, which lists eighteen North American star athletes who all failed to find success as coaches (using team performance [win/loss ratio] as the primary measure of success).

Similar anomalies abound in other sports. As Rynne and Cushion (2017) note, José Mourinho played <100 games in the Portuguese second division, but won first division titles in Portugal, England, Italy and Spain as head coach. He also has a degree in Sport Science. Arsène Wenger and Alex Ferguson were great football coaches but not players while superstars Pelé and Maradona failed to master the art of coaching (Hodgson, 2014). Eddie Jones is one of the most successful rugby union coaches of all time—despite a fairly modest playing career. He has a degree (and experience) in teaching. As does rookie NRL coach Anthony Seibold, who, in his first season as senior coach, took South Sydney Rabbitohs from not reaching the finals (2017) to the top four (2018) and in the process was named NRL coach of the year. Like Jones, Seibold is also a qualified teacher. Possibly the most famous U.S. football coach of all time, (Vince Lombardi), was an average college player. But like Jones, Wooden, Seibold and countless others, he too had an education degree (and teaching experience).

In an empirical analysis of head coaches in Major League Baseball ($n = 46$), the National Basketball Association ($n = 38$) and the National Football League ($n = 50$) in the United States, Schempp et al. (2010) found that playing experience had no statistically significant impact on coaching success. Thus, based on this finding, coupled with the information presented in this manuscript, it would appear that: (a) Many great coaches were not great players, and (b) Not all great players make great coaches.

Tertiary Qualifications

A perhaps under-reported fact is that many successful professional head coaches are tertiary-qualified. What is possibly even more surprising is how many have teaching degrees and experience (see Table 2). As Brisson notes, given the choice between a skilled hockey player and an experienced physical education teacher to help at youth hockey camps, she will always take the teacher (Beilock, 2010), because it's one thing to tell an athlete that they need to do something, but being able to effectively communicate exactly *how* to do it is more likely to come from coaching experience not playing experience. Indeed, Stonebridge and

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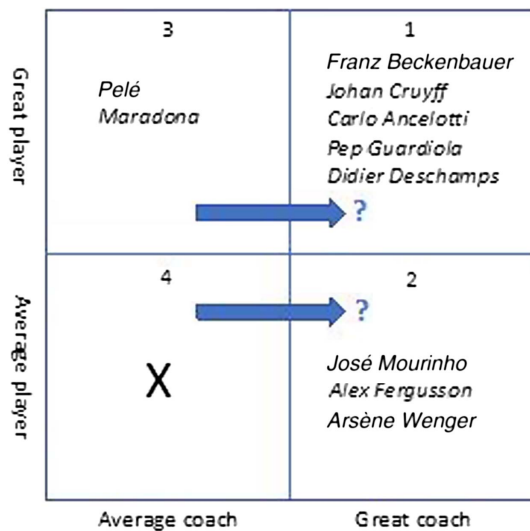


Figure 1 — Player-coach success grid (with illustrative examples from soccer).

Cushion (2018) have found that graduate coaches used more divergent questioning, showed greater self-awareness and provided more comprehensive rationales than their non-graduate counterparts.

Apprenticeships (Prior Coaching Experience)

Anecdotally, it would appear that the better the player the quicker they secure the head coach role—at least in Australia and the UK. This appears to hold across a number of codes (sports) but particularly cricket and AFL (in Australia) and soccer and rugby union in the UK (Blackett et al., 2018; Watts & Cushion, 2017). Why do clubs appoint relatively inexperienced coaches? Possibly the main reason would be falling prey to the ‘halo effect’, i.e. over-valuing certain attributes while undervaluing others (Sorcher & Brant, 2002). Professional playing careers would be an obvious example of potentially over-valued attributes, but other drivers might include perceived contemporary knowledge, perceived benefit of no ‘generation gap’ with players, appointing the club’s favourite son/daughter, media and marketing potential, effect on potential membership sales, social media savvy, the appeal of being coached by a former ‘star’ and perhaps easier to eventually sack a younger coach. Indeed, Blackett et al. (2018) found that among 13 ‘fast-tracked’ former elite players-turned-coaches, 6 returned to their first club and 5 remained at their last club. Similarly, Watts and Cushion (2017) reported that 5 of 8 former players were coaching at clubs they had previously represented shortly after retiring. Both aforementioned studies focused on rugby and soccer in the UK.

Based on Table 3, the mean amount of time spent as an assistant before becoming head coach in Australia is well under a year. Hence it is not uncommon for (Australian and UK) star athletes to fast track to head coach positions. Rynne (2014) has confirmed that fast tracking of star athletes through established national coach accreditation structures is gaining momentum in Australia. By contrast, U.S. coaches tend to be much older than their Australian/UK counterparts. The owners of the U.S. pro

franchises appear to want much more compelling evidence (indeed proof) that they are entrusting their clubs to established coaches with proven track records, backed up by considerable word of mouth. Business savvy owners need to be reassured that a candidate has the ability to handle their very high priced, strong-minded professional athletes. They are not inclined to risk their investment on an inexperienced coach who has not proven themselves over an extended duration, with distinction.

This thinking applies to the national team too. For example, sixty-nine-year-old San Antonio Spur’s NBA coach Gregg Popovich was recently named U.S. basketball coach for the next Olympics.¹ Even more impressive was ‘Connie Mack’ (Cornelius McGillicuddy), who only retired from coaching Philadelphia Athletics at age eighty-seven. But what (else) is wrong with examples such as those in Table 3? As Rynne and Cushion (2017) note, they are inequitable: “With little basis upon which to privilege hiring recently retired champions over those with higher levels of qualifications and experience, the situation is discriminatory and unjust.” They go on to list other disadvantages, such as a limited pool of candidates and limiting innovation and creativity.

Recommendations

1. In the U.S., many professional athletes (and hence coaches) have college degrees—thanks to the U.S. collegiate sport system (National Collegiate Athletic Association; National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics and the National Junior College Athletic Association). Pro athletes in the NFL and NBA have to pass through the college system. Similarly, a disproportionately higher proportion of Indian professional cricketers/coaches have University degrees.² This could be because their pathway systems are not fixated with youth above all else. In response, national/state cricket (and other sports’) boards could perhaps resist signing high school students as young as (commencing) year 11 on ‘rookie contracts’ (effectively denying them a university opportunity) and look to contract more players in their early twenties (as the BCCI in India appears to do). Most universities today are well-advanced in their elite athlete-friendly programs. Perhaps state cricket boards should give talented teenagers university scholarships rather than rookie contracts – and then first see how they perform at district/grade/premier level while studying *before* awarding state contracts?
2. The Australian Players Association already provides education grants to its members—perhaps this scheme could be expanded and the pool of funds increased. After all, other than those in the national team, Shield players and Future League players have considerable ‘down time’ in an average year. Indeed, even in season, the average cricketer would spend less hours a week training than say gymnasts, swimmers, or many other pro athletes. The point being that even for most cricketers, finding 2-3 hours a day to study online for example is surely not an unreasonable ask?
3. Coaching apprenticeships are much longer in the U.S. than in Australia. Examples such as those in Table 3 would not occur in North America. The mean age of rookie head coaches in U.S. pro teams would be late 50s—having served their 20+ year apprenticeships as assistant coaches (see below). Cricket Boards could learn from this model—requiring coaches to serve longer apprenticeships before landing the top job. Players such as Jacques Kallis and Adam Voges transitioned

Table 1 North American Star Athletes Who Have Struggled as Coaches

	As Player	As Coach
Elgin Baylor	Hall of Famer, 11-time All-Star with Lakers.	86-135 regular-season record with New Orleans Jazz from 1976-1979. Teams never reached the playoffs.
Bob Cousy	Hall of Famer, won six NBA titles with the Boston Celtics	Compiled a 141-209 regular-season record in five seasons of coaching the Cincinnati Royals (1969-72) and Kansas City-Omaha Kings (72-74).
Herm Edwards	Nine-year career as cornerback with Philadelphia Eagles. 33 interceptions. L legendary for fumble recovery in game against Giants.	2001 head coach of NY Jets. Went 4-12 in 2005 and the Jets let Edwards sign with Kansas City. He turned a 9-7 Chiefs team into a 2-14 team in just three years and was quickly let go.
Bob Gainey	Arguably greatest defensive forward in NHL, won Selke Trophy record four times & five Stanley Cups.	Doesn't have a winning record in 472 games as a coach with three teams. His teams only won one playoff round in seven seasons.
Wayne Gretzky	Nine-time MVP, four-time Stanley Cup champion and leading scorer in NHL history	Never led Phoenix Coyotes to playoffs in 4 seasons. Stepped down as coach shortly before the start of 2009 season with team mired in bankruptcy hearing
Magic Johnson	Hall of Famer, won five NBA titles, three league MVPs and was 12-time All-Star with the Lakers	Coached Los Angeles for 16 games in the 1993-94 season and finished with a 5-11 record.
Eddie Mathews	Hall of Famer. 512 home runs and drove in 1,453 runs. Two World Series titles, nine-time All-Star.	Atlanta Braves coach in 1972 and ended up with a 23-27 record. His second season resulted was 76-85. Didn't make it through his third season.
Kevin McHale	Hall of Famer, won three NBA titles, seven-time All-Star with the Celtics	Head coach Houston Rockets. Made it to the Conference Finals in 2014 but a poor start to 2015 spelled end for McHale. Never found much playoff success. 39-55 win record
Mel Ott	Hall of Famer and centre piece of NY Giants between 1926 and 1947. 511 homers and career .304 batting average. 11-time All-Star.	Starting in 1942, became a player-coach with the Giants. The Giants would never place higher than third and Ott was eventually replaced by Leo Durocher during the 1948 season
Willis Reed	Hall of Famer, won two NBA titles and was a seven-time All-Star.	82-124 regular-season record coaching NY Knicks and NJ Nets. Teams reached the playoffs once
Art Shell	Hall of Famer. Three Super Bowl winning teams between 1968 & 1982.	After working as assistant was re-hired by Raiders in 2006 as head coach. Promptly fired after club went 2-14 in one of worst seasons in Raiders history.
Bart Starr	Hall of Famer, four-time Pro Bowl selection, two-time All-Pro. Won five NFL championships, including 2 Super Bowls. 1966 MVP, twice Super Bowl MVP.	Starr took over as Packers coach in '75 and won two division titles. He had just two winning seasons in nine years. Twice finished 8-8 and was dead last in the division four times, ending with a 52-76-3 record.
Isiah Thomas	Two-time NBA champion and 12-time All-Star with the Detroit Pistons	Failed to get Indiana Pacers past first round of the playoffs three straight seasons. Joined NY Knicks for two unsuccessful seasons.
Bryan Trottier	Four-time Stanley Cup winner with NY Islanders (all-time leading scorer) Hockey Hall of Fame.	Coached N.Y. Rangers in the 2002-03 season. Fired after only 54 games.
Wes Unseld	Hall of Famer, won with Washington Bullets in 1978, five-time All-Star.	Compiled a 202-345 regular-season coaching record with the Bullets (1987-94). His teams made one playoff appearance, losing in first round.
Ted Williams	One of the best 'sluggers' in the history of baseball.	As coach, went 273-364 in four seasons with the Senators-Rangers.
Maury Wills	Hit .281 over 14 seasons, earning five All-Star appearances as a player	Win record of 26-56 (32%) in two seasons with Seattle Mariners.

Note. Adapted from: <https://www.nbcsports.com/great-players-were-bad-coaches-sports#slide-9> and <https://www.thesportster.com/entertainment/14-legendary-players-who-failed-as-coaches/>

from playing in the BBL (T20) to *head coach* of a T20 team in the same year (2016 and 2018 respectively)—a feat that would be inconceivable in U.S. pro sports. Indeed, just as there are well conceived and articulated 'player pathways' in Australian representative cricket, so too could there be well-articulated representative coach pathways. Four examples of significant apprenticeships follow:

- a. Bill Walsh coached Washington High School in 1954, then served a 25-year apprenticeship—including stints at various clubs as defensive coordinator, chief recruiter, running backs coach, receivers and quarterback coach, head coach at Stanford before becoming the San Francisco 49ers head coach in 1979.
- b. Bill Belichick began as assistant coach at the Baltimore Colts in 1975, but only took over the head coach position at the New

Table 2 Convenience Cross-Section of Successful Coaches and Their Qualifications

Coach	Sport	Undergraduate (Institution)	Postgraduate (Institution)	Championships
Red Auerbach	NBA	Teaching (George Washington)		9
Bill Belichick	NFL	Economics (Wesleyan)		5
John Buchanan	Cricket	Teaching (Queensland)		4
Alistair Clarkson	AFL	Sport Science	MBA (Monash)	4
Graham Ford	Cricket	Commerce (Natal)		2
Alan Jones	Rugby Union	Arts (Queensland)	Dip Ed (Oxford)	2
Vince Lombardi	NFL	Education (Fordham)		5
José Mourinho	Soccer	Sport Science (Technical University of Lisbon)		25
David Parkin	AFL	Physical Education (UWA)	Honorary doctorate (Deakin)	4
Anthony Seibold	Rugby League	Teaching (USQ)	M. Education (USQ)	R*
Paddy Upton	T20 cricket	Phys. Ed. (Stellenbosch); Honours, (Port Elizabeth).	M. Sport Sci (UCT); M. Exec Coaching (Middlesex)	3
Bill Walsh	NFL	Physical Education (San Jose State)		3
John Wooden	NBA	English (Purdue)		10

Note. This list is non-exhaustive and incomplete – its purpose is merely illustrative only. R = rookie.

Table 3 Convenience Sample of Australian* Professional Player-to-Head-Coach Transition Times

Player/Coach	Sport	Year Retired	Year Appointed Head Coach	Time Spent as Assistant Coach
Nathan Buckley	AFL	2007 (Pies)	2012 (Pies)	2 years (Pies)
Michael Checka	Rugby	1999	1999 (Petrarca Padova)	–
James Hird	AFL	2007 (Bombers)	2010 (Bombers)	–
Jason Gillespie	Cricket	2008	2010 (Midwest Rhinos)	–
Justin Langer	Cricket	2008	2012 (Perth Scorchers)	3 years
Andrew McDonald	Cricket	2016 (BBL)	2015 (LCCC) 2016 (Victoria, Renegades)	–
Kevin Muscat	Soccer	2011 (Victory)	2013 (Victory)	–
Ricky Ponting	Cricket	2013 (Mumbai)	2014 (Mumbai)	–
Adam Voges	Cricket	2018 (Scorchers)	2018 (Scorchers)	–
Michael Voss	AFL	2006 (Lions)	2009 (Lions)	2 years (West Coast)

Note. Source: Wikipedia.

*Australian examples for illustrative purposes only. Martin Johnson (UK) took <3 years post-retirement to be appointed manager (i.e., head coach) of England's rugby union team.

England Patriots in 2000. Like Walsh, he too served a full 25-year apprenticeship, including various roles as receiver's coach, defensive coordinator, linebackers' coach.

c. After his playing career and university studies, José Mourinho worked as physical education teacher, player scout, youth team coach and assistant manager before becoming a head coach. Indeed, he served as a highly successful assistant to head coach Sir Bobby Robson at both Porto and Barcelona (1993–1996) and as assistant to head coach Louis van Gaal at Barcelona for a further two years before securing the top job at Benfica in 2000.

d. Paddy Upton worked as the Strength and Conditioning coach for the South Africa cricket team (1994–1998). In 2008, he

was appointed mental conditioning coach of the Indian cricket team. He was then appointed Performance Director of the South Africa team (2011–2014), during which time they became the first team to simultaneously hold the ICC World #1 ranking in all three formats of the international game. However, he was only appointed head coach (in the IPL) for the first time in 2012.

Examples such as 3a-d are rare in cricket. Had Upton played international cricket, chances are he too may have been 'fast-tracked' and missed out on the apprenticeship detailed above. Ironically, a 'reverse halo effect' forced him to learn his trade the 'right' way, before securing the least successful team in BBL history their maiden premiership in 2017.

Conclusions

The skills required for playing a sport are not the only skills needed for effective coaching (Wheadon, 2014). Moreover, the skills are not automatically transferred from one to the other. Some clubs (and coaches) have it the other way around—they put more emphasis on the ‘science’ of coaching (e.g., technique, analysis, facilities, technology) than on the ability to teach and manage people. As a generalisation, cricket probably fits into this category? Cricket is a ‘people’ game—people with emotions, self-interests, ambitions, anxieties and worries.³ Teaching and managing people can be a difficult challenge. There are many coaches who know a lot more about the game than other coaches, but there are only a few great coaches who know more about what is most important in coaching. Coaching is a people business.

C. L. R James (1963) said in the preface to his award-winning book, *Beyond A Boundary*, “What do they know of cricket who only cricket know”.⁴ If the coach is only a ‘cricket head’ they are in danger of being/becoming quite narrow minded. They may fail to appreciate how their sport fits into the bigger picture of society. They may not be able to benefit by comparing the same issues from other fields in politics, economics, history and different sports. Often the challenges are all the same but just different contexts. The best coaches are usually well read with a wide variety of interests. For example, Sir Alex Ferguson (American Civil War, wine, race horses), Vince Lombardi (under consideration for the Democrat presidential candidate), Kevin Sheedy (history), Michael Malthouse (history, environment) or Tom Hafez (theatre).

At no point is it inferred that great players cannot become good coaches. Nor is it suggested that tertiary qualified coaches are superior to those without qualifications. Moreover, diligent authors could probably write a similar (but opposite) paper to this—extolling the virtues of playing experience and providing (limited and highly selective) anecdotal examples to support their claims. The intention of this article is not to spark an ‘us versus them’ debate. No causal relationships are posited and all examples cited constitute convenience samples only.

All I have attempted to do with this article is to challenge the misguided belief—particularly in AFL/cricket/rugby/ circles—that being an elite player is the one and only guarantee of coaching success (or that ‘fast-tracking’ a star athlete to level 3 is all the formal coach training required). Indeed, some of the best cricket coaches in the world today never played international cricket. For example, Mickey Arthur (South Africa, Australia, Pakistan); Graham Ford (South Africa, Sri Lanka, Ireland), Paddy Upton (assisted with South Africa and India, head coach Sydney Thunder, Delhi Daredevils, Lahore Qalanders). If one looks at results, titles and ICC rankings, it is difficult to look past John Buchanan as one of the more successful Australian cricket coaches in recent times, despite also never playing internationally and only averaging 12 with the bat in 7 first class games. The point of this article is to provoke debate. The more coaching credentials are discussed and studied, the more likely future coaches are to be better prepared, which ultimately benefits players, fans, owners and administrators.

Limitations and Disclaimer

At no point is any disrespect intended towards any of the named players/coaches in this article. They are all public figures and their profiles are in the public domain (e.g., Wikipedia). Their inclusion is simply to serve as illustrative examples of certain points—not to infer right or wrong or better or worse. Indeed, all are famous and

highly successful individuals in their own rights. Moreover, this is but a snapshot in time.

Notes

¹<https://www.mysanantonio.com/sports/spurs/article/Scenes-show-Spurs-Coach-Gregg-Popovich-working-13108589.php>

²David, Laxman, Kumble, Ashwin, Rahane, Dhoni, Srinath, Srikanth, Raina, Vijay, Salvi and Khurasiya, to name a few.

³A fairly high proportion of cricketers in particular seem to struggle with mental health issues.

⁴A play on a Rudyard Kipling quote from the poem “English Flag”: “*What should they know of England who only England know?*”

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Author Biography

Tom Ewing is an elite cricketer and representative coach. He has competed in four national championships (u15, u17 and u19 twice) and was named in the nineteen-man Australian u17 squad (2015). He has played cricket in Australia, England, Sri Lanka, India, and South Africa. Teams he has coached have won both state and national championships. He is a graduate of Swinburne University and is currently a research student at the University of Canberra. He has published in *Sport, Education and Society* and *Business Horizons*.

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