COACHING MYTHS

Fifteen Wrong Ideas in Youth Sports

RICK ALBRECHT

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To the memory of my Dad,
who was my first and best coach,
and to Mom and Andrea,
who provided the unwavering support and
encouragement that made this book possible.

Acknowledgments

As is the case with nearly every acknowledgments section of nearly every book published, I must begin by stating that it would be impossible to list all the individuals who provided me with guidance, reassurance, suggestions, and support while I was writing this book. I will therefore only mention two groups of people without whom this task would never have been undertaken, let alone, completed. First, are the hundreds of students enrolled in my classes at Grand Valley State University who read, reread, edited, discussed, and greatly improved each successive draft. Second, are my many mentors and colleagues at the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University who were there at the beginning of this rewarding journey into the world of coaching education.

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Preface: Rethinking the Way We Coach

"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."

— Soto Zen master Shunryu Suzuki[1]

"It's what you learn AFTER you know it ALL that counts."

— Sign prominently displayed in Coach John Wooden's office[2]

The responsibilities and demands placed on youth sport, interscholastic, and intercollegiate coaches are frequently underestimated. As coaches, we are not only expected to teach motor skills to young athletes but to do so in an environment that is conducive to the ethical, emotional, social, and physical well-being of each and every one of our athletes. Tasks as important as these cannot be accomplished in a haphazard fashion. They require deliberate and conscious thought. As illustrated by the two quotes at the top of this page — one based on ancient wisdom, the other on years of practical coaching experience at the highest level — the more we think we know about coaching (or anything else for that matter), the less likely we are to learn new and better ways of being a coach. Simply put, to improve ourselves and our athletes, we have to stop coaching out of habit and challenge ourselves to rethink the way we do the little things.

If we have any desire of becoming effective coaches, the first question we have to answer is also the most obvious — "Why do I want to be a coach?" Although the question may be obvious, its answer very often is not. When I ask students in my coaching education classes this question I generally get one response — "Because I like sports." Liking sports (or at least a given sport) is indeed a prerequisite for coaching — necessary yes, but hardly sufficient. How does "liking sports" make you different from just about everyone else you know? Your dentist probably likes sports. Your accountant

probably likes sports. Your plumber probably likes sports. But why have you decided to be a coach instead of a dentist, accountant, or plumber? Believe it or not, I've had a couple students actually admit that they were training to be coaches "Because I can't do anything else." Although I appreciate their candor, I can't say that I'm comforted by the fact there are people out there who choose to become coaches simply because they can't (or don't think they can) do anything else.

The first step in improving ourselves as coaches requires us to do pretty much what we tell our athletes to do — take a good, hard look at ourselves and assess our strengths and weaknesses. Needless to say, this can sometimes be an uncomfortable experience for those of us who are more accustomed to scrutinizing the performances of others. The following questions might help you get started. Simply take a couple minutes to reflect on the following questions every day:

- What went well in practice today?
- What didn't go so well today?
- Where does the athlete or team still need to improve?
- What can I do to make myself a better coach for this team?
- Is there anything I can do that would make me a more effective teacher?
- Did my players have fun today?
- Did I have fun today?
- Did I send an unmistakable message to my players that I really love being their coach?

How Do We Learn to Be Coaches?

If you're like most of us, you've had very little formal training to be a coach. Although more and more colleges and universities are offering degrees and certificates in coaching, most of us developed our coaching philosophies, ethics, strategies, tactics, practice plans, and even our pep talks by watching other coaches. Those of us who were athletes got our first taste of what coaching was all about by watching the way our own coaches conducted practices and executed game plans. In fact, much of the practical education we received came from working long hours of "apprenticeship" — as volunteers and assistants — under the tutelage of more experienced coaches. Even now we often find ourselves coming away from a coaching clinic or televised game with an idea from a well-known coach. The way we learn our coaching style from others reminds me of something I saw as a child.

When I was a young boy, the circus came to town. As was customary when the circus visited a small town like ours, they publicized their arrival by parading their animals, clowns, and acrobats down Main Street. The thing I remember most about these parades was the way they had trained the massive elephants to walk in a straight line. To keep these powerful, sensitive, and intelligent beasts from going off on their own, the elephants had been trained — from the time they were small and vulnerable — to feel most secure and safe when they had their trunks intertwined with the tail of the elephant in front of them. The handlers merely had to make certain the lead elephant (usually one so old and weak it was unlikely to present a challenge) went where they wanted. By habit, all the others would mindlessly follow along, comforted by the sense that they were linked to their herd. Might they have been happier going in another direction? Might they have found more food, shade, or water just by veering a bit to their right or left? Perhaps, but it really doesn't matter because none of the elephants ever attempted to go anywhere other than where those before them had gone.

And so it often is with coaches. We feel comfortable simply copying what we've seen other successful coaches do. But like the elephants on parade, we sacrifice the possibility of improving ourselves in order to maintain our sense of security. This is far more than my personal observation. Research supports the fact that coaches often base their approach to coaching on their experiences as an athlete, and by working with experienced coaches (Lemyre, Trudel, and Durand-Bush 2007).

There's little doubt that we all learn valuable lessons from watching the mistakes and successes of others. In fact, it is so common psychologists even have a term for it — vicarious learning. We need to keep in mind, however, that it's not sufficient to simply be as good as our coaches and teachers — it's our job to be *better* than our coaches. And that requires abandoning our herd mentality.

Our understanding of what makes for good coaching is constantly changing and coaches in the Twenty-first Century can't afford to limit themselves by mimicking what others — or they — have done in the past. A striking example of how the coaching profession has changed can be seen in an ESPN documentary from a few years back, *The Junction Boys.* The movie — based on a book by the same name (Dent 1999) — depicts the appalling way legendary football coach Paul "Bear" Bryant physically and mentally "conditioned" (some would say "tortured") his Texas A&M players at training camp prior to the 1954 football season. His long and harsh physical practices that went on for 10 days in the 100 degree Texas heat, his withholding of water, and his failure to provide proper medical care might have been an

accepted way to "toughen up" players at the time but would likely result in a coach today being sued — or perhaps even being sent to prison if they followed the lead of this celebrated and successful coach.[3]

How This Book — and the Greatest Coaches Ever — Can Help You Be a Better Coach

This book contains no special magic. In fact, the only thing "special" about it at all is that it will allow you to systematically examine some of the most commonly held myths we, as coaches, tend to pass on from one generation to the next.

Although the information in each chapter is based on the most current scientific evidence available (please notice all the scientific references that are given), each is written in the everyday language of coaches and covers the topics that we all deal with on a daily basis. As a way of demonstrating the practical significance of each chapter, you will see that each myth or misconception is introduced with a quote from a famous and successful coach. We'll see that these icons of coaching often break with tradition and discover for themselves that much of what passes for "conventional wisdom" are little more than myths, misconceptions, and mistakes that are mindlessly passed on from generation to generation. The coaches who will provide the keynote quote for the chapters are:

- Bill Walsh: Elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1993, Coach Walsh took a floundering San Francisco 49ers team to three Super Bowl championships and established the foundation for his successor, George Seifert, to win two more. His innovative "West Coast Offense" and superior leadership style changed the way professional football was played.
- Tom Izzo: Considered one of today's premier college coaches, Coach Izzo has guided his Michigan State University men's basketball teams to seven Big Ten Championships, six NCAA Final Four appearances, and an NCAA Championship in 2000. His success at the helm of the Spartans led ESPN basketball guru Andy Katz to declare that MSU was the top college basketball team in the country during the decade between 1998 and 2007 (Katz 2007).
- Mike Krzyzewski: "Coach K" has won more NCAA Division I Men's Basketball games than any coach in history. In his 37 years as a head coach at Army and Duke his teams have won 927 games, made 11 NCAA Final Four appearances, and won four NCAA Division I Championships.

Krzyzewski also served as the head coach of the gold medal-winning USA Olympic Basketball team in 2008 and 2012.

- C. Vivian Stringer: The first coach in the history of college basketball to lead three different teams to the NCAA Women's Basketball Final Four, Coach Stringer is the third winningest coach in women's college basketball and has been named the Naismith College Coach of the Year (1992). She was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 2009.
- Joe Torre: During every one of the 12 years he was manager of the New York Yankees, Torre led his team into post-season competition. During his tenure the Yankees won six American League pennants and four World Series championships. In 2008 he became the manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers and promptly took his new team to two consecutive post-season appearances. In total, Torre won 2,326 Major League games as a manager.
- Dean Smith: When he retired as the head men's basketball coach at the University of North Carolina in 1997, Coach Smith had accumulated more NCAA college basketball victories than any coach in the history of the game. During his 36 years at the helm of the Tar Heel program his teams won 30 Atlantic Coast Conference regular season and tournament championships, went to 11 NCAA Final Fours and won the NCAA Men's Basketball Championship in 1982 and 1993. Coach Smith's coaching accomplishments were acknowledged by his induction into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 1983 and the College Basketball Hall of Fame in 2006.
- Tony Dungy: Considered one of the true gentlemen in pro football (Chandler 2011), Coach Dungy led the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the Indianapolis Colts to 11 post-season appearances in his 13 years as a head coach. In 2007, the protégé of four-time Super Bowl champion coach Chuck Noll, won his own Super Bowl championship with the Indianapolis Colts and became the first African American head coach to win an NFL championship.
- Tom Landry: A true legend in professional football, the stoic Tom Landry served as head coach of the Dallas Cowboys for 29 years. During that time his teams had 20 consecutive winning seasons, won five NFC Championships and two Super Bowls (1971 and 1977). In 1990 Landry's lifetime of accomplishment earned him a spot in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.
- Pete Carroll: Currently the head coach of the Seattle Seahawks, and formerly the top man with the New York Jets and the New England Patriots, Coach Carroll is probably best known for his accomplishments while the head coach of the University of Southern California (USC) Trojan football team from 2001 to 2009. He took the Trojans to a bowl game in each of his nine years as head coach and seven straight years led his teams to top four finishes in the Associated Press poll — including a ranking of #1 in the

nation for 33 consecutive weeks. Carroll's Trojans also won back-to-back National Championships in 2003 and 2004.

- Dan Bylsma: As the youngest coach in the NHL at the time, Coach Bylsma took his Pittsburgh Penguins to the 2009 Stanley Cup championship just four months after being named the team's head coach. In his first 25 games that year, he guided his team to an 18-3-4 record — the second best start by a new coach in league history. The following year Bylsma was presented the Jack Adams Award as the NHL's most outstanding coach.
- Jason Garrett: While serving as offensive coordinator and assistant head coach of the Dallas Cowboys, Jason Garrett became one of the most sought-after young coaches in the NFL. In 2011, he was named the eighth head coach of the Cowboys.

It is no coincidence that I also rely heavily on the words of Coach Wooden throughout the book. Over the years his wisdom about coaching (and life) has inspired millions of coaches — and a far greater number of non-coaches. I had the honor of meeting this man I consider the greatest coach — and teacher — of all time when he visited Kalamazoo, Michigan, to support the Western Michigan University basketball program (he had become friends with the then Bronco head coach Steve Hawkins years earlier when Hawkins served as his "driver" at basketball camps). During our brief one-on-one chat, Coach Wooden was, as you might expect, the most gracious and generous man I had ever met. But it was what happened after our meeting that made me fully understand the tremendous impact Coach Wooden has had. This elderly gentleman (he was 95 at the time) never coached a local team, had no affiliation with nearby schools, and had coached his final college game long before many of the 3,000 people in attendance were even born. But there they were. Folks from 9 to 90, men, women, boys, and girls of every race and ethnicity showed up that evening simply to hear what this man had to say. Coach Wooden epitomizes the way we should all coach. He serves as my role model and I hope he will be yours too.

If some of the information presented in this book makes you uncomfortable — that's exactly the way it should be. You might even disagree so much with certain parts of the book that you'll find yourself trying to dismiss or deny its truth. That's perfectly normal. Whenever we're confronted by a whole new way of thinking it makes us uncomfortable. Just keep in mind that this book is based on our best understanding of coaching theory — at least today. Perhaps fifty years from now someone will have to write another book debunking the myths put forth in this one. Until then, the information in this book presents the most scientifically based way to help you become a better coach.

MYTH NO. 1

"Mastering the Xs and Os Will Make You a Successful Coach"

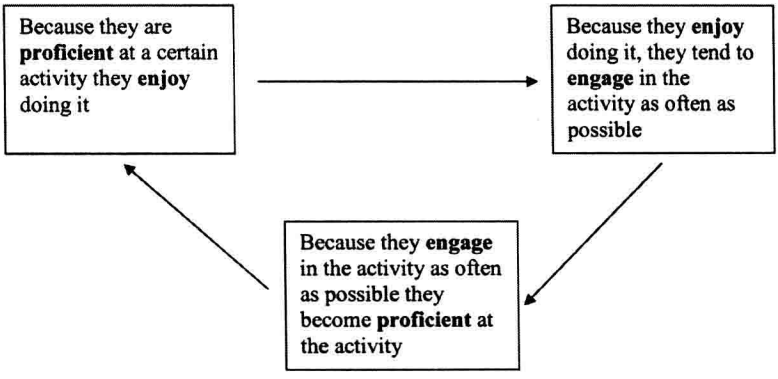
People matter most— more than equipment ... or Xs and Os. People are at the heart of achieving organizational greatness.

— Coach Bill Walsh[1]

Have you ever noticed that, when left to their own devices, our athletes will generally choose to practice the skills they are good at while purposely avoiding the skills they really need to improve and therefore *should* be practicing? (Don't worry, in the Myth No. 2 chapter we'll discuss ways we can help them make better decisions). It's a frustrating three-step cycle that results in little overall improvement in performance as depicted in Figure 1.1.

Although most of us can easily recognize these unproductive behaviors in our athletes, it is much harder for us to accept the fact that we are engaging in the same self-limiting behaviors nearly every time we attend a coaching clinic or study a diagram in a coaching magazine. As coaches, we absolutely *love* our Xs and Os. We attend clinics and workshops in the hope of stumbling across a new drill, a new strategy, a new technique, a new tactic, a new offense, or a new defense that might give us a competitive advantage. We scour the coaching literature for any "gadget," "gimmick," "trick," or "wrinkle" we can add to our already overflowing arsenal of surefire "gotchas."

Organizers of coaching clinics and producers of coaching materials understand perfectly well that coaches are primarily interested in Xs and Os and, like all good entrepreneurs, they make a living giving their customers what they want. In just the past month for example, I attended two coaching education meetings. At least a dozen times the organizers of these two sessions stressed the importance of "luring the coaches in" to our educational program by offering, as bait, what the coaches want most — Xs and Os. As a result, an endless line of "successful" coaches are paraded before us and



Of course the reverse is also true:

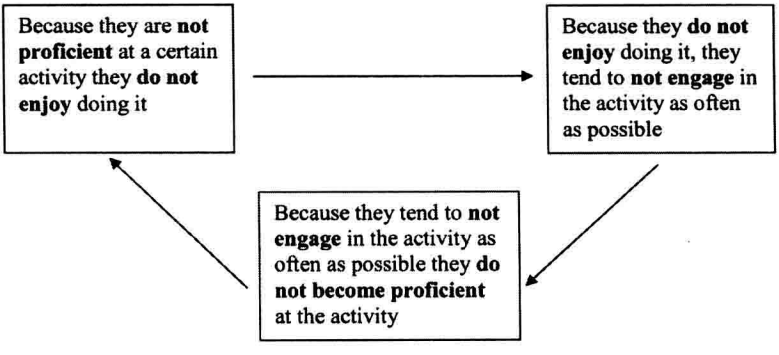


Figure 1.1: Cycle of Practice Preferences Resulting in Little Improvement in Performance.

we sit mesmerized by their every word — resolute in our belief that whatever it was that worked for them will work equally well for us.

Now there's nothing wrong with whiling away the hours rubbing elbows with the "rich and famous" of the coaching profession or listening to their often cited (and perhaps somewhat embellished) "war stories." Nothing wrong, that is, unless we have fooled ourselves into believing that we are acquiring privileged information that will somehow help us become a better coach. The unfortunate truth is it usually won't — for a variety of reasons. Two of these reasons, in particular, deserve special mention. First, as you can well imagine, it's often impossible for us to reproduce the exact conditions that allowed these techniques to work in the first place. Second,

we coaches — like many professionals — tend to overestimate the overall contribution technical expertise has on our success.

You Coach Under Very Different Conditions

Let's begin by examining why "your mileage may vary" when attempting to implement techniques that apparently worked so well for some of the "big-name" coaches in your sport. One reason is that these coaches rarely tell us about the successes they had when they were coaching at *our* level (many of them, in fact, never coached at our level at all). Instead, they entertain us with colorful anecdotes about what worked for them when they were coaching elite college, professional, or Olympic athletes. Although we typically find their stories interesting enough, the question we should be asking is whether or not these experiences are relevant to our particular coaching situation. Specifically, it might help if we ask ourselves five simple questions to determine the degree to which their athletes and situations are similar to ours and thus, the extent to which we might expect their positive experiences to transfer to our team and to our athletes:

Question #1: Do my athletes possess the same level of physical, perceptual, and cognitive development?

Physical development. What might be a perfectly appropriate skill or tactic for an elite adult athlete might be horribly inappropriate when used with less mature or less skilled athletes. For example, knowing how the San Antonio Spurs successfully break a full court press or the weight training regime employed by the Oakland Raiders will provide us with little useful information if we are coaching junior high school basketball or "pee-wee" football. Not only are our athletes often physically incapable of performing these skills (imagine most seventh graders throwing a length-of-the-court overhand "baseball" pass to an open cutter under the basket) they can often do more harm than good to a physically immature body (much of any weight training resembling that employed by an NFL team would obviously be inappropriate for youth sport football players).

I am reminded of the hundreds of youth baseball coaching clinics I presented while working at the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University. Hardly a clinic went by where a coach — driven by a burning desire to dominate the rest of the league — didn't ask me how to best teach the mechanics of throwing a "curve," "slider," "slurve," "split-fingered fastball," or "sinker" to his 11-year-old pitcher (not surprisingly,

the boy was often the coach's son). Even if such a pitch could be mastered, the irreparable damage it might cause to a youngster's undeveloped joints, tendons, ligaments, and muscles renders the question ludicrous. Despite its inappropriateness, coaches constantly clamored for this information and, if I had favored them with these demonstrations, they would have no doubt rewarded me with hours of undivided attention (not to mention better speaker evaluation ratings).

Perceptual development. Sport performances require athletes to take in and process tremendous amounts of rapidly changing information about themselves and their environment. Imagine how much sensory input needs to be analyzed in a fraction of a second just to catch a "routine" fly ball. Similarly, consider the body-hand-foot-eye coordination needed to successfully execute an overhand serve of a tennis ball, head a soccer ball past an opposing goaltender, do a forward roll on a balance beam, make an accurate bounce-pass to a running teammate, or use a crooked stick to flip a sliding piece of rubber between defenders, while balancing on two thin metal blades on a surface of ice. As coaches we need to understand that young children don't have the ability to process complex sensory information as efficiently as adults. For example, most of us have watched baseball and softball coaches hitting towering fly balls to their young outfielders. Now, here's something to think about. How many of those long fly balls were actually caught? It's easy to think that most of the balls were simply missed because the young players lacked the skills needed to make these catches and, given the demands of the game, this may seem like a perfectly reasonable expenditure of practice time. Perfectly reasonable that is, until you consider the fact that the outfielders needed far more than ball-catching repetitions. Until their eyes reach adult proportions; young children generally lack the visual capability (technically called "dynamic visual acuity") to track the flight of a long, arching fly ball (Morris 1977; Sanderson and Whiting 1974; 1978). Oops. At a minimum, having them try to catch these long fly balls is a total waste of valuable practice time. But even far more damage could have been done. First, having the ball players try to perform a task they simply can't do only leads to frustration and a sense of incompetence. The come away with the misimpression that they're just not very good at this game. Second, and this should be of greater concern, having the outfielders attempt this drill puts them in danger of sustaining a serious injury. Having our athletes engage in an activity where they could easily get hit in the head with a long fly ball — just because they can't see it properly, is a risk we should never ask them to take. As coaches, we need to educate ourselves regarding the perceptual abilities (and inabilities) of our athletes. Listening to a well-known baseball manager tell