SO YOU WANT TO BE A GREAT "BIG-EVENT COACH?" THREE THINGS THAT CAN MAKE OR BREAK YOU

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With the upcoming Olympic Trials for the Winter Games, we wanted to reprint this article by Dr. McCann. Enjoy!

Like athletes, some coaches thrive in big pressure situations, and others fare poorly. The Summer Games in Athens were my 6th Olympic Games, and with close observation of coaches in these situations, I have noticed certain patterns that exist in the coaches who excel under pressure. For simplicity's sake, I have organized these behaviours into three key skill areas; self-knowledge, having a coaching-stress-thermostat, and relationship-building with athletes.

Self Knowledge

I am regularly surprised by generally successful coaches who have very large "blind spots," or issues that everybody except the coach seems to be aware of. Often, coaches are left in the dark about the blind spots until something goes very wrong in a big event.

In preparing for big events, I'd suggest gaining self-knowledge in two areas: Defining coaching excellence at big events, and getting feedback on your strengths and weaknesses when stressed.

Define Coaching Excellence. In an Olympic Coach article a few years ago, I wrote how difficult it was for Olympic coaches to evaluate their own coaching performance separately from the medal performance of their athletes. Forcing yourself to write down a checklist of "behaviours of excellent big-event coaches" before the event, can help to increase self-knowledge. By rating your skills in each of these behaviours (e.g., daily organization, flexibility under pressure, optimism, ability to delegate, etc.), it will give you clues on your potential blind spots at big events. Of course, success at the big events is related to excellence, but it isn't the same thing. As Joe Paterno said "Success is perishable and often outside our control. In contrast, excellence is something that's lasting, dependable, and largely within a person's control." If you strive for big event coaching excellence, success is more likely to come.

Learn Your Stress Personality Through Feedback. One of the most useful (and difficult) things a coach can do is get honest feedback from the people around them. For big event coaching, it is extremely useful to know how those around you see your strengths and weaknesses when you are feeling criticized, angry, nervous, or depressed. These four conditions are regular visitors to coaches at big events, and knowing how you are perceived by athletes and other staff during those moments can help you develop a strong plan to use your strengths and compensate for your weaknesses. Unfortunately, research has shown that the higher you rank in an organization, the less likely you will be to get honest feedback. You need to have at least one person in your coaching environment that isn't afraid to tell you the truth. Do you?

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A Thermostat for Coaching Stress

Like a thermostat that releases coolant to an engine in danger of overheating, it is important for coaches to have mechanisms to handle the increased stress of big events. Coaches who lack these mechanisms tend to get in "survival mode" during big competitions and a coach who is just "trying to make it through" a major event is not an excellent coach. There are four key strategies to building your own stress-thermostat:

1. Controlling anxiety. People vary greatly in how nervous they get during competition. Nervousness is not a problem unless it interferes with your ability to coach at your best. Unfortunately, I have witnessed numerous examples of a nervous coach coaching poorly at the most important events. This can happen by making other staff nervous, by worrying endlessly, by spreading nervousness to athletes, by over-coaching (saying too much) and under-coaching (saying too little), by focusing on not making mistakes instead of possible opportunities, by becoming rigid, and by becoming tense and irritable and draining the fun out of everyone around you. If any of these have happened to you at smaller events, they are more likely to occur at bigger events.

To battle coaching anxiety, you must be good at controlling thoughts, feelings, and your physical state. Identify the thoughts and feelings that calm you down, and develop the ability to call-up those thoughts and feelings when nervous. For example, one successful coach thinks of his family for 30 seconds before he gives a speech to his team. This allows him to believe his message of having fun and staying relaxed and aggressive. In addition to thoughts and feelings, developing breathing and relaxation techniques to quickly lower your heart rate and slow down breathing will help prevent your coaching body from undermining your coaching mind.

2. Stress-management strategy. I don't know any successful coaches who don't have some way to reduce overall stress. For most coaches, the most successful way is exercise, although I have known coaches to read, listen to music, write letters, and play video games. Whatever strategy you use, the key thing is to continue the strategy during big events! I have seen too many coaches who give up a stress management strategy during the Olympics because "I just don't have time." If managing stress makes you a better coach, you can't afford to stop managing stress in the biggest events with the most stress.

3. Compartmentalizing. A number of real issues can interfere with your ability to focus on the present and have an effective meeting with an athlete during a big event. These issues can include; unfinished business, questions about schedule changes, unexpected technical challenges, anger over stupid decisions, challenges in your personal life, and a variety of other issues. Compartmentalizing, or setting aside those thoughts for a while in order to focus on the here and now, is a key skill to master. Without this skill, you can lose the ability to solve problems quickly as well as the ability to connect emotionally with the people around you.

Even very simple techniques can help you develop the ability to compartmentalize. One strategy coach's use is to identify a physical place which is the last point where extraneous thoughts can enter your head. For example, a coach who always drives a car to competitions, literally opens a glove compartment, takes a breath, drops in all extra unhelpful thoughts, closes the glove compartment and leaves those issues for after the competition. Another coach uses a two sentence verbal checklist before talking to individual athletes on competition day. Before approaching the athlete, he says "Where am I? I'm right here, right now." With this exercise, he assures all other thoughts are cleared from his head so that he can really listen to the athlete.

4. Impulse control. The powerful emotions that hit you at big competitions are one of the things that can make coaching at big events so much fun. On the other hand, strong emotions can sometimes overwhelm coaches. While anger and frustration may be real and appropriate responses to a terrible call that could cost you a medal, effective big event coaches learn to control the impulse to vent anger during the competition. Impulsively shouting, swearing, or physically displaying your feelings can send a powerful message to other coaches and your athletes.
At a recent Olympics, an athlete told me that an outburst by an angry coach told her that the coach didn't believe she could win in her next event. In fact, the coach was angry at something else, but the athlete assumed he was angry about her performance. For a coach at a big event, finding a safe place to express

feelings is one thing, losing control is another. At big events, with everyone under stress, losing control is very dangerous.

Knowledge of your athletes

The best coaches understand their athletes. Period. One wrinkle for coaching at big events is that your athlete may show you something you haven't seen from them before. As one coach told me after a devastating surprise failure at the Olympics, *"I didn't think I had to talk to him about managing pressure. He is a World Champion! Of course, in hindsight, he had lots more pressure and expectations here. I worried about some of the others, but not him. I should have talked to him."*

Of course, understanding your athletes and developing effective communication is the heart of all effective coaching. Big event coaching is no different except the consequences of not knowing your athletes' is bigger! Keys to remember on this important subject include:

1. Don't overlook emotions. Feelings are often more important than thoughts at big events. People react differently to stress, and athletes may be on a completely different page than you. Know the early warning signals for confidence problems, nervousness, and over-arousal. One coach told me after the fact *"I saw her nodding and smiling, but I could tell she was so fired up that she wasn't listening at all."* Taking the extra five minutes with this athlete to calm her down and remind her how simple the job was made all the difference for this Olympic medal winner.

2. Develop good questions. Getting in the habit of asking rather than telling pays giant dividends at big events. Rather than guessing how the athlete is doing, asking the right questions can help the athlete develop self-knowledge, self-control, and self-confidence. Among the best questions you can ask are those that remind an athlete how they got to where they are. For example, asking what they did to make training go so well the day before is a great way to talk to an athlete before a big event. It reminds them to focus on the "what to do, not the what if".

One of my favorite exercises with a nervous athlete at a big event is to go through four questions:

1. What is your job? (Answer, for example "wrestle well tomorrow")
2. How do you do that? ("Attack the first minute, then go harder")
3. Can you do that? ("YES! I'm in amazing shape)
4. Will you do that? ("Yes.")

Asking questions can become a routine that allows you to quickly figure out where your athlete's head is at. In addition, it lets athletes find solutions rather than simply agreeing with yours (if the athlete can't say it, he isn't likely to believe it!).

3. Develop trust so that athletes can express weaknesses. Guess how many athletes like to tell their coaches that they are afraid? Exactly. None do. Guess how many coaches want a terrified athlete to keep it to themselves at a big event? OK, maybe some would! But you cannot solve a problem if you don't know it exists. Your athletes need to be able to tell you when they need your help, when their own skills are over-matched by the situation.

One of the most dangerous myths athletes hold is that "mental toughness" means ignoring the dangerous and distracting thoughts, the anxiety, and the self-doubt. Many athletes believe that talking about fears makes them real, while trying to push these thoughts and feelings away equals mental toughness. Unless they have a strategy for controlling their thoughts and fears, however, this approach is doomed to fail at big events, where the demons are so much bigger. This problem is greatly increased if athletes are afraid to admit any weaknesses to their coach. Treating nervousness and self-doubt as normal parts of big events allows you to talk about and help solve these challenges with the athletes. On the other hand, if mentioning these things is taboo, you won't know until you see them arrive in the form of defensive and tentative behaviours in the competition.

4. Know the difference between "Good quiet" and "Bad quiet." You must know how your athletes look

when they are ready to go versus when they are trying to look as if they are ready to go. Knowing this difference is the key to big event coaching, because knowing this means you know when to brake, when to steer and when to get out of the way. Of course, it isn't just the quiet athletes you need to read. You also need to know what it means when an athlete laughs with others, does jumping jacks, talks on the cell phone, or prays. You must know the normal competition routines, and the ones you are seeing for the first time. Big events often bring new behaviour, and you must determine if this new behaviour is good or bad.

The best way, of course, is to go from past behaviour (which is always the best predictor of future behaviour). Seeing behaviour for the first time at an Olympics isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it sure isn't always a good thing either. If you have good communication, it is rarely a problem to ask in athlete how they are doing, especially if that is your normal routine. Just like your athletes, you should always question why you are doing something for the first time at a big event. The extra adrenaline that comes with big events like the Olympics and World Championships are like a wave coming at you. If you have the three key areas figured out (self-awareness, coaching stress-thermostat, and really know your athletes), you can catch that wave like a surfer and have a great time. If you don't, well, it's like a wave coming at you.