Critical thinking

When Galit Chait, an Israeli ice dancer, transitioned from Olympic-level athlete to coach, she said, "I never knew it would be so hard. You not only have to be a good coach, you also have to be a psychologist." Coaching practice has never been as simple as telling an athlete what should be done. Rather, it involves helping the individual or team understand the different components of a skill or play and how they work together to facilitate a desired outcome. Whether it is teaching a runner how to start out of the blocks, a soccer team how to score a goal, or an athlete how to overcome the nerves of competition, moving beyond the physical skills or the "how to" instructions and engaging the psychological comprehension of the athlete(s) is an essential strategy of coaching.

So, how do coaches encourage the athlete to become a part of the learning process? Many theorists suggest that developing critical thinking is a key ingredient in learning. The use of strategic questioning to engage the athlete in the training process will lead to a higher degree of transfer of knowledge. For coaches, this means understanding critical thinking processes and being able to construct a strategic plan of questions to move their athletes through the problem-solving process to improve the skill on which they are working. Retention of a skill is usually higher when the athlete is personally engaged in the learning process.

Critical thinking is an activity that involves examining an issue through a variety of lenses, processing the information gathered, and integrating this information into one's own knowledge base. It involves identifying the goal of the learning process, gathering knowledge from different perspectives, comparing the information against what is currently known, and determining the best course to acquire a new set of skills.

I recently spoke to a coach who was asking me if SIRC had any resources to help him with his athlete who was struggling with the nerves of competition. In order to examine how some world class athletes approached pre-competition preparation, we gathered quotes such as:

- "It is very important to be mentally strong when you are out in the competition arena. You have done all the physical things, so it comes down to the mental focus. You have got to get in there and focus on yourself and get the job done. You have put in the hours, lifted the weights, thrown the shots, done the drills and it is just getting out there and doing it." Valeri Vili, 2008 Olympic Games gold medal women's shot put.

The relationship between nerves and performance, what skills were already being applied, what was working and what was not. In order to provide the coach with alternate strategies to discuss with his athlete, we turned our focus to finding resources discussing coping strategies for competitive anxiety. The following resources are some that were suggested:

Ensure that you receive all the educational coaching resources from SIRC, Canada's Sport Information Resource Centre, by activating your SIRC membership today. This benefit is available to you as a Coaches of Canada member.

Registration is easy.
- Go to Coaches of Canada http://www.coachesofcanada.com
- Sign in to Member's Login
- Follow the instructions to register for SIRC Resources

better. I feel the excitement with the Games is really a motivational thing, and not something that will hold us down. Any extra spark we can use as a mental spark is welcomed." Larsen Jensen, American swimmer on preparing for Beijing 2008

- "I felt really relaxed out there, even doing the warm-up. I was supposed to smile a bit more, be a bit more calm, it was one of my key words tonight, be calm, loose and just trust my training, because I have been training the best I have ever been." Joannie Rochette, Skate Canada International gold medalist

The final step of the process is for the coach to take his or her new resources and combine this with teaching expertise to lead the athlete through his or her own learning session by using a clearly conceptualized questioning strategy that will connect with the overall learning objective and enhance the athlete's understanding of the skill being learned. Asking athletes critical thinking questions during training sessions will help them to transfer their new knowledge onto the playing field.

References


Davies, N. (2002). Implementing critical thinking skills in health education. GAHPERD journal (Macon, Ga.), 35(2), 12-16. [SIRC ID# S-875607]


Parks, Janet B., Quarterman, Jerome, and Thibault, Lucie (2007). Contemporary Sport Management. 3rd ed. [SIRC ID# S-1023937]


Copyright of Coaches Plan/Plan du Coach is the property of Coaches of Canada and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.