How can coaches manage conflict-of-interest?

As Hilary Findlay, Rachel Corbett and Steve Indig (2006) note: “Increasingly, we are seeing coaches become members of boards of directors of sport organizations for which they coach.” They go on to suggest that this is, in part, a move “to select board members on the basis of expertise as opposed to regional affiliation” (p. 20). Trying to provide regional representation from regions with relatively small populations in marginalized sports has always been problematic. I applaud the move to building boards of expertise as a move toward improving the quality of service to athletes. As sport science becomes more complex, we need expertise to navigate the myriad of training and equipment options proffered to athletes and to advocate on their behalf. Although I wholeheartedly support this notion of using professionals for their expertise we must not neglect the profession of coaching.

In a recent article in this publication, Rachel Corbett (2009) cautions that in an effort to avoid conflict-of-interest “coaches should not participate in any debate or vote on matters that relate to team funding, athlete or coach selection” (p. 16). Generally, these are key issues related to athlete preparation and I would hate to see boards deciding to make these decisions in the absence of coach input. Kiernan and Sinha (1988) suggest that involving professionals in the debate can actually strengthen an organization’s responsiveness to public interest.

Coaches as professionals
Coaches of Canada’s stated mandate is to advance the profession of coaching; moving toward self-regulation of the practice of coaching and, therefore, it is important for us to continue to move the notion of professionalization forward in our efforts at connecting the sport community through Coaches of Canada. Boards of directors are a fundamental component of the sport community. Erde (2008) advocates for professionalism as a core competency in the curricula of professional education programs. For coaches, leadership has always been a core theme in the educational process and professionalism is merely an offshoot of leadership. We could probably do more to educate coaches about dealing with conflict-of-interest, but the outline is in place. Erde (2008) advocates that professional competence necessarily means adherence to a code of ethics that specifically identifies managing conflict-of-interest as a competency. Our code of ethics provides specific conflict-of-interest guidelines:

- First, do not exploit any relationship established as a coach to further personal, political or business interests at the expense of the best interests of their athletes or other participants (3.9). These other participants would, in this case, include the organization.

Second, be clear about and avoid abusing relationships (e.g., with athletes, assistants, officials, administrators, board

“Let us not lose the enormously valuable professional expertise a coach can bring to the board table under the guise of fiduciary responsibility.”

Continued on page 14.
members) and avoid other situations that might present a conflict of interest or reduce the ability to be objective and unbiased in the determination of what might be in the best interests of athletes (3.10). Here, the key is being open and honest about your motives. Your involvement at this stage may serve to mitigate a conflict-of-interest from a parent or equipment provider who may also be serving on the board.

Finally, declare conflicts of interest when they arise and seek to manage them in a manner that respects the best interests of all those involved (3.11). Engage in debate over issues to the extent warranted by your professional expertise and refrain from voting when a conflict truly exists or when a majority of board members think one does.

Let us not lose the enormously valuable professional expertise a coach can bring to the board table under the guise of fiduciary responsibility. Amateur sport organizations spend more time trying to recruit members than holding elections, unless membership is mandated through regional representation. The vast majority of board members have a vested interest (parents, officials, participants, etc.) and an accompanying conflict-of-interest. If we can expect lay persons to declare and manage these conflicts, surely we can expect no less of the professional coach.

References