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The Long Game, Part 1: Experience-Based Lessons for Developing Strength and Conditioning Coaches

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Abstract

Effective coaching extends beyond technical knowledge of programming, biomechanics, and sport science. While knowledge in these areas is essential, it does not determine long-term coaching success. This article synthesizes current literature and professional experience to examine key principles that contribute to the continual development of strength and conditioning coaches. Six lessons are presented: (1) experience alone does not guarantee improvement; (2) good coaching requires practice; (3) self-improvement is important for professional improvement; (4) seeking constructive criticism is essential to growth; (5) long-term development starts today; and (6) competence develops reputations. Evidence from coach development, expertise, and reflective practice literature demonstrates that effective coaching is an active, deliberate process requiring intentional learning rather than passive accumulation of years in the profession. Practical applications are provided to help coaches implement these principles throughout their careers. Collectively, these lessons emphasize that coaching excellence is developed through continual refinement of both technical knowledge and professional behaviors. By adopting a mindset of intentional learning, reflection, and openness to feedback, coaches can better adapt to the evolving demands of sport performance while improving the quality of service provided to the athletes they support.

Introduction

Coaches who have the longest and most impactful careers are rarely the ones who knew the most when they first started coaching; instead, they are the ones who consistently sought feedback, accepted constructive criticism without ego and personal involvement, and deliberately refined their coaching.[1,2,3] Just as athletes train deliberately to improve strength, speed, and power, great coaches deliberately train their ability to communicate, observe movement, build relationships, solve problems, and lead others. Coaching is not a static trait, but a performance skill that can be refined (or atrophied) over an entire career.

Early in a coaching career, it is easy to believe that becoming a better coach is primarily a matter of accumulating more knowledge about programming, exercise selection, and sport science. While technical competence is undoubtedly essential, both the coaching literature and the experiences of successful practitioners suggest that many of the factors that shape long-term coaching effectiveness are less obvious.[4,5,6] Reflection, humility, continual learning, effective communication, and receptiveness to feedback often distinguish coaches who

continue to grow from those whose development plateaus. Every young strength and conditioning coach wants to write the perfect program and come up with the perfect training blocks for their athletes. Few coaches spend the same amount of time trying to become a more well-rounded and more skilled coach. Looking back, these are lessons many coaches (the author included) would likely benefit from understanding earlier. This narrative synthesizes literature and common lessons in coach development through the lens of the principles and personal experiences that occur early in a coaching career.

Lesson 1: Experience Does Not Automatically Make You Better

One of the most common misconceptions among any profession, to include young strength and conditioning coaches, is that simply accumulating years in the profession will naturally lead to expertise.[7] Although experience is undoubtedly valuable, experience alone is not synonymous with development; current literature on expertise consistently suggests that the quality of the experience, rather than the quantity, determines whether meaningful skill improvement occurs.[8,9,10] Time spent coaching only becomes developmental when it is accompanied by intentional reflection, feedback, and purposeful refinement of coaching behaviors, similarly to how gains in athletes are limited if they are not training with intention, lack assessments, or fail to have clear goals.

Similarly to how athletes must apply the principle of progressive overload to stimulate physiological adaptation, coaches must continually challenge their own knowledge, communication, leadership, and decision-making skills to stimulate professional growth and development of those skills. Remaining within one's comfort zone may increase familiarity with daily coaching responsibilities, but familiarity should not be mistaken for improvement. Spending ten years repeating the same coaching habits does not necessarily produce a better coach compared to spending one year deliberately evaluating, critiquing, and refining those habits. For example, a coach who consistently provides ineffective cues and never seeks feedback may deliver those same ineffective cues for years without meaningful improvement; conversely, a coach with considerably fewer years of experience who routinely reflects on athlete responses, actively seeks and solicits feedback from mentors, and experiments with alternative coaching strategies and cues may develop far more rapidly. Another example would be overcoaching; a poor coaching habit may be overcorrecting or giving an athlete too many cues at once. A coach who is not deliberately improving may not observe athlete reactions and not realize they're giving too much information, whereas a coach who is putting deliberate effort into improving may give one cue and wait to see the athlete's response. The difference is not the coaching experiences themselves, but the willingness to deliberately improve after the experiences occur.

Ultimately, meaningful coach development requires viewing coaching as a skill that demands continuous refinement rather than a profession in which competence naturally accumulates with time. If you repeat the same exercise at the same weight for weeks on end, you're going to become good at that specific exercise at that specific weight, yet those skills will not transfer to other exercises at other loads. The question, therefore, is not simply "how long have you been coaching?" Rather, it is "how intentionally have you been developing throughout those years?"

These considerations raise an even more pressing question: If experience alone is insufficient to develop a great coach, what factors drive meaningful improvement in coaching ability?

"Remaining within one's comfort zone may increase familiarity with daily coaching responsibilities, but

familiarity should not be mistaken for improvement."

Lesson 2: Treat Coaching Like a Skill That Requires Practice

One lesson that becomes increasingly apparent throughout a coaching career is that professional growth rarely occurs passively. Accumulating years of experience does not inherently translate to improved coaching ability; rather, meaningful development requires intentional engagement in learning, reflection, and adaptation. Extensive literature on expertise development suggests that experience alone is insufficient for improving performance, with deliberate practice and purposeful feedback being critical components of continued growth.[11] This distinction is particularly important within human performance and strength and conditioning, where coaches must continually adapt their practices based on evolving scientific evidence, athlete needs, and contextual demands.

Figure 1 provides a conceptual model for continued improvement for a strength and conditioning professional. The importance of continual learning has long been emphasized by successful coaches, including renowned University of California Los Angeles basketball coach John Wooden. Throughout his career, Wooden consistently demonstrated commitment to systematic improvement and identified several key features of continual learning that contributed to sustained coaching effectiveness.[12] The first feature is identifying and defining important, recurring instructional problems within a specific context.[13] Effective coaches must develop the ability to recognize limitations within their athletes, training systems, or personal coaching practices and then intentionally seek knowledge to address those challenges.[14] Without identifying a problem, or identifying the true problem, meaningful improvement is unlikely to occur. The second feature involves developing and implementing detailed instructional plans. Wooden was recognized for his emphasis on preparation, reflecting the concept that effective performance is built through planning rather than reaction.[15] Within strength and conditioning, this requires coaches to establish both long- and short-term objectives, including annual training goals, seasonal priorities, and daily session plans. These plans provide structure while allowing coaches to evaluate whether their decisions are moving athletes and themselves toward desired outcomes. The third feature emphasizes the use of evidence to guide reflection, analysis, and future decision-making. For strength and conditioning professionals, this may include documenting training sessions, monitoring athlete responses, recording coaching observations, seeking feedback, and evaluating the effectiveness of implemented strategies. However, data collection alone does not facilitate improvement; meaningful development occurs when coaches actively reflect on observations, identify patterns, and modify future practices accordingly. Reflection transforms experience into a learning opportunity rather than simply another repeated exposure. The final feature of Wooden's approach involves persistent pursuit of measurable improvement and a deeper understanding of cause-and-effect relationships within teaching and learning. Wooden continued refining specific aspects of coaching until he developed a comprehensive understanding of how to effectively teach and improve them.[16] This process involved studying literature, learning from other coaches, testing strategies, evaluating outcomes, and continuously refining his methods.[17] Similarly, effective strength and conditioning coaches must adopt a mindset of lifelong learning, viewing coaching development as an ongoing process of inquiry, experimentation, reflection, and refinement.[18]

Continual learning also involves staying up to date with current literature and best practices. There is new

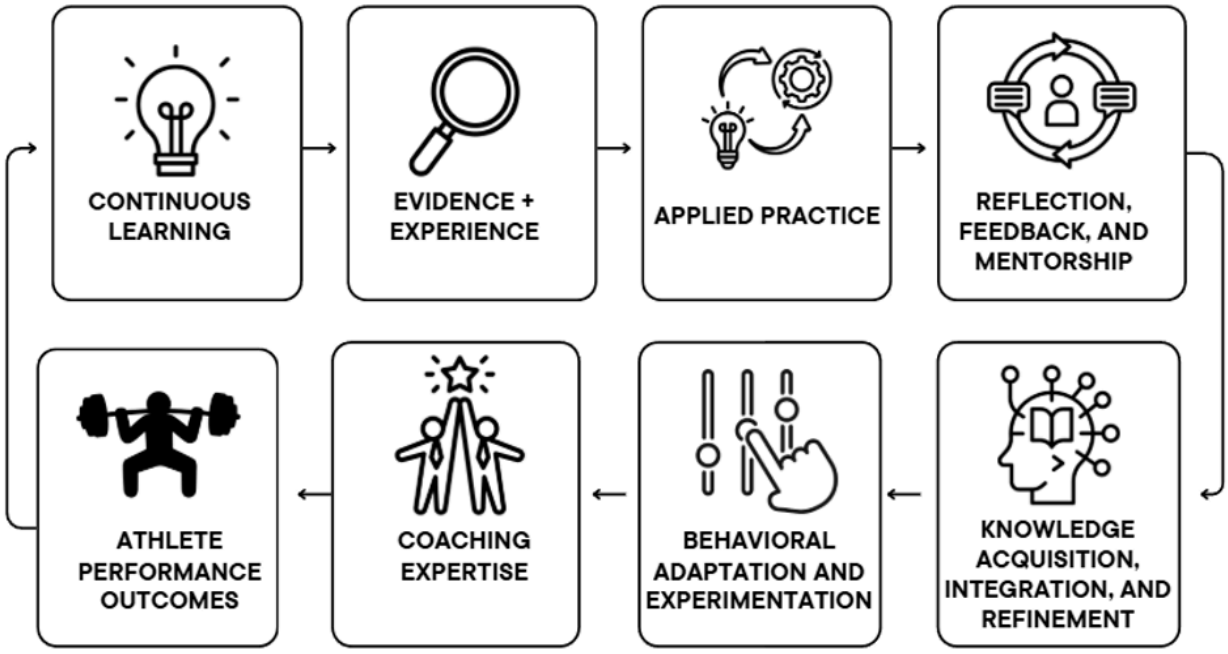


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Continuous Learning for a Strength and Conditioning Coach. Coaching expertise develops through a continuous cycle of learning, application, reflection, feedback, and adaptation. This iterative process promotes continual professional growth and ultimately enhances athlete outcomes.

information every day regarding the best training protocols, the best injury prevention strategies, and the best drills for athlete development. New articles in the fields of exercise science, human performance, and strength and conditioning research are published every day, changing the playing field.[19] There is an endless amount of information to learn, and if you have the desire to be a successful coach, it is your responsibility to take an active role in continual learning to improve and put the information to good use. This also requires the ability to critically evaluate information rather than accepting every new trend at face value; the rise of social media has made coaching information more accessible than ever, but accessibility does not guarantee quality. Great coaches learn how to distinguish evidence from opinion, recognize methodological limitations within research, and determine whether new ideas apply to their athletes. Lastly, since coaching is centric to humans, as society changes, the "art" of coaching should adjust accordingly. While there are time-tested truths to coaching, the art of coaching changes and a coach cannot rely on their experience in isolation to be successful.

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Lesson 3: Pursue Self-Improvement Along the Way

Self-awareness is an essential skill for any strength and conditioning coach to possess, and developing a better sense of self-awareness is perhaps one of the best ways a coach can improve themselves. Self-awareness includes being constantly mindful of the signals and messages you send to your athletes, both verbal and nonverbal.[20,21] As a coach, it is important to be aware of the body language you use with your athletes; are you open and engaged? Or are you standing to the side of the field with your arms crossed, looking

unapproachable for the majority of the session? Are you consistently giving positive feedback or coaching cues to athletes while they're working, or are you quiet and keeping your thoughts to yourself? Self-awareness also means recognizing how your emotional state influences your athletes. Coaches who become visibly frustrated after mistakes, appear distracted during training, or unintentionally communicate disappointment may negatively affect athlete confidence without realizing it; if a coach is unable to control their emotions during moments of stress, it is not realistic of them to expect their athletes to be able to control their emotions either. Finally, athletes primarily remember how a coach made them feel just as much as what they taught.

Another lesson many young coaches underestimate is the importance of humility. Although technical knowledge is often emphasized early in coach education, humility may be one of the strongest predictors of continued professional growth. Humility is defined as a psychological and moral virtue involving having an accurate and modest view of oneself without self-depreciation.[22,23] Humility involves being open-minded, receptive to feedback, and other-centered rather than self-centered. In practice, humility involves having accurate self-awareness, and as discussed earlier, self-awareness is incredibly important in and of itself. While often seen as a weakness, humility enables an individual to be resilient and develop as an athlete or coach and acts as a positive driver for the future of a team or organization.[24]

Studies have shown that fostering humility helps develop stronger interpersonal relationships, higher levels of gratitude, create a sense of psychological safety, and better overall mental health.[25] Throughout Daniel Coyle's book, *The Culture Code*, Coyle states that psychological safety is needed for strong cultures.[26] Psychological safety manifests itself by athletes being more likely to ask questions, admit confusion, and communicate injuries when they know their coach values learning over being right.[27] Coaches who can acknowledge uncertainty or admit mistakes often build more trust than those who always insist on appearing correct.

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Additionally, willingness to change is a culmination of aspects previously mentioned, including humility and continual learning. It is inevitable that during a tenure as a strength and conditioning coach, there will be a time when your beliefs or your methodologies will be challenged; the willingness and ability of one to change is an important characteristic of a good coach, both in the short and the long term.[28,29] In the short term, you may be required to change your schedule, information delivery tactics, or something as small as the tone of voice to reach the desired outcome. In the long term, you may be required to change your training and coaching philosophies, overall coaching style, or the location and demographic of the individuals' you coach. Throughout all of this, the willingness to change, and the ability to be fluid amid the changing environment, is what contributes to making a coach great.[30]

Often, balancing the science of human performance and the experience of a strength and conditioning coach can be one of the more difficult aspects to master over time. There is a large gap between lab settings and conditions, and the environment of a strength and conditioning facility. Science should guide all the decisions a coach makes regarding exercise selection, programming, and program implementation,[31] however, without the coaching expertise to back it up, science is all but useless. Without the ability to instruct, lead, and coach, the practical findings of a scientific manuscript go nowhere. The opposite is true, and the importance of scientific backing and evidence-based

practice in the weight room or on the field cannot be overstated; if a coach is not following the scientific principles of progressive overload, specificity, and reversibility, or lacks proper exercise selection or technique knowledge needed to maximize the gains of athletes, the coaching skills are all but useless.[32] Additionally, real-world strength and conditioning is nothing like the sterilized and incredibly controlled lab settings of research and science; hardly do things ever go to plan, and rarely is a plan perfectly executed. Research rarely tells coaches exactly what to do. Instead, it provides principles that must be interpreted within the context of the athlete, competitive calendar, available equipment, injury history, and team culture. Scientific evidence should inform coaching decisions, not replace coaching judgement. Likewise, intuition developed through years of coaching should never become an excuse to ignore high-quality evidence.

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Lesson 4: Learn To Love Constructive Criticism

Perhaps the lesson that deserves the greatest attention is the role of constructive criticism. Although feedback can be uncomfortable to receive, the literature consistently identifies reflection and external evaluation as essential components of expertise development.[33,34] Therefore, it is important to work on how feedback is received and used in future tasks. There are numerous possible ways to interpret feedback and criticism. Coach A hears, "Your exercise cueing needs work," and translates it as, "I'm a bad coach." Coach B hears "Your exercise cueing needs work," and translates it as, "My cueing isn't wrong, you just don't understand it." Coach C hears "Your exercise cueing needs work," and responds in a more curious manner, and translates it to "I've found my next area for improvement." All coaches received the same feedback, but one took it personally, one immediately got defensive, and the other took it as a step forward to improvement. Coach A spent the rest of the session questioning every piece of feedback they gave athletes, questioning their ability as a coach, and consequently was distracted from the session and did not coach to the best of their ability. They went home that night and continued to think about how they were a bad coach and became nervous about the next day's training. Coach B spent the rest of the session angry and distracted and missed valuable coaching opportunities. Coach C tried a few different cues with their athletes during the session and noticed some immediate improvement in athlete execution; they went home that day and did some reading to get ideas for other cues and will come back to the facility the next day with a deeper breadth of knowledge. Same feedback, three very different outcomes.

The reality is that the greatest coaches, athletes, teachers, and students have heard that their communication needs work, or their effort needs to be improved, or they need to be doing better in a certain area. The difference between the great coaches and everyone else is that they listened, made the appropriate changes, and grew from the experience. Many coaches unintentionally attach their identity to being knowledgeable. As a result, criticism feels like criticism of who they are rather than feedback on what they currently do. Separating identity from performance allows feedback to become instructional rather than threatening. Your ego does nothing but protect your identity. Your humility protects your career.

Lesson 5: Invest In the Coach You'll Be Five Years from Now

There are numerous ways to invest in your future self, as both a coach and a professional in the field. There are active choices you can make to expand your knowledge,



Figure 2: Conceptual Model of Deliberate Development of a Strength and Conditioning Coach. Coach development is a continuous process in which foundational attributes (continual learning, self-awareness, humility, and willingness to change) help shape evidence-based coaching decisions, leading to greater self-awareness, more continual learning, and improvement over time.

experience, and expertise, and there are multiple areas a coach should invest their time in to improve both their coaching and their personal development. The first investment a coach can make is to read material outside of the field of strength and conditioning.[35] Research in sports psychology, motor learning, and behavior change is a great resource for strength and conditioning coaches to utilize to expand their expertise in how to get the most out of their athletes.

The second investment a coach can consider making is getting a mentor. The value of a mentor is vastly understated; learning from an individual who has established themselves in the field and has successfully

built a career is invaluable.[36] The most important thing to consider when finding a mentor is finding someone who will challenge you. The best mentors hardly ever agree with their mentees; rather, they consistently push them and challenge them to think outside of the box and devise creative solutions to problems.

"Separating identity from performance allows feedback to become instructional rather than threatening. Your ego does nothing but protect your identity. Your humility protects your career."

Another investment in your future self as a coach is simply to put more meaningful and deliberate effort into coaching. Repetition upon repetition is not just the best way to train the muscles, but also the best way to become better at any skill, including coaching. The best coaches stack thousands of purposeful hours in the weight room or on the field, coaching, running drills, and practicing the movements themselves. Simply coaching more is not enough, though, and coaching quality must be emphasized more than just the number of repetitions put in; research has shown that training a skill with intent and with quality at the forefront of your focus is best for ideal outcomes.[37,38]

Lesson 6: Build Competence Before Chasing Reputation

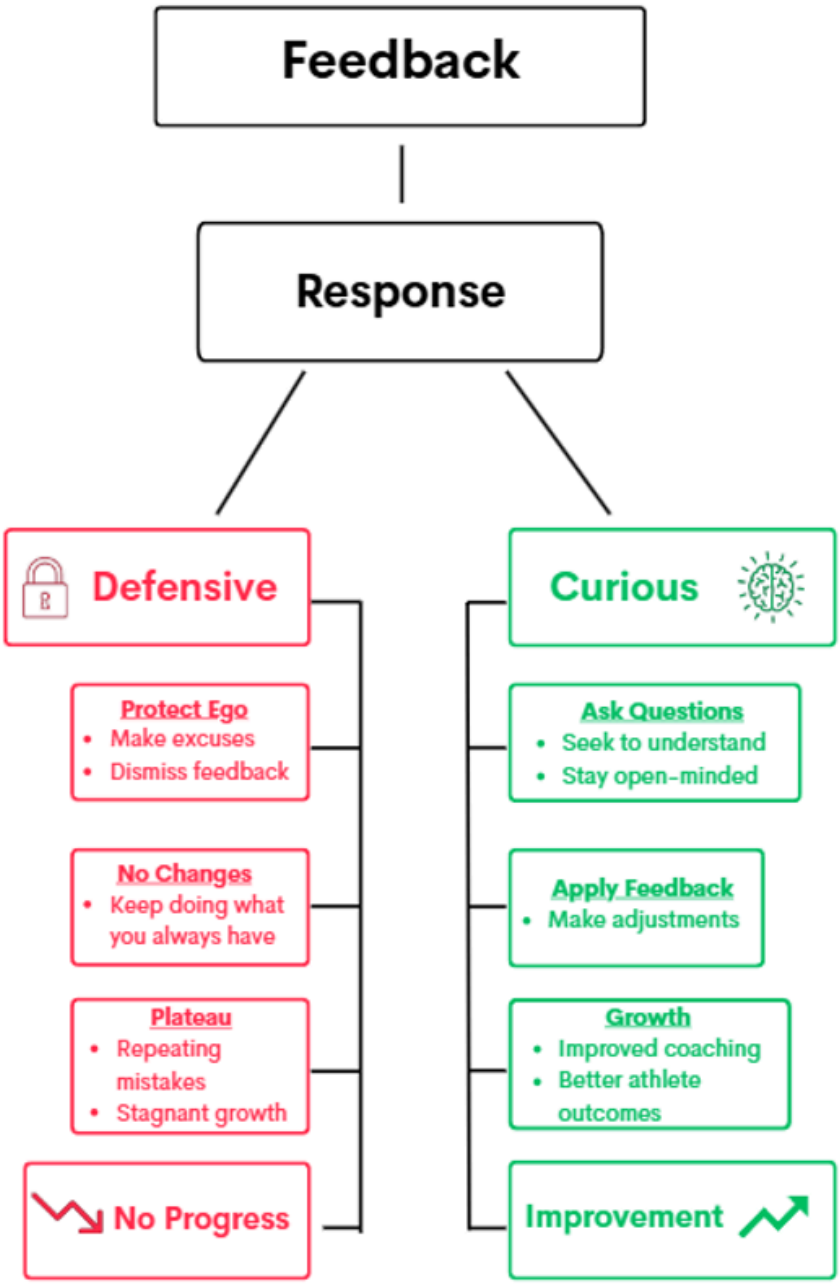


Figure 3: Feedback Decision Tree. Responding to feedback in a defensive manner is used to protect the ego and sets coach development back, while responding to feedback in a curious manner allows for better learning practices and growth.

The final investment that should be implemented in every strength and conditioning coach's routine is reflection. Reflection facilitates deliberate practice by identifying patterns, reinforcing successful behaviors, and highlighting areas that require improvement.[39,40] After every

session, a series of questions should be asked to both close out the session and appropriately prepare for the next one. After every session, these three questions should be asked: What went well? What didn't? What can be improved tomorrow? Reflection converts experience into learning. Without reflection, today's coaching session simply becomes another hour spent in the weight room. For example, a coach who does no reflection may not realize that they spent the entire lifting session correcting mistakes and giving little to no positive reinforcement, leading to frustrated athletes and decreased team morale, which may affect tomorrow's lift. A coach who spent ten to fifteen minutes after the session reflecting on it may realize that they didn't give enough positive reinforcement and will make sure to focus on it in tomorrow's session. The return on each one of these investments' compounds significantly over time.

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Collectively, the literature suggests that the characteristics most responsible for long-term coaching success are often the ones that receive the least attention early in a coach's career.[41,42,43] The International Council for Coaching Excellence identifies six domains of coaching competence: technical knowledge; professional development; building relationships with athletes and peers; communication skills; setting visions for the organization; and implementing effective coaching strategies.[44] The author has both personally experienced and observed from the classroom, weight room, and conference setting that young coaches frequently devote considerable effort toward learning programming, exercise technique, and sport science while overlooking the importance of reflection, humility, continual learning, mentorship, and receptiveness to feedback. These qualities ultimately determine whether technical knowledge continues to evolve throughout a career.

Although these principles may appear straightforward, they represent lessons that many coaches only fully appreciate after years of professional experience. Recognizing their importance earlier has the potential to accelerate coach development, improve athlete outcomes, and foster careers characterized by continual growth rather than accumulated experience alone. Many young coaches chase having an all-star reputation (the author included), but the most experienced coaches chase competence. What the younger coaches don't realize is that having the competence and the skills to back yourself up builds a reputation over time anyway. A reputation as a good coach is not built instantly and requires a substantial amount of time and investment in both yourself as a coach and the athletes that you're responsible for developing.

Reputation is often pursued directly through visibility, social media, or chasing impressive titles. Careers, however, are built indirectly through competence, reliability, integrity, and consistency. Every well-designed program, every difficult conversation handled professionally, every athlete developed, and every opportunity to continue learning represents another investment in the career you are building. Ironically, coaches who focus least on building a reputation often develop the strongest reputation over time because their work consistently speaks for itself. A career is built over time, through a series of different tasks, and through crucial development of intrapersonal skills. These tasks include, of course, coaching your athletes, but also include building meaningful professional connections. Going to conferences and networking is perhaps the best place to start. Additionally, presenting research you've done, working on publications, and getting

them out into the public are great ways to develop your name in the field and, over time, developing the reputation of a skilled professional.

Conclusion

Excellent coaching is not something passively accumulated through years, but rather a skill that is developed through deliberate practice. While technical knowledge provides the foundation for effective coaching, sustained professional growth depends on a coach's willingness to critically evaluate their experiences, seek feedback, remain intellectually curious, and embrace opportunities for improvement. These characteristics not only enhance coaching effectiveness but also improve the quality of service provided to athletes. Literature consistently demonstrates that expertise develops through deliberate practice rather than passive experience.[45] Coaches who actively reflect on their decisions, pursue ongoing education, cultivate meaningful mentoring relationships, and maintain humility are better equipped to adapt to the evolving demands of sport performance. Every coaching interaction presents an opportunity to acquire new knowledge, evaluate current practices, and refine future behaviors. By approaching professional development with curiosity, self-awareness, and a commitment to continual improvement, coaches can ensure that their expertise continues to evolve throughout their careers. The most successful coaches are not necessarily those with the greatest number of years in the profession, but those who never stop learning from them.

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Author Biography

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