Athlete Autonomy and Self-Discovery:

Are We Coaching Our Athletes Too Much?

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If you are a fanatical worshipper of Bruce Lee like myself, you are probably familiar with the early scenes in “Enter the Dragon”. When we are first introduced to Master Han’s island fortress, we witness a mass army of evil henchmen performing punching and kicking drills. Their technique during this mass demonstration of martial arts was sub-par at best, shouting out reps for each punch and kick, giving the impression of teamwork, commitment, efficiency and aggression. Who wouldn't think this was a cool way to train, even in the 1970s. Unfortunately for Han, Bruce Lee makes quick work of all of his men in the final scenes of the movie, despite their fancy group training methods. Bruce Lee – who was known to do a lot of his training on his own – was faster, stronger and more technically proficient than all of them, and was the last man standing at the end of the movie. Is this food for thought or simply a convenient plot ending?

The sights and sounds of organized group training fascinate us. Whether from military drills or choreographed Broadway shows, we attach value to seeing lots of athletes moving at once, doing the same activities and making noise. Many coaches believe that team training, especially if organized in an overly regimented fashion, will lead to more profound training adaptations. Watching and counting every repetition, yelling cues and instructions whenever possible, is considered exceptional, energetic coaching. However, are athletes actually benefitting from such overt instruction and monitoring? Are they learning how to monitor and manage their own training? When they are away from the group environment and constant
supervision, can they make good decisions on how hard to push, and when to back off? These are all important considerations. In my opinion, athletes need to develop some degree of self-sufficiency, self-motivation and self-awareness as they move on to higher levels of performance and different sport organizations. If they are constantly provided with external sources of motivation, energy and discipline, do they lose their own intrinsic abilities in these areas?

Recent conversations I have had with strength coaches in the professional ranks confirm that many athletes that join their teams after four years in college do not know how to lift, train or recover properly, particularly when they are left to their own devices. This is a significant problem in my mind. Having an army of subservient robots on your team may seem like a good way to achieve compliance and productivity. But Hollywood has repeatedly shown us that human individuals can always overcome robotic armies by applying ingenuity, creativity, lateral thinking and sheer passion for life. The same applies to any walk of life where exceptional performances are required in times of adversity and high-pressure situations. The individual that can think outside the box and create something out of nothing will typically not be the common follower, but a leader borne out of necessity.

When I was an athlete in college, I did not have a strength coach or even a periodic weightlifting coach. It was accepted practice that the older athletes would pass on training tips down to the freshman athletes on how to lift properly and select appropriate loads. In many ways, it was a “sink or swim” environment, with the onus placed on the athlete to improve each day in multiple areas. While this does not seem to be the most efficient means of improving performance, it does have the ability to elicit positive outcomes in individuals. Organically, we
became better students of our sport and our training. We were able to diagnose problems with our training and come up with effective solutions spontaneously.

Like many leadership books will tell us, the best way to get the most out of people is to let them shine on their own, not instruct them exactly how to succeed in a step-by-step manner. When someone else tells you how to perform, you derive less enjoyment out of the task. When you assume responsibility for your own outcomes, there is much more intrinsic value attached to the journey and greater commitment to the process. As young athletes, we were not drilled into compliance like military soldiers and, hence, would look forward to training every day and we grew stronger as a team by working together in a semi-autonomous manner. In situations where teammates were not present to help, training alone in the weight room or on the track could reveal other strengths in our character. Although we truly appreciated the help we received from coaches, I thoroughly enjoyed the fact that we had a stake in our own development as well.

While I am not proposing that athletes go unsupervised all the time, there should be periods of time that athletes are left on their own. I recently spoke with a group of athletes and pointed out the fact that they needed to learn how to come up with their own routines based on work that I have previously prescribed. In some case, I would purposely not post up a week of training and then witness them scramble around like the Keystone Cops not knowing what to do. We used that instance as a teachable moment on the concepts of self-sufficiency and
awareness, educating them on appropriate progressions of work and optimal training loads. If we spoon-feed the athletes for every exercise rep, set or session, we are doing a disservice to them in the long run.

I have experienced this type of forced helplessness from my work with Charlie Francis in the area of developing sprint programs for athletes. I would always want Charlie to spell out the training program for me, detailing each run and recovery period from workout to workout. Instead, he would go over training principles and “scenarios” that we could expect with specific athletes, and then always finished by saying, “It depends…” This initially drove me bonkers as I wanted the full answer to the question, “What is the optimal training program for this athlete?” However, it made me start to think in a very “Jedi-like” manner and “trust my feelings” on what would be best training solution at any given time in a training week. By not force-feeding me generic menus of training programs, Charlie made me use my brain to come up with the best course of action for the circumstances presented to me, and I am forever grateful.

Some of the greatest athletes in history have spent time alone working on their craft. For basketball players, going to the gym and putting up thousands of shots on their own or working on ball-handling can be the difference between simply playing in college or going on to play in the NBA. In the same vein, athletes who spend time playing in an unstructured,
competitive playground environment can find out more about themselves than by going to an overly-structured basketball camp. In the playground environment, athletes are more able to come up with creative solutions because they are not bound by structure and, I would argue, are more motivated to compete at the highest intensity. Who would you rather have on your team – an athlete that can create on the spot, or one that can only rely on what he or she has been formally taught in the past?

We live in a time when we walk our kids to school every day, surveillance cameras are everywhere and every appliance and electronic device is marketed as ‘smart’. We should all be doing more tasks on our own without the help of others. The need for ongoing monitoring, surveillance and direction is robbing our athletes of their autonomy, creativity and critical thinking skills. If we educate and enhance awareness, rather than hold the hands of athletes, we will achieve more in the long run.