

# How My Experience with Autism Has Made Me a Better Coach

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As a young developing coach, I was always searching for the ultimate protocol or teaching cue that would provide my athletes with the best outcomes in every circumstance. When your knowledge base and experience is limited, you look for templates to follow, trying to keep everything as black and white as possible. In that way, I would say that I was an immature coach that was looking to limit the amount of actual thinking required for the job. When I sat down with my mentors, I would ask for examples of their training programs for different scenarios. I was fortunate to have mentors that forced and encouraged me think and not treat written workout plans like magic menus for success. Charlie Francis was the classic example of someone that would never give in to requests for 'sample' workout plans. To him, writing a training program for someone that you have never seen or assessed seemed totally preposterous. And the thought that coaches can be certain about what our athletes needed two, three or four weeks ahead drove him bananas. "How can we have absolute certainty about anything? We aren't even certain that there is going to be a tomorrow! The only reason we believe there will be a tomorrow is that yesterday we hoped there would be a tomorrow, and today we are still here. But there is no certainty that there will be a tomorrow!" Charlie had a way with words indeed.

In Charlie's world, training plans and specific cues had to be individual and circumstance-specific - not generic or assumed. You could anticipate what might happen in a session, but you never naively assumed it was absolutely going to happen. There was no 'one-size-fits-all' approach. Not even close. Accordingly, my requests for sample training plans for athletes were always met with the phrase, "It depends..."

Over 15 years later, having had the opportunity to work with Olympic medalists, world record holders and professional athletes, as well as serve as a consultant to a number of teams in the NFL and NBA, one would think I would have my approach solidified, patented and ready to package for the masses. Thankfully, my lack of entrepreneurial acumen, a steady dose of self-doubt and an ongoing battle with procrastination has kept me from selling cookie-cutter training programs, over-complicated spreadsheet templates and nauseating certification videos. Instead, I have been working with a talented autistic sprinter that has been preparing for a chance to run in the Paralympics in the cognitive disability category. I was up for the challenge of taking my so-called expertise and adapting it to the 'abilities' of this young athlete. For the sake of this article, I will refer to him as "Colton".

The biggest question I had entering into this relationship was, “Where do I start?” My conversations with Colton’s parents were very helpful in preparing for the unknown. Their son had not been involved in competitive sports at any significant level throughout his youth. Only very recently did he begin to run in a few recreational road-race events to get him familiar with the concept of running a race and competing against others. Ultimately, they wanted to get him on the track and racing in competitive meets. Their goal was to have him race in the 400 meters as a paralympic athlete. He had the natural gift of being able to run smoothly and effortlessly, but sprinting at the highest level of the paralympics would be a big challenge.

In my efforts to find more information on working with athletes on the autistic spectrum, I found a very interesting and illuminating quote from Dr. Stephen Shore, a consultant and author on the subject of autism. *“If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.”* There would be no cookie cutter templates for working with this young man. My coaching approach would not be dictated by previous successes or formulaic approaches.

I would be working with the information Colton’s parents had given me from their experiences with their son, and my own real-time personal interactions with him at the track. His father would outline what he had previously done with Colton, including a variety of activities that I would classify as “rituals” to get him focused on training and competition. His father had told me that some of the rituals made no sense and have no scientific basis, to which my reply was, “Is he consistently improving?” His reply was, “Yes, he is.” Accordingly, I told him, “Well, you’re doing the right thing. Don’t let anyone else tell you different.”

Working with Colton was both educational and enjoyable. Although some of the work we performed was based on my previous experiences with sprinters, a good deal of time was spent within the realm of ‘trial and error.’ However, it was productive trial and error. There are far too many people out there who act with extreme certainty and get little to no results. I was operating under the assumption that I knew very little about working with an autistic athlete and that any progress would be an awesome outcome. Guess what? We had some great results.

Rather than bore you with the details of our training sessions, I feel that it is more productive to share the ideas and concepts that I have taken away from the training experience. My good friend Giuseppe Gueli, when informed about my results with Colton quickly commented that, “We should train all of our athletes like you train this young man.” Wise words that made me think more about my approach to teaching, learning and improving myself. Key reflections that resulted from the process included:

1. **Individualization is not about giving people separate training programs.** It is truly about adapting your approach to fit the needs of an athlete. People often think that you need to write separate training

programs, include different exercises, varying rep ranges and more distinctive names to these exercises. While we pay so much attention to what we believe our athletes need, we should be paying more attention to how they respond to what we provide them.

In the case of the Colton, it was easy to start with activities that I was comfortable prescribing. However, I soon found out that we achieved more success when I modified my approach to fit his tendencies. In the case of performing sprint accelerations, even though I would specify a shorter-distance sprint of say 20 meters – clearly marked with an orange cone – he would consistently run a 50- to 60-meter repetition. At first this was a bit humorous. But after a number of repetitions of this behavior, it was clear that I had to provide greater recovery breaks and less overall volume of work to conform to his tendencies. He was not going to run only 20 meters, regardless of what I told him. Once Colton got into full stride, I believe that he thoroughly enjoyed sprinting at a high speed, and didn't want to cut it off in mid-acceleration because it likely felt incomplete. Thus, we made the necessary adjustments – providing adequate recovery periods and a reduced number of repetitions – and allowed him to complete each run as such.

2. **Making things more complex does not make things better.** It just makes things more complex. Everyone wants to have a fancy drill or exercise with lots of equipment and technology thrown in. They give exercises ridiculous names to differentiate themselves from the crowd, and also give the impression to the athlete that they are innovative and cutting-edge. Some people will quote Shakespeare or Winston Churchill during training sessions, which is both impressive and unconventional, yet still unnecessary. This is all the opposite of what the athlete needs.

When working with Colton, we achieved better results with cues that were of one syllable and that were not overly obvious or too prescriptive. If you want to have an athlete run faster, you simply tell them to run faster. Other coaches might discuss stride frequency, knee height, arm action or vertical force production. In the case of Colton, the word “smooth” seemed to work very well. It was easy to say, easy to hear and did not make him anxious. It allowed him to settle down and produce optimal mechanics at high speed. This is in line with Charlie Francis' characterization of athletes who are hitting their sweet spot, in the zone and performing at their maximal abilities. They do not look stressed or as though they are overtly thinking about the situation. They simply flow. By finding the cue or circumstances that put athletes in this “zone” you can help them to achieve optimal results in both training and competition.

3. **Making a connection with the athlete is essential.** This does not mean that you are going out for beers with the athlete after every training session. It does mean that the athlete truly knows you care, and not just about their

athletic success. Some coaches prefer to talk down to athletes, essentially putting their own insecurities ahead of the needs of the athlete. On the other end of the spectrum, coaches can enable negative behaviors in athletes, not providing enough discipline and structure, with no professional boundaries established. The results in both cases can be equally destructive and disruptive.

I am very fortunate to work with an athlete such as Colton who is very personable and outgoing. Our conversations mainly focus on our families and how they are doing. He provided extremely descriptive stories about his dog and cat on numerous occasions. These types of conversations between repetitions in sprinting work very well because of the need to have adequately long rest periods. When I bring my young children to the track for training sessions with him, they talk about pets, birthdays, favorite foods, school and sports. In this way, the relationship becomes more personal and positive. Trust was formed very quickly and we both realized that it was not just about the sprinting. It was about the process and the experience. It was both a positive and safe experience for all involved. As a result, every training session was better than the previous one.

4. **Things you once believed were true may not always be true.** We often get so caught up with what has worked previously for us that we do not consider other options. Perhaps it is less laborious to approach a task in the same manner that we have approached previous challenges. Maybe we are such ego-driven individuals that we firmly believe that we know best in every situation, despite changing circumstances. When I was planning my first session with Colton, I had envisioned using a series of sprint drills that had worked well with many of my previous athletes. These drills would help to emphasize proper limb mechanics and overall posture during different phases of the sprint including early acceleration, late acceleration and maximum velocity phases. I had it all figured out.

Come training day, none of the drills worked. In fact, they all failed miserably. Basic drills designed to improve technique resulted in a mess of limb movements. Thankfully, I had been taught to never hesitate to pull the chute and stop the free-fall. The drills were thrown in the trash and we reverted back to basic sprinting repetitions with minimal instruction. Our simple cues during these runs continued to result in improvements, so why should we feel the need to add more salt into the soup. It tasted just fine. I have since revisited my use of drills with all athletes in an effort to determine their true efficacy. Am I using the drills to improve the athletes, or am I simply trying to satisfy some degree of insecurity in my own approach to instruction? "Think twice, speak once!" Charlie Francis always said. Just because I am not barking out ongoing instruction and cues – generally producing nothing more than white noise – does not make me less of a coach.

5. **The presence of fatigue may not always be readily apparent.** One of the easiest ways to detect fatigue is through basic measurement. In the case of track sprinting, the stopwatch is the first line of defense. Visual cues are also very important, watching limb tracking and hip height on each stride. Audible cues can be also be telling, particularly if you closely listen to the impact of footfalls during high-speed runs. In the case of the Colton, his father pointed out to me that he noticed his son began to stutter in his speech when he reached a certain level of central nervous system fatigue during speed training. This did not happen with significantly higher volumes of lower intensity work. It was only with maximal sprinting efforts. As we tracked levels of fatigue from repetition to repetition, we found that this tendency was exceptionally consistent. I would have never picked up on this cue if not for his father's mention. It definitely made me think about looking away from the more obvious indicators of fatigue with all athletes. Casting a broad net, rather than simply observing with a narrow focus, can be very helpful in the long run.
  
6. **Put yourself out there and work with diverse populations of athletes.** While we all strive to work with the best of the best when it comes to working with athletes, these are not always the most rewarding and enlightening experiences. When athletes are tremendously talented, your job becomes much easier. When athletes are not talented and may even have a specific disability, the demands on the coach become more significant. Do not evaluate the success of your career based on the talent of the athletes you have worked with. Do evaluate yourself on how much you have helped people – regardless of their salaries, talent levels and Instagram followers. The value of your work will be borne out of relative successes and the development of quality relationships, not self-indulgence and ego-driven pursuits.

We are all yearning to be treated as individuals in our journey toward fitting in. When you have met one person, you have met one person. Although it may seem to be more difficult to not stereotype athletes and provide a menu-driven approach, it will undoubtedly provide far superior results. My experiences with Colton and his family have driven home this point emphatically. In many ways, we are all somewhat 'autistic' and should be treated as such. There is a lot to be gained treating people as individuals and bringing out the best in their abilities. It will make you a better coach and person.