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research article

## Coaching Education and a Survey of Youth Sport Coaches' Perceptions of their Coaching Efficacy

—Matthew Richards (Editor: Jennifer Lee)

One of America's greatest passions, both past and present, is athletic sports. In many ways sports are a major part of our culture. Maybe you yourself are actively involved in a sport, or you have a child who is. Perhaps you frequently overhear discussions of the latest sports news while on the job. Whether you are the casual sports fan or a passionate sport enthusiast in support of your local sports teams, most of us have some ties to sport one way or another.

Nowadays, as the popularity of youth sports has grown, so too has the need for qualified youth sport coaches. Youth sport coaches are often selected by the notion that they are qualified coaches based on their availability and willingness to assume the coaching position (Vargas-Tonsing, 2007). Certainly we would expect that they be entirely committed to their role as coach, but it is not appropriate to assume this ensures they are qualified to coach youth.

A major problem in contemporary youth sports is that far too many coaches rely on their past athletic experience as a form of coaching education when overwhelming research validates the many benefits of receiving formal coaching education. Furthermore, many youth coaches today have not developed a coaching philosophy, a set of beliefs or principles that guides a coach's actions (Martens, 1990). Vargas-Tonsing (2007) suggests that coaches with less experience may not be fully aware of their coaching education needs, while other research has shown that youth sport coaches are indeed aware of their flaws (Nash, 2003). Consequently, a coaching education program is essential for youth sport coaches to address and improve upon their coaching weaknesses and to positively impact the lives and sport experiences of youth. When coaches hold true that serving the individual athlete is more important than winning, they are adopting a healthy philosophy of coaching (Werthner and Trudel, 2006; Feltz et al., 1999; Malet and Feltz, 2000; Campbell and Sullivan, 2005).

### CoachSmartNH (CSNH)

The CSNH program is a youth sports coaching education workshop that was developed in 2005 to serve professionals involved in youth sports in New Hampshire. It was developed and is administered by coaching education experts at the University of New Hampshire. The program is tailored to youth sport leaders who work primarily with pre-collegiate athletes in the high school ranks and below. The goal of CSNH is to provide a solid foundation of coaching education to enhance coaching effectiveness by increasing coaching efficacy levels of its participants. It is recognized as an approved coaching education program by multiple New Hampshire associations. Local recreation directors, school athletics administrators, and youth sport coaches take part in the program to introduce CSNH foundations to their schools and communities.

There are two levels to the CSNH program, but research participants received only level 1. The CoachSmartNH Level 1 workshop is a three-hour, interactive workshop that addresses four major areas of coaching competence: coaching philosophy, efficient planning, effective teaching, and communication skills. Level 2 of

the CSNH program is an advanced workshop that addresses three major areas: understanding the differences in the phases of athletic development and their impact on coaching, understanding parent and coach interaction for different athlete age groups, and providing tips on how to coach your own child.

## **The Coaching Efficacy Study**

A vital role that coaching education programs play in the lives of youth sport coaches is their impact on coaching efficacy. Coaching efficacy is a coach's confidence in his or her own abilities to affect the learning and performance of athletes (Feltz, Short and Sullivan, 2008). Similar to self-efficacy (one's confidence about one's capabilities to produce desired levels of performance in non-coaching tasks), coaching efficacy is a situation-specific confidence in one's coaching abilities (Bandura 1997).

Studies have shown that coaches who perceive they have high levels of coaching efficacy are more likely to engage in the behaviors which their athletes recognize as effective (Bandura, 1997). Effective coaching behaviors have been shown to yield positive psychological effects in athletes such as high perceived ability and self-esteem (Horn, 2002). There is also a strong correlation between high coaching efficacy and greater winning percentages and player satisfaction, as well as greater player and team cooperation and positive team culture (Malete and Feltz, 2000; Vargas-Tonsing et al. 2003).

In 2010 I participated in conducting a study of the impact a coaching education program could have on the coaching efficacy of high school coaches. I took on this research project because the subject hits home for me, given that I intend to pursue a career in coaching. I was also eager to learn how to conduct academic research.



*The author demonstrates proper shooting mechanics of a basketball free throw in the Hamel Recreation Center at UNH. (Photo by Brian Kimball)*

Part of my role was in assisting Dr. Karen Collins, associate professor in the Department of Kinesiology: Sport Studies at the University of New Hampshire, in administering surveys to the participants to determine the impact a coaching education program had on efficacy. The study was underway in August 2010 and reached completion in December. In August the coaches filled out a questionnaire and attended a CSNH level 1 workshop conducted by Dr. Collins. They then completed the same questionnaire at three points during the course of the season in order to examine changes in perceptions of coaching efficacy levels before and following the coaching education workshop.

## **Measuring Perceived Coaching Efficacy**

There are four fundamental competencies in which we measured levels of perceived efficacy: game strategy, motivation, technique and character building. These four competencies are the subscales, or categories, which the questions in the Coaching Efficacy Scale (CES) address. The CES is a 24-question survey developed by Dr. Deborah Feltz of Michigan State University, which measures coaching efficacy by determining a score for each of the four efficacy subscales (Feltz et al. 1999). Each question relates to one of the four subscales and begins "How confident are you in your ability to." For example, a question relating to game strategy is, "How confident are you in your ability to make critical decisions during competition?" (See Appendix)

Game strategy efficacy is the confidence that coaches have in their ability to coach during competition and lead their teams to successful performances. Motivation efficacy is the confidence coaches have in their ability to affect the psychological states and skills of their athletes. Technique efficacy is defined as the belief coaches have in their ability to teach instructional skills. Character building efficacy is the confidence that coaches have

in their ability to influence a positive attitude towards sports and good sportspersonship (Vargas-Tonsing, Warners and Feltz, 2003).

Respondents rank their answers on a 10-point Likert scale ranging from 0 “not at all confident” to 9 “extremely confident.” The CES is a reliable tool for measuring coaching efficacy. It has been used extensively in coaching efficacy research (Vargas-Tonsing et al., 2003; Maleté and Feltz, 2000; Myers et al., 2005).

When a coach ranks his/her level of perceived efficacy for a question specific to one of the four efficacy subscales, that coach is ranking their level of perceived efficacy pertaining to that specific question. However, when a coach ranks his/her confidence on all of the questions that pertain to one specific subscale, the scores of those questions are used to compute a total efficacy score for that specific subscale. The mean of the sum of scores which pertain to a specific subscale determines the coaching efficacy level for that subscale.

The study participants were eight New Hampshire high school coaches, five male and three female, who were coaching fall season sports at a local high school. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted by the University of New Hampshire Research Integrity Services Committee in order to include human subjects in the study. The high school Athletic Director granted access to the coaches, and informed consent was obtained from all coaching participants. The fall sports represented were volleyball, soccer, golf and field hockey.

The majority of the coaching participants (5/8) were ages 45 years or above, while the others (3/8) were ages 35 years or below. There was a considerable difference in the number of coaches who coached the sport for five or more years (5/7) compared to those who had coached for one year (2/7). (One coach did not answer this question.) All coaches had earned a bachelors degree, while half had completed some graduate work or obtained a higher degree.

The eight high school coaches completed the same CES questionnaire at four separate times: before and after the CSNH workshop, and at the midpoint and endpoint of each coach's season. Coach participants took the first two surveys in August 2010 at the high school where the CSNH workshop was held. These first two surveys were completed immediately before and following the workshop, before the sport season had begun. This allowed me to learn if the CoachSmartNH workshop had impacted their coaching efficacy levels. I compiled the CES surveys in a statistical analysis computer program (SPSS) and interpreted the results.

## **Results and Discussion**

I calculated the means of each CES coaching efficacy subscale for each coach. Below are those means of all eight coaches at all four data collection points (pre-CSNH, post-CSNH, mid-season, and end of season).

The results show that there were no significant changes in efficacy. The high scores of efficacy in Table 1 were very similar to those in the Feltz et al. study. The authors of that study noted that high efficacy scores indicated by coaches make sense because high scores of perceived self-efficacy are typical in athletics. They went on to assert that individuals who have very little or no confidence in their coaching ability may be less likely to pursue a career in this field. In Table 1, the mean Pre scores are high to begin with, that is, above 7 on a 9-point scale. Feltz et al. provide the rationale that these high scores may also be due to number of years coaching, prior coaching success, the coaches' perceived skill of their athletes, and/or the outside or community support they received.

Table 1

Mean Scores of Efficacy for Each Subscale

Subscales	Data Collection Points				
	Pre	Post	Mid	End	Average
Character Building	8.21	8.09	8.15	7.96	8.10
Motivation	7.19	7.43	7.30	7.37	7.32
Game Strategy	7.05	6.78	7.19	7.41	7.10
Technique	7.31	7.02	7.22	7.29	7.21

Coaching efficacy may have decreased after CSNH participation for a number of reasons. It is possible that the participants felt less confident in their coaching abilities after having undergone the CSNH workshop. A second possible cause may be due to a less than full understanding of CSNH material. If coaches were not fully confident in their learning of key concepts following the workshop, they may not have felt ready for the upcoming season. It should be noted that some of the coaches had never received formal coaching education before. It is fair to suggest that following the workshop, the coaches who had not received coaching education in the past felt less prepared with their levels of coaching knowledge and preparation, resulting in their feeling less efficacious. (Feltz, Chase, Moritz and Sullivan, 1999).

Although no statistically significant changes in coaching efficacy were apparent by the last data collection point, small increases and decreases during the study period were evident. There was a slight decrease in mean character building, game strategy, and technique efficacy from Pre to Post (8.21 to 8.09), (7.05 to 6.78), (7.31 to 7.02) respectively. There was a slight increase in mean motivation efficacy from Pre to Post (7.19 to 7.43).

It is possible that the character building subscale experienced a slight decrease because the coaching workshop's focus on coach-athlete communication made the coaches less confident in their abilities to communicate with their athletes and positively shape their character. This decrease in perceived character building efficacy may also result from some coaches never having held character building as a priority.

It is possible that the decrease in game strategy efficacy was a result of coaches feeling less confident that they could adjust game strategy to lead their teams to success due to poor previous team success. It is also likely that the coaches felt less confident in their critical thinking in regard to sports.

It is possible that technique efficacy decreased from pre to post because the coaches became less confident in their capability to put newly learned approaches to teaching into action. It is also likely that the coaches had lower technique efficacy because they felt less confident in how well their athletes understood their methods of teaching sport skills.

There is a good chance that only a slight increase was shown in motivation efficacy due to reinforcement of past learned knowledge on the subject. It is common knowledge in sport that coaches must be proficient motivators. It is fair to presume that the coaches' eagerness to learn new motivational strategies may have positively impacted their confidence.

## Limitations and Significances

Throughout the course of the research, I noted a few limitations in the study. Among those limitations, coaches reported high levels of perceived coaching efficacy before they took the CSNH interactive workshop. This is a limitation because, since the mean efficacy scores that were reported Pre-CSNH were already high, it would be difficult to prove there were any significant increases in coaching efficacy Post-CSNH. Causes for these initial high scores could be that half of the coaches had received prior coaching education, many had years of experience coaching multiple sports, the majority had extensive playing experience in the sport they coached, and, finally, most of the coaches held head coaching positions, requiring higher confidence (Myers, Vargas-Tonsing and Feltz, 2005). Other limitations that warrant noting include the fact that coaching efficacy was assessed via a self-reporting questionnaire. The questionnaire may not accurately reflect actual on-site coaching behavior (Fung, 2003). Furthermore, having only eight subjects provided a low sample size that cannot accurately represent a wider population of coaches. It is fair to correlate this low sample size directly with a lack of coaching diversity in terms of age, sex, background, sport experience, among other areas. A larger sample of coaches may have produced more statistically significant results.

Despite these limitations, this research was important to assess the impact of a coaching education workshop on perceived coaching efficacy for professionals involved in youth sports. Coaching efficacy research is important because it provides an assessment of the coaching-specific knowledge and skills that will best meet the coaches' needs. Coaches need to be aware that their coaching-efficacy can impact their team as a whole. Coaches' higher levels of confidence in their coaching may positively impact the way that they coach and be beneficial in increasing their team's confidence (Vargas-Tonsing, Warners and Feltz, 2003). Coaching efficacy can dramatically improve overall coaching.

As a whole, coaching education programs create more positive athlete-coach relationships, which benefit both the team and the athletic program (Pompei, 2005). This study is important to the field of athletics because we anticipate that this may bring an increased awareness of the value of coaching education opportunities. When coaches participate in coaching education workshops, they acquire valuable skills that will ultimately allow them to make a positive impact in their athletes' lives, thus modeling the "Athlete First, Winning Second" coaching philosophy (Martens, 1990).

*I give the most appreciation to Jehovah-Shalom, my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Had it not been for my faith and relationship with Him, my academic endeavors would have never been made possible. Secondly, a great deal of my gratitude goes out to the staff of the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program at the University of New Hampshire. What I most appreciate them for is their diligent pursuit in carrying out their mission to see undergraduate minority students reach new academic heights and attain graduate degrees. I would also like to thank my research mentor Dr. Karen Collins for all that she has invested in me. She believed in me from day one, challenged me, and also taught me what it takes to accomplish research in this field. Lastly, a special thank you goes out to my family and friends who continue to be in my corner offering me daily support.*

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# Appendix

## Coaching Confidence

Think about how confident you are as a coach. Rate your confidence for each of the items below by circling the number that best describes your thoughts, from 0 (not at all confident) to 9 (extremely confident). Thank you for your help.

How confident are you in your ability to...	Not at all Confident									Extremely Confident
{1} ...maintain confidence in your athletes	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{2} ...recognize opposing team's strengths during competitions	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{3} ...mentally prepare athletes for game/meet strategies	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{4} ...understand competitive strategies	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{5} ...instill an attitude of good moral behavior	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{6} ...build the self-esteem of your athletes	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{7} ...demonstrate the skills of your sport	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{8} ...adapt to different game/meet situations	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{9} ...recognize opposing team's weakness during competition	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{10} ...motivate your athletes	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{11} ...make critical decisions during competition	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{12} ...build team cohesion	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{13} ...instill an attitude of fair play among your athletes	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{14} ...coach individual athletes on technique	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{15} ...build the self-confidence of your athletes	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{16} ...develop athletes' ability	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{17} ...maximize your team's strengths during competition	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{18} ...recognize talent in athletes	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{19} ...promote good sportspersonship	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{20} ...detect skill errors	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{21} ...adjust your game/meet strategy to fit your team's talent	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{22} ...teach the skills of your sport	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{23} ...build team confidence	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
{24} ...instill an attitude of respect for others	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

### ***Author Bio***

*Senior **Matthew Richards** learned about research as well as about youth sports coaches in his project: “The research process in its entirety is demanding yet incredibly rewarding. I learned that you must be okay with not having all the answers. You will frequently need to rely on the help of others, and that dependency will only build stronger relationships, humility, and will lead to newfound knowledge.” Matthew’s research, part of the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program, was motivated by his past sport experience in high school athletics and his desire to pursue graduate studies to become a strength and conditioning coach. He was born and raised in Worcester, Massachusetts, of Jamaican parents and will graduate in May 2012 with a Bachelor of Science in Kinesiology with emphasis in Sport Studies.*

### ***Mentor Bio***

*Dr. **Karen Collins** is an associate professor in the Department of Kinesiology: Sport Studies. She has been at the University of New Hampshire for nine years and specializes in coaching, coaching education, and social issues in sport. Matthew’s project, she says, provided timely evaluation for the five-year old CoachSmartNH program. Although Dr. Collins has not been an “official” mentor before, she enjoys “working with students and seeing them develop a knack for research.” It can at times be frustrating for the faculty mentor, she admits, “because we have to take a step back and be patient about the process.” Dr. Collins has worked with Matthew in preparing his article and feels that writing for Inquiry’s wider audience is “definitely a challenge,” especially for those accustomed to writing in “discipline-specific prose.” The Inquiry experience, she feels, is especially useful for students who will be “practitioners, as opposed to researchers, in their field.” Therefore, she concluded, “we need to adapt and be flexible.”*