

COACHING, FAMILIES AND LEARNING IN BRAZILIAN YOUTH FOOTBALL PLAYERS



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Literature on coaching in North America can be traced back over 75 years when Coleman Griffiths wrote "The Psychology of Coaching" in 1926 and was based upon known psychological principles of that era and actual coaching practices. In most developed countries, football coaches enjoy a position of national prestige, and in the professional ranks, are handsomely paid, and parents normally facilitate the progress of their children emerged in sport.

One factor of interest is the success of athletes who have received relatively little formal coaching, from lower socio-economic environments who have little parental participation in their sport, such as Central American boxers, urban American basketball, and South American football players. In these situations, sporting excellence may stem more from the potential economic benefits of success in professional sport, of greater levels of mass participation, and of unstructured peer modelling which may overcome the disadvantages resulting from the lack of structured coaching programmes.

For example, we carried out studies involving pre-elite Brazilian football players (16-18 years) who were selected to the junior professional developmental teams of Cruzeiro, Atletico and America in Minas

Geraiis. This sample represented a selection of 22 players chosen from approximately 3000 annual trials for these teams. Coaches and family members were asked to detail the nature of their experiences with the players up until their selection for these professional teams. It was found that most young football players selected to play for the junior sides of these teams reported that, prior to being selected, they had little familial support nor formal coaching, but that they dedicated all of their leisure time to practicing football without participation in other sport experiences. The lack of coaching appeared to be compensated for by their volume of practice time, and the anticipated financial rewards of a professional career. Exceptional performance seemed to emerge from the sheer number of participating candidates who

appeared to override their lack of formal coaching. Perhaps a great volume of unsupervised practice made up for more specialised coaching, when the results of the outcome was so appealing and potentially lucrative.

In subsequent interviews with their current professional coaches, we discovered that these coaches had little contact with the families of the players, most had no formal coach education, but all were former professional players. The setting of goals for training took place for one day yearly, along with 20-minute weekly sessions. This seeming lack of formal organisation was made up for by 3-hour daily morning practices, with two additional afternoon sessions. In contrast, expert Canadian coaches reported that they carried out detailed daily practice planning, but it was

doubtful that they could submit their athletes, nor themselves, to the training volume experience in Brazilian football.

Within the Brazilian football context, the majority of players were from poor rural environments where 80% of the total family monthly earnings were between \$150 and \$375 and 65% of parents only had primary school education. In contrast, 40% of the parents of Brazilian tennis players had an upper middle class status and earned between \$1500 and \$3000 per month, and 40% earned \$3000 or more; 25% had secondary or university education. Moreover, while 65% of the tennis players' parents only had primary education, their earning powers in a major city was considerably higher than in the rural setting of the football players.



Picture courtesy of Action Images

We also showed, in separate interviews with the parents of this same sample of football players, that they received only minimal coaching until they reached the professional ranks as juniors, but played and practiced an enormous amount of time, with 85% of them reporting that playing football occupied all of their leisure time. In contrast, all tennis players received specialised coaching from the beginning of their careers and during their leisure time, and 75% of them participated in other sport activities apart from tennis. The latter is in agreement with work in Canada involving multiple Olympic and World champions which showed that athletes spent their youth discovering a variety of other sports, and only in a few cases, were totally devoted to their preferred sport. The early period of the "sampling years", allowed young athletes to experiment with a number of sport and leisure activities and shared their 'down time' from sport in other domains throughout their sport career. Sampling other sports permitted a broader skill and fitness base, and these diversions may have contributed to their ultimate commitment to the sport.

Given that the practice and play of the football players was largely unsupervised without coaches, 78.3% of the families that we interviewed in Brazil claimed that their son's activity in football did not change any aspect of their daily life routines. Only 17% reported making adjustments to allow them to participate in sport.

With Brazilian tennis parents, 17 to 56% of them changed their daily routines to accommodate their children's sport participation, at various stages of their careers, whereas 24% of the tennis parents took time to interact with the coaches regarding their children's progress. No interaction was reported in the case of the football parents, since coaching was almost non-existent, but about one third of the fathers told their sons about their previous experiences and provided insights on playing the game. Finally, the tennis

parents understandably maintained daily contact with their daughters at all levels of performance, while 50% of the football parents saw their sons only every one to three months at the time of the interviews, because they had relocated hundreds of kilometres away to an urban metropolis.

The situation in Brazilian football is quite intriguing, since until the athletes have reached 16 or 17 years of age, they have received little or no structured coaching. They have devoted their entire leisure time to playing the game in informal, often disadvantaged conditions, without a proper ball, shoes or playing surface. "Football is king" in Brazil, and everyone follows the game year round by means of its televised coverage. Trials for professional teams in the major cities involve thousands of candidates who often travel from the countryside to the professional

club at considerable family expense, while only a handful of players are selected. While they did not receive supervised coaching, they probably, however, practiced passionately, haphazard as it may, more than other achieving children.

Coaching is undeniably what could be termed an ill-defined task. The complexity of the process increases when coaching is put within its broadest perspective on an international scale where the access to physical and human resources may vary, as well as the nature of the predominant values of each culture systems colour the total process. From the internationals now playing football in England from less developed countries in South America and Africa, there are surely some lessons to be learned between the balance of formal coaching and unsupervised play and learning the sport.

Further Reading

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