

re•view \ri-`vyü, also `rē-\ *vb* **1:** to examine or study again; esp: to re-examine judicially **2:** to view retrospectively: look back over **3:** to write a critical examination of <a book or novel> **4:** to study material again



Athlete-Centered Coaching: Developing Inspired and Inspiring People

Cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But conscience asks the question, is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must take it because his conscience tells him it is right.

-Martin Luther

Lynn Kidman, a coach educator at the Christchurch College of Education in Christchurch, New Zealand, has written a book that offers insight into how to enhance athlete learning and development through sport, concentrating on long-term athlete learning and fostering a quality team environment.

In the preface, Kidman states, “With an athlete-centered approach, athletes take ownership of their learning, thus increasing their opportunities and strengthening their abilities to retain important skills and ideas. This learning also develops athletes’ ability to make informed decisions during competitions, an important element in successful performance at any sporting level. It helps athletes to take a leadership role and ownership in enhancing the team culture.”

Kidman interviewed and observed New Zealand coaches from a number of different sports, including men’s softball, netball, women’s hockey, men’s and women’s basketball and rugby. In addition, she joined Mark Norton at Riccarton High School for research with the boys’ volleyball team.

The book is broken down into 14 chapters, nearly all with a guest author

to provide unique insight into each topic. Chapter 1, Being Athlete-Centered: The Empowering Coach, begins by defining this successful and incredibly innovative approach to mentoring athletes.

“Because coaches are responsible for enabling athletes to learn, coaching is a complex process. Like other learners, athletes develop understanding and learn more effectively when they are involved in solving problems for themselves (Butler, 1997). Important tools in the learning process are to develop new ideas, knowledge and the ability to make decisions. If experts merely present knowledge (sometimes quite forcefully) to those who are ‘non-expert’ and make decisions for them, the athletes became disempowered” (p. 13).

Kidman explains that when coaches use an empowering style of coaching, also referred to as athlete-centered, the athletes gain and take ownership of the “knowledge, development and decision making that will help them to maximize their performance. This athlete-centered approach provides athletes with a chance to be part of the decision-making process that is involved in the organization and performance of sports teams” (p. 13).

In the chapter, Kidman goes on to compare athlete-centered approaches with their polar opposite – coach-centered approaches. Questioning, Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) and team culture are also introduced because they allow the athletes to take responsibility for their own learning.

David Hadfield, one of New Zealand’s best known and most experienced sport psychologists and coach educators, presents Chapter 2. He concentrates on how the athlete-centered approach can be implemented and discusses how coaches can gain the necessary confidence to change their current coaching approaches. The chapter concentrates mainly on the query theory approach, where coaches question their athletes on individual understanding of technique.

“Becoming a master practitioner in athlete-centered coaching takes a commitment from coaches similar to that required from your athletes. You may be using athlete-centered methods to some extent now; if so, that is great. If you believe that you need to change, then you need to ask yourself, ‘How am I coaching now? Am I coaching optimally? Am I the best agent of change I can be?’ If you are to change habitual behavior and move through from unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence as a master of athlete-centered coaching, you will need to be committed to the change process” (p. 43).

Chapter 3 concentrates on a case study of the Riccarton High School Boys’ Volleyball Team. Head coach Mark Norton focused on creating a quality team culture for the 2003-04 campaign. Kidman served as a player/manager and shadowed the team throughout the season. The chapter tells the story of the season and how focusing on the particular team culture helped the players meet their goals.

In the chapter, Norton explains, “I want to create a positive, enjoyable and meaningful experience for the kids to be involved in. I want the team and the team mission to become a focus in the boys’ lives. I also want to create good volleyballers and a team that plays quality volleyball. I suppose I like to use volleyball and physical activity as a vehicle to teach the kids about themselves, other people and how to effectively interact and function with others. Volleyball, a game hugely reliant on teamwork and on teammates, lends itself to do this superbly” (p. 47).

Chapter 4 moves on to men’s softball and Don Tricker’s Black Sox. Tricker’s teams have been three-peat world champions in the sport and as a coach, he offers superb insight for readers to gain the ability to become athlete-centered. He demonstrates how coaches need to be willing to change and concentrate on the individuals in the team.

“My philosophy on coaching is to take a holistic view, as I believe that there is more to life than sport,” he explains. “I like to think that I have not only helped the athlete realize their athletic goals, but have helped them become a more rounded person through their experience in sport. Coaching is simply about delivering a service; therefore, I need to understand the requirements and expectations of each person that I coach, be they five years old or a high-performance athlete” (pp. 70-71).

Ruth Aitken and Leigh Gibbs, head and assistant coaches with the Silver Ferns (netball), respectively, discuss their athlete-centered approach with their own team in Chapter 5.

Gibbs explains, “I try to create an environment where the players enjoy and have that passion for the game, but also to create situations where they develop, both as people on the court, as well as people off the court. It is satisfying to work with people who are young and inexperienced in that they are still developing and learning. I feel it is my role to help these players expand their horizons holistically by providing lots of learning opportunities for all parts of their life using netball experiences” (p. 95).

The next two chapters feature athlete-centered coaches, including Ian Rutledge (Black Sticks women’s hockey, Chapter 6), and Mike McHugh (Wellington Saints women’s basketball, Chapter 7). Creating and maintaining a quality team culture, and developing fine young people, not just in sport but also in life, are the two major themes of these chapters.

Chapter 8 focuses on Team Seagate, an adventure racing team that advocates focusing on its own quality team culture. The

team is made up of four lifetime athletes who are professional adventure racers, but the money they earn is not the most important reward they receive from the experience.

“Team Seagate has shown that the public and the media need to understand the true educational value of sport. It seems to have been lost in translation. Some would argue that professionalism has brought a need to do well in order to earn money and look after ‘number one’ rather than creating athletes who are human beings, not just sport jocks. As a professional team, however, Team Seagate has demonstrated that the ‘me’ culture that pervades professional sport is not a given. To this team of four, what is most important is learning and applying life lessons through sport. The money is a bonus” (p. 185).

Chapters 9 and 10 return once again to single coaches – Wayne Smith, an international rugby coach, and Lyn Gunson, netball, respectively. Their individual athlete-centered philosophies are highlighted in these two chapters.

Chapters 11, 12 and 13 appeared in Kidman’s earlier publication, *Developing Decision Makers*. In Chapter 11, Rod Thorpe presents his TGfU philosophy. Moving away from traditional drills that are unrelated to the actual sport, the key importance of TGfU is the game itself. Coaches design training sessions and drills more game-like so the athletes learn about the tactics and the skills simultaneously.

Thorpe says, “Remember, there is no ‘right way’ to coach, just as there is no single ‘right way’ to play. You will choose coaching methods to suit your persona. This said, just as a good player does not try only one method of beating an opponent, so a coach should develop a range of approaches” (p. 237).

Chapter 12 gives practical guidelines for planning and asking meaningful questions of athletes. In fact, the questioning technique is addressed, as well as the true art of asking meaningful questions.

Chapter 13 concentrates on sport and children. Some of the issues presented include why children participate in sport, the value of and concerns about competition and several strategies to provide young athletes with a positive sporting experience, which translates into a lifelong love of sport.

“Competition is great if children see it to be successful. Success does not mean winning; instead it means enjoying the experience and learning. Remember that because young children do not really understand competition, they will listen and act the way parents and other adults do. For this reason, adults need to be particularly careful not to put too many pressures on children, or the result may be that the children do not enjoy their sport and ultimately drop out” (p. 260).

Chapter 14 serves as a forum to summarize some of the key points raised. The purpose of the chapter is to encourage coaches to begin to implement an athlete-centered approach, consider how to use it and then continue to improve over time.

To order a copy of *Athlete-Centered Coaching: Developing Inspired and Inspiring People*, log on to the USA Volleyball web site at www.usavolleyball.org.



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