

Embracing Diversity in Sports Coaching: Insights for Inclusive and Effective Athlete Development

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Abstract—As sports coaching continues to evolve, it's becoming increasingly important to address the socio-economic and cultural differences that shape the performance of athletes in diverse environments. While traditional coaching frameworks have focused on technical and tactical skills, there is growing recognition of the impact that socio-cultural and economic factors have on athlete development. Coaches often face challenges when working with athletes from varied backgrounds, including language barriers, differing support structures, and unequal access to resources. This article aims to enhance our understanding of how coaches can create more inclusive, culturally sensitive, and effective coaching practices. It highlights the importance of developing flexible coaching frameworks, fostering open communication, and adapting feedback to meet the diverse needs of athletes.

Keywords— Sport Coaching, Diversity, Socio-economics, Performance, Inclusive Coaching, Language Barriers

CURRENT CONTEXT ON SOCIOECONOMIC AND MULTICULTURALISM IN SPORT

The optimisation of the coaching environment is a fundamental goal for everyone entering team and individual sports. Much of the current research explores performance improvement through direct coaching practices, with a particular focus on developing frameworks specific to sporting concepts (Lyle, 2005). However, in recent years, there has been increased scrutiny on diversity considerations, examining its effects on coaching outcomes when dealing with various sporting groups. A major concern for professionals in the coaching space is how to bridge individual and team diversities to achieve high performance. This process becomes even more challenging when the coaching role shifts beyond familiar contexts, encountering various socio-cultural, economic, language, and family-oriented support structures throughout a coaching career.

Socioeconomic status is a widely recognised contributor that influences sports participation, with low-affluence families reporting higher barriers and stating that their financial position affects their participation in sports (Tandon et al., 2021). A 2018 study reported an

average expenditure of USD 1,500 per year on sports club activities, with children from high-income households showing higher participation rates and a greater likelihood of sport specialisation (Post et al., 2018). These trends suggest difficulties associated with sports for low socioeconomic groups in individual and team sports environments. While it can be suggested that socioeconomic considerations and policies for sport need to change to address the social diversities in sport participation and improve inclusivity, it is beyond the role of the coach and supporting staff to address these issues in a holistic manner.

While these facts provide a sense of doom and gloom, there can be opportunities for coaches and support staff to institute real change at most levels of sport. Promoting talent support programs and talent identification opportunities for individuals and teams may result in better engagement with the technical, tactical, and psychological aspects of a winning performance, and these opportunities are worth exploring.

Interestingly, a quick Google Scholar search, limited to recent publications (2020 onwards), reported over 18,400 results when “sports coaching” was typed into the search engine. Recent articles explored successful coaching trends, online and remote coaching practices, and various coaching styles (Cassidy et al., 2023). A search for “sports coaching and multiculturalism, language barriers, mental health, and socioeconomics” returned 16,600 to 17,100 publications since 2020. When considering an open date search, “sports coaching” returns over 1.4 million publications, research trends highlight an increased focus on the diverse experiences of coaches and support staff in the field. Furthermore, it is logical to link this shift in literature to the historical reports of cultural insensitivity, racism, and prejudice in team sports and state and national programs, which have been documented and shown to have negative effects on individuals and team culture (Bradbury et al., 2020).

Through the lens of multiculturalism and socioeconomics, we can recognise the growing complexities in sports coaching, which provides context for the challenges coaches face in the field. Importantly, we identify that a paradigm shift in the coaching framework typically occurs with the introduction of

modern coaching practices, which often include the employment of staff from diverse social, cultural, and financial backgrounds, whether from different countries or socio-economic regions. While sports coaching may be a smaller consideration than large-scale populations, a picture that highlights the need for greater understanding in the exchange of support and critical information, such as feedback, is emerging.

With recent research in sports coaching indicating a rise in publication frequency and increased interest in mental health, socioeconomic, cultural, and diversity considerations, we recognise the need to incorporate practical applications into coaching (Cassidy et al., 2023). Furthermore, a coach who can identify the changes necessary to optimise an athlete's training and performance environment will ultimately achieve better outcomes and have enhanced employment opportunities. While research has suggested that governments and policymakers should include broader considerations for minorities (Mthombeni et al., 2024), it does not limit a professional's capacity to implement diversity and inclusion in their coaching methodology and practice, with a primary focus on developing a healthy, inclusive environment. It is increasingly evident that there is a greater need for coaches and support staff to consider athletes' mental health, including lifestyle and cultural inclusivity, for improved outcomes (Bissett et al., 2020). So, where does this lead?

Given this context, this article aims to explore a key question: How can coaches navigate socio-economic and cultural differences while maintaining optimal performance in their coaching practice?

ADAPTING COACHING PRACTICES FOR CULTURAL AND SOCIOECONOMIC INCLUSIVITY

Optimising the coaching environment starts with clearly identifying the coach's intended outcomes. It is essential to ask: What are coaches and support staff aiming to achieve to enhance performance, and how can they streamline this process through best practices? Defining the coaching interaction—encompassing instruction, execution, and feedback—requires a clear understanding of the specific needs of the practice.

Coaches must continually assess whether the learning outcomes align with the tactical, technical, psychological, or social aspects of skill acquisition. Equally important is the need for coaches to understand the social and interpersonal dynamics shaped by cultural and socio-economic differences within the sporting community. By fostering greater cultural and social awareness, coaches and support staff can refine their practices to better address these diverse needs and create a more inclusive and effective coaching environment.

For professionals working overseas, challenges may arise due to the diverse socio-economic backgrounds of athletes and potential cultural differences, which can create operational challenges. It is therefore recommended that coaches increase their flexibility in their coaching frameworks, especially regarding personalised athlete engagement, rapport building, and adapting the coaching environment. Recognising countries or programs with established diverse policies and inclusivity strategies in sports can serve as primary examples and reference points for improving individual coaching practices (Skille, 2020). By balancing inclusion strategies with a focus on athlete performance, coaches can foster better social perceptions and developmental pathways.

It is crucial to remember that enhancing sporting performance remains the ultimate goal, and these diverse considerations must be integrated into achieving winning outcomes. Implementing proven strategies from other professionals in the field is considered best practice. Coaches who identify cultural, socio-economic, or diversity-related issues within their sporting communities are encouraged to enhance interpersonal interactions with their athletes and provide constructive feedback to their governing bodies. Recent literature and industry expert's practical coaching experiences suggest several key recommendations for developing balanced coaching approaches that effectively address these challenges.

In the following sections, some practical suggestions are offered with the hope that readers might find them

insightful and consider adapting them within their own coaching practices.

RECOGNISE THE NEED FOR A COACHING FRAMEWORK

The development of sport-specific coaching practices is a crucial factor for success, where technical knowledge of the sport is taught and executed with a high level of efficiency (Zabala, 2009). The technical aspects of the sport can serve as the cornerstone of the connection between coaches and athletes (Lara-Bercial et al., 2017), helping bridge socioeconomic and cultural differences. Importantly, by exploring various coaching strategies, coaches and support staff can identify ideologies that enhance physical, psychological, and feedback mechanisms to boost performance, potentially optimising athletes' skill execution (Stein et al., 2012).

Over time, this process can lead to the creation of a coaching framework that offers strong opportunities for the inclusion, development, and performance of diverse athletes. It presents a chance for coaches to overcome barriers posed by social and cultural behaviours that may hinder outcomes. Regular discussions with athletes provide educational opportunities, allowing them to understand technical and tactical concepts more deeply while developing psychological reasoning for why specific tasks, roles, and communication methods are used. This approach helps athletes embrace necessary adaptations in both social and performance contexts compared to their previous behaviours.

Incorporating educational discussions as a core practice within the coaching framework promotes a guided understanding of performance requirements and highlights how certain behaviours might impede professional development. It is essential to recognise the technical, tactical, and psychological components of the sport, as these factors can significantly impact both individual athletes and teams. By applying principles of coaching philosophies, expertise, communication, recognition, and performance, the development of a coaching framework evolves into a personalised model of

success, tailored to the individuals it engages. Thus, coaching principles grounded in both technical expertise and personal development become foundational elements of a successful coaching framework.

EMBRACE AND ADAPT TO CULTURAL AND SOCIAL DIFFERENCES

A culturally sensitive leadership approach is crucial for sporting professionals, as it emphasises the need for teams to embody the culture and traits that drive success. Through coaching athletes and team members, you can foster a culture centred on growth and performance, underpinned by the “growth mindset” philosophy (Atkinson et al., 2022). This approach has become even more relevant as cross-national coaching practices have increased, leading to multi-national coaching teams and staff (Kim & Tak, 2024). Recent research highlights the importance of cultivating a willingness to learn, develop, and collaborate to improve performance. Coaches who embrace cultural and social diversity in their training are likely to achieve more inclusive and effective outcomes. This requires understanding the family, social, and religious backgrounds of team members, as these elements can significantly contribute to team success. Such considerations help develop international coaching practices that balance performance-driven objectives with inclusive strategies.

Establishing accountability for each individual within the coaching environment is also essential. Examples of accountable coaching practices that improve performance outcomes for individuals and team environments are having arrival and departure standards for training i.e. arriving 10 minutes before training and performing appropriate post-training recovery before leaving, having opportunities for open discussion, developing leadership and mentor positions within the team and coaching staff (Lara-Bercial et al., 2017), and personal accountabilities to which each individual agrees.

NAVIGATE LANGUAGE BARRIERS FOR BETTER COACHING AND FEEDBACK

The importance of exploring coaching instruction, execution, and feedback mechanisms for athletes and staff becomes even more critical when considering language

barriers in sports performance. A study investigating the development pathways for Singapore youth coaches identified six major learning points that contributed to their job experience. These included interactions with coaches, observing overseas practices, their athletic experiences, on-the-job training (instruction, execution, and feedback), mentoring, and coach education programs (Mizushima et al., 2022). While there is limited research specifically addressing language barriers in sport coaching, the fundamental processes of coaching—such as instruction, execution, and feedback—remain essential. For coaches without multi-language backgrounds, observing professional practices from other countries provides an opportunity to grasp key coaching concepts in real-time, even without direct language interaction. This observation process is particularly beneficial for developing the technical knowledge of the sport, as coaches can connect these concepts with their own physical experiences and on-the-job training. The flow-on effect of international training observations can contribute to the evolution of a coach’s practice, with or without a shared language, reinforcing the idea that learning and development are not solely dependent on verbal communication.

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ESTABLISH STRONG RELATIONSHIPS TO UNDERSTAND ATHLETES IN DIVERSE ENVIRONMENTS

There is a historical emphasis on coaches and support staff establishing strong, cooperative relationships with team athletes to improve team culture and cohesion, as well as reduce stress and anxiety in communication (Mason et al., 2020). Encouraging communication with athletes through supportive and constructive conversations is reported to lead to higher levels of

openness, readiness, and enjoyment during training sessions (Mason et al., 2020). These principles create opportunities for coaches to engage with the cultural and social diversities within a team and develop a deeper understanding of each individual.

Inclusive practices require considering the technicalities of coaching, particularly the types of instruction and feedback that become central to improving performance. Here, the technical aspects of the sport and the cultural understanding of each individual must be explored to foster high-performance development. For example, internal, external, and normal cueing are fundamental starting points for feedback, and working in a diverse training environment will likely lead to the exploration of various feedback strategies to bridge language and cultural differences, ultimately driving better performance outcomes. While external cues have been shown to be more effective in aligning with the coach's expertise, the timing, context, and method of delivering feedback still require further clarification (Otte et al., 2020). Ultimately, it is important to work with different types of cues to establish an effective understanding with each athlete, using high-performance as a guide for success.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to coaching philosophies and the practical application of inclusivity on the field, the outcomes are often open to debate. While some argue for strict coaching principles that require firm adherence, there is now a substantial body of research supporting the idea that sports coaching can be more inclusive. A diverse coaching framework not only fosters a larger multicultural sporting community but also enhances social exposure and improves interpersonal interactions within the team, staff, sport, and broader community. The benefits of inclusive coaching and training have shown strong outcomes in overcoming language, social, and cultural differences, creating better opportunities for developing interpersonal relationships and improving team cohesion. Recognising policies, procedures, and opportunities within sporting communities and

organisations to support diversity and inclusivity is a fundamental start.

Key Takeaways:

- **Non-Verbal Coaching:** Utilise non-verbal cues to help athletes develop an understanding of physical skills through shape and movement.
- **Develop Personal Interactions:** Explore different language cues and their directions (internal, external, and neutral) to enhance communication.
- **Educate on Behavioural and Performance Change:** Use discussion frameworks to guide athletes in improving their behaviour and performance.
- **Encourage Socioeconomic Inclusion:** Implement strategies that enhance diversity and inclusion within the team environment.
- **Comprehensive Coaching Framework:** Develop a coaching approach that integrates technical, tactical, psychological, and personal elements.

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