

## APPLYING HUMANISTIC LEARNING THEORY:



### *The “Art” of Coaching*

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**T**he purpose of this article is to apply specific principles of psychology to the coaching process. More specifically, it is about you becoming the type of coach you have always dreamed of and aspired to become — a productive, effective and impactful coach, who positively affects the athletic careers and lives of young people, a genuine and caring coach. Becoming this type of coach in part means understanding the basic tenets of humanistic learning theory and its applications in successful coaching.

Being a successful coach is more than planning practices, teaching technique and strategy, breaking down film, and winning games. Coaching is a complex and demanding profession that involves far more than just training athletes to compete (Vallee & Bloom, 2005). It is about mentoring people to become successful athletes and successful human beings. Indeed, many of the world’s greatest coaches are committed to teaching their players to excel not only in athletics, but in life as well (Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007). In essence, successful coaching is about much more than just the “science” and the quantifiable. Successful coaching is often about the “art” and

less quantifiable factors such as motivation, emotions, expectations, self-worth and relationships.

Although scientific approaches to coaching and training are necessary for coaching effectiveness and athlete success, they typically neglect a part of what makes athletes human. Indeed, scientific approaches tend to dehumanize athletes and overlook issues such as emotions, personal beliefs, personal growth and communication — all of which are important to athletes as human beings. Thus, exploring the so-called “art of coaching” is a worthwhile venture for coaches looking to add to, and enhance, their “coaching toolbox.”

At the epicenter of the coaching process is the athlete. As Buscaglia (1984) said, “You don’t teach subjects; you teach people.” Consequently, one goal as a coach should be to grow those individuals you work with as human beings and not simply as athletes. The nice thing about such a goal is that the results are twofold because it also positively affects motor learning and performance. Individuals who possess a healthy psychological perspective, competence, confidence and a sense of self-worth tend to be better learners (Brunson & Vogt, 1996) and achievers (Kohn, 1993). Similarly, Huber (2013) argued that a well-adjusted and more actualized individual ultimately makes for a more effective, successful and happier athlete.

Recent research in sports coaching (Jones, 2009; Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2004) has also documented the important role of humanism and how it applies to effective coaching practice. In the book *Sports Coaching Cultures: From Practice to Theory* (Jones et al., 2004), the authors described the practice approaches of eight elite coaches in sport. Themes such as “building player confidence through caring,” “establishing a learning environment to grow players,” and “developing thinking players” (p. vi) were prominent throughout the in-depth interviews with the coaches. Similarly, Jones (2009) documented his re-

flections of his own practices as a coach of a national-level United Kingdom-based boys’ soccer team. He argued for the importance of “caring in the coach–athlete relationship” and of “actively nurturing such an ethic to realize the potentialities of others” (p. 377). So, what can coaches learn and apply from humanistic learning theory to improve their practice?

## Applying Key Humanistic Principles in Coaching

Humanism can manifest itself through the coaching process in four ways. These common emphases are communication, self-concept, affect and personal values (Huber, 2013). Table 1 summarizes these key emphases and provides suggestions for applying them in practice.

In his influential book on the humanistic coach, Lombardo (1987) outlined numerous humanistic principles that can be applied to coaching. These principles and their application can be used in conjunction with the aforementioned emphases of humanistic coaching (Huber, 2013) to further develop your coaching toolbox and help your athletes develop as athletes while concurrently helping them grow as human beings.

**Table 1. Key Emphases and Strategies for Humanistic Coaching**

Emphasis	Coaching Strategies
<p><b>Communication</b> Skills and principles related to effective human relations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be honest and real with your athletes.</li> <li>• Really listen to your athletes.</li> <li>• Arrange team meetings and goal-setting sessions.</li> <li>• Get to know your athletes personally through regular interactions.</li> <li>• Constructively resolve conflict by facilitating active involvement by all in the process.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Self-Concept</b> Development of a positive self-concept/how athletes view themselves.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be positive in what you say and what you do.</li> <li>• Be genuine; be true to your athletes.</li> <li>• Promote success, not failure.</li> <li>• Maintain positive perceptions and expectations of your athletes; expect the best.</li> <li>• Invite rather than disinvite athletes; facilitate self-directed, capable and valued athletes.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Affect</b> Focus placed on emotions, thoughts and feelings.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be attentive and sensitive to athletes’ feelings.</li> <li>• Increase athletes’ awareness of others’ feelings.</li> <li>• Encourage athlete thinking and emphasize learning how to learn.</li> <li>• Set effective objectives and goals for your program (conscious integration of humanism).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Personal Values</b> Awareness and development of autonomy: athletes taking responsibility for and control of their lives.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be conscious of the values you teach.</li> <li>• Nurture personal responsibility in your athletes.</li> <li>• Facilitate your athletes’ efforts to problem-solve for themselves.</li> </ul>

A selection of these important principles (as outlined by Huber, 2013) and their applications are summarized next.

### **Congruence**

Truly great coaches are authentic. Their emotions, feelings, thoughts and actions represent who they are. Being open and honest with your athletes is crucial, as they are perceptive and can quickly detect on their mental radar when coaches' actions do not match their verbal message. A deeper connection with your athletes and the development of a trusting relationship start with authenticity and not being afraid to show weakness or admit mistakes.

### **Success promotion**

Lombardo (1987) suggested that the best way to promote success is to give athletes the freedom to set meaningful personal goals and to give them the opportunity to self-evaluate the attainment of those goals. Giving your athletes autonomy with this task can be very powerful and demonstrates a belief in their ability to self-determine and self-evaluate. As Lombardo wrote, "In short the process of preparing athletes to independently determine goals is, in effect, an inherently success-promoting technique" (p. 43).

### **Interaction**

Interaction has to do with coaches and their ability to interact with their athletes. Interaction also has to do with the manner in which athletes are permitted to express themselves and be heard. Providing frequent opportunities for your athletes to communicate and encouraging them to speak out, give suggestions and provide input are important. As Lombardo (1987) said, "An important characteristic that distinguishes humanistic athletic leaders from their colleagues is their capacity to truly listen and hear the athlete, to clearly perceive what the athlete is saying, to comprehend the hidden message conveyed, and to discern the covert agendas within the player's communication" (p. 45).

### **Empathy**

Although coaches can never fully understand exactly what the athlete is going through, being sensitive to an athlete's thoughts and feelings is an important characteristic associated with the humanistic coach. Similarly, coaches should respect the dignity of each athlete and provide support, acceptance, encouragement and inspiration. For example, when providing constructive criticism and feedback, coaches should make a distinction between the athlete and the individual person. You may dislike an athlete's motor performance yet like and value the individual person and their potential for goodness and growth.

### **Summary**

Humanistic learning theory has the potential to have a profound effect on your coaching, as well as your athletes' lifetime success. By taking a humanistic approach to coaching, you help your athletes develop as both athletes and human beings. This

personal-growth promoting process results in greater personal maturity, self-confidence, insight, self-functioning and coping skills, which in turn positively affect the success and quality of students' athletic careers as well as their lives beyond sports.

Coaches have the potential to make a difference in the lives of their athletes on a daily basis. A coach's greatest reward should be their ability to say, "I made a difference in that person's life." You can help this process by making humanism an integral part of your coaching toolbox.

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