

A Survey of Attitudes Toward Coaching Evaluation

Ronald L. Pinnell
Stetson University

William R. Eissele
Seminole County Public Schools

ABSTRACT. The purpose of this study was to examine to what extent the formal written evaluation of athletic coaches existed in the high schools of a central Florida school district. It was determined that 1 of the 6 high schools in the school district utilized such a system of evaluation. However, there was not consensus among the respondents of this school regarding how this system operated. The results also indicated that there was strong support within the school district from principals, athletic directors, and athletic coaches for a formalized system of evaluation. It was suggested that the coaching domains offered by Pflug (1980) provide a functional framework for determining what should be assessed in such a system. Based on these findings, seven recommendations were made regarding the implementation of a formalized system of evaluation in schools.

Historically, the justification for the inclusion of interscholastic athletic programs in America's secondary schools has been grounded in the sociological and psychological benefits purported to be availed to all participants, not just the obvious physiological effects associated with vigorous physical activity (Edwards, 1973; Eitzen, 1979; Grato, 1983). Most certainly, interscholastic athletics in contemporary secondary schools continue to be justified to a large degree on their potential for teaching, developing, and refining desirable personal qualities (Fry & Massengale, 1988).

However, mere participation in a team or individual sport does not in and of itself guarantee the development of such wholesome traits. Athletic coaches

unequivocally play an important role in their formation. It is clear that the pedagogical skills of athletic coaches are critical in all phases of learning associated with sports and competition. Effective coaches have the know-how and skills to teach to all three domains of knowledge: psychomotor (technique), cognitive (strategy), and affective (sportsmanship, team spirit, and striving for excellence). Indeed, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools has underscored the importance of pedagogy in athletics by including it in their accreditation standards (S.A.C.S. Criteria, 1991).

It is incontrovertible that high school athletic coaches are hired to fulfill an educational role within schools. It naturally follows that their ability to teach will to a large degree influence their capability to fulfill that role. Unfortunately, many coaches receive little assistance from their supervisors in developing and refining their pedagogical acumen. As Leland (1988) reflected, "Much of the evaluation in athletics is informal: 'nice job', 'tough loss.' Comments such as these are often the only feedback coaches receive" (p. 22).

Given that: (1) interscholastic athletic coaches serve a legitimate educational role, (2) a significant portion of a coach's responsibility is considered to be instructional, and (3) coaches occupy positions officially sanctioned by the school districts, educators at all levels need to come to grips with the pedagogical role of the coach and respond to their needs for continuous professional development. More systematic and objective evaluation of teaching and coaching competencies is a necessary step in that direction.

Formal written evaluation not only provides the administration with an awareness of a coach's performance and abilities, but also provides constructive feedback to the coach. Gratto (1983, p.59) acknowledged, "Evaluation of coaches and their programs is no less important than the evaluation of any other school program or function." As Leland (1989) pointed out, a comprehensive evaluation process will help coaches and athletic directors "reduce reliance on informal evaluations, increase the level and quantity of communication in both directions, help identify goals and clarify priorities for each program, and provide the basis for contractual rewards and salary adjustments" (p. 22). Docheff (1989) also strongly supported formal evaluation of athletic coaches when he cogently observed:

Coaches are always looking for ways to improve their coaching technique. New drills, training regiments, and strategies are continually explored by coaches in an effort to establish an edge over their opponents. Evaluation can provide this edge, and a

good evaluation instrument, properly used, can be an effective tool in the process (p. 12).

Program accountability, fiscal regulation, and legal issues associated with employment are additional considerations that strongly suggest formal evaluation is no longer an option but rather a necessity for schools. However, as logical and professionally appropriate as the formal evaluation of athletic coaches appears to be, there is not consistent acceptance or support within the educational community for such assessment. Only a small minority of states have guidelines for the formal evaluation of coaches, notwithstanding the fact that the majority of states require specific endorsement or certification of individuals desiring to coach interscholastic athletics (Noble and Sigle, 1980).

The state of Florida requires a specific endorsement but does not require formal evaluation. Each of the 67 school districts within the state has its own policy (explicitly or implicitly) regarding such evaluation.

The central Florida public school district in which this study was conducted had no policy mandating the formal evaluation of coaches. The purpose of this study was to investigate the status of formal written evaluation of athletic coaches in the high schools within this school district, to determine if there is a perceived need for such evaluations, to collect information from the respondents regarding what the components of such an evaluation should be if implemented, and to discern perceptions on how the evaluation should be used by the principals and athletic directors in the schools.

Method

The subjects of this study included school-based administrators, athletic directors, and athletic coaches from each of the six high schools in the school district selected for study. The athletic director of each high school, along with 24 randomly selected coaches and 15 school-based administrators, were provided a questionnaire (total of 45). There was a 66% return rate of useable questionnaires. Five athletic directors, 17 coaches and eight school-based administrators responded.

The instrument contained 15 questions. Questions 1-13 were forced choice items which sought information regarding the existence of a formalized coaching evaluation system in their school, the nature of such a system if indeed one existed, and the general perceptions respondents had regarding the desirability for systematic evaluation of athletic coaches. Question 14 was a Likert Scale of coaching evaluation domains based on the work of Pflug (1980).

The final question was a narrative response item which sought information concerning the respondents' conceptualization of the purpose and functions such a system should serve.

Results and Discussion

Survey responses indicated one high school, out of the six in the school district, had a formal written evaluation procedure of athletic coaches in place at the time of this survey. However, it did not appear that there was uniform understanding of the purposes or procedures related to this system of evaluation. The athletic director and one coach, out of the two coaches that responded from this school, indicated that the evaluation was used in a formative manner. On the other hand, the administrator and the other coach indicated the evaluation was utilized in both a formative and summative manner.

There was also discrepancy regarding who evaluated the coaches at this school. The athletic director indicated he was solely responsible for carrying out this function. However, the administrator and the two responding coaches indicated both the principal and the athletic director took part in the evaluation process. The opportunity for input in developing the guidelines and criteria for the evaluation procedure was another point of divergence. The two responding coaches perceived these as being established by the school's administration. The administrator and athletic director, in contrast, saw these as being collaboratively established by the administration, the athletic director, and the coaches.

The capability of coaches to make post-observation conference changes in the evaluation was also an area of possible incongruity. The administrator and the athletic director indicated coaches had the opportunity to make these changes in the evaluation. The two coaches, on the other hand, did not respond to this question.

There were also areas of agreement among the respondents of this school. All four indicated the guidelines or criteria for the evaluation were presented to the coach at the beginning of the school year. They were also unanimous in agreeing that coaches had the opportunity to respond to the evaluation and that the evaluation was used for the improvement of coaches, not to "get the coach."

What is not clear is whether the formal evaluation system of this school provided for more than a single end-of-the-year conference with the athletic director and/or the principal.

Responses to questions targeting all the schools were revealing. Overall, there was strong support for a formal system of evaluation of athletic coaches. Seven of the eight principals, four of the five athletic directors, and 14 of the 17 coaches, for a total of 25 (83%) respondents, indicated they were in favor of such a system.

Nineteen (63%) of the respondents indicated that they felt the administration and the athletic director should collaborate in administering the evaluation. Six respondents indicated only the athletic director, while five indicated only the administration should conduct the evaluation.

With regard to the development of standards for a system of coaching evaluation, 27 (90%) of the respondents felt that all three principal actors (administrator; athletic director; coach) should have input in establishing the guidelines and criteria used in the assessment. Furthermore, 21 respondents felt the evaluation should be formative while nine indicated it should be summative.

The challenge of determining what competencies should be included in the evaluation system remains, regardless of who establishes the guidelines of the system or how it is ultimately used. Pflug's (1980) 12 domains of athletic coaching provided a listing of specific competencies that could be utilized for this purpose. These domains represent the job related roles and responsibilities of athletic coaches. Table 1 presents the combined Likert Scale scores of the 12 domains. Domains were ranked according to the degree of perceived importance. The highest score (5) represented being most important, and the lowest score (1) represented being the least important.

Collectively, a number of specific domains were considered strongly related to high school coaching competence. The conduct of the coach, fundamentals, organizational skills, school philosophy, enthusiasm, and communication skills all received strong ratings. The domains of sport knowledge, firm discipline, and attitude of the team were rated moderately lower than those above, and public relations, care of equipment and appearance of the team were rated least important. It is important to note, however, that even the lowest rated domains (care of equipment; appearance of team) received relatively strong support (3.6) by the combined group.

The final survey question was open-ended and asked the respondents to take the time to explain how formal evaluation of a coach should be used. The majority of comments made by the three groups indicated they viewed the process of formal evaluation as being a positive tool to guide coaches in improving their effectiveness and furthering their professional development. As

one principal reflected, "Coaching is a profession which requires a wide array of skills and techniques to successfully fulfill the duties. It is an integral part of schools. A formal written evaluation system would further professionalize coaching."

Table 1
Importance Ranking of Domains - Combined Group Scores

Domain	n	M	SD
Conduct of Coach	26	4.7	.80
Fundamentals	26	4.4	.72
Organizational Skills	23	4.3	1.23
Firm Discipline	21	4.2	.91
Communication Skills	24	4.2	.88
Enthusiasm	27	4.1	.96
School Philosophy	28	4.0	1.18
Attitude of Team	21	4.0	1.36
Sport Knowledge	26	3.8	1.31
Public Relations	21	3.7	1.02
Care of Equipment	21	3.6	1.02
Appearance of Team	19	3.6	1.02

Note. These data reflect the scores for all subjects.

Accountability was a recurrent theme that also emerged in the responses to this final question. One coach cogently opined, "I believe that anyone who is put in a position of being responsible for the safety and welfare of young impressionable adults should be accountable for their instruction and leadership."

The notion of holding administrators accountable for their actions was also identified as being a positive by-product of the process of formal evaluation. One coach commented, "Make administrators accountable for promotions/demotions of coaches etc. based upon written evaluations, not 'the good old boy system'."

Comments were also consistent across the groups for support of the evaluation instrument being designed by a committee consisting of coaches, athletic directors, and principals.

As would be expected, not everyone was in agreement with the concept or the process of formal evaluation. One athletic director indicated a formal written evaluation would be impractical for use in high schools. Unfortunately, this athletic director did not provide the rationale for his conclusion.

Three coaches expressed concern about the possibility of the evaluation being too subjective and the likelihood of too much power being held by the individual conducting the evaluation. One of these coaches also cynically quipped, "Requiring formal written evaluations of coaches would make the process routine and meaningless, as teacher evaluations are today."

Conclusions and Recommendations

The modest sample size and the descriptive nature of this study limit the specific extension of findings to other school districts. However, the primary value of this study lies in the initial confirmation of a void that exists in the formal evaluation of athletic coaches in this Florida school district. This raises the question of whether this is the current status for evaluating scholastic coaches in other school districts around the state.

The results of this study did indicate that there was strong support from principals, athletic directors, and athletic coaches in this school district for a formalized system of evaluation for athletic coaches. Notwithstanding this degree of support, it was revealing to note that only a single school in the district had such a system in place. Additionally, the confusion regarding the fundamental purpose of the system and how it operated suggests a questionable degree of commitment to standardize the process in order to maximize its effectiveness.

Even though there is substantial support from all groups for a more systematic and formalized approach there appears to be a willingness on the part of each group to accept without complaint the relatively loose, informal and subjective process that has traditionally been used for the purpose of evaluating coaching competence.

When viewed as a whole, the findings of this study are troublesome. It appears the school-based administrators and athletic directors in this district continue to perpetuate the use of informal and highly subjective approaches to evaluation. Aside from the ineffectual nature of this approach for stimulating professional growth this practice also exposes these administrators and athletic directors to considerable legal risk and potential liability.

Lawsuits alleging negligent retention or supervision of personnel are often generated from student injuries associated with participation in sports. The inability to produce documentation of supervision does not do much to support one's cause. On the other hand, a comprehensive, objective and formalized approach to evaluating coaching personnel that has been systematically implemented provides compelling evidence of affirmative supervision of personnel that can be used to counter such accusations. Allegations of wrongful discharge or a lack of due process in terminating a coach is yet another area of litigation facing contemporary administrators and athletic directors. Again, a systematic and objective procedure for evaluating athletic personnel is critical for successfully fending off such an allegation. No competent administrator would entertain the notion of terminating an instructional employee without sufficient documentation. The same degree of caution needs to be exercised in the dismissal of coaching personnel. This especially holds true now that a number of decisions have been handed down by the appellate courts requiring school districts to reinstate coaches judged to have been improperly dismissed. Ensuring athletes are being provided instruction and strategies that are technically correct and safe is the most compelling reason of all for having a formal evaluation procedure. No athlete should be subjected to unreasonable risk of injury due to a lack of competence or concern for the welfare of athletes on the part of their coaches. It is clear that the only reliable way in which to carry out this ethical responsibility is to assist coaches with their professional development and systematically monitor their performance. A formalized system of coaching evaluation needs no further justification than this.

It is the school's administration that has the ultimate responsibility for protecting students from unnecessary harm. Based on these findings, it appears the school administrators and athletic directors in this school district are abdicating this responsibility.

With regard to the development of an assessment instrument for formalized evaluation, the results of this study support the use of Pflug's (1980) coaching domains. These domains provide a functional framework for determining the criteria that could be assessed in a formalized system of coaching evaluation. What is not certain is the degree of agreement among the coaches, athletic directors and administrators regarding the degree of importance that should be assigned to each domain for the purpose of evaluating coaching competence. Further study of these perceptions could assist in the continued development and refinement of an evaluation instrument that accurately reflects the critical components of the profession.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered to those school districts without formalized systems of evaluation for athletic coaches:

1. A county-wide task force of principals, athletic directors, and coaches should be formed to establish a formal system for the evaluation of athletic coaches.
2. A formative approach to the evaluation of coaches in the school district should be adopted.
3. Proficiencies that have been identified as being strongly correlated with both teaching and coaching effectiveness should be used to develop the instrument used in the evaluation process.
4. The athletic director, or assistant athletic director, and an administrator within the school should comprise a formative evaluation team for each individual on a school's coaching staff.
5. Coaches should be presented with the evaluation criteria and have the opportunity to discuss the criteria at the beginning of each year.
6. Time for coaches to discuss their evaluation with the evaluation team during the school year should be built into the evaluation process.
7. Staff development opportunities and training programs should be systematically offered to coaches for continuous professional development.

It would certainly be prudent for every school district in the state of Florida to consider the issues and address the questions connected with the evaluation of high school athletic coaches. Further study of athletic coaching evaluation policies around the state is warranted. This continued study should seek to document the number of school districts and individual schools having formalized procedures and examine the instruments used in these evaluations. Additional information regarding how the information gleaned from these instruments is utilized for evaluating coaching competence would certainly prove to be beneficial to the educational community and hopefully serve to broaden the acceptance and utilization of such procedures.

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Ronald L. Pinnell, 353 Silver Pine Drive, Lake Mary, FL 32746.