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ATHLETES DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES:
SELF-COACHING EXPERIENCES OF NEW ZEALAND OLYMPIANS

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ABSTRACT

Self-coaching in sport (athletes coaching themselves) is a little understood concept. It has not been researched or written about by academics to any great extent although practitioners from both the sport and business environs have made some contribution to the literature. The basic premise of self-coaching is the fact that the athlete is responsible for all activities oriented towards their performance enhancement and goal achievement. This does not mean that the athlete achieves this without any outside influence or assistance. Rather, it is their decision when, or if, to call on a coach, mentor, technical advisor or observer for input. This research aims to provide a clear definition of self-coaching, to identify reasons why athletes self-coach and characteristics/qualities of self-coached athletes and to propose strategies and clearly delineated steps or guidelines for self-coaching.

Data for the research was collected using self-administered questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Forty-five of the 97 members of the New Zealand 1996 Summer Olympic Games team and 36 New Zealand Summer Olympic Games medal winners from the 1956 to the 1996 Olympics participated in the study. Data was analysed using SPSS, concept mapping techniques and document analysis.

The most common reasons identified by New Zealand athletes for self-coaching was lack of available, certified, sport-specific or elite level coaches. Other reasons included incompatibility with the coach, financial considerations and inconvenience of traditional coaching. The characteristics/qualities identified by these athletes as most essential to effective self-coaching were discipline, self-criticism, motivation, self-belief, confidence, determination and honesty.

The self-coaching strategies employed by these athletes include learning from mistakes made, using a training diary, using a training partner, talking with other (elite) athletes and coaches, gathering outside feedback and using structured programmes. The proposed six step process incorporated steps such as vision and goal setting, identification of strengths and weaknesses, development of a plan followed by monitoring, revision and evaluation of the plan.

Academics and practitioners can assist athletes to improve their sporting performance by further exploring the concept of self-coaching with a view to providing positive, useful suggestions which can be implemented by athletes who find themselves in a self-coaching situation. Practical outcomes that have been suggested here focus on useful strategies, procedures for self-coached athletes to implement a training programme and action plans including modification to coach education schemes and a Self-Coaching Cycle.

Future research opportunities, which could be of benefit to both New Zealand athletes and those from other countries, include such topics as:

- sport-specific case studies to identify for which sports self-coaching is most appropriate and which are interested in implementing self-coaching processes
- case studies on team, individual and dyadic athletes to identify which benefit most from self-coaching and which are interested in implementing self-coaching processes
- replication of this study using Paralympic athletes as the sample population
- coaches' thoughts and perceptions of the self-coaching process
- extension of the Self-Coaching Cycle to integrate more specific self-coaching techniques and tools for coaches and athletes.

Self-coaching is a new and exciting concept which will develop and no doubt be recognised as a legitimate coaching process.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The Hillary Commission (the HC or the Commission) - responsible for improving the wellbeing of New Zealanders through sport, fitness and leisure

The New Zealand Sports Foundation (the NZSF, the Foundation or the Sports Foundation) - committed to sporting excellence by assisting athletes to succeed in high performance/elite (international) sport

The New Zealand Olympic Committee (the NZOC) - responsible for promoting the Olympic ideal and organising Olympic and Commonwealth Games contingents

Coaching New Zealand (CNZ) - responsible for encouraging, promoting, educating and certifying coaches

National Sport Organisations (NSOs) - responsible for sport-specific development, organisation and delivery

Regional Sport Trusts (RSTs) - preferred delivery agents for Hillary Commission programmes which educate, support and promote sport in the community

High performance athletes - term used to refer to athletes competing at the international level who are ranked among the best in the world or who have the potential to be, also known as elite level athletes

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