

The Impact of Faith and Experience on the Development of Coaching Philosophies

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to address coaching philosophies in the context of experience and faith. In particular, how do coaches at Christian colleges develop their ideas and beliefs about coaching which guide their actions and behaviors? To what extent does faith impact these philosophical commitments? What is this process of decision-making and growth like? Does this development process occur intuitively, through rational discourse and planning, or perhaps through some sort of symbiotic process? This paper is both descriptive and normative, both reflective of the experiential process in developing one's coaching philosophy as well as prescribing effective ways to integrate faith, experience, and coaching ideals and practices. Establishing a coaching philosophy is indeed a developmental process. For the attentive coach, coaching guidelines and principles change over time. Second, a coaching philosophy is developed through experience more so than being derived from abstract principles. While individuals may promote concepts like fairness or compassion, these principles are fleshed out and modified through relationships. Third, a coaching philosophy informed and constructed by faith, when properly and consistently applied, can play an important part in this process. Coaches may draw from their own faith experiences in ways that positively impact the team climate.

Introduction

In his book, “*Quiet Strength: The Principles, Practices, & Priorities of a Winning Life*,” former NFL coach Tony Dungy (2008) details his approach towards succeeding in the hyper-competitive environment of professional athletics. Dungy explains how his personal faith commitment impacted his coaching approach and philosophy. “Although football has been a part of my life that I’ve really enjoyed,” Dungy writes, “I’ve always viewed it as a means to do something more. A means to share my faith, to encourage and lift up other people” (p. xv). For Dungy, and other coaches informed by their religious backgrounds, integrating faith into a personal coaching philosophy is an essential aspect of one’s professional life.

This is not to say that every successful coach develops a philosophy influenced by faith nor do they necessarily need to do so. Indeed, there are many ways to create efficacious guiding principles with regards to coaching. One need only look at the multiplicity of coaching styles evident at every spectrum of sport to realize this. Some coaches utilize faith principles in a very overt manner while others do so more subtly. For example, although both experienced an upbringing influenced by faith and religion, John Wooden approached the coaching profession in a manner vastly different than Vince Lombardi. There are also many exemplary coaches who work from a secular standpoint, operating from broad-based philosophical concepts such as the pursuit of excellence, fairness to all, justice, or even love.¹ Coaches, by virtue of their professional positions, hold the possibility of tremendous influence. American philosopher Henry Bugbee (1999) writes of his growth under the tutelage of his college crew coach, John Schultz. “For me,” Bugbee writes, “he was the awakener” (p. 47). Impacted by Schultz, Bugbee

experienced growth in spades; he became more in tune with the intricacies of rowing and his own philosophical ideas.

Given the impact that coaches can have on their athletes, and the frequent nature of coaches employing faith principles, the purpose of this paper is to address coaching philosophies in the context of experience and faith. In particular, how do coaches at Christian colleges develop their ideas and beliefs about coaching which guide their actions and behaviors?² To what extent does faith impact these philosophical commitments? What is this process of decision-making and growth like? Does this development process occur intuitively, through rational discourse and planning, or perhaps through some sort of symbiotic process? This paper is both descriptive and normative, both reflective of the experiential process in developing one's coaching philosophy as well as prescribing effective ways to integrate faith, experience, and coaching ideals and practices. First, establishing a coaching philosophy is indeed a developmental process. For the attentive coach, coaching guidelines and principles change over time. Second, a coaching philosophy is developed through experience more so than being derived from abstract principles. While individuals may promote concepts like fairness or compassion, these principles are fleshed out and modified through relationships. Third, a coaching philosophy informed and constructed by faith, when properly and consistently applied, can play an important part in this process. Coaches may draw from their own faith experiences in ways that positively impact the team climate.

The Nature and Purpose of a Coaching Philosophy

Developing a personalized set of beliefs and values is an important step for coaches, one acknowledged by those in the sport-related professions (i.e., Kretchmar, 2005). Lyle (1999) defines a coaching philosophy as “a comprehensive statement about the beliefs and behaviours that will characterize the coach’s practice” (p. 30). Constructing such a philosophy entails both overall objectives and goals in addition to guiding principles and values. Coaches need to consider numerous aspects of the position: How will they define success? What do they hope to accomplish through their coaching efforts? How will they treat players, opponents, officials, and parents? What kind of training methods will they employ? These questions – and many more – form the basis for individual coaches and their development of a personal coaching philosophy.

Martens (2004) identifies the characteristics of a coaching philosophy in terms of major coaching objectives and the beliefs or principles that provide guidance in pursuing those ends. Throughout their careers, coaches respond to situations based on these coaching philosophies. When a particular situation arises (i.e., a player breaks a team rule), the coach draws from this belief system when formulating a response. The particular event may cause the coach to further solidify these beliefs, or at times the coach may modify or change these philosophical principles in order to move forward. The challenge is to develop a personal coaching philosophy that is solidly based on well-constructed principles yet flexible enough to change over the course of a coaching career. According to Martens, such a coaching philosophy “guides [coaches] every day; it helps [coaches] interpret the events in [their lives]; and it gives [their lives] direction” (p. 4). These philosophies have value in that they guide coaching actions and relationships, provide

focus and clarity, and allow coaches to communicate their ideas and rationale to athletes, parents, and alumni.

At their best, coaches intentionally construct these belief systems through years of experience. Each season provides additional resources for use in this developmental process. These ideals and actions are consistent and coherent; they are communicated through word and in action. Athletes become aware of the principles which their coaches espouse, observing these ideals shared during team meetings, individual training sessions, and post-game interviews. Similarly, coaches demonstrate and share these beliefs both verbally and nonverbally. For example, those who observe coaches recognize how well and to what degree the coaches understand and empathize with athletes or how consistently they manage team discipline. As Collins et al. (2009) contend, the philosophical underpinnings help coaches effectively transmit life skills to their athletes.

Coaches implement their coaching philosophies in a variety of manners. Some philosophies are loosely constructed and haphazard. Some are more rigid and constrained. Some are articulated in word and through verbal communication. Others may be defined yet only at the subconscious level. Some philosophies are spoken but not lived out. Even those coaches who contend that they have no guiding principles transmit the importance of implicit principles nonetheless. The athletes, parents, spectators, and opponents within their purview fully understand which values the coach implicitly holds dear.

Developing a coaching philosophy requires the approach of a scientist and of an artist. As the disciplinary field of coaching education expands, there is a great deal that coaches can learn regarding the physiological principles of training, psychological aspects of competition, offensive and defensive strategies, recruiting and overall program development, communication skills and much more. Coaches learn in formal settings (i.e., through coaching education programs, through apprentice-like positions as assistants), at times mimicking the values and actions of their experienced mentors (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006), gradually acquiring the wisdom of the coaching community. However, the aspiring coach also needs a creative mindset, one open to adjustment and adaptation rather than fixed closure (Dweck, 2008). Coaches who operate from this artistic and open approach learn how to mold a group of individuals into a team, how to make decisions regarding playing time or behavior. They are sensitive to their own intuitions and to the sport environment. This mindset may require the coach to modify scientific principles in order to address a particular situation or individual.

How do coaches construct these ideas regarding effective coaching? How do they actualize their coaching philosophies over the course of many years? To what extent is this a logical process of development (Parsh, 2007)? Conversely, to what extent are these coaching beliefs constructed through experience and intuition? In this sense developing a coaching philosophy may be closer to a description provided by Bugbee (1999). He contends that the philosophical process is not “set up like the solution of a puzzle, worked out with all the pieces lying there before the eye. It will be more like the clarification of what we know in our bones” (p. 35).

The approach to this project reflects a similarly intuitive process, combined with personal coaching experience, faith, and academic training. As I read *The Inward Morning* over a decade ago my thoughts gravitated towards sport and coaching. Bugbee's (1999) descriptions of rowing and his experiences as an athlete invited me to respond in kind. His descriptions of Coach John Schultz brought about my own reflections of influential coaches. In fact, like Bugbee (1999), I found that "certain memories from experiences long ago once again press upon me as if they bore the image of conclusive meaning" (p. 42). It was not immediately apparent how Bugbee's themes of attention, certainty and immersion would intersect with the development of a coaching philosophy. Yet, the intimations were present. I had a sense that these themes could help connect the disparate yet similar processes of Christian coaches constructing and implementing their coaching philosophies.

To ascertain the experiential process of developing and employing a personalized coaching philosophy, five coaches were interviewed during the fall of 2009. All five coaches were from the same church-affiliated, liberal arts college in the Midwest (MWCC).³ All the coaches were male. Four of the coaches were actively coaching their sports and one coach had retired from coaching. The coaches were head coaches from the teams of men's basketball, women's basketball, football, cross-country, and wrestling.

Coaching, Experience and Interpretations of Experience

For those in the coaching field, experiences as athletes and assistant coaches profoundly shape how they view the coaching profession. On this point Bugbee (1999) notes: "We are involved, to the soles of our feet, in the attitudes inflecting the meaning which we realize, or fail to realize, in our on-going experience" (p. 41). While aspiring coaches seek to establish their own philosophical beliefs, they do so from within their personal narrative. Cushion, et. al (2003) contend that these experiences "form a screen or filter through which all future expectations will pass. Coaches thus come to see and interpret future coaching events and observations on the basis of this early experiential foundation" (p. 218). For example, a basketball coach who served as an assistant for Bob Knight encounters basketball and the coaching profession in a much different manner than one who apprenticed with a mentor such as Phil Jackson. A Knight protégé might be, all things equal, more prone to view verbal or emotional derision as a necessary motivational strategy. Conversely, an assistant of Jackson may view such tactics with skepticism or even scorn, choosing to employ encouraging forms of feedback. Yet, similar experiences as assistants or athletes can result in different interpretations of the same process. For example, those athletes who toil in reserve roles are likely to approach coaching philosophies in a different manner than their first-team peers. The bench warmer may not embrace the coach's ideals, and may in fact gravitate towards other coaching styles when they become a coach. Or the coach's philosophy may simply not resonate with the athlete. When college football coaching legend John Gagliardi began his coaching career, taking over a high school program while at the age of 16, he promptly removed practice standards such as wind sprints and calisthenics – aspects he hated as a player (Evans, 2009).

All five coaches in this study had significant, albeit differing, experiences leading up to their appointment as head coach. Some are alumni of the college while others went to state schools or other Christian liberal arts colleges. Even the alumni encountered the institution and their college athletic careers in different ways, depending on the coach, their level of athletic achievement, or the program success. This experiential foundation impacts how these coaches approach their team and sport today and, more broadly, how they view competitive athletics at a Christian institution.

The wrestling coach attributed a portion of his coaching beliefs to his high school wrestling coach, an Olympic silver medalist. He took a personal interest in this young wrestler, spending extra time with him in the wrestling room and encouraging him to develop his talents including providing the young wrestler the opportunity to compete against National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I opponents. Similarly, the football coach viewed his college football coach as a “father figure” and “relationship builder,” someone who was willing to set an example for his players, one willing to share lessons of life and faith. This approach differed from his high school coach who was more of a “player’s coach.” The cross-country coach benefitted from a coaching mentorship, although not necessarily in ways directly related to running. He did learn from his high school and college coaches about relationships, handling difficulty, setting goals, and so forth. In particular, he recounted the impact of his high school football coach, an individual who provided athletes with the opportunity to develop responsibility, both as athletes and as young men.

For a number of these individuals, time spent as assistant coaches helped shape their approach to head coaching positions, perhaps none more profoundly than the women’s basketball coach. Prior to assuming the head women’s basketball position, he assisted four different coaches, all with varying philosophies and approaches towards the sport and people. From these individuals he was able to identify aspects which he later implemented, in part, as a head coach himself. From one former coach he witnessed first-hand the fast-break offensive style of play. From another he developed an intellectual attitude towards the game, with close attention to game adjustments and use of timeouts. From a third coach he gained an appreciation for the detail and organization of coaching, especially in recruiting and relating to his team. Finally, from the fourth coach he learned the importance of entrusting assistants with responsibility and how the use of motivational phrases can impact a team. He drew from these varied approaches to develop his own style of coaching basketball, integrating his assistant coach experience into his own personal approach. In describing this process the coach noted the importance of his Christian faith – he wanted “to see consistency in the walk and in the talk,” and sought to develop this in his own philosophy of coaching.

Certainty in the Context of Developing a Philosophy

Coaching involves constant decision-making, a process which can include both certainty and, at times, an element of risk. On a daily basis coaches make decisions regarding practice plans, recruiting efforts, and personnel issues. In a broader sense, coaches continually make decisions regarding the overall direction of their program, the importance of winning, the

meaning of success and so forth. This process of reflection and discernment necessarily results in choices and actions. In this way decisions become certain in an experiential sense – coaches realize they need to reach a point where a decision is required and that they need to reflect certainty to their team. Yet in an epistemological sense, they may not attain full certainty, nor should they. Bugbee (1999) provides a helpful method to unpack this particular paradox. He describes certainty as “the root of action that makes sense... a basis for action rather than arrival at a terminus of endeavor” (pp. 36-37). Certainty, for Bugbee, is the starting point, a place from which to begin or what Anderson (2006) describes as a “working certainty.” Coaches utilize hunches, with intuition, or as Bugbee notes, they “feel things in their bones.”

Based on their accumulated experience, coaches develop a background which informs their decision-making. As an example, the football coach noted his method of hiring an offensive coordinator for the team. He received many qualified applicants and the decision-making process became excruciatingly difficult. Throughout the process the coach had a “gut feeling” that one applicant was the right person for the job. This is not to say the decision was made solely because of this feeling or intuition. Rather, that this sense, along with the coach’s own experience as an athlete, assistant coach and head coach, coincided with other rationale and perhaps explicit reasons to hire the eventual assistant as a member of the staff.

Similarly, the men’s basketball coach noted his own approach to the recruiting process which demonstrates how experience impacts certainty: “The journey in the cocoon to be a beautiful monarch butterfly is sometimes very messy . . . I’ve guessed right and I’ve guessed wrong, on both ends of the spectrum.” He went on to contend that observing a variety of information helps provide guidance towards the decision. Is the recruit from a “winning program”? Do they face “big moments” with confidence? Are they open to faith? Are they teachable? As this coach discovers the answers to these questions he becomes more certain of his decision with increased knowledge. This information helps him determine, with a “working certainty,” the extent to which these athletes are likely to flourish at MWCC. “Most of the time,” he maintained, “if they walk like a duck and talk like a duck, they’re a duck.”

Each of these coaches articulated numerous situations where they developed or changed a particular aspect of their coaching philosophy as a result of experience. At some point the coaches had to decide which ideals, techniques, or strategies to employ and which to decline or modify. The football coach cited his assistant coaching experience at a Division II institution as one such example. Following a particularly frustrating game, he berated his defensive back group, using a tone and language that differed from his typical demeanor (although one that was not atypical for some of the other assistant coaches at this institution). After finishing his tirade the coach faced only silence . . . and then giggling. When he asked his players about their response, they indicated that the yelling and dictatorial demeanor “just wasn’t him.” He points to this particular experience as a time when he realized that the demonstrative, invective-laden approach did not fit his personality and was not a motivational or pedagogical tactic that he wanted to pursue.

The men's basketball coach received analogous inspiration from a friend who asked him once, "Are you using your program to build up young people or using young people to build up your program?" This question prompted the coach to reflect on his personal motives and the extent to which his coaching philosophy focused on individual student-athletes and their personal growth. As a result of this conversation and additional reflection, he became steadfast in his priority of focusing on his athletes as individuals. He took greater measures to insure that he treated his athletes as ends in themselves rather than a means for his own purposes.

For a few coaches, this reflective nature developed through reading. The cross-country coach mentioned the insights he gleaned from long-time coach turned motivational speaker Bruce Brown (2007), pearls of wisdom with regards to pride, humility, selflessness, leadership, and accountability. The themes resonated with this coach and he became determined to include them, when possible, as he works with his team captains in particular. As an example, Brown expounds on the importance of having a teachable spirit, learning to take correction as a compliment. On reflection, the cross-country coach realized that there were points when he stopped providing feedback and correction for some of his athletes; in these cases the coach believed he subtlety gave up on these individuals. Over the past two seasons he decided to implement what he calls "chirping" – being committed to letting his runners know that he cares about them, that he notices instances in their lives where progress is in order, and that he thinks and believes that they can improve as runners and as people.

Sometimes these insights surface after an extended period of time. Bugbee (1999) writes that "reflection, it seems, must earn the gift of the essential meaning of things past. It is as if experience must continue underground for some time before it can emerge as springwater, clear, pure, understood" (p. 140). As an example of the extended process often connected with experience, the wrestling coach described his relationship with a mentor, head coach, from a Division I wrestling program. During his collegiate career the MWCC coach often wondered why his mentor recruited some athletes with suspect character traits. Through the course of conversation, he explained to the MWCC coach that some of the young men could have been in jail if they had not pursued college wrestling. This explanation impacted how the MWCC coach viewed his own coaching philosophy with respect to recruiting. He became more willing to seek out student-athletes from a variety of backgrounds, not limiting himself to only so-called "good fit" individuals. This led the coach to occasionally take a chance on wrestlers that might not seem, at first glance, to fit at the institution. These young men could quite possibly leave campus or face academic difficulty; conversely, the individuals might develop into outstanding wrestlers and young men because of the coach's decision to risk.

Several coaches encountered experiences along the way, as athletes, that proved difficult at the time but eventually strengthened their coaching approach. The women's basketball coach played basketball at MWCC but became a self-described "frustrated senior." He struggled to accept limited playing time and how this impacted his role on the team. The men's coach painted his collegiate basketball experience as a painful one as well. As a reserve player, he wondered why his hard work and effort did not translate into increased opportunities to play. He

questioned why those athletes, some with reckless lifestyles off the court, were rewarded with starter status. For both coaches, these experiences proved difficult to navigate and yet each eventually embraced their difficult memories as a means to better understand themselves, the coaching profession, and ultimately their athletes. In hindsight they realized that their coaches made sound decisions and issues of playing time are complicated matters. This foundation also provided both coaches with the means to better relate to their own bench players.

Several coaches mentioned growth periods encountered through difficulties as a coach as well. The men's basketball coach noted the strain of coping with a particularly frustrating season. As he struggled to deal with the mounting losses and disappointment, the coach realized that he had developed what he termed the "disease of me," feeling sorry for himself rather than focusing on his team. From this situation, he became determined to maintain focus on "end goals" regardless of the difficulties that arose. Rather than wallowing in self-pity or regret, the coach focused on helping each athlete develop, both as a basketball player and person. He remained resolute in his decision to use basketball as a tool to help develop young men of character, in this sense returning to the core beliefs he developed for the program.

In a similar way, the football coach spoke about developing maturity and growth during his coaching career. He mentioned moving towards becoming what he termed "my own coach," becoming less dependent on directly following his mentors. This enabled him to blend his own coaching philosophy and behaviors in a way that felt right. For this particular individual, this process even began while an intercollegiate athlete. He observed how his teammates responded to a variety of coaching styles. He noted the particular methods that worked and those that did not, including the approaches and philosophical aspects which resonated with him personally. For the wrestling coach, this process of discernment began as he served in assistant coaching positions. He realized that there were coaching techniques that might have worked for other athletes which did not necessarily work for him. He began to think about the future, when he might step into a head coaching position, and asked himself what he would do with his "own program." The cross-country coach continues to approach this development process with the mindset of a distance runner. As an athlete, following a race, he asks himself how he could improve for subsequent competitions. He reflects on the same kind of questions each season with regards to coaching. In what ways might he become a better coach and how might this impact his team? He has come to realize that he is constantly trying to adapt his philosophy with his team (of individuals) as they all continue to adapt as well.

Each coach mentioned the helpfulness of counsel during times of deliberation. For the women's basketball coach, a male coach of a female sport, this means engaging in conversation with his wife and female assistant coaches. This coach realized that it is helpful to gain their perspective on his team and situation. Engaging in these conversations prompted him to modify his approach, at times, largely based on this input from others. The football coach noted intentional conversations with coaches at other institutions. He is in constant communication with assistant coaches and head coaches around the country, men he has grown to respect and admire. The coach finds ways to connect with them over the phone, via e-mail, and in person.

Through this process, he can share aspects of his own coaching journey, seek guidance in regards to particularly thorny circumstances, and hear the perspectives of his peers at other institutions. Throughout his tenure as wrestling coach, this individual relied on the counsel of a number of people, including his wife, assistant coaches, team captains, other MWCC coaches, and the Athletic Director.

On occasion, soliciting counsel from others involves differences in opinion. The cross-country coach noted how much he appreciates running (and talking) with his assistant coach; their respective positions improve with the banter and, at times, conflict. The head coach and his assistant discuss training principles, flexibility programs, and much more, at times disagreeing in their approach. These discussions are helpful, however, in that they allow the head coach to clarify his own thoughts and ideas and, at times, change the course of his approach while simultaneously developing a deepening relationship of trust and honesty with his assistant. Due to the largely collegial nature of cross-country coaching, this coach has also found other coaches very sociable and willing to share ideas, techniques, and strategies related to running.

Overall, each coach developed a particular way of coaching largely reflective of and shaped through personal experience. Over time as athletes, assistant coaches, and head coaches, these individuals gradually understood how coaching ideas and beliefs became cashed out in the lives of their respective sports. Through conversations about sport, coaching, and values, they molded and modified their own beliefs about the coaching profession. For these coaches, another integral aspect of both experience and coaching beliefs hinges on themes of faith.

Efforts to Integrate Faith and Coaching

In this final section I want to examine the extent to which faith impacts how these coaches construct their respective coaching philosophies. Most of the coaches grew up in homes where religion played an integral role in family life – the scriptures, biblical understanding, and their faith community became the lens through which they viewed life experiences. Faith, most often expressed through prayer and small group discernment, continues to guide many aspects of their lives, including how they approach decision-making as an intercollegiate coach. Spiritual beliefs inform their coaching philosophies on a daily basis, guiding both those aspects of change as well as aspects that stay the same.

Because both sport and religion play such prominent roles in the lives of these individuals, they have had to wrestle with how to integrate these powerful institutions. The wrestling coach, for one, mentioned the process he went through in determining how best to express his Christian faith as a college wrestling coach. Early in his career he approached sport as an evangelistic tool where winning becomes a platform to share the gospel. Over time he began to think more broadly about the faith experience, realizing the impact of his ministry through the setbacks and struggles in sport, too. The cross-country coach mentioned the integration of faith and sport as well and approaches his coaching in what he terms a “holistic” manner, where faith permeates all of human existence. In this sense, individuals do not encounter God solely through chapel or in church but throughout all areas of life. In the context of his own sport, this coach believes cross-country and endurance running mimics life and helps

teach principles of faith. In this respect, the language of faith and distance running hold many similar traits. He notes that “concepts that go along with faith – like a word like commitment – they go deeper the more your faith grows” and contends that “if [athletes] are not growing as a person, then they’re likely not growing in their faith – they’re not growing anywhere.” Finally, the coach mentioned that as an athlete himself he learned spiritual qualities of perseverance and integrity through competitive sport and the commitment process.

A number of the coaches mentioned that faith, and in particular their own spiritual disciplines, helped to provide perspective as a coach. In fact, the football coach noted that he needs to rely more on his faith as a head coach, perhaps because of the increased responsibility, challenge and visibility in moving from an assistant to a head coaching position. He has found that prayer and studying the scriptures help to provide both a sense of balance as well as the direction he needs to lead his team. In addition, he mentioned utilizing prayer and reflection in terms of personnel hires. The women’s basketball coach noted that theological principles impact how he relates to his team and assistant coaches, too. One such aspect is grace. A key component of the Christian faith found repeatedly in scripture, grace involves God’s kindness to humanity, a quality not earned but rather freely given. As it regards human relationships, grace reflects a similar gift of kindness, at times showing forgiveness rather than condemnation. The coach noted that he has learned the importance of both giving grace to others as well as accepting grace in return. On occasion this means applying grace as it relates to team and individual discipline, perhaps deciding to allow a misdeed to go unpunished (although corrected) because of the particular situation.

While the coaches depend on their Christian faith for a sense of perspective and direction, doing so does not preclude listening to and caring for those from secular or non-churched backgrounds. Engaging with individuals with regards to faith entails a great deal of communicative effort. Coaching requires the ability to effectively articulate one’s respective coaching philosophy – to recruits, athletes, the department and institution, and to the broader community. Each of these coaches have worked at this process of communication, seeking to both talk about and live out their faith and coaching philosophy on a daily basis. They also identified that this process is not a one-way proposition. Each coach mentioned the need to listen intently to others.

Several coaches noted a need for openness, both with respect to their own faith as well as in relationship to others who may hold differing or no faith backgrounds. This tension between certainty and openness became most evident in the area of recruiting. When the football coach meets with student-athletes from un-churched backgrounds he explains to them his own faith journey and beliefs but puts himself in a position to listen to their life story as well. He recognizes that he does not “have all the answers” and is still open to learning from others in his own spiritual walk. One issue in particular that all MWCC coaches deal with is the type of student-athlete they seek to recruit. They mentioned the importance of a “good fit” – individuals open to an athletic experience at a Christian liberal arts institution like MWCC. They did not think it was particularly healthy, however, to recruit only Christian student-athletes. The

women's basketball coach even wonders, at times, if he has missed an opportunity by not recruiting more players from un-churched backgrounds. All of the coaches noted the importance of welcoming student-athletes from all backgrounds into the MWCC athletic and academic community. The men's basketball coach mentioned that he is not intimidated by the "rough edges" that some players might have. He welcomes those recruits that may not be sure about faith although acknowledging that because of its mission, MWCC will primarily attract local student-athletes and those from alumni families.

For the women's basketball coach, the process of communication begins in the recruiting process and continues once the recruits matriculate to MWCC. While recruiting, he mentioned the importance of being open about MWCC core values and the campus environment. He recognizes that some student-athletes will ultimately choose to attend another institution because of the "MWCC difference" but at least they have the knowledge to make an informed decision. Each coach recognized the importance of getting to know their athletes, first during the recruiting period and more intentionally once they enter MWCC and begin team activities. The football coach noted that he tries to watch his athletes carefully, attempting to understand their perspectives on life. The women's basketball coach endeavors to engage his athletes in conversation, inviting them to stop by his office to talk about school or family, and eventually about things related to basketball. His rationale is that he wants his student-athletes to know that his concern for them goes beyond the basketball court. The cross-country coach makes a regular practice of keeping in touch with his runners, going so far as to schedule individual athlete meetings on his appointment calendar.

In addition to individual meetings, several coaches noted their efforts to focus on a core group of a few team members. For example, both basketball coaches mentioned the importance of meeting regularly (i.e., two or three times per week) with a small group of players, three or four individuals who the coaches would like to target as developing leaders. Both coaches cited Jesus' example of spending more time with several disciples to further the gospel message. For these coaches, this means entrusting more responsibility with these few athletes and hoping that their coaching philosophy coupled with the leadership potential of the captains will help permeate the broader team character. The men's coach noted that it is important that these student-leaders do not become a carbon copy of the coaches, however, but develop their own leadership style.

A number of coaches mentioned the attention they placed on their language and terminology. They realize each athlete comes with a unique life story and set of experiences – they may approach college life and sport in dissimilar ways from the coaches. As the cross-country coach quite humorously put it, he realized over time that periodically he's "speaking French but [his] athletes may be hearing Swahili!" He noted the trait of responsibility in this way. His athletes may not fully understand what responsibility means, so he may have to teach them the concept before holding them accountable. This coach has tried to bridge the communication gap by telling athletes what his eyes see; then he asks them what they are experiencing in turn. In a similar way, the men's basketball coach notes that he needs to "speak

their love language,” finding ways to use idioms that communicate the faith concepts he wants to promote in ways that resonate deeply with his athletes.

Conclusions and Implications:

Given this experiential investigation of coaching philosophies with respect to experience and faith, I will conclude with several broad implications for developing and employing coaching philosophies. While my aim is to primarily address those who coach from faith-based positions of influence, the implications cut across the religious-secular divide to include those from secular positions as well.

First, coaches at every competition level and along all ends of the age spectrum must remember that development of a coaching philosophy is a career-long process. Those principles and guidelines that hold true for the newly hired junior varsity coach at age 22 may not remain when the individual finishes her coaching career at the high school level some thirty years later. The process of continued growth and development includes revisions according to new experiences. American philosopher John Dewey (1944) wrote that growth “is essentially the ability to learn from experience; the power to retain from one experience something which is of avail in coping with the difficulties of a later situation” (p. 44). In this way effective coaches continue to mold their beliefs based on the course of sport experience. The coach who ends a frustrating season needs to re-evaluate, learn from the situation, and chart new paths to improve for subsequent seasons. Similarly, the coach who encounters a deeply meaningful season must reflect, too, on this experience, evaluating those aspects which enabled success to occur. This emphasis on continued growth is not an easy proposition, however. On this note Dewey contends that “We become uneasy at the idea of initiating new courses; we are repelled by the difficulties that attend entering upon them; we dodge assuming a new responsibility. We tend to favor the old self and to make its perpetuation the standard of our valuations and the end of our conduct. In this way, we withdraw from actual conditions and their requirements and opportunities; we contract and harden the self” (353). Coaches can become complacent, believing that beliefs and methods which worked initially will continue to do so, and be unwilling to revisit their ideas. Thus, growth requires a vigilant effort to seek out those experiences, decisions, and actions that lead towards refinement and amelioration.

Second, in experiential terms, the process of developing a coaching philosophy is the result of experience more so than a derivation from abstract principles. Coaches may hold a theoretical position concerning the value of winning, team discipline or training programs. Similarly, those coaches from religious backgrounds may believe in principles such as faith, hope and love. Coaches formulate their positions in the context of experience, however, through interactions with others in their respective practice community. Bugbee (1999) speaks to this very issue. “Abstracted from intimacy with the lives of persons,” he contends, “our idea of experience becomes paltry . . . Experience, then, is not something standing over us . . . from which we are removed to the capacity of observers, about which we are in a position to make assured reports. Experience is our undergoing, our involvement in the world, our lending or withholding of ourselves, keyed to our responsiveness, our sensibility, our alertness or our

deadness” (pp. 40-41). Throughout their careers, coaches construct their ideas and beliefs about coaching through their immersion and commitment to coaching. Because of their experiences, and at times in spite of experiences that may be negative, these individuals face their profession in a particular way. It is through the course of day-to-day interactions with others, interpreted in a responsive and reflective manner that effective coaches continue to mold their approach towards coaching.

Third, faith can be one avenue towards constructing and implementing a personal coaching philosophy. When it comes to establishing ethical principles and guidelines, some coaches may derive these principles from faith traditions. Those from secular positions may develop guidelines based on other, often similar, principles and ideals. The Christian coach may incorporate spiritual principles such as love or hope while the secular counterpart may speak of respect for persons or fairness from an impartial point of view.

Incorporating spiritual principles with sport requires a consistency with the faith community – a belief system that is consistent between word and deed. For the Christian coach, or those from various faith traditions who hope to incorporate religious principles into the coaching arena, the journey is daunting. Combining faith and sport can be extremely fruitful but presents challenges too. For example, during the 1973-1974 academic year the MWCC wrestling coach, then a sophomore wrestler at a Division I institution, converted to Christianity. This decision resulted in profound changes in his life not the least of which impacted his stance towards wrestling. During this season he continually struggled with how to meaningfully integrate his new-found faith with his athletic passions. An All-American high school wrestler from, this individual had his sights set on making the 1976 United States Olympic squad. After his faith conversion, however, he realized that wrestling was “competing with his heart.” He ultimately continued wrestling and upon graduation moved on to coaching positions at a mid-major state university and finally to MWCC. Throughout his coaching career he continued to grapple with these issues of how best to combine his personal ideas and beliefs about sport with his faith in Christianity.

In sum, attempting to integrate faith with coaching beliefs is a tenuous process, one that demonstrates the humanity of the coaching profession. Those individuals engaged as coaches, particularly those in Christian higher education, seek to combine faith with their respective coaching philosophies in genuine ways. Through the course of their experiential foundation the coaches gradually develop a coaching philosophy that they can own as theirs, one that remains in flux for the duration of their coaching career. Through prayer, reading, reflection and the counsel of others, these coaches integrate their faith into their coaching philosophies in a holistic manner, positively impacting the lives of countless student-athletes in the process.

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¹ For example see: "Season of life: A football, a boy, a journey to manhood" by Jeffrey Marx, detailing the life and coaching philosophy of football coach, Joe Ehrmann, in Baltimore.

² I recognize that coaches who espouse Christianity coach not only at "Christian colleges" but also at public institutions both in the United States and around the globe. My purpose here is not to ignore their respective experience or impact but merely limit the scope of my study. Further, by Christian colleges I have in mind those institutions where faith and Christianity strongly influence the institutional and athletic department missions. Many schools have historical ties to Christianity but have, over time, moved away from their denominational roots. While not an exhaustive list, the institutions I refer to as "Christian colleges" include those affiliated with the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities.

³ MWCC (Midwest Christian College) will be used to designate the institution.