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What do coaches orchestrate? Unravelling the 'quiddity' of practice.

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## **Abstract**

The general purpose of this article is threefold. Firstly, it is to further the notion of coaching as orchestration through developing insight into precisely how and what coaches orchestrate. Secondly, it is to firmly position coaching as a relational practice, whilst thirdly it is to better define coaching's complex nature and how it can be somewhat ordered. Following an introduction where the purpose and value of the paper are outlined, we present the reflective method of critical companionship through which we explored and addressed the aforementioned purposes. The case for the quiddity, or the 'just whatness' (i.e., the inherent nature or essence) of coaching as involving complex, relational acts which can be somewhat explained through recourse to the developing theory of orchestration is subsequently made. In doing so, two precise examples of how we as coaches orchestrate sporting practice are presented. The paper concludes with both a summary of the principal argument(s) made, and some reflective considerations for future directions.

Keywords: Coaching; orchestration; quiddity; relational practice

## **Introduction**

The overarching purpose of this paper is to further the notion of coaching as orchestration (Jones & Wallace, 2005, 2006; Santos, Jones & Mesquita, 2013) through developing insight into precisely how and what coaches orchestrate within their professional practice. A secondary related objective is to locate and contextualise such practice within a fundamental element of coaching's complex nature; its relational character. This is not so much with regard to coach-athlete dyadic interactions, which a (micro) sociology of coaching has developed elsewhere (e.g., Jones et al., 2011; Denison, Mills & Konoval, 2015; Cronin & Armour, 2015). Rather, it is to develop a view of coaching as a complex social system of which the coach is but one (albeit a leading) member. Such a view posits coaches as prominent contextual figures who, although restricted by a variety of factors in terms of establishing progressive direction(s), are nevertheless continually engaged in 'steering' or orchestrating practice towards desired goals (Jones & Wallace, 2005; Jones & Thomas, 2016). A third and subsequent purpose of the paper lies in taking further issue with the previous claims of others that coaching has been somewhat portrayed as 'unmanageable complexity' (e.g., North, 2013). Building on previous work (e.g., Jones, Edwards & Viotto Filho, 2016; Jones & Thomas, 2016), this is done through definitively illustrating how some of the complexity previously alluded to can actually be managed in practice.

Since Jones and Wallace (2005, 2006) first applied the metaphor of orchestration to sports coaching, the concept has gained considerable traction. An idea borrowed from Wallace and Pocklington's (2002) work on managing complex educational change, orchestration was envisaged as better engaging with the "ambiguity endemic to the coaching process" than the rationalistic fare offered to date (Jones & Wallace, 2005: 119). The case made reflected the belief that many iterative changes within coaching situations are rather

unmanageable, whilst demonstrating “how to cope with such changes within the given structural limits” (Jones & Wallace, 2005: 124). Consequently, orchestration was defined as:

a coordinated activity within set parameters expressed by coaches to instigate, plan, organise, monitor and respond to evolving circumstances in order to bring about improvement in the individual and collective performance of those being coached.(p.128)

The concept was further developed by Jones, Bailey and Thompson (2013) to include the pedagogical notion of 'noticing' (Mason, 2002) which was argued as being the precursor of orchestration. The justification presented here related to the ability to systematically observe events as they happened, to be more sensitive to the opportunities of the moment resulting in more insightful orchestrated action (Jones, Bailey & Thompson, 2013). In turn, Santos et al. (2013) put empirical meat on theoretical bones by directly investigating how and what coaches orchestrate. The findings from this latter work indicated that coaches, although holding to bounded plans, continually and considerably reacted to contextual 'goings-on'. It is a position akin to Bourdieu's (1990) notion of 'structured improvisation', and of making context sensitive decisions in the manner of virtuoso social actors (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Here, respect is given to both the social order as well as the agent's capacity for invention and improvisation. The precise actions of the coaches included in Santos et al.'s (2013) work related to monitoring and subsequently engineering the loyalty of support staff, in addition to generating a degree of uncertainty among athletes, with both measures justified as attempts to secure 'best efforts' from crucial contextual others. Despite providing some interesting pointers, the work done was inevitably limited in both size and scope (e.g., being confined to a sample of five coaches, interviewed twice). Hence, no doubt more empirical work is needed

so that the concept of orchestration can be enriched to further assist coaches' practice. This particularly relates to developing a concern for what Garfinkel et al (1981) termed the 'quiddity', or the 'just whatness', of coaching as orchestration; that is, more critical engagement with the occupational practice itself.

The significance of the current paper also lies in developing the idea that much of coaching's complexity lies in its relational nature. Such activity has been defined as "the network of social relations between actors which are irreducible to the actors involved in them" (Crossley, 2011; 1-2). In this way, individuals are always portrayed as relatively autonomous actors existing "within networks of interdependence and interaction" (ibid. p.3). Although, at first glance, this may appear a statement of the obvious, it remains a sentiment surprisingly absent in much on-going research. For example, work from more psychological perspectives (e.g., Duda [2013] and colleagues) consistently view both coaches and athletes as rather closed self-centred individual circles (Engström, 2000); a tendency towards atomism. We consider this to be an oversimplified view of coaching, with the individual's segment (or 'intervention) of any doing being abstracted "from the complete social act" (Morris, 1967: xvi). Within such fragmented work, the focus of the explanatory account is moved away from the collective whole. Such a perspective denies the contextual history of utterances and relationships, and the contention that any interaction is sedimented in a past which allows a particular present. In other words, and echoing the point made above, even so-called novel practice is structured by its historicity. Hence, similar to other work practices, coaching needs to be explored and appreciated in temporal terms; as an array of practices manipulated and distributed in space and time (Atkinson, 1988). Context thus, is viewed as a relational concept; one which relates social actions and actors to each other and to their respective surroundings (Fetzer & Akman, 2002). As argued elsewhere then (e.g., Jones & Corsby, 2015), work in coaching has largely ignored the social beyond the level of the

interactional. Such an argument is not to deny the case for agency. Rather, it is to conceptualise individual actors as 'agents-in-relation' (Crossley, 2011: 3); that is, actors who operate within networks of inter dependence and who embody differential distributions of power and authority. The point of developing such a perspective is to further clarify the characteristics of the complexity that coaches must operate or orchestrate within, where they can't simply 'reculture' or remould people and practice.

Finally, the value of the paper can also be seen as a further response to those (e.g., North, 2013; Lyle, 2007) who have claimed that the picture emerging from critical coaching scholars is one of 'unmanageable complexity'. Despite considerable writings to the contrary on the value and necessity of structure (e.g., Jones & Corsby, 2015; Jones, Edwards & Viotto Filho, 2016), perhaps the case needs to be made clearer still. The significance of the paper in this respect lies in more clearly articulating the nature of the claimed complexity, and in particular that of constant negotiation as a chronic aspect of how to manage it. Drawing on both complexity and relational theory, the case is subsequently made that coaching is not found in snapshot interventions, prescriptions or even emulations of 'evidence based' practice, but in intentional engagement with context to actively perform the events of the activity. Hence, far from coaching through pre-defined mechanical reduction, we argue for coaches to exercise judicious discernment within the cloudy imprecision of practice (Schofield, 2003). This is because, following James's (1908) classic advocacy of process thinking, coaching *is* multi-dimensional, ever-changing, plural and never finished (Schofield, 2003). Consequently, it needs to be treated as such. As argued earlier (e.g., Jones, Edwards & Viotto Filho, 2016), this is not to eradicate all traces of precision and structure for coaches. Rather, like Schofield (2003), it is to better value the dialectical tension within the relationship between structure and agency so as to maximise the generative potential of subsequent practice.

Following this introduction where the purpose and value of the paper are outlined, we present the method through which we explored and addressed the topic in question. This is followed by a discussion of coaching's complex and convoluted nature and, in particular, of identifying some of the activity's paradoxical yet co-existing properties. Building on previous work (e.g., Jones, Edwards & Viotto Filho, 2016; Jones & Thomas, 2015; Jones & Wallace, 2005, 2006), the argument for the relational nature of coaching is then presented as a further example of the complexity referred to. The case for the quiddity of coaching as involving complex, relational acts which can be somewhat explained through recourse to the developing theory of orchestration is subsequently given, assisted by the provision of precise practical examples. The paper concludes with both a summary of the principal argument(s) made, and some reflective considerations for future directions.

## **Method**

The method used within this study involved dialogical or interactive reflection on personal practice. Although Schön's (1983, 1987) concepts of reflection-in and -on practice are (rightly) considered of salience within the field, they have been criticised as being essentially monological and asocial in character; in other words, they are confined to the individual. Alternatively, we evoke the notion of 'critical companionship'; an idea grounded in several theoretical perspectives including critical social science as well as creativity in professional practice (Titchen, 2003). Critical companionship, however, is not suggested in this instance as some kind of facilitation through mentoring, where a more experienced practitioner accompanies a less experienced one on a particular learning journey. Rather, we view it as a collaborative gathering, evaluation and critique of self and peer practice for the purpose of knowledge clarification and further generation (Titchen, 2003). The method of data generation employed within the project then involved concerted and co-operative critical



reflection, and the development of new knowledge through debate (Titchen, 2003). Concepts that consequently resonated with the interactive process undertaken were consciousness raising in relation to everyday practice as well as the problematisation and deconstruction of tacit knowledge.

However, departing from Titchen (2003), this research process of critical companionship was not undertaken as merely 'researching within'; of only reflecting upon what we already knew and did. Alternatively, and borrowing from Zeichner and Liston's (1996) ideas of re-theorizing and reformulating, we positioned our discussions in light of, or in relation to, the notion of coaching as orchestration. In this respect then, although an engagement with the phenomenological roots of reflection was undertaken (having a focus on lived experience and personal consciousness), this was done through exploring, challenging and interpreting ontologies and epistemologies of orchestrated (coaching) practice. Following Findlay (2008), this was carried out through (1) inter-subjective reflection (putting focus on the relational context, and the emergent, negotiated nature of practice); (2) mutual collaboration (a participatory, dialogical approach); and (3) ironic deconstruction (where the ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings in coaching contexts were somewhat deconstructed).

As the study was reflective in nature, we, as authors, were naturally the participants within the research. Although both of us currently work within academia, we also have over 40 years of coaching experience between us. Such experiences stretch from being coaches of junior school teams, through semi-professional clubs and representative age grade teams, to full international squads in the USA, UK, Norway and New Zealand. Additionally, both of us continue as active coaches and coach educators. It was these experiences and interpretations that were principally drawn upon to inform our deliberations.

As opposed to overtly structured interaction on set topics, what guided our reflections here were considerations outlined by Ely et al. (1997). Hence, the discussions between us

were conceptualised as a 'quest' into previously unexplored 'corridors of meaning' in relation to the topic under investigation. Borrowing from O'Connor (1985), who posited that the act of writing should not be considered the product of what has been discovered but rather an essential part of the discovery process, we reflectively 'thought aloud' as we went. In this way, we tried to access and understand ideas that "lurk below the level of conscious thought" (Ely et al., 1997: 9). Consequently, we often had to revisit topics previously explored in light of later discussions to solidify understandings. In this respect, the process marked an attempt to explore our coaching 'knowing in action' (Schön, 1987) as related to orchestrated practice.

Some of the precise topics we debated, both in person and over email, over a period of 9-10 months included 'better understanding the complexity of coaching'; 'how we actually orchestrated practice to manage this complexity'; 'what we meant when defining coaching as a relational act'; and 'what, as coaches, did we actually observe in practice' among others. From the resultant spontaneous and considered interaction, we arrived at three principal points which serve to both strengthen and enrich the practicalities of the 'coaching as orchestration' metaphor. These comprised (1) better defining the nature of coaching's complexity, and how it can be ordered; (2) uncovering the meaning of 'coaching as a relational activity' and; (3) providing illustrations of how coaches can orchestrate within such dynamic conditions to achieve desired ends. It is to a presentation and discussion of these, as the results of the project, that we now turn.

### **Identifying and ordering the complexity**

Recent literature on sports coaching has emphasized that the activity is marked by 'complexity' (e.g., Bowes & Jones, 2006). However, complexity is in danger of being applied as a buzzword within coaching, thus explaining everything and (therefore) nothing. Consequently, building on previous work (e.g., Santos et al., 2013), to make the notion of

complexity more applicable and relevant to coaching research, we need to dig into some aspects of it, in terms of what it actually looks like.

In studying pedagogical strategies that utilise complexity theory, Axley and McMahon (2006: 303) stated that 'it is undeniable that a classroom of people qualifies as a complex adaptive system in itself'. This similarly applies to sport teams (or those associated with athletic performance in general), with a simple immediate example being reflected in the number and diversity of participants. For example, as the number of team members increase, so naturally does the number of relationships related to it. Hence, whereas a team of 5 participants constitute 10 relationships (in terms of dyads), a team of 20 participants make up 190 relationships [formula:  $(n \times n - 1) \div 2$ ]. In addition, numerous constellations of differing players exist; that is, 3-4 individuals compose different kinds of performance units within the team often being based on interrelated playing positions. Consequently, if we consider social relationships rather than individual members as building blocks of a team, the complexity explodes with increasing team size.

However, it could be argued that although size makes the context more complicated, this does not necessarily means it is more complex; that is, not everything that is complicated manifests features of complexity. In this respect, Cilliers (1998) distinguishes between being 'complicated' (i.e., having many parts, but where each part can be explained [e.g., a mechanical engine]) and 'complex' (i.e., having many parts, not all of which can be named, neither can the processes involved be tracked or described). Thus, complex problems can encompass complicated ones but not be reduced to such. This is because complex problems (as in coaching) carry with them significant elements of ambiguity and uncertainty (Mason, 2013).

Likewise, theorists have distinguished between two types of related inquiry; that which possess disorganized and/or organized complexity. The former deals with problems

characterized by “millions of variables that can only be approached by the use of statistical mechanics and probability theory” (Johnson 2001: 46). The latter meanwhile conceptualizes the nature of variables quite differently, paying attention to their interrelatedness: ‘These problems, as contrasted with the disorganized situations with which statisticians can cope, *show essential features of organizations*’ (Weaver 1948, in Johnson 2001: 47; italics in original). Thus, complexity theory per se leads, or relates, to organized complexity, as opposed to any incomprehensible phenomenon.

The German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1995) saw the process of reshaping and structuring the world’s disorganized complexity as fundamentally related to meaning making, thus enabling people to interact and communicate. Indeed, according to Luhmann, the transformation (‘reduction’) from unorganized to organized complexity is necessary for any social system (e.g., a team or organization) to be operative and functional within its particular context. Somewhat paradoxically, he believed that, over time, such dynamic systems build up internal complexity through a combination of elements such as an increase in internal relations. However, this greater internal complexity leads to increased sensitivity towards the (even more complex) environment (Ronglan, 2011), whilst also demanding a requisite variety of responses (Weick, 1979). This is because “only variety can accommodate variety” (Axley & McMahon, 2006: 298). Following from such logic, sport teams and coaching processes should strive to reflect the context in which they operate in adequate but still manageable ways. For example, because sporting performances are not neat, well ordered and predictable, a need exists to develop players and coaches who can handle and make sense of the chaos; a principle seemingly lost on some coaching scholars and educators.

A mistaken interpretation of complexity theory is that it can somehow ‘account for’ or model the totality of things (Cilliers, 1998). This is not the case. Rather, the approach invites us to focus on relationships and interactions rather than static categories (such as

decontextualised models of decision making, behaviours and practice). Further, the interactions are seen as multiple, and multiply connected, while it is the multiplicity of interactions through time that produce 'effects' (Haggis, 2013). Causality, of course, in such a situation cannot be reduced to single or a limited number of factors, as each aspect of any factor is crucially implicated in relation to each other. Of particular relevance to coaching is Byrne's (2005) suggestion that we shift from the habitual preoccupation with *causes* to a focus on *effects*, due to the impossibility of tracking these multiple interaction processes. Such a shift echoes the metaphor of orchestration, which also directs attention towards the outcome of processes as opposed to exclusively prescribing how to get there. Conceptualizing causation as multi-dimensional and de-centered (Haggis, 2013) echoes the logic of orchestrating as steering a complex social process (Jones & Wallace, 2005, 2006); that is, a context bound activity characterized by collaboration, struggle and negotiation (Santos et al., 2013). In this respect, what is needed of a coach in contributing to achieve a goal can vary considerably depending on the web of interrelated interactions influencing the precise process engaged in.

A substantial amount of empirical research based on complexity thinking and theories has been occupied with the contextual handling of diversity, ambiguity, insecurity, nonlinearity and, not least, paradox (Axley & McMahon, 2006; Haggis, 2008; Lewis & Dehler, 2000). Acknowledging complexity then means acknowledging paradox, and engaging with it as part of a continuous process. This implies working with “contradictory, mutually exclusive elements that exist simultaneously and for which no synthesis or choice is possible nor necessarily desirable” (Lewis & Dehler, 2000: 708). Such a paradox may appear as mixed messages (e.g., praising teamwork while rewarding individual performance), opposing perspectives (e.g., short term and long term, people and productivity), or conflicting demands (e.g., creativity and efficiency, cooperation and competition). In coaching then, as in

any complex system, paradoxes are immanent and intrinsic. Subsequently, they should be handled rather than hidden away, and even accommodated as potential avenues for learning and development. In this respect, Axley and McMahon (2006) suggested that a leader's role in working with paradox was to maintain and hold it, in order to preserve the creative tension and uncertainty it provides. Similarly, Lewis and Dehler (2000) advocated learning through paradox as a pedagogical strategy for exploring contradictions and complexity. This may be a promising approach for coaches in their efforts to shape, and adapt to, constantly changing conditions, thus becoming increasingly comfortable with the integral ambiguity of their work.

### **Coaching as relational**

As this article is the outcome of an interactive process (between the authors), so coaching is a relational process involving coaches, athletes and other actors attached to the community of practice (often labelled 'the team'). The world of a sports team can be viewed as a society in microcosm. In line with the classic sociologist Georg Simmel's relational turning point, supposing that society *is* (not 'has') relations (in that society is made up of the interactions between and among individuals), we argue that a team basically consists of relationships. From this perspective, relations rather than individuals form the building blocks of the team (and, therefore, of any subsequent performance). Hence, a relational point of departure reaches far beyond merely stating that interaction is relevant to coaching. That is, athletes' lives are not only shaped by their own relationships with coaches, but also by those of other people. For example, the availability of sponsorship means less or more resources to be spent on development; a coach's on-going relationship with some athletes may result in the changing perceptions and relations with others, and so forth. Viewing the team as relations and, by extension, coaching as relational, means a shift of attention: from action to

*interaction*, from cause-effect to *reciprocity*, and from ‘one plus one is two’ to *emergent* effects.

A simple understanding of emergent phenomena is that a whole is something more (or less) than the sum of its parts. More specifically, the notion of emergence implies that new properties and behaviours emerge that are not contained in the essence of the constituent elements, or able to be predicted from a knowledge of initial conditions (Mason 2013). In other words, collectives and relations possess emergent properties that cannot be reduced to individual properties (Sawyer 2001). To illustrate this, we can take the social relation ‘friendship’ which does not belong to either of two friends but is shared and valued by both. Relational goods, therefore, reside in the relationships that link or bond the members concerned. In the same way, “no-one can take away part of the orchestra of a football game as their personal property; they can only take themselves away from the orchestra or the team” (Donati 2010: xi). Thus, the social order is a relational entity and emergent in kind.

To follow the football analogy, a football game is no doubt relational and thus emergent. What we mean here is that it displays flow and dynamics that are collectively produced, although not able to be precisely predicted from an initial knowledge of the participating players. Nor is it possible to reduce rhythmic interplay among team mates to the ‘sum’ of their individual actions. This is because collective rhythm emerges (or not) *between* interacting players and remains invisible when observing the actions separately. To coaches then, orchestrating relations becomes vital; a point which supposes the ability to carefully notice what is going on between players (i.e., in the *interaction*). Consequently, the success of the action is never contingent on the individual, but rather on the network of relations within which such action takes place.

In stating that coaching is relational, we also assert that it is characterised by a temporal aspect. Indeed, according to Berscheid and Peplau (1983) it is the “temporal

patterning of interconnected activities that form the substance of social relationships” (p.13).

This is particularly in respect of the properties manifest in networks and relations which, being irreducible to the actors involved in them generate further emergent properties over time including languages and moral systems (Crossley, 2011). Furthermore, the actors involved in such relations only emerge as 'actors' through the process of the interaction. In the words of Crossley (2011: 2), “action is always orientated to other (previous) action” which affords it a definitive temporal quality.

### **Examples of practice: Orchestrating the quiddity of practice**

So, how did (and do) we orchestrate or better structure the complex coaching domain. The first step, of course, taken from the above, is not to deny the existence of such complexity. This involves an acknowledgement that coaching comprises a dynamic social system which, to a degree, cannot be rationalised, whilst also encompasses elements of inherent emergent order. Consequently, the debate about how to structure the coaching context is always a relative one, contingent on many factors including objectives, constraints and relationships. Of importance, however, is to structure the context so that the framework is an enabling one; that is, one that enables athletes to better strive for the desired outcomes. The activities engaged in then, are so organised “such that they regularly bring out a particular type of outcome” (Hedström, 2005: 25). This is as opposed to a restricting framework, which both denies agency whilst appearing totally unrealistic within the vagaries of practice.

Our first example (of personal practice) comes from football. As an invasion game comprising 22 players on the field at the same time with few rules about how and where to pass the ball, in addition to limited opportunities for direct coach intervention once the game has begun (just a perfunctory half-time break), the complexities inherent in trying to influence performance and outcome are obvious. Rejecting any micro management of a



definitive game plan, which by the precise nature of the activity can never succeed as intended, the coaching undertaken is done so from the perspective of 'principles'. Additionally, respecting some of the complexity which can never be managed away, coaching with and through intentional 'typical game situations' is routinely engaged in. It is a way of thinking which denounces an impatient pursuit of linear simplicity, thus making the practice practical; what Schofield (2003: 325) in quoting James (1908) referred to as respecting the 'ontological reality of life'. This is not to ascribe a naïve 'learning in and through action' mantra, but rather to scaffold some of the indeterminacy of coaching practice towards given ends (Jones & Thomas, 2015).

One of the aforementioned principles in relation to offensive play in football is that of creating and exploiting 'overloads' or 'doubling up'; a situation where a single defender is confronted by two attackers. Mere 2 v 1 grid work, however, where two attackers secure the ball to a certain space or point thus defeating the attentions of the defender, is just not appropriate. Rather, the objective lies in the *generation of opportunities* where such overlap (or underlap) is created before being exploited in a 7 v 8 or, even more realistically, a 10 v 11 situation. So, rather than totally reduce the complexity (as in a 2 v 1 practice) the goal is to temper it, thus creating (realistic) conditions for the desired success to be achieved.

A particular example lies in an 8 v 8 attack against defence practice, with each player occupying his or her likely position on the team. Here, both 'teams' would be organised into their respective starting positions and subsequent unit shapes. The point of the exercise is initially outlined and explained to the players in terms of offensively working to develop overload opportunities, and defensively in relation to resisting such developments. A further condition is then provided, in that at a certain point, one of the defenders will be withdrawn for a short period of time without warning. In response, the offense is expected to notice and take advantage of the numerical mismatch thus creating doubling-up opportunities and better

attack the goal in question. Here, the players must realise and create the possibilities generated by the defensive imbalance before parity is restored. Similarly, the defence have to also react to the situation by reorganising accordingly. Both parties must, therefore, respond to contextual demands; for the defence it is an increasingly complex and difficult situation (defending while a player down), while for the offence, having a numerical advantage, the likelihood of success is increased (although so is the expectation of success which brings a pressure of its own). Any subsequent coaching then, becomes contingent on developments and outcome.

A second example comes from handball, an invasion game which comprises two teams of seven players each (six outfield players and a goalkeeper) who pass a ball using their hands with the aim of throwing it into the goal of the other team. Again, the example is located within an exercise where the attack is pitted against the defence (replicating game like scenarios). Like the previous example, the objective of the session relates to improving the offense in terms of engineering and taking advantage of goal scoring opportunities. Here, principles of attacking play, including highlighting possible weaknesses or gaps in the defence, are initially discussed and pointed out to the attacking players. This framing, structured discussion also focuses on ways these weaknesses could be both unearthed and exploited through deliberate play. Such moves are generally ascribed as opposed to being procedurally pre-determined, again giving primacy to the bounded indeterminacy of context. As a crucial issue here is respecting the relational nature of play with attacking players occupying given zones across the court to stretch the defensive unit, such zones could be initially marked by cones. Offensive players would be free to move between and within these zones as long as each zone is occupied, before the cones are taken away. In line with Vygotskian thinking, the goal is to encourage an internalisation of knowledge through initially utilising before withdrawing external structures. To increase the level of complexity

and degree of difficulty for the offense, following the initial framed discussion with the attacking players, the focus of the coaching is more-than-often with the defense. Raising the level of the defense's effectiveness, naturally presents more difficult challenges for the offense, who, in turn, may need to revisit original strategies or devise new ones (again with and through the guiding hand of the coach).

The above examples illustrate how we continue to orchestrate the learning of athletes through both restricting and enabling contextual practice. Working directly through principles and typical game scenarios enables better transference between 'situations like this' to occur, whilst the relational nature of sporting performance within team games is respected. Here, the athletes get a better sense of themselves as being not just game players, but players in relation; in relation to others, to their location on the field of play, to objectives, and to expectations. That is, they develop an awareness of themselves as parts of greater networks of interdependence, the evolution of which is often dependent on the circumstances faced. The abilities and talents of players are seen to emerge within, “and be inseparable from, interactions” (Crossley, 2011: 3). Within such an ontology of coaching, and the practices outlined, players develop in relation to each other and the demands and expectations of their temporal situations. We liken such practices to orchestrating what can somewhat be termed a functional community of practice through maximising knowledge exchange among participant athletes across the group, and constructing learning within realistic, complex situations.

At a more instrumental level, what we try to do is to engineer a number of archetypal situations that players (will) face in real-time games. The point is to make them recognise and subsequently excel in these typical situations. However, as no two situations or scenarios are ever identical, the prescription can't be too tight; there must be room for athlete discernible judgement which again is actively factored in to the practice (as in the examples given

above). The situations or the practices presented to players then, although possessing similar characteristics, are never identical. Consequently, there is no one correct course of action here, just contrived opportunistic openings that could lead to more likely preferred consequences. The work of Schechner (1985) appears particularly explanatory of our intentions. Here, the rehearsal process is broken down into three stages. Firstly, the performer is removed from familiar surroundings. Secondly, he or she experiences transition(s) where new or re-arranged old behaviour is engaged with. Finally, integration occurs where the 'restored' behaviour is practiced until it becomes second nature. In this respect, although we know that players will not ever face exact situations in games as practiced, neither will they not not ever face such situations. Within such a frame, athletes' agency or choice remains activated. Relatedly, recognising its emergent, temporal nature we view coaching as never only happening in the present. Rather, it is grounded in a past, while constantly being thrown into the future.

## **Conclusion**

In developing this paper, we set out with three guiding objectives; to further the conceptualisation of coaching as (1) orchestration, (2) as a relational practice, and (3) as a system comprising manageable complexity. We drew not only from our academic positions as interpretive researchers, but also from our on-going experiences as practicing coaches to make the case. In turn, the argument proposed centres on identifying the quiddity of practice, illustrating not only the complex 'just whatness' of coaching, but how we try to engage with and manage it. Acknowledging that players need to have a degree of agency, the practice depicted remains a far cry from the rather naive call to 'athlete empowerment' and such like (a criticism recently well made by Denison and colleagues [2015]). Rather, following the Vygotskian notion of a 'more capable other', coaches should decide what the players learn

and what they should 'see'; in essence, to see the game (more or less) as they (i.e., the coaches) see it. Such a perspective of course, cannot be entirely forced on athletes, as the actions engaged in have to be considered meaningful for all concerned. Players thus must see relevance and value in their practice and roles; a value more-than-often constructed in negotiations with coaches, with each other, and context.

That both coaches and athletes must see value in their practice speaks to the relational nature of coaching. In this respect, although both parties have agency in the constructing of coaching, they are always 'agents in relation'. Coaches' orchestrated practice then, should always be in relation to athletes (abilities, goals and so forth), to objectives and to situational structures. With particular relation to the latter two, we consider the (re)construction of game related scenarios or sequences as crucial; that is, typical game situations, which regularly occur albeit slightly differently. The players are allowed to decide upon their own actions within such structured expectations. In this way, the opportunity for meaningful action is constructed, while that action itself is left to the players. This was perhaps most evident in the second (handball) example, where the focus of the coaching was on resisting the objective (i.e., working harder against something to move that something forward). In this respect, what we are continually experimenting and 'playing' with as coaches is the eternal tension between structure and agency. To think as a coach from this perspective is to think sociologically; of how much structure and/or agential space athletes should have, so that their learning is maximised.

Although we made the decision to work and write together largely because of our ontological common ground, we also disagreed on several issues. Here, we engaged in a 'debate of ideas' to enrich each other's thoughts and beliefs. Such a process is in line with our basic coaching practice; where commonly rooted ideas are considered in light of what we think we know. In many ways then, this article can be seen as the manifestation of how we

engage with coaching and athlete learning itself. Finally, a word about the rather unconventional method employed within the project. Being representative of some form of reflective speech or interaction within speech, it was grounded in the belief that it is in the acts of speaking and explaining that we come to understand ideas and concepts as opposed to preliminary thinking and then speaking what we think we know. Again this mirrors how we coach; respecting that meaning making unfolds in the activity of doing, both for ourselves and the players we coach. Such orchestrated action, as argued, does not advocate an absence of organisation or structure. Rather, it supports the case for considered proactive engagement by coaches, sensitive to the relational nature of practice and the players subject to it.

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