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‘HUMOUR HELPS’: ELITE SPORTS COACHING AS A BALANCING ACT

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To date, humour’s role in sport settings has hardly received scholarly attention. However, reflecting on future research within the sociology of sports coaching (Jones, Ronglan, Potrac & Cushion, 2011), it was suggested that ‘the multi-functional use of humour, its intent, manifestation, and effect within the often emotionally-charged world of coaching, would appear to hold very interesting possibilities’. This formed the point of departure for the work presented in this paper. The study focuses on how coaches interpret the appearance of humour in the context they operate, and how they apply it as an integrated part of their coaching performances. In-depth interviews with six experienced elite Scandinavian sport coaches formed the empirical basis for the analysis. Based on Erving Goffman’s sociology of social interaction, the data were analysed and discussed in relation to three main categories: humour’s significance in the elite sport context, humour and group dynamics, and the performance of the coach. The analysis demonstrates that ‘humorous coaching’ can be seen as a balancing act between the inherent tensions of ‘seriousness and fun’, ‘distance and closeness’, and ‘authenticity and performance’.

Key words: Coaching performances, humour, social roles, interaction, impression management

Introduction

Recently, sports coaching has come to be increasingly acknowledged as a social activity, with social interaction between coaches and athletes at the heart of its process (e.g., Jones et al., 2011a). One of the interviewed expert coaches in the book 'Sport Coaching Cultures' put it this way; 'the art of coaching is about recognizing the situation, recognizing the people and responding to the people you are working with' (Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2004, p. 18). A principal challenge for coaches, then, is to handle different individuals and groups, and to be able to utilize the possibilities offered by the environment. This supposes flexibility and social competence (Ronglan, 2011).

Included within 'social competence' is the ability to relate adequately to humorous communications. The term humour is derived from Latin, its meaning associated with 'moisture' or 'fluid'. (In this respect, it certainly appears as a crucial liquid to make social relations flow). It is a form of communication expressed in relationships between friends (Hay, 2000) as co-workers (Romero & Pescolido, 2008), and leaders and subordinates (Holmes, 2007). Indeed, humour is embedded in a multitude of social contexts, used for different purposes and fulfils a range of functions. Sport is no exception in this respect. Humorous situations, or strategic uses of humour, can be initiated both from coaches and athletes. Recognizing humour's presence in the context as an inevitable part of social 'goings on', invites both researchers and practitioners to take a closer look at the phenomenon and its

potential within sports coaching. Until now, the topic has received only little attention in the coaching literature. However, it was recently suggested that more thoroughly examining ‘the multi-functional use of humour, its intent, manifestation, and effect (...) would appear to hold very interesting possibilities’ (Jones, Ronglan, Potrac & Cushion, 2011, p. 185). This formed the point of departure for the present study.

The sociologist Michael Davies (1979: 109) postulated that ‘sociologists without a sense of humour will never be able to understand the workings of the social world’. We would claim that the same is true for coaches. Aristotle (2004:78-79) described humour as a virtue of social interaction; as the mean state between clownish buffoons that go too far, and the boorish with no sense of humour. Based on this notion of humour, as a characteristic of the intermediate position, the present study focuses on how coaches interpret the appearance of humour in the context they operate, and how they apply it themselves in influencing situations and persons. Thus, the purpose of the study was to map and analyse Scandinavian elite sport coaches’ reflections on and uses of humour as an integrated part of their coaching performance.

The value of the paper can be perceived in several ways. First, an exploration of humour as a communicative tool can enrich our understanding of how coaches actually perform their day-by-day orchestrations in an environment characterized by ambiguity and inherent contradictions (Jones & Wallace, 2005). Secondly, it can contribute to our in-depth knowledge of how social structures are produced and challenged in the coaching context. Finally, demonstrating humour’s contextual significance can provide coaches and coach educators with more refined understandings of the ‘social competence’ related to sports coaching in general.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, the literature on leadership and humour from educational and organizational settings is briefly summarized. Second, the paper's theoretical framework is sketched out, based on Erving Goffman's microsociology. Specifically, his concepts of performances, impression management, and social roles are introduced as a framework for analysing coach-athlete relationships and coaches' conduct. The methodology is then explained, followed by a presentation and interpretation of the interviewed coaches' reflections and behaviours. The article is concluded by an overall discussion of 'humorous coaching' as a balancing act.

Leadership and humour

While coaches' use of humour has not been subjected to systematic research, humour and leadership has been studied in pedagogical (teacher-students) as well as organizational interactions (manager-subordinates). Within both such settings, the literature draws a distinction between 'productive' and 'destructive' humour production. This has also been classified as positive (inclusion, sense of belonging, enjoyment) and negative functionality (exclusion, ridicule) (Martin & Gayle, 1999). For example, on the one hand, sharing a laugh is signalling common ground and a sense of belonging to a group, thus, creating and expressing a sense of solidarity (Rogerson-Revell, 2007). Indeed, within the working context, Romero and Pescolido (2008) argued that what they called positive use of humour led to improved group cohesion and thereby increased productivity. Further, within pedagogical settings there is substantial research indicating a positive relationship between teachers' use of humour and students' learning (Wantzer & Frymier, 1999).

On the other hand, humour may be a 'double-edged sword' (Rogerson-Revell, 2007) contributing to social exclusion as well as inclusion. It may be a thin line between 'laughing with' and 'laughing at'. Humour as a means to strengthen internal cohesion can easily be used

to create feelings of superiority; we laugh at the expense of someone. This dimension – humour as a tool of power – is emphasized by the ‘superiority theory of humour’ (Moreall, 2009). An issue further complicating the study of humour in classrooms and organizations is the vast array of humour types being performed by teachers and leaders. It can be presented as jokes, puns, sarcasms, and nonverbal behaviours among others, and can target virtually anything. Wantzer and colleagues (2006) suggested that some forms of teacher humour might violate classroom norms and be perceived as inappropriate, while other forms would not. As humour is a situated phenomenon, it is problematic to determine a *fixed* positive relationship between instructional humour and student learning. In the same way as teachers may use humour more or less successfully in terms of affecting learning processes (Wantzer et al., 2006), we would argue that coaches need to know both their athletes and the social environment in which the interaction takes place to be able to use humour appropriately as part of their coaching strategies.

The stress-relieving function of humour (Moreall, 2009) is another dimension emphasized in the literature that is highly relevant to the coaching context. Here, humour can be used as a coping strategy when facing uncertainty or risk (Grugulis, 2002), it can help to relieve the tension of embarrassment in social situations (Goffman, 1967), and can function as a relief from routine-driven boredom (Cooper, 2008). Plester and Orams (2008), examining the role of ‘the joker’ in companies, noted that ‘jokers’ offered a respite from pressure and stress by creating fun and laughter. Similarly, Holmes and Meredith (2002) found that subordinates sometimes used humour as a self-depreciation device when they had not acted as they should. Here, witty and indirect self-ridicule may increase a speaker’s status, ‘allowing one to save face while releasing tension and building rapport’ (Martin & Gayle, 1999: 74). According to Duncan, Smeltzer and Leap (1990), humour may also be a particular suitable strategy to ‘test the water’; that is, to use humour to communicate messages that are socially

risky to the initiator. Finally, there are examples of how coaches deliberately use humour to make the situation 'lighter' or to increase the influence of their messages: 'I know they think some of the expressions I use are quite funny, but I'm happy about that because they'll remember it' (Jones *et.al*, 2004: 127). This illustrates how humour can be a valuable discursive strategy in regulating tension and attention simultaneously.

Another line of leadership research has focused on the use of humour in the construction of workplace culture. According to Holmes (2007), leaders and their team members collaborate in constructing not only a workplace culture, but also an appropriate leadership style. Investigating organizational leadership in a typical egalitarian societal context, Holmes (2007) found that humour provided a useful strategy for negotiating ways of doing leadership within cultural expectations of equality. Through a fine balance between leaders' self-deprecating humour, which downplayed self-promotion and subordinates' ambiguous leader parodies, indicating respect as well as equality leadership was a joint construction (Holmes, 2007); findings very relevant to the challenges that elite coaches face. This is because, on the one hand, coaches are expected to be strong and charismatic leaders. On the other, however, they are operating in a context characterized by conflicting goals and inherent dilemmas (Jones & Wallace, 2005; Saury & Durand, 1998). This requires a finely tuned leadership performance.

Erving Goffman: playing the coach role

Basic to Goffman's analysis of social interaction was his dramaturgical metaphor of social life (Goffman, 1959). Here, a core concept was 'performance', defined as 'all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers, and which has some influence on the observers' (ibid: p. 32). The intention of the performance is to give a certain impression to the people present. Thus,

'impression management' refers to how we, in social encounters, display an impression of selves that we wish others to receive in an attempt to control how those others see us. In presenting a viable image of oneself in the eyes of others, Goffman (1959) introduced the concepts of 'front' and 'dramatic realization'. The personal front referred to the totality of individual expressions, which more or less consciously are part of the performance. Dramatic realization was similarly related to the performer's use of dramatic signs to ensure that the audience understands the points that are difficult to see.

Goffman (1959) emphasized that performances are not to be seen as an isolated individual's presentation of self; rather, performances are always contextualized and usually staged by teams or groups. The team develops and tries to sustain a certain consensus on the definition of the social situation, making it possible for the participants to act suitably. Thus, a 'team performance' may be seen as a fluid collaborative effort to get through the interaction without stumbling (Goffman, 1967). Also, performances may be given in a 'front region' (front stage) or a 'back region' (back stage), guided by different principles. Goffman (1959, p. 114) considered the back region a place where the performers can relax, drop their front and 'step out of character'. Despite this distinction, he did not see the back region as a place of authenticity where the 'real self' could emerge (Branaman, 1997), as people give performances even here.

To Goffman, individual performances were always constrained *and* made possible through social roles and the interdependency between such roles (e.g., coach-athlete). In his development of the role concept (Goffman, 1961), he made distinctions between role commitment, role attachment, and role distance. Role commitment referred to roles, which are imposed on the individual, role attachment to those we wish to play, and role distance to roles from which we wish to remain separate. These concepts facilitate a flexible analysis of the constraining and enabling aspects of social roles, and allow more detailed investigations of

the interplay between individuality and roles. Hence, roles are not ‘just played’, as they may be adjusted or personally formed for different purposes and by different individuals (Jones et al., 2011b).

Methodology

The empirical material generated in the study stems from in-depth interviews with six Scandinavian elite sport coaches. The informants consisted of four males and two females, aged between 42 to 67 years old. All were full-time professional coaches, currently working with national teams or individual athletes performing at the international level. Each had been a professional coach for more than 10 years, and been responsible for several teams or groups of athletes during their coach career. All of the participants currently worked as coaches in Norway and had done so for several years, although three were originally from other Scandinavian countries.

The coaches came from different sports; football, handball, swimming and rowing. At the time of the interviews four coached male athletes and two coached female athletes. As all were responsible for groups of athletes, the coaches were involved in team leadership activities as well as individual coach-athlete interactions. Although research has indicated that specific sports are marked by cultural characteristics (Ronglan, 2011), it was not an objective in this study to compare the sports, nor factor in aspects of gender in terms of the forms and amount of humorous exchanges. Rather, the coaches were selected as information rich informants in terms of their reflections on and uses of humour.

In line with the aim of the study to map and analyse elite sport coaches’ uses of humour, qualitative interviews were deemed an appropriate method. Exploring a topic that has been largely ignored in coaching courses and literature requires in-depth conversations that can bring the informants’ personal experiences into focus. The main topics covered in the

interviews included (a) the appearance of humour in the coaching context; (b) the forms of humour evident; (c) the use of humour in relation to social structures/group dynamics; and (d) the coaches' own deliberate use of humour as part of their coaching strategies. When reflecting upon the given topics, the coaches were encouraged to draw on the totality of their coaching experiences, not just from their current respective situations. The interviews were semi-structured, with a balance being kept between the structure and pace indicated in the interview guide, whilst allowing unscripted thematic exploration. Each interview lasted about an hour, and was recorded and instantly transcribed verbatim. Member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was conducted both by discussing preliminary interpretations during the interviews and by forwarding transcriptions to the informants for verification and clarification.

The interviews were analysed through a combination of what Kvale (2007) described as (a) meaning condensation, and (b) meaning categorization. First, based on the research questions (and the main topics in the interview guide), meaning condensation was done to highlight the informants' principal experiences and reflections. Each interview was read carefully and interpreted to safeguard the informants' perspective, and related statements and perceptions were condensed. Rather than being a pure reproduction of the content, the condensation represented a reconstruction based on recurring themes. The process resulted in text reduction (a shortened version of each interview), making it possible to handle the total interview material without losing too much of the individual variation. Second, through a theoretical reading (Malterud, 2001) based on Goffman's conceptual framework, the data were further analysed and collapsed into three main categories: humour's significance and role in the elite sport context, humour and group dynamics, and the performance of the coach. In the following sections findings are presented and discussed in line with these categories.

Analysis of results

The significance and role of humour

All the coaches agreed that humour is highly relevant within elite sport. They seemed conscious of the possible risks stemming from the highly competitive and result-orientated nature of the context. In this respect, they were aware that elite athletes' life styles were in danger of becoming overly 'serious', with very few degrees of freedom. According to most of the coaches, the detailed planning and extensive surveillance of such athletes' daily activities reinforced this risk. One of them put it this way:

Humour is an important counterbalance to the seriousness characterizing our practice. In many ways it is an extremely repetitive and structured life we are living within elite sport. I believe that humour becomes even more important within such a setting. Otherwise, the whole thing becomes entirely serious, which is devastating for engagement and desire.

Another coach made a similar statement, related to the need to break the monotony marking the athletes' life styles:

A lot of our work is demanding, physically and mentally. Sharing a laugh recreates energy and contributes to breaking up the monotony. That's quite essential when we're at training camps and staying abroad for longer periods of time. Humourists are vital to have in the group.

Such arguments point to elite sport as a demanding 'working context', where the strain stemming from rigorous training regimes may be easier to handle within a humorous atmosphere. Humour does not just offer a respite from pressure and stress. According to the coach above it can also rebuild energy in the participants. In this way, humorous exchanges and joyful, 'purposeless' interaction may be seen as a necessary counterweight in elite sport

contexts often marked by strict discipline and massive surveillance and control of behaviour (Denison, 2007).

Joint humour may be the result of individuals that create funny situations for the enjoyment of the group. As a consequence of an awareness to create a relaxed atmosphere in between ‘the hard work’, some of them were concerned with providing space for the ‘funny ones’ in the group. In this respect, one of the coaches perceived her current team as ‘too correct’. She noted that ‘practical jokes are almost absent in this group, contrary to what I’m used to’, and elaborated on how she tried to change the culture:

You know, prolonged hotel life during camps is quite boring; I try to make it a bit livelier by exchanging the players’ shoes in the hotel corridor and things like that. A while ago my assistant coach cut off the brushes on some of the players’ toothbrushes. I think they now have traced us as the guilty ones; I’m waiting excitedly for the reprisal. Hope they’ll figure out something funny. We need more of that kind of teasing and practical jokes.

The coach recognized that there were several ‘humourists’ in the team and wanted to stimulate their joking behaviour. Again, the rationale seemed to be that the time they spent together should be joyful, not just hard and focused work. Implicitly, this line of argument is based on the need for a humorous atmosphere as a complementary sphere lightening the hard work and making it more bearable over time. Such a milieu would be more attractive to athletes, and release energy needed to keep focused and work properly. This finding is in line with research from other working life settings (Cooper, 2008) that shows humour’s relief function by offering a respite from business pressure and routines.

In Goffman’s terminology, performances are given in a ‘front region’ and a ‘back region’, guided by different principles. As illustrated by the discussion above, the coaches

were concerned with the atmosphere and interaction marking the back region (the athletes' 'spare time'), because of its significance for the athletes' hard work (i.e., the front stage) comprising training sessions and competitions. Viewing back stage interaction as a vital premise for optimal front stage performances is in congruence with previous research into elite sport demonstrating that the off-court sphere is detached from, but at the same time highly relevant for, the on-court sphere (Ronglan, 2000). In line with the concept of orchestration (Jones & Wallace, 2005), the facilitation of humourous off-court exchanges could also be viewed as part of the coaches' 'behind the scenes string pulling towards desired objectives' (Jones, Bailey and Thompson, 2013, p. 272).

When it came to the amount and the timing of the humour displayed 'during work', the coaches had slightly different experiences. Some of them noted that within elite sport they had rarely experienced athletes who were brought out of focus in training or competition by laughter and joking. As one commented; 'they are so dedicated; I've never seen laughter as a problem'. However, one of the coaches considered that joking might have interfered with some athletes' focus prior to competitions:

One example was some players that were concerned with joking during match rituals and the ceremonial entry into court, even during the playing of the national anthem. It simply became too much. They displayed an image that was not favourable, team mates found it inappropriate, and I'm sure it contributed to leakage of energy. The joking brought them out of focus.

The quote illustrates how front stage performances are guided by different rules than back stage activities. Indeed, being 'funny' at the wrong place or wrong time may not be perceived funny by co-participants. In this respect, before a national audience, a national team is expected to give a certain 'team performance' (Goffman, 1967); one that possesses very

limited opportunities for role distancing during the national anthem without violating social norms. Ironic distance and ‘stepping out of character’ is primarily a back stage privilege.

The coach in the quote above not only found the behaviour of the athletes inappropriate, but also believed that the banter and joking brought the athletes out of competition focus. Humour was seen as the ‘cause’ of the issue (lack of focus). This wasn’t a universal view, however, as one of the other coaches emphasized the opposite relationship pointing to experiences where athletes’ joking behaviour seemed to be a coping strategy to handle a stressful competitive situation. In his words:

Humour can be used to blur a situation, or to escape from a situation, which is too unpleasant. I have experienced athletes who have not handled the pressure, and instead escaped into nonsense and fooling around.

Here, humour was used as a managing mechanism, where humour itself was not the ‘problem’, but a consequence of a need to deal with perceived pressure. However, the use of humour to relieve tension does not always lead to escaping from a particular situation. On the contrary, the majority of the coaches emphasized how ‘a suitable mix of humour and focused seriousness’ was what they strived for during preparations and prior to competitions. Here, they believed that a considered dose of humorous exchanges may be fruitful not only to remove some of the gravity, but also to better focus athletes through more realistic perspective taking. With such a sentiment in mind, one of the coaches noted:

In such situations the coach, but even more experienced players, may calm down team mates through liberating or funny comments. Mike, as an example, is an excellent role model in that respect. In the locker room before key matches he displays a kind of balanced distance to the event. Like before a match in the World Championships; ‘come on, it’s not life or death, the worst thing that can happen is that your mom will

hate the referee forever if he's not giving you a free kick when you deserve it'. Besides creating laughter, he planted some new thoughts. Like; what's most important, a million TV-spectators or your mom?

The quote illustrates how humour can be flexibly used to balance distancing and dedication. The 'balanced distance' the coach referred to can be interpreted as the use of humour to balance commitment with a certain oblique glance at the task about to be (or being) performed. In the example above, Mike neutralized an anxious situation by a witty remark contributing to switching the perspective and, in Goffman's terminology, 'reframing' the situation. Using humour to balance dedication and distancing links into the concept of 'pragmatic irony' (Hoyle & Wallace, 2008). In a recent development of the orchestration metaphor, Jones and colleagues (2013) included pragmatic irony as a strategy to cope with the ambiguities and dilemmas inherent in the coaching context. Here, they argued that as 'irony assumes a capacity to live with the dissonance of opposites' (ibid, 273), humorous exchanges can be well suited to handle the 'seriousness of elite sport' and facilitate more fluent shifts between role commitment and role distance.

Humour and group dynamics

Two of the coaches emphasized how humour may demonstrate group structure or be a driving force in group dynamics. In addition to reflecting on the amount and type of humour ('what') and the functions of it ('why'), these coaches were concerned with *who* performed it. One of the coaches put it this way:

Who has the right to speak? Who has the right to be funny? This can tell you a lot about the social structure in a group. Earlier in my career I have experienced – not as head coach, though – to be stuck in a position where I was not allowed to be funny. A

quite frustrating experience. I was bubbling over with perspectives that could not be expressed.

The last sentence refers to humour's potential to express ambivalence or alternatives in a way that can open people's minds without directing it. As the (same) coach noted; 'with humour you can express things between the lines; indirectly force people to think'. As an example, he mentioned how he deliberately made comments, rolled his eyes and smiled at one of his star players' overly-rigid locker room routines, to underpin his overall objective: to increase team flexibility and ability to deal with unpredicted situations while at the same time destabilizing the fixed hierarchy of the group. Hence, the ambiguity characterizing humour makes it a flexible discursive strategy (Holmes, 2007). Careful observation of group interaction then may also uncover hierarchical structures by noticing who is 'allowed' to be funny and whose humour dominates the team communication. By developing awareness of how humorous communication is signalling group structures and forms of hierarchies, coaches may be better equipped to interpret and intervene in the social dynamics going on.

In particular, one of the coaches interviewed was concerned with the significance of having a 'clown' or two in the team. His view was based on the clown's potential to neutralize difficult topics within elite sport teams that are often composed by a heterogeneity of personalities:

In any team there are typically lots of differences in terms of personalities, beliefs, and political standpoints. For example; I've had highly religious people and atheists on the same team. A good clown can reduce and take the edge off such differences by being in a position that enables him to joke with everything and everyone. The role of the clown fulfils a vital function in reducing tensions and potential conflicts among the group.

In elite sport teams, members are recruited based on their athletic performances, and may be very different away from ‘the court’. Despite the interpersonal heterogeneity, they often spend much time together in a close and quite isolated coexistence (Ronglan, 2000). The quote points to humour’s potential in mitigating intra-group differences that – if taken too ‘seriously’ – may reinforce internal boundaries and undermine team unity. Humour may soften the differences.

Of course, viewing such humour as a social function supposes that jokers are funny in an inclusive way. According to the coach above, the ‘ideal clown is one that displays an inclusive humour and does not take himself too seriously’. As an example, he told a story of an ‘unintentional funny player; ‘an absentminded guy (Pete) that said and did weird and funny things at the most peculiar occasions’:

One episode happened during the half time break in an important first division match. We were gathered in the locker room and Pete asked me, quite seriously; ‘who are the green ones we are playing against?’ Everybody leaned over the benches and laughed; he obviously didn’t know. Then Pete stood up and asked emphatically: ‘But isn’t it important to know who we are playing against?’ People laughed so much we almost missed the second half.

The episode was obviously very amusing to everybody present, including the coach who found it ‘liberating’ in a tense atmosphere. However, it also illustrates how unintentional funny people walk a fine line between being appreciated or being laughed at in an excluding way. The role of a ‘clown’ in a sports team may be a vulnerable position, particularly if the person is perceived as an unintentional clown. In the example of Pete, he held a strong position on the team due to his merits as an internationally recognized player. According to the coach, Pete was embraced by the others and was certainly no outsider despite (or because

of) his weird comments. However, it is easy to imagine how an inexperienced player behaving in a similar way might be reduced to *merely* a clown and, thereby, marginalised as an athlete. Being deadlocked in such a role may function as a straitjacket, hindering development. Contextual considerations must be included with a such interpretation then.

Coaches' humourous performances

All the interviewed coaches stated that they used humour deliberately as part of their communication with the athletes. In particular, they seemed to be concerned with humour as a discursive strategy to regulate the distance between themselves and their athletes, and to appear more 'human' in the latter's eyes. Here, one coach noted:

I use self-irony; reveal weaknesses and show 'human traits', in a way. The players chuckle when I ask for help to handle the technical gadgets that the players know everything about. It's important to be able to laugh at oneself and to be relaxed regarding one's own limitations. Self-importance really doesn't work in the Norwegian culture.

The last part of the quote refers to how construction of leadership is embedded in the socio-cultural context. The coach told about different experiences when he worked abroad; 'it was a more authoritarian culture, with other forms of humour as well'. In such a culture, too much self-irony may be perceived as weakness and contribute to decreased respect from athletes. In the Scandinavian context, however, the coach found it more legitimate, even necessary to a certain extent, to display humbleness and an ability to laugh at oneself. The sentiment echoes the need to consider the wider environment when trying to understand 'local humour' (Rogerson-Revell, 2007) (for example, the strong egalitarian values evident in Norwegian culture [Andersen & Ronglan, 2012]).

A similar observation was made by another coach, when he changed position from assistant to head coach in the national team:

*I noticed that the players started to look at me differently. Like, 'there is the **national** coach, you know. Almost too much respect. It's important not to take yourself too seriously, but be able to make fun of yourself and reveal that you do silly things. Then, the distance is reduced.*

Such a strategy to reduce the distance between coach and athletes, of course, supposes that professional authority is maintained. Accepting such a caveat, the coach further told a story that illustrated how he exposed more of his private self to the players in a laid-back and humorous way:

They know that I love cooking. Once, I told them about onion soup, which supposes real chicken and not just bouillon dices. My neighbour at home is a farmer, and I asked if he had a chicken or two to spare. One morning, I found a bag with 8-10 chicken outside my front door. They were dead, but that was all. To the players I explained in detail how a true amateur like me strived and struggled with ribbing, cleaning and cutting all those chicken to make real bouillon for the soup. They almost laughed to death.

The coach had, over the years, found that his 'serious image' worked more efficiently if it was combined with showing a more human and multifaceted self. The combination of demonstrating professional competence and displaying a 'human face' improved his relationship with athletes. An increased awareness concerning his holistic appearance was stimulated by reflections throughout his career:

Earlier in my career, I received some comments hinting that although I was perceived as a thorough and good coach, I sometimes appeared overly grave and angry. This

really surprised me, because I didn't feel that way, but I obviously seemed like that in the eyes of others. I began to work carefully to appear differently; a little more smiling, informal and flippant. That doesn't undermine the seriousness of my work, but gives me a better point of departure for interventions.

Coaches' sensitivity regarding how their behaviours appear in the eyes of others is decisive in the creation of productive face-to-face interactions. Meaningful coach-athlete interaction is based upon the coach's ability to take the perspective of the other (Mead, 1934). The quote above illustrates how the coach, through paying attention to athletes' reactions to his own conduct, developed his front in a different, more favourable direction. According to the coach, 'it all stems from my intense dedication, but I've become more aware of how my engagement should be *expressed* to have the intended effect'. The coach seemed to have improved his perspective-taking and impression management through such increased awareness. This gives some empirical evidence to the concept of 'noticing', which was recently suggested as the basis for coaches' orchestration (Jones et al, 2013). Noticing 'the world of small realities' (ibid, p. 277), certainly includes the ability to precisely consider and realise how one's appearance and manner are perceived.

Another coach from the sample interviewed underlined humour's potential in making contrasts; that is, to use (or not use) humour as a dramatic sign (Goffman, 1959) to distinguish the important from the less important:

To me the contrasts are important. Sometimes I use humour and sometimes I deliberately don't. If I suddenly no longer appear as 'funny Eric', it is like the athletes wake up; wow, now we're not laughing anymore around here, right? To me those changes are interesting, between loosening and tightening, and loosening and tightening again.

Humour was thus used as a flexible resource in regulating attention and concentration. Within sport, and elite sport in particular, this may be particularly important, because the context is characterized by ever-changing demands. Sometimes the situation primarily requires physically demanding hard work, where humorous exchanges may be stimulating and make the training more bearable. Other situations require total concentration and complete focus, which can be difficult to maintain within a joking atmosphere. The quote above points to how coaches through a flexible balancing of humour and seriousness ('loosening and tightening') can optimize their influence in various coaching situations.

Although all the coaches noted that they used humour as part of their coaching behaviour, they obviously did so to varying degrees. In this respect, several noted that they only used humour in a way that was 'natural' to them. They were aware of that they 'acted' as coaches, but their coach performance had to be in reasonable accordance with their overall self:

Humour helps, so I try to give some funny messages. But I have to be myself; I can't play the role as a humourist because I'm not. I know coaches who are more typical 'funny guys' and use humour to a much greater extent in their coaching practice because it comes naturally to them.

Social competence implies the ability to appear trustworthy (Ronglan, 2011). Consequently, (efficient) social impression management supposes that co-participant behaviour is perceived in accordance with the person 'behind' the role. 'Humour helps', but trying to be 'desperately funny' if it doesn't come somewhat naturally would probably be counterproductive.

'Humourous coaching' as a balancing act

As the previous discussion has demonstrated, it is neither 'the more the better' nor 'the less the better' when it comes to coaches' use of humour. Humour is a social virtue and the key is

to apply humour as an appropriate and integrated part of coaches' conduct to optimize their influence on people and processes. We conclude the paper by touching upon three aspects of this balancing act; 'seriousness and fun', 'distance and closeness' and 'authenticity and performance'.

Having fun and being serious should not be simplistically viewed as merely opposite concepts. The Danish writer, Piet Hein, once stated: he who takes jest only as jest, and seriousness only as seriousness, has misunderstood both. Similarly, for sport and play to be fun, the play has to be taken seriously. However, what often is experienced in elite sport is that the serious, rule-governed and goal-oriented environment may undermine the playful approach that is equally important to the development of athletic performance. The seriousness may degenerate into mechanical rule following allowing no laughter or degrees of freedom. In such contexts, humour can play a crucial corrective role. The presence of humour in the training environment can be seen as a contrast to the gravity that regularly surrounds competitions. In elite sport, this can provide a relief for the athletes; a primary quality of humour according to its associated 'relief theory' (Morreall, 2009).

To coaches then, the ability to notice the degree of 'seriousness' and its impact on the athletes is basic to be able to facilitate an appropriate balance between seriousness and fun. In some milieus and situations, the dimensions may be well balanced and do not call for any specific initiative. In other circumstances a more thoughtful orchestration may be needed, as demonstrated in the previous coach example aiming to stimulate practical joking within the group. Further, humour may be used deliberately to create contrasts; to distinguish the really 'serious' things, and to maximize attention and concentration by cutting the joking short at certain moments. Thus, to coaches, *timing* is crucial in this balancing act: to decide when is it productive to use humour as a strategy to regulate tension, stimulate creativity, increase attention, or strengthen social bonds, and, when is it more appropriate to use other

interactional strategies. Such dilemmas point to how fine-tuned noticing and flexible uses of behavioural repertoire are fundamental aspects of coaches' practice.

Humour's potential to balance distance and closeness was highlighted by all the interviewed coaches. As demonstrated, coaches may use humour deliberately to decrease the status difference between themselves and athletes (through self-irony, displaying 'personal self'), as well as to increase their authority and gain control over evolving situations ('I no longer appear as funny': Eric). Regulation of power difference and role distance refers to how the coaches worked with impression management to appear as both 'human' and 'professional' in the eyes of athletes. To elite coaches, gaining respect from athletes is essential to be able to influence persons and situations, while such respect is usually given based on a perception of the coach as a professionally and socially competent leader (Potrac, Jones & Armour, 2002). Therefore, humour has to be used in combination with other competencies, and in reasonable accordance with the expectations directed towards the coach role to achieve such a goal. Using the right forms of humour in the right situations can be seen as a vital part of the social competence needed for coaches to appear as trustworthy leaders.

The balance between authenticity and performance is related to seemingly contradictory demands: on the one hand coaches are 'actors' who perform a role which on the other hand they need to 'be themselves' to appear trustworthy before athletes. This means that coaches' *performances*, in a Goffmanian sense, has to be perceived as something else than 'pure acting' to have the intended effect. Athletes, as humans in general, trust 'true' persons and mistrust manipulative behaviour. Therefore, successful performances are typically viewed as authentic and well adapted to the situation at hand. When coaches themselves note that 'the best coaches would make good actors (Jones, *et al.*, 2004: 139), it is worth emphasizing that good actors manage to present reliable holistic figures. To coaches, this implies that the humour they display should be consistent with the perceived image of the coach 'as a person'.

The performance should be perceived as authentic. Hence, since joking behaviour does not come naturally for everyone, it might be better for some to select other ways of behaviour to influence situations. However, if forms of humour are included in coaches' general repertoire, there should be no reason to always suppress it in order to present a persistent 'serious' coaching front, considering the potential benefits humorous exchanges bring.

Concluding remarks

Sports coaching is complex and multi-faceted. Humour helps, but it is far from enough. To establish humour as a relevant aspect of sports coaching is not to propose a radically new way of coaching. Rather than introducing humour as the point of departure, the intention of the paper has been to increase the awareness of the phenomenon and its potential within this field of practice. The paper has demonstrated that Scandinavian elite sport coaches are aware of humour's significance in the context which they operate. It has also shown that they – to different extent and in various ways – apply humour themselves as part of their respective coaching performances. On this basis, we believe that humour deserves further attention as a valuable tool in orchestrating coaching processes. Generally, it is possible to use humour to include or exclude, to support or harm, to empower or suppress, and to exert social control or to lose it. Having 'bright' as well as 'dark' sides, humour should be taken seriously by coaches and researchers trying to understand the social nature of sports coaching.

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