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**“Champions are Built in the Off Season”: An Exploration of High School Coaches’
Memorable Messages**

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Abstract

This study explored memorable messages that former high-school athletes recalled their coaches delivering. Respondents were asked via a survey questionnaire to recall a memorable message and to describe the context in which the message was delivered. Qualitative survey questionnaire responses were analyzed using constant comparative methodology. Results indicated that coaches' memorable messages displayed several related themes, which included: challenge/motivation, life lessons, responsibility, physical toughness, regret/reflection, work ethic and sacrifice, and instruction.

**“Champions are Built in the Off Season”:
An Exploration of High School Coaches' Memorable Messages**

The coach-athlete relationship is an under explored yet significant social relationship that communication scholars only recently have begun to examine (Kassing & Infante, 1999; Turman, 2001, 2003a, 2003b; Turman & Schrodt, 2004). Within this fundamental relationship coaches stand to influence players considerably by filling a leadership role that encapsulates both support and instruction (Smith & Smoll, 1990; Turman, 2001; Turman & Schrodt, 2004; Zhang & Jenson, 1997). Effective coaches shape athletes' self-perceptions and motivation (Black & Weiss, 1992), monitor athletes for burnout (Raedeke, Lunney, & Venables, 2002), and help athletes cope with anxiety (Ryska & Yin, 2000). Athletes in turn look to coaches for training and instruction (Turman, 2001).

Along with providing social support and instruction coaches play a significant role in producing a motivational climate (Charbonneau, Barling, & Kelloway, 2001; Hansen, Gilbert, & Hamel, 2003; Pensgaard & Roberts, 2002; Turman, 2000b). In the process of motivating youth athletes coaches face the challenge of balancing criticism and encouragement as well as performance and enjoyment (Pensgaard & Roberts, 2002). Coaches use various motivational strategies including direct positive reinforcement, verbally challenging behavior (as opposed to character), and physically challenging athletes (Hansen et al., 2003). Athletes report preferring positive, immediate, encouraging, and evaluative feedback, that is reinforcing and rewarding and that demonstrates social support (Dwyer & Fischer, 1990; Sinclair & Vealey; 1989; Smith & Smoll, 1990; Weiss & Friedrichs, 1986).

Thus, coaches act as social support for athletes and are expected to give verbal feedback on ability, expectations, and duties performed (Martin, Dale, & Jackson, 2001; Mavi & Sharpe, 2000; Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001; Solomon, 1998; Summers, 1991). However, the degree to which coaches do this competently varies. Findings indicate that coaches used different goal setting strategies than their athletes and tended to rate their strategies as more effective than the athletes did (Weinberg, Burke, & Jackson, 1997). There also is evidence to suggest that coaches set unreasonable standards for their athletes (Huddleston & Garvin, 1995) and that less responsive coaching and threatening punishment occur more readily when increased competition and substandard performance are present (Liukkonen, Laakso, & Telama, 1996; Miles & Greenberg, 1993). To counter these trends Mavi and Sharpe (2000) recommended that coaches continually monitor and revise expectations during practice. Thus, coaches have the capacity and opportunity to influence youth athletes, but will vary in their ability and competence to do so. One way in which this variability could manifest is through the expression of memorable messages.

As communicative performances memorable messages represent a socializing force (Stohl, 1986). Knapp, Stohl, and Reardon (1981) define memorable messages as verbal statements "which may be remembered for extremely long periods of time and which people perceive as a major influence on the course of their lives" (p. 27). Additionally, such messages are usually brief oral commands that prescribe rules of conduct (Knapp et al., 1981). Communication scholars have examined memorable messages with regard to organizational socialization (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Stohl, 1986), health communication (Ford & Ellis, 1998; Keeley, 2004), aging (Holladay, 2002), and as guides to self assessment (Ellis & Smith, 2004; Smith & Ellis, 2001; Smith, Ellis, & Yoo, 2001). Research indicates that older people viewed as authority figures tend to provide memorable messages (Holladay, 2002; Keeley, 2004; Knapp et al., 1981), including higher status and longer tenured employees (Stohl, 1986), trainers and

managers (Barge & Schlueter, 2004), and teachers and parents (Ellis & Smith, 2004). Research also reveals that the context in which memorable messages occur shapes their thematic content (Ford & Ellis, 1998; Kelley, 2004). Ford and Ellis (1998), for example, reported themes of support and nonsupport that emerged from nurses' accounts, whereas Keeley (2004) discovered that themes such as religious faith and spirituality were present in memorable messages expressed during final conversations between loved ones. We suspect that memorable messages expressed within the coach-athlete dyad also will display context appropriate themes. Exploring these themes provides a better sense of the ways in which coaches communicatively provide feedback, offer social support, and foster a motivational climate. The following research question guides this investigation:

RQ: What themes are apparent in high-school coaches' memorable messages?

Method

Sample

A sample ($N = 75$) of former high-school athletes participated in this study. Respondents reported having played a variety of sports that included basketball ($n = 21$), football ($n = 18$), track and field ($n = 8$), baseball ($n = 6$), volleyball ($n = 6$), softball ($n = 4$), soccer ($n = 4$), cross country ($n = 3$), wrestling ($n = 2$), ice hockey ($n = 1$), tennis ($n = 1$), and water polo ($n = 1$). The amount of years respondents played ranged from a minimum of one year to a maximum of four years ($M = 3.42$, $SD = .92$).

Approximately 61 % of the participants were male, whereas 39% were female. The age of former high-school athletes participating in the study ranged from 18 to 43 years ($M = 21.90$, $SD = 4.69$). Approximately 63% of the respondents reported their ethnicity as Caucasian, 16% as Hispanic, 13% as African American, 1% as Asian, 1% as Native American, and 6% as something other than the choices provided.

Data Collection Procedure. A survey questionnaire was used to collect data. A combination of a purposive and network sampling were used to recruit participants. Respondents solicited were either undergraduate students, acquaintances of the researchers, or participants recommended by fellow participants. Respondents were contacted directly by the researchers who provided them with the survey instrument. One hundred eleven questionnaires were administered and 76 were returned for a response rate of 68%.

Instrumentation. Although traditionally memorable messages have been collected via survey interviews (Ford & Ellis, 1998; Keeley, 2004; Knapp et al., 1981; Stohl, 1986) survey questionnaires have been used to solicit memorable messages in recent research (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Holladay, 2002; Smith & Ellis, 2001; Smith et al., 2001). The first page of the survey provided the definition of a memorable message (Knapp et al., 1981) and gave examples that were not related to sport. The questionnaire then asked respondents to reflect on their high-school athletic experience and to recall and provide a memorable message offered by a high-school coach. Additionally, respondents were asked to describe what they believed the meaning of the message was intended to be and the context in which the message was delivered (e.g., a championship game, practice, etc.). Finally, respondents provided demographic data about themselves and their sports experience.

Data Analysis. After an initial inspection of completed and returned questionnaires one was excluded from data analysis because the respondent did not provide a memorable message.

The remaining surveys questionnaires produced a total of 75 memorable messages for analysis. We chose to use constant comparative methodology to explore themes apparent in coaches' memorable messages. This involves developing and reworking categories as the data are read and coded instead of having categories prepared beforehand (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Emergent categories were constantly developed, condensed, and refined until such categories existed that were inclusive of the data. The categories are not intended to be mutually exclusive, as considerable overlap exists between them. Both authors reviewed all messages then discussed emergent themes until reaching consensus regarding the content and nature of themes. Seven categories emerged to represent the different types of coaches' memorable messages that former high-school athletes recalled. Each of the seven themes is discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Results and Interpretation

Challenge/Motivation. Challenge/motivation memorable messages ($n = 18$) called for players' internal character assessment and self-reflection. Coaches appeared to use these messages to (re)frame the challenges their athletes, teams, or both faced. For example, a basketball player recounted how his coach questioned the team's poor early season performance by asking if they were nervous. When the team responded affirmatively the coach replied:

Those are not nerves you feel. It's fear.

This memorable message challenged players by eliminating nervousness as an excuse for playing poorly. A similar motivational strategy was evident in the example a football player provided, whereby his coach told the team during halftime of a game they were losing:

The only one who can tell you that you can't do something is you. And you don't have to listen.

In this instance the coach frames the challenge as a personal decision the players must make. Thus, challenge/motivation messages called for self-reflection and assessment as a means to motivate athletes to meet specific challenges.

Life Lessons. This grouping of memorable messages ($n = 16$) although directly applicable to sport also spoke to life beyond sport. They illustrated how coaches used memorable messages to demonstrate that sport can have implications for how athletes conduct themselves outside the sporting context, in life in general. For example, a former basketball player on a team which repeatedly provoked fights recalled his coach firmly preaching to the team:

Every battle isn't worth fighting.

In another example a coach told players:

Someone is going to win. Someone is going to lose. If you lose, pick yourself up, dust yourself off and go back at it again. This is life.

Here the coach notes for players that the same competitive aspects apparent in sport generalize to life and therefore that perseverance in sport, like life, is necessary.

Both of these memorable messages transcend sport and apply to greater lessons in life. What distinguishes this grouping of messages is their capacity to be cross-contextual. They could be offered readily in other settings (e.g., at home, work, etc.).

Responsibility. Responsibility memorable messages ($n = 10$) incorporated the theme of responsibility to oneself and to the team. A former basketball player remembered her coach saying:

Don't be sorry, make it better.

This memorable message bluntly evoked responsibility on a personal level calling for the player to be held directly accountable. Responsibility memorable messages also illustrated the need for players to be accountable and responsible to their team and teammates. A former basketball player recalled a couple of teammates getting in trouble for "screwing around". In response the coach made the entire team, except for those in trouble, run and declared:

The wrong doings of the few affect the many.

In this case responsibility was tied, as the player recalled, to "team self regulation" in which players were reminded that they should be accountable to one another.

Work Ethic and Sacrifice. Work ethic and sacrifice memorable messages ($n = 9$) summoned commitment and persistence from athletes. This grouping resembles challenge/motivation messages, but differs in that it reflects an emphasis on specific statements about expectations with regard to work and effort. Work ethic and sacrifice memorable messages spoke to the need for persistence and commitment during practice. For example:

Practice makes permanent.

Perfect practice makes perfect.

The messages rely on the notion that desirable results are achieved through working hard and sacrificing during practice sessions. Similar messages though emphasized the need for commitment and effort to continue throughout the season (e.g., "We'll be here everyday unless it snows"), in the off season (e.g., "Champions are built in the off season") and in general (e.g., "If you want to be the best, outwork the best"). Thus, work ethic and sacrifice memorable messages varied temporally by placing emphasis on either practice, the entire season, the off season or work and sacrifice in general.

Regret/Reflection: Memorable messages that evoked feelings of actual or potential regret as the result of substandard performance or unrealized potential comprised the regret/reflection category ($n = 8$). A former volleyball player remembered her coach telling the team:

Play every game as if it's the most important game of the season.

Similarly, a former football player remembered that at halftime during games in which his team was losing his coach would say:

After all is said and done, you need to be able to look yourself in the mirror and know you have left it all on the field.

These messages are underpinned with the notion that athletes will regret the outcome and their performance if they do not play optimally.

Physical Toughness. Memorable messages that focused on physical toughness ($n = 8$) were explicit with regard to tolerating pain and working through discomfort. These messages served to normalize pain and discomfort as part of the sporting experience. A former football player recalled an incredibly vigorous practice in which several players fell down from exhaustion. His coach yelled:

You'll pass out before you die, don't stop when your body tells you to.

When deciding that he would wrestle injured and against doctor's orders a former high-school wrestler reported that he recalled his coach's declaration:

Pain is temporary, pride is forever.

These examples illustrate that coaches' memorable messages at times confirmed the commonly held expectation that tolerance for pain and physical toughness are part and parcel of the sporting experience.

Instructional. In a few instances memorable messages related to sport-specific instruction and direction ($n = 6$). Instructional memorable messages contained specific directions as to how to perform a task related to one's given sport. For example, a former baseball player remembered the message his coach constantly offered:

Keep your elbows down, your hands in, and swing through.

The coach's message instructs the athlete on specific play behavior (i.e., batting). The athlete recounted hearing this message everyday in practice indicating that the messages became memorable primarily through repetition. Instructional memorable messages then appear to be recalled most likely because they were heard repeatedly, rather than because they contained uniquely memorable characteristics.

Discussion

Challenge/motivation and life lessons memorable messages were recalled most often confirming that coaches act as motivators and provide social support for youth athletes (Charbonneau et al., 2001; Hansen et al., 2003; Turman, 2001). Interestingly, instructional memorable messages were recalled least often by athletes even though previous research indicates that coaches are expected to train and instruct players on specific tasks (Smith & Smoll, 1990; Turman & Schrodt, 2004; Zhang & Jenson, 1997). This is perhaps due to the fact that instructional messages become memorable through repetition rather than message specific or context specific features, indicating that other coaching tasks (i.e., providing social support, creating a motivational climate) are more readily achieved through the use of memorable messages.

Considerable variation exists in the emergent themes revealed here including topics we would expect to uncover in the coach-athlete relationship (e.g., instruction, challenge/motivation, work ethic and sacrifice), but also topics that transcend sport (e.g., responsibility, life lessons, regret/reflection). The later grouping affirms the potential for sport to be an important socializing context, whereby communication is the primary mechanism by which this is achieved (Kassing, et al., 2004; Mean, 2001). Taken together the memorable messages reveal something about the experience of high-school athletes. Besides motivation and instruction, memorable messages evoked growing up as responsible, tough, and hard-working person with no regrets. Paradoxically memorable messages called for high-school athletes to be responsible, while at times acting irresponsibly (i.e., pushing themselves to a point of physical exhaustion, playing through injury and pain).

Future research should continue to explore the nature of coaches' memorable messages attending particularly to why and how messages become memorable, the implications of such messages beyond the context of sport, and how athletes resolve some of the inherent paradoxes contained within coaches' memorable messages. The current findings add to the growing body of communication research assessing the coach-athlete relationship and also extend the well-developed legacy of memorable messages research. In so doing it signals the need for similar work, work that brings communication theory and practice to under-explored contexts such as sport.

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