



“Three Years Tops” How long can you effectively coach an athlete?

by Sean McCann, USOC Sport Psychologist

I believe coaches need to move every three years if they are going to be effective. Athletes get tired of listening to the same voice. I’m not sure I’m going to make it three years.

Larry Bird on coaching NBA Players (in his autobiography: Bird Watching)

At the U.S. Olympic Committee, from Olympic Quad to Quad, we see coaching stability in some sports, athlete stability in other sports, and complete turnover of athletes and coaches in a few sports. Generally, however, we see more and more athletes have the ability to stay in Olympic sports into their late 20’s and even 30’s. Given this increasing longevity in Olympic sports, we are starting to test the Larry Bird hypothesis that coaches need to move on in order to stay effective. The central question is: when does a stable coach/athlete relationship turn from a positive to a negative?

WHEN DOES STABILITY BECOME A NEGATIVE?

In preparation for writing this Mind Games column, I talked to Olympic Coaches and athletes about the Larry Bird Quote. I asked a variety of informal questions. Is it true? Is it only true for professional athletes? Are there different timelines depending upon the nature of the sport? Can some coaches pull off a long-term relationship with an athlete, while others cannot?

In general, Olympic coaches and athletes agreed that stability and longevity were very helpful. They felt that Larry Bird’s NBA-based timeline was much too short. As one coach said, “with elite athletes, you are just starting to figure out how best to work with them after two-three years.” Certainly there are many examples of excellent long term Olympic relationships, such as Michael Johnson and his

coach Clyde Hart. On the other hand, there was agreement that change and development in the coach/athlete relationship is inevitable and positive. And there was agreement that you have to know when it isn’t working.

HERE ARE SOME OF THE RESPONSES:

“Change is good. Something has to change, if you are in any relationship for a long period of time. It may be that the nature of the relationship is what changes, rather than a change in coaches.”

Older Olympic veteran athlete with history of many coaches.

“I believe there is a ‘shelf life’ for coach effectiveness with athletes. I think three years is too quick though. In our sport, you are just hitting the sweet spot at three years. I think six-seven years is where you see things getting stale.”

Olympic coach for multiple countries.

“Two Olympic cycles is the limit. After that you need a change. Both of you need a change.”

Medal winning Olympic athlete.

“I know some that have worked for over a decade. But I have seen others hang on too long simply because they were comfortable.”

Olympic athlete and coach.



FACTORS IN SUCCESSFUL LONG-TERM COACHING RELATIONSHIPS:

The Age of the Athlete

“In our sport (a judged sport with personal coaches), athletes ‘shop’ for coaches anyway. It’s pretty rare for there to be a problem of too long a relationship. Usually, you have a hard time hanging on to athletes for three or four years. I have to say though, it is hard to coach an athlete first at age 11 and coach him or her all the way to 18. There are so many changes going on, and the athlete rebels against you, just like their parents”

One consistent sentiment from both athletes and coaches is that the long-term relationship is much more difficult if the athlete starts off very young. Based on my experience in working with coaches of adolescent athletes, I would have to agree. It’s not that the same coach cannot work successfully with both young athletes and adult athletes, but that the elite adolescent athlete tends to go through so much turmoil. It is very hard for the coach not to get caught in the crossfire of competing interests (parents, boyfriends and girlfriends, school, career, experimentation with various diversions, etc.).

It takes a skillful coach to be able to be tough enough, patient enough, and supportive enough, to shepherd an athlete through adolescence while still pushing the steep improvement curve of an adolescent athlete. The intensity needed in this effort tends to tire both coach and athlete enough so that separation can seem like a good idea, even if results continue to be good.

EMOTIONAL NEEDS/PRACTICAL NEEDS

“It’s tough, because you need to like each other to work together for a long time, but to be a good coach, you need to be tough with your athletes sometimes. It takes a certain personality match for that to work over the long haul.” Veteran Coach

“Our key is to have a coaching staff rather than just one coach. Athletes sometimes just need to hear it from somebody different for them to really hear it. With just one coach, you can see the athlete’s eyes glaze over sometimes” Olympic Head Coach

One key to longevity seems to be a certain amount of realism about the nature of coach athlete interactions. This seems to be easier for older coaches who have worked through a variety of relationships, both good and bad. Younger coaches tend to believe they can be both friend and mentor, prodder and supporter, good cop/bad cop, with every athlete. Older coaches know that there are limits to this, because every coach-athlete relationship is a transaction, with emotional and practical calculations being made along the way. How can you be a friend when you are evaluating and choosing who gets to compete? How can you be fair if you favor one athlete over another? How can you remain the image of the perfect coach when athletes see you on your bad days as well as your good?



Experience teaches coaches that one key to longevity is knowing when to try harder to convince an athlete to make a change versus when to let the athlete figure it out on their own. When there are multiple coaches on a team, allowing another person on the staff to make the attempt can often be the best solution. Larger coaching staffs have found that sometimes a new voice (a new assistant coach, for example) saying the same thing can have much more impact than one coach trying to repeat the same message.

Being secure enough to give athletes a certain amount of freedom is difficult, but it helps when you have learned that trying to hold on tighter usually backfires. The coaches of star athletes in individual sports have the hardest time with this, since the reputation of the coach rises with the star, and the impulse to take ownership is hard to resist. Coaches' self-confidence, experience, and emotional distance from the athlete are sometimes the only antidotes to the often poisonous pull of a superstar athlete.

In Olympic sport, it is sometimes difficult to determine who has the most power, the athlete or the coach, but it is clear that both parties have practical and emotional needs. Many coaches have a hard time admitting that part of the coaching relationship is emotional and that coaches have an emotional need, similar to their athletes. As important as the practical issues are, many of the challenges to long term coaching relationships are emotional in nature.

WHAT IS THE POINT OF NO RETURN? WHEN SHOULD COACHES AND ATHLETES END THEIR RELATIONSHIP?

RESULTS-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING

In sports, as in most competitive environments, the bottom line is the bottom line. The most common reason for an end to an athlete-coach relationship is disappointment with results. Although a result-oriented assessment of the relationship is not always the fairest measure (what if the coach has done a terrific job with a less talented athlete, or what if injuries or other variables have compromised results?), results are the most powerful measure of success. Results can rescue a "bad" relationship and a lack of results can overwhelm a "good relationship. As one coach said to me "look, if the athlete isn't getting better for a while, it's time to take a look at whether the coaching is a factor." One problem, however, is that there is rarely agreement on how much progress is happening, how fast it is happening, or how much progress is possible.

One of the most common problems is the unrealistic expectations and hopes of a parent who knows a lot less about elite sport than they think.

This issue is most challenging in individual Olympic sports where athletes hire their coaches. Examples include figure skating, gymnastics, tennis, and track & field. In these sports, I have witnessed coaches, athletes, and athletes' families engage in painful and sometimes brutal struggles as the different parties argue over why things aren't better. One of the most common problems is the unrealistic expectations and hopes of a parent who knows a lot less about elite sport than they think. As a figure skating coach described it to me one time, "You walk a fine line between encouraging the parents and creating a monster! You may say 'In five years she can be a champion,' and all they hear is 'she can be a champion', and they wonder 'If she's so good, what is taking so long. Maybe it's the coaching.'"

ARE THERE SOME RELATIONSHIPS THAT JUST DON'T WORK?

One problem when assessing coach-athlete relationships is that coaches often have a hard time admitting that they aren't a great coach for every athlete. Again, this tends to be a bigger problem for young coaches. Veteran coaches have received enough feedback to know that sometimes the "fit" between coach and athlete isn't quite right. It's not that the coach isn't excellent, or that the athlete isn't talented, but rather that circumstances or personality interfere with an effective coaching relationship. Specific examples of a bad "fit" I have seen in the last two Olympic Quads, include:

- 1) The perfectionist athlete and perfectionist coach, who worry and tinker themselves right out of a good result.
- 2) The hard-working coach who cannot control her anger with a remarkably talented and lazy athlete.
- 3) Image issues. Sometimes a coach is too much like dad (or mom), and the athlete cannot get past that.
- 4) Coaches who excel by pushing and challenging, and who can't back off with a more fragile athlete.
- 5) Athletes who "need" to be special, working with a coach who refuses to elevate one athlete above another.
- 6) Fearful athletes who work with a coach who focuses primarily on avoiding mistakes.
- 7) A talented but emotionally volatile coach who says angry and hurtful things to athletes and/or working with an athlete with low self-confidence.

Given these and countless other issues of fit between coach and athlete, some coaches (such as NCAA coaches with a four year window for coaching each athlete) have found it is easier to look for and recruit an athlete that they know they are a good fit with, rather than attempt to change who they are and how they coach. Certainly, longevity in the coach-athlete relationship takes less effort if you are spending most of your energy on results and less on relationship repairs.



WHAT TYPE OF COACH CAN MAINTAIN A LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP?

COMMITMENT TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT- BEING A LIFE-LONG LEARNER.

Most of the best coaches I have had the opportunity to work with shared one trait. They always felt they had something to learn. Despite status and recognition and even fame, they keep turning over rocks looking for a new piece of information, a new technique, a way to improve. Relentless curiosity, a love of coaching, and a love of learning drives these coaches. These coaches are not necessarily the happiest or most satisfied people in the coaching world, but they excel.

These coaches tend to have long-term relationships with athletes, in part because their constant changing and improvement means that the relationship never gets stale. These coaches challenge every one around them to improve and show them something. This tends to stimulate competitive athletes.

SELF CONFIDENCE.

Coaches all know how important confidence is for their athletes. Self-confidence is also a critical talent and skill for coaches. One area it has an impact is in maintaining effective long-term relationships. Self-confidence produces

patience. A self-confident coach can convince an athlete to believe in a system or technique change in those months it can take for the change to make things better. A self-confident coach expects the pressure that comes with success. A self-confident coach isn't threatened by other great coaches.

I once worked with a coach who had developed a young athlete into an Olympian. She constantly doubted whether she knew enough to be coaching at this level. Despite the obvious success of her athlete, she was always worried that the athlete would leave her for another coach. She was so anxious about this, that she constantly communicated her doubt about the relationship. Eventually, the athlete did leave her coach, and when I asked her about it later, she told me that the "paranoia" just got old.

One final area where self-confidence is a critical aid in long term coaching relationships is the willingness to challenge an athlete. Some coaches of Olympic athletes have so much respect for an athlete's talent that they let the athlete call the shots. They don't want to make the athlete angry by pushing them when they are tired, so they back off. Eventually, the unwillingness to challenge an athlete will result in poorer performances. While it is easier for a coach when an athlete likes them, a coach needs to be confident enough about his program to push, even when a star athlete disagrees.

REALISM

Coaches who manage to have effective long term relationships with athletes tend to be realists about sport and about human nature. One of my favorite stories about coaching captures this realism. I heard this story attributed to Scotty Bowman, the long-time National Hockey League coach who coached teams to numerous Stanley Cup Championships. Allegedly, Coach Bowman was asked by an admiring young college coach:

"How do you get them to listen to you? They make millions of dollars a year, and they could just ignore you."
Coach Bowman replied "Have you ever held a bird in your hands?"

When the coach said no, Coach Bowman continued "Well, the key is just the right amount of pressure. Too much pressure can crush their tiny bones, and too little pressure, and they will fly away. But no matter how much pressure, one thing is certain, they will definitely crap on your fingers."

Recognition that the coach-athlete relationship requires the occasional clean-up job may help develop the sense of humor and realism needed to weather the storms that are part of any long-term relationship.