

GETTING BETTER AT GETTING BETTER

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Coaches today face different challenges than I did when I started coaching in 1969. In my 48-year coaching career, the world has changed dramatically, but now it is changing at a faster rate than ever before. More data is being created, and faster, with 2.5 being produced each day! That is the equivalent of 250 Libraries of Congress of new information being created each day. Add the bombardment of social media and instant communication, and there seems to be less time to reflect.

We cannot ignore these societal changes. Some may make our lives better, but we also cannot do what we have always done. Coaches must adapt – not by compromising standards and lowering expectations, but by being more professional and reaffirming values that can be learned through sport.

As coaches, we are change agents. Therefore, we must lead change, not follow or react to change. We must learn how to learn better to get better at getting better. We must get better every day. That is the supreme challenge we face today as coaches.

George Leonard once said, “mastery is not about reaching perfection, but rather comes from maintaining a particular mindset as you move along the path of improvement in building your skills or overcoming challenges in any endeavor.” Getting better is about the path to mastery. Forty-eight years into my coaching journey, I am convinced that our biggest gains in sport – as well as the so-called marginal gains – will come from how we get better at getting better: how we improve our teaching, how we make practice and training more meaningful, and how effective we are as difference makers. Personally, this a major focus for the rest of my career.

Somehow, with the embrace of technology and social media, we have lost our understanding of fundamental pedagogical principles. The coaching process has a deep foundation in pedagogy, supported by science, forged in experience and tested in the competitive arena. Your classroom as a coach is the field, court, track, gym or pool. As a coach, you are a teacher. Coaching is teaching! I fear we have allowed technology to replace the personal element of coaching and teaching. Coaching is a high-touch process of connecting with the athlete to impart the necessary information in a manner they can use.

We must recognize that coaching is a creative process. What differentiates the good from the great coach is the ability to see the same athlete, the same skill, the same movement and see what others cannot or have not seen yet. Coaching is constant iteration, prototyping, tinkering to get it right for the athlete. The coaching process is not a reductionist, paint-by-the-numbers algorithm. A creative coaching process recognizes that the body is smart.

Creative coaching begins with instilling a foundation of basics in the athlete that is then built upon. Once foundations are established in an athlete, the coaching process continues with progressively more difficult and challenging movement problems for the athlete to solve. The creative coaching process trusts that the athlete will be able to “figure it out,” building their personal answers to movement puzzles on the foundation of basics. The final solution that the athlete comes to may not meet the criteria of “perfect technique” or ideal training, but it works for that athlete. Getting it to work is the measure of good coaching. Use all your senses and follow your instincts.

The fastest way for a coach to get better and become more creative is to get smarter. Great coaches are learners. Nobody is holding you back. You can learn and get smarter. The learning can be formal or informal, but the key is to keep learning and growing. Arie de Geus said it best when he said, “probably the only sustainable competitive advantage we have is the ability to learn faster than the opposition.”

Know where to learn. Get beyond the hype and marketing and look for substantive material. Be careful of evidence-based claims. Ask yourself, where is the evidence? Is there practice to back up the evidence? What is the why? What to do and how to do it are just not good enough. You must be able to reproduce it – to apply it. Always default to training principles and do not forget common sense. Be informed by science but not driven by it. Coaching is a careful blend of art and science. Learn to trust your instincts. If your instincts and experience tell you something is not right, then follow your instincts.

Expand your horizons. The best coaches go outside their coaching specialty and outside of sport to seek continual improvement and find new ideas. I will never forget asking Eddie Jones, the head coach of England Rugby, where he got an idea. His answer was quite revealing: the Belgium women’s field hockey team! Some may ask what that has to do with rugby. Eddie made the connection to make him and his team better. That is why he is a great coach; he leaves no stone unturned in his pursuit of being the best. We must recognize that the coaching journey parallels the athlete journey – trying, failing, getting up again and moving forward. As we grow and get better, our athletes grow and get better.

Great coaches who epitomize coaching excellence innovate; they are open to new ideas and are constantly learning. The coaches who are average imitate. They do what they have always done, and they do not take risks or try anything new for fear of failure. Do not be afraid to fail. Repeating the same coaching process every year – in my experience -- will lead to staleness and lack of success in the long term.

I believe the answer to the most important questions in coaching lies in continuous professional development. Continuous professional development is not just going to coaching clinics or symposiums. It is part of the daily routine of coaching. How much time do you devote each day and each week toward your professional development?

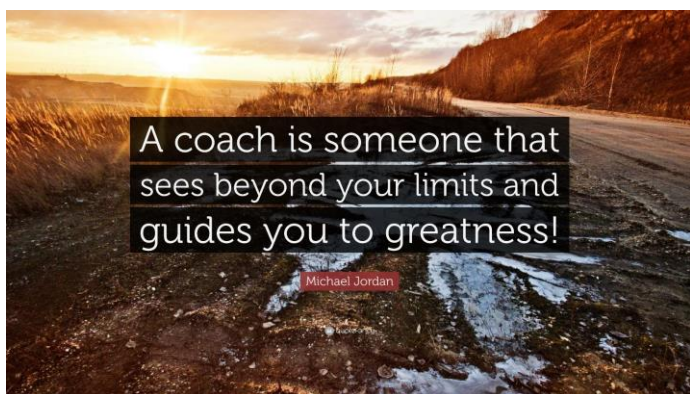
Here is what some of the best have done. Juan Carlos Osorio, after being pushed to resign by the New York Red Bulls, immediately went and spent six weeks at FC Barcelona with Pep Guardiola and then spent six more weeks at Bayern Munich with Louis Van Gaal. He did this to get his career back on track and to get better. Now he is recognized as one of the most cerebral tacticians in the game and is NOW the manager of Mexico’s men’s national soccer team. Joe Vigil, Ph.D., is a great track and field coach and mentor to many, including me. He does an hour of professional development reading each morning at 5:00 am. He has been coaching for close to 70 years and is now 89 years old! Nort Thornton, one of the greatest swim coaches ever, shares ideas from books we have read and challenges other’s ideas on training on a periodic basis. He has been coaching for more than 60 years and is in his late 70s.

**Be the kind
of leader
that you
would
follow.**



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Continuous professional development will help you answer the questions that matter most: what do you know, what do you not know, what is your plan to reconcile what you do not know with what you do know, where do you learn, who do learn from, how do you learn, how do you communicate and are you communicating effectively? Let the examples above inspire you to remember you are never too old or too knowledgeable to keep learning. Keep learning and keep growing. Always remember we coach people, not athletes or sports. We must emphasize the process, not the outcome. Continuous professional development is the way to model those tenets, as well as model the principle of lifetime improvement to all people we coach and influence.



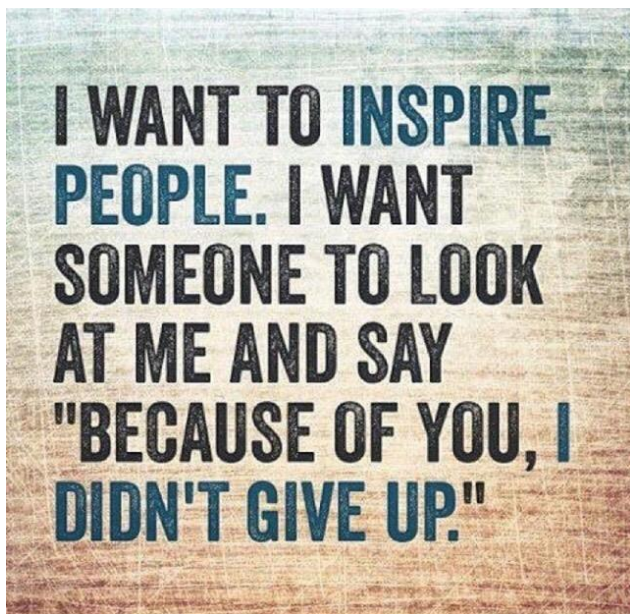
New ideas will arise to challenge you. Just when you think you have it figured out, something new will come along. For me, it is mastering technologies and then figuring out which will make me better and more productive. The only way you can do that is through continual professional development. Christopher Morley said it best: “read, every day, something no one else is reading. Think, every day, something no one else is thinking. Do, every day, something no one else would be silly enough to do. It is bad for the mind to be always part of unanimity.”

Never stop learning and challenging yourself to get better. Stay ahead of the curve and be proactive. Do not copy and follow, but rather, innovate and lead. Get out of your comfort zone.

Regardless of how many years you have been coaching, always approach what you do with a beginner’s mind (“Shoshin” in Japanese). Never lose this perspective, because it is full of possibilities. It helps to see with a child’s eyes. It is seeing what is actually there, as opposed to seeing what we think is there. Erase confirmation bias. Expect nothing, and you will be surprised with what you see.

- ❖ Getting better, step by step –some practical pointers:
- ❖ Have a clearly defined vision and mission statement. Turn the words into action and live them in coaching and in life. The vision statement is a statement of purpose; it is why you do what you do. The mission statement is a clear description of the route; it is how you will do it.
- ❖ Practice daily self-reflection, and make it a habit. Debrief after every training session. It can be formal or informal; do whatever fits your situation. Keep a journal and answer these questions: What did I plan to do? Did it get done? Was it exceptional, average or good? Why and why not? What do I need to do better next time? Taking time to answer these questions is a simple but effective way to constantly improve.
- ❖ Read everything you can – read books, articles websites and blogs. Learn from anyone you can. Try to have a focus or the theme to direct your reading. Take notes. Discuss your reading with others.
- ❖ Write – keep a journal. Tie this to your self-reflection and debrief. Take notes on your reading and things you hear or read.

- ❖ Do it yourself –try it and feel it. There is no better way to teach a skill than to learn it yourself. That will give you a feel for what the athlete has to do when they are learning.
- ❖ Network & Collaborate –work together with someone. Together is better. Seek diverse opinions and critical evaluation of your work.
- ❖ Find a mentor both in and out of coaching. Find someone who has been there before and is willing to share their success and failures
- ❖ Go outside your sport and outside of sport – go far afield. I have found a wealth of ideas looking at design thinking. Look at the performing arts.
- ❖ Know what you know, and know what you do not know. Be confident, but never be constrained by either.
- ❖ Remember that communication is the essence of good coaching. It is also the cornerstone of getting better. It demands intention and attention: intention that the meaning be shared and attention that it has been shared. Pay attention!
- ❖ Observe – watch good coaches coach, and for that matter, watch bad coaches coach. You can learn what to do and what not to do. Watch and read interviews of coaches.
- ❖ Specialize in being a generalist –get uncomfortable and go outside your area of expertise. Make connections between seemingly unconnected areas. This will allow you to make more diverse connections to deepen, as well as broaden, your knowledge.



- ❖ Practice tech free coaching days.
 - ❖ Leave your iPhone and iPad in the office. Put the Go Pro away.
 - ❖ Stop! Look! Listen! Heighten and sharpen your observational skills. Don't worry about bar speed; watch the lift. Turn off the GPS and watch the athlete move. See how they generate those numbers that you have been gathering.
 - ❖ Throw away the wellness questionnaire and talk to the athletes. Get to know them as people.
 - ❖ Forget the triphasic workout, because all movement involves coordinated eccentric, isometric and concentric muscle action. Just coach! You will be surprised at what you have been missing. Use technology to complement what you do, not to replace it. Know yourself and never forget you are coaching people who run, jump, and throw.
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- ❖ Perfect the eye test – sharpen your powers of observation. See with new eyes. See unfamiliar in the familiar. Know what to look for and what to ignore. Beware of confirmation bias.
 - ❖ As Seattle Seahawks coach Pete Carroll says, "learn from the learner." Who better to learn from than the athletes we are teaching? They are doing it. We can get feedback that will make both coach and athlete better.

- ❖ As Frank Dick said, practice the Four R's daily
 - ◇ Reason – know why are you doing what you are doing.
 - ◇ Reality – know exactly what you are doing.
 - ◇ Reflection – know what did you learn from what you did.
 - ◇ Response – know and take appropriate action on what you will do differently.
- ❖ Always remember it always comes back to the basics:
 - ◇ Learn the basics.
 - ◇ Understand the basics.
 - ◇ Master the basics.
 - ◇ Teach the basics.
 - ◇ Execute the basics flawlessly.
 - ◇ Never stray far from the basics.

From your first day of coaching you can get better. After all, this is what we expect from our athletes. Why should we expect anything less of ourselves? Accept the challenge and start getting better at getting better right away.

Below is a list of resources on getting better at getting better that I have found useful. This is by no means exhaustive, but rather primarily contains books I have in my library that I have read. Use it as a starting point. I am now in the process of re-reading some of these books and going through them all to review the annotations and underlines to put together an action plan of principles that we can all use as coaches. It is going to take some time, and I am interested in hearing from you about other resources and ideas in this area.

Finally, we will all get better at getting better by sharing. Please reach out and connect.

The first thing is to
LOVE YOUR SPORT.
Never do it to please someone else.
IT HAS TO BE YOURS.

peggy fleming

Vern is considered the founding father of functional sports training. He has worked on product development, athlete and coach development on the national and international levels, with both amateur and professional teams and athletes. He has lectured and consulted internationally and has written extensively in the areas of physical training with a wide array of sports. To learn more about Vern, visit www.Gambetta.com.