

It takes two:

Reflections on a coaching relationship

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As the start of the Games draws closer it has made me think about the relationship I had with my coach. Not just the impact this had on my swimming career but also how it has helped shape who I am today. Ian Armiger first became my coach when I was 12 years old and, with the exception of one year, continued to be my coach until I retired in 2004. Throughout our time together I competed at numerous European Championships, Commonwealth Games, World Championships and two Olympic Games. Our most successful year was in 2001 when I became World Champion and World Record holder as part of the 4 x 200m freestyle relay. At the time, I took our relationship for granted but as I have begun to coach in the business world I have started to look deeper into this and how it changed and reformed over the years. Over all I would say that Ian and I had a great relationship, which continues to this day, but the one we had when I was a 12 year old was very different to that of my early twenties. Throughout the years my coach acted as a friend, parental figure, advisor, mentor, confidant and

coach and I truly believe it was his ability to adapt the role he played in my life which made our partnership successful.

Research has only recently begun in the area of coach-athlete relationships. However, as we are quickly approaching an event that the whole country has been looking forward to since that momentous day in 2005, more and more people are becoming interested in the often hidden figure who has supported an athlete to be their best. A coach and their athlete are often linked contractually, professionally or voluntarily with a view to achieving set goals and relationship quality is linked to performance success. Why wouldn't we want to know more? An interesting lens through which to view the coaching relationship is provided by the COMPASS model¹. COMPASS identifies seven themes: conflict management, openness, motivation, positivity, advice, support, and social networks (See Figure 1.0). In using the model to reflect on the strengths of my coaching relationship with Ian, I am struck by the importance of the following three factors: (see overleaf)

Figure 1.0



1 – Rhind, Daniel J. A., Jowett, S. Relationship Maintenance Strategies in the Coach-Athlete Relationship: The Development of the COMPASS Model. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, Jan-Mar2010, Vol. 22 Issue 1, p106-121.

MOTIVATION

This is about the factors that influence how motivated the coach and athlete are to work together and pursue an ongoing relationship. Examples which fit under this dimension are effort, fun and ability.

At the beginning of each training cycle I would meet with Ian to discuss the goals we would be setting for that particular season. Swimming can be quite a lonely sport as up to 25+ hours a week can be spent swimming up and down a pool staring at the black line beneath you and whilst the outcome goal of the season was always very motivational to me, for example to be selected for Team GB, getting up at 4.43am in the middle of winter to dive into cold water could be hard. This is where our planning would come into effect. Each training cycle would be broken down into individual weeks and then broken down further into what the focus of each day would be. Ian would then help my motivation even further by highlighting the purpose of each session and how this fed into the overall goal. I also found him very inspiring. His passion and enthusiasm for anything to do with swimming and getting the best out of his swimmers was contagious and he could make the hardest training sessions that little bit easier to get through.

POSITIVITY

This encompasses three main aspects: adaptability, fairness and dealing with external pressures. The relationship needs to be adaptable in order to meet the preferences of both parties. The relationship needs to be

fair, for example, showing good sportsmanship, and the ability to deal positively with events that are outside of the coach/athlete's sporting life.

I competed in my first Olympic Games only weeks after taking my GCSEs and whilst I have often looked back and thought it was just something that I did, in reflecting on it further for this article I have begun to appreciate the different elements that had to come together to make me a successful student and swimmer. Ian was able to adapt to the unusual circumstances of having such a young successful swimmer who desperately wanted to continue academically as well as in the pool. Many swimmers at the time often put their education second but Ian was 100% behind my decision and that of my family that this couldn't be the case. He took the time to meet with my headmistress and my parents to discuss the other demands on my life and worked out a way of me being able to train whilst accommodating everything else. Session times were changed to give me more time to rest or study and even when I had progressed to university he met with key figures to discuss what impact training camps would have on my studies. This was one of the most important things he could have done for me. There were numerous times when the pressures of studying and training could have become too much resulting in something having to give, but together we managed to get to the end of a successful swimming career whilst studying up to MSc. level.

ADVICE

This was defined as giving opinions on problems encountered by the coach or the athlete, as well as giving and receiving feedback in a positive and open way. This means being able to discuss issues that are directly related to training and competition, praising the athlete/coach where appropriate and being able to give views and instructions designed to improve performance rather than criticise.

In 1998 I was faced with the challenge of deciding which university to go to. On one hand the decision was easy – Ian had taken the role of Director of Swimming at Loughborough University the previous summer and it had always been the plan to join him. However, the British Swimming Performance Director at the time wanted me to go to another university where a new swimming programme was being set up. For me, Loughborough University had always been top of my list; however, I had to contend with knowing that the Performance Director had told me my lottery funding would be discontinued if I chose Loughborough and that in his view I would not have a chance of competing at an Olympics again. For Ian it was simple – I would go to Loughborough and we would prove the performance director wrong! I'm not sure if Ian ever had any doubts about this but whenever I did he gave me so much support and encouragement that by the time the Olympic trials came around there were no doubts that I would be on that team. My coach was there when I needed him to encourage me,

give me advice and provide that unwavering support.

These are just some examples of what made this coaching relationship successful for me, both in terms of process and outcomes. Ultimately, the way we worked together allowed our coaching relationship to evolve and fit the needs and demands of the time. This supported me in some of my greatest achievements and still impacts the way I approach my performance, in particular my coaching, to this day.

THE COACHES VIEWPOINT

Ian Armiger is currently Director of Swimming at Loughborough University and has 30+ years experience as a Head Coach. During this time his swimmers have won medals and broken records at British, Commonwealth, European and World level. He has placed swimmers on five Olympic Teams, making Olympic Finals at two of these Games. A further four of his of his swimmers will be competing this summer.

“As an outstanding athlete and exceptional person, Janine was very coachable and responded well to an evolving coaching style and model...the fit was perfect.

We addressed PROCESS rather than OUTCOME and I would view this process from two standpoints: the PHYSICAL TRAINING ENVIRONMENT and the NON PHYSICAL TRAINING ENVIRONMENT.”

