

Coaching Adults to Get Active: Balancing Knowledge with People Skills



Sports Coach UK Research Team
February 2017

© The National Coaching Foundation, 2017

This document is copyright under the Berne Convention. All rights are reserved. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, electrical, chemical, mechanical, optical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner. Enquiries should be addressed to Coachwise Ltd.

Sports Coach UK is the brand name of The National Coaching Foundation and has been such since April 2001.

Author

John McIlroy

Reviewed by

Craig Blain, Liz Burkinshaw and Beth Thompson

Sports Coach UK
Chelsea Close
Off Amberley Road
Armley
Leeds LS12 4HP

Tel: 0113-274 4802 Fax: 0113-231 9606

Email: coaching@sportscoachuk.org

Website: www.sportscoachuk.org

Patron: HRH The Princess Royal

92575

1 Introduction

Getting more people regularly engaging in sport and physical activity is at the heart of the government's agenda. This includes encouraging those who are inactive to become active and building more resilient habits among those who are less active. Previous research has shown that good coaching can and does increase participation and retention in sport, but much of the research has focused on regular participants in single sport clubs. It is therefore important to understand the views of adults outside sports club settings and explore how coaching might influence their participation.

In the summer of 2016, Sports Coach UK conducted research with adults taking part, or contemplating taking part, in sport or physical activity. These were people from a variety of backgrounds who did not describe themselves as 'sporty' and would fit the Sport England definition of 'mass market' participants¹. Importantly, these were predominantly beginner-level adult participants with different histories, aspirations and fears than regularly active adults. The aim of the research was to understand their perceptions of coaching and how coaching might help them to get and stay active.

This paper presents the key findings from the research and provides some recommendations for coaches, and organisations that recruit, develop and deploy coaches.

1.1 Methodology and context

This report is based on qualitative research with participants who were either taking part in, or thinking about taking part in, sport or physical activity. The research involved three focus groups held in Birmingham, Liverpool and Nottingham with these participants. Focus group participants did not describe themselves as sporty people and fitted the Sport England definition of 'mass market' participants.

Each focus group followed the same structure. Participants were asked to discuss their reasons for taking part in sport or physical activity, their preferences for a coach and their views on the content and delivery of a coached session.

In this report, the term 'coach' is used to describe anyone using coaching skills to help people in sport or physical activity. This could be a coach, leader, activator, fitness instructor or others. In the focus groups, the participants regularly used these terms interchangeably.

¹ In this report, 'mass market' refers to participants who drop in and out of sport or activity, and people who are trying to be active. 'Core market' refers to participants who have a strong affinity for sport and are regular participants. This terminology is in line with Sport England's strategy 'Towards an Active Nation 2016–2021'.

1.2 Structure of the report

The report includes some practical recommendations and top tips for coaches, and organisations that recruit, develop and deploy coaches. It is structured around the following themes of discussion:

2 First Impressions

2.1 Appearance

2.2 Participant expectations around training

2.3 Reflecting on the research

3 Demonstrating Knowledge

3.1 Planning and managing sessions

3.2 Guiding participants

3.3 Reflecting on the research

4 People Skills

4.1 Four skills for adapting sessions to the individual

4.2 Support and encouragement

4.3 Reflecting on the research

5 Summary

Appendix 1 Methodology

2 First Impressions

First impressions count. The appearance and demeanour of a coach can have an influence on a person's decision to get active and stay active. Furthermore, participants have certain expectations about a coach's level of training, experience and qualifications.

2.1 Appearance

Focus group participants were asked to look through a selection of photographs and choose the photographs that represented the type of people they would want to coach a sport or activity session. These photographs were chosen by the researchers to represent a full spectrum of people, from high performance coaches to people in the street with no obvious relationship to coaching.

Although this methodology was primarily used to stimulate a broader discussion about coach behaviour, the analysis showed that participants were making judgements based on appearance. While some participants preferred sporty-looking people, this was not universal, and some participants were put off by 'over-sporty' looks. For other participants, a coach who looked like them was more important.

To summarise, appearance matters, but it matters in different ways to different people. When recruiting coaches for sport or physical activity programmes, there is no one size that fits all.

2.2 Participant expectations around training

Following the discussion about the type of people they would like to lead a session, participants were asked for their views on a coach's level of training, experience and qualifications.

Most participants assumed that a coach was placed in charge of a session because he or she was trained and had acquired some relevant knowledge. However, participants were unsure about how this knowledge should be obtained because they had little knowledge of the range of training and qualifications available. Participants believed that it was the responsibility of the employing organisation to ensure that coaches were suitably trained and qualified. Despite this, some participants felt that overly qualified coaches might be intimidating, too intense or unable to come down to the beginner level of these participants.

One area that all the groups agreed on was the importance of training, particularly for injury prevention. Trained coaches provided some reassurance to those participants who were fearful of injury. One participant commented:

'I would prefer someone with a qualification because, for me, I have bad knees, and I need to know that they can adjust whatever we are doing to support that.'

In one group, a small number of participants stated that the actions of the coach were more important than their level of training.

2.3 Reflecting on the research – first impressions

The box below provides tips on first impressions for coaches, and organisations that deploy coaches.

Findings	Top Tips for Coaches	Top Tips for Organisations
<p>Participants will make an initial judgement on appearance.</p>	<p>Remember that appearance is more than just what you wear, have an awareness of your body language too.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look at the different places that people can ‘see you’ to potentially make a judgement (in person, social media, club website). What image are you giving people? Ask others to give their first impressions too. • Consider the expectations of the group you are coaching. Are they likely to be put off by your appearance? 	<p>Think about the ethos of the programme. Does the appearance of the workforce reflect this?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect data on what people are expecting from the coach before they start and from coaches on how they see themselves. Is there a match? • Gather feedback from your target market on how the workforce is portrayed. Use surveys or talk to people as they leave a session.
<p>Participants expect the coach to be trained although they are unsure what form this should take.</p>	<p>Consider having an online profile where participants can learn about your previous experience and training.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a Facebook profile or web page. <p>Use appropriate references to technical knowledge or experience to reassure people.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain changes in the body after exercise. For example, when participants are breathing heavily after an exercise, explain why it is happening and how to control it. 	<p>Provide regular training and continuing personal development (CPD) opportunities that are related to coaching the appropriate participant groups.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online training, work shadowing and mentoring are all examples of useful training beyond formal qualifications. <p>Provide coaches with information or access to resources to help when coaching participant groups with a high probability of health issues or fear of injury.</p>

3 Demonstrating Knowledge

Participants are more likely to return to a session and stay active if the coach demonstrates relevant knowledge. The focus groups explored participants' expectations of what should happen within a sport/activity session and how this related to coach behaviour. Three themes emerged: planning sessions; managing sessions; and guiding participants.

3.1 Planning and managing sessions

Participants expected that the coach should have a plan for the session, along with a longer-term plan. Participants associated lack of planning with time-wasting:

'There will always need to be some sort of structure, or else you're spending an hour of your time running up and down.'

People management skills were also seen as an important factor, particularly in 'turn up and play' sessions, which involve a more transient movement of people in and out of the group. It is important that the coach can demonstrate authority, when required, to avoid any disruption to the group.

3.2 Guiding participants

One of the main reasons cited by participants for taking part in coached activity was to learn how to do something correctly. One participant commented: 'If you knew what to do, you would have done it at home.' Participants felt the coach provided essential advice on 'where to start, where to stop, how to build up'.

Participants felt that the advice from coaches was particularly useful in helping them progress within their sport/activity. For the participants in this study, progression was linked to avoiding boredom, rather than performance. This is possibly related to the stage of development of these participants. As beginners, they saw progression as being about gaining competence, which they believed opened up more ways to enjoy the activity.

The coach's delivery style was also regarded as important by participants. All groups agreed that any guidance provided by the coach should be sensitive to the needs of each individual within the group.

'They've got to have the skills so when they are teaching that particular person, they're not making them look an idiot at the same time.'

There was recognition among participants that group sessions are made up of people with different levels of experience and ability, and a good coach should be able to adapt accordingly.

'I think if you want to take it up a level, they could. If you didn't want to, they'd take it down. Some people would be bored with just slow pace, some people want a higher pace. So you have to have a coach who can do both.'

3.3 Reflecting on the research – demonstrating knowledge

The box below provides tips on demonstrating knowledge for coaches, and organisations that deploy coaches.

Findings	Top Tips for Coaches	Top Tips for Organisations
<p>Participants expect the coach to have a plan.</p>	<p>Explain what the aims of the session are at the beginning, but always be ready to rearrange plans as situations change.</p> <p>Plan individual sessions that fit into a longer-term plan. After each session, make notes and adapt the long-term plan.</p> <p>Find out about your participants in advance if possible. (For example, are there any health issues you need to be aware of?) This will help with any modifications that you have to make to your session plans.</p>	<p>Provide support and tools to coaches to develop their skills to plan sessions effectively.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide some formal training on planning or link them with an experienced mentor. <p>Allow time for coaches to develop session plans (as well as reflect and amend post-session).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage a reflective conversation after each session. What went well? What did they learn? What would they do differently?
<p>Sometimes the coach will need to be authoritative to manage disruptive behaviour.</p>	<p>Be clear about the identity of the group or session you are delivering so as to manage people's expectations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use appropriate language to explain what will happen in a session. For example, 'We are a slow and social cycling group.' <p>Step back to try to understand reasons behind any disruptive behaviour before addressing it.</p>	<p>Provide coaches with the confidence to handle different situations and reassurance that they will be supported.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider training or provide information on emotional intelligence/soft skills/managing conflict.
<p>More than anything, participants want to avoid getting bored.</p>	<p>Empower participants to shape their own sessions and change activities regularly to keep them fresh.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask participants to add their own variations to games formats. <p>Provide regular feedback to participants, linked to their motivation, to keep them focused.</p>	<p>Encourage a culture of sharing new ideas among coaches.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise and reward creativity that is having a positive impact. <p>Provide networking opportunities for coaches.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a WhatsApp group for coaches.

4 People Skills

Focus group participants were also keen to discuss the personality of the coach and how that impacted on the session and the participants' experience. Two key themes emerged from this section: adapting sessions to the individual; and providing support and encouragement.

4.1 Four skills for adapting sessions to the individual

Focus group participants stressed the importance of the coach being able to understand individuals within the group and adapt sessions accordingly. Four common themes emerged: empathy; listening; being approachable; and awareness.

Empathy involved recognition that other factors may influence a participant's ability to take part in a session. As one participant commented: 'We've all had bad days.' Another participant commented:

'Now it's half-term, my boys start at ten to nine, and that changes everything...Timings are flexible. He notices when I need to change.'

Listening and being approachable are related. Participants reported that they need to feel able and comfortable to ask the coach a question, but that it's also important to feel listened to.

'If you're talking to someone, and you can physically see that they're not really listening to you or taking any notice of you, you're just not going to feel confident in them or comfortable because they are not listening to you as a person.'

Awareness was also cited as an important factor: awareness that everyone in the session is an individual. One participant highlighted the importance of awareness:

'If she thinks someone is struggling, she'll slow down to get you back into the group.'

4.2 Support and encouragement

Providing individual support and regular encouragement to participants were cited as good coach attributes. These attributes can not only help participants throughout a session, but they can also motivate participants to return. Two participants demonstrated these attributes as follows:

'Some of us go round the park, and some of us take a short cut. But he will still encourage you: "Keep on going, still time left."'

'[He says] "Compared to the last session you are so much better," and that encourages us more.'

4.3 Reflecting on the research – people skills

The box below provides tips on people skills for coaches, and organisations that deploy coaches.

Findings	Top Tips for Coaches	Top Tips for Organisations
<p>Participants suggested four key skills of adaptable coaches are empathy, listening, being approachable and awareness.</p>	<p>Smile!</p> <p>Call people by their name.</p> <p>Ask about them and their life.</p> <p>Encourage participants to ask questions.</p>	<p>Consider desired attitudes as well as knowledge during recruitment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coaches with people skills who can be trained may be more valuable than people with knowledge but no willingness to develop.
<p>Supporting and encouraging participants will keep them in a session.</p>	<p>Always praise effort from your participants and find a positive from the session as a leaving note.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saying ‘well done’ for making it to a session can be as beneficial as rewarding achievement. • Recognise achievement, progress made or new challenges uncovered. <p>Provide nudges to repeat desired behaviours.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask questions to commit people to the next session: ‘So I will see you next week?’ 	<p>Review sessions with coaches to understand what makes them unmissable.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask what their unique selling proposition is. <p>Think about loyalty and reward schemes that would encourage participants to come back each week – for example, free sessions.</p>

5 Summary

Participants who are less active and/or are new to sport and physical activity often have different histories and motivations for engaging in sport or physical activity than those in more traditional sports markets. However, their expectations of a coach are very similar to traditional sports participants, albeit in different proportions and styles of delivery.

While it is not possible to generalise from this small-scale qualitative study, there are a number of themes that might be worth considering when planning or delivering sessions and programmes for these groups of participants. The key finding from this research is that sport and activity sessions should meet the specific needs of the individual participant.

To summarise, coaches working with less active participants and/or those who are new to sport and physical activity should consider:

- their image and appearance and how these might be viewed by participants: first impressions count
- how they plan and manage sessions, demonstrate knowledge and authority, and show support to participants throughout their journey
- their personal and people skills, which are regarded by participants as just as important as their technical skills
- adapting their sessions according to the needs of their participants: showing empathy and listening to participants; being approachable and supportive; and understanding individual needs.

The key findings are presented on the following pages with tips for coaches and organisations that recruit, develop and deploy coaches.

5.1 First Impressions

Findings	Top Tips for Coaches	Top Tips for Organisations
<p>Participants will make an initial judgement on appearance.</p>	<p>Remember that appearance is more than just what you wear. Have an awareness of your body language too.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look at the different places that people can ‘see you’ to potentially make a judgement (in person, social media, club website). What image are you giving people? Ask others to give their first impressions too. • Consider the expectations of the group you are coaching. Are they likely to be put off by your appearance? 	<p>Think about the ethos of programme. Does the appearance of the workforce reflect this?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect data on what people are expecting from the coach before they start and from coaches on how they see themselves. Is there a match? • Gather feedback from your target market on how the workforce is portrayed. Use surveys or talk to people as they leave a session.
<p>Participants expect the coach to be trained although they are unsure what form this should take.</p>	<p>Consider having an online profile where participants can learn about your previous experience and training.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a Facebook profile or web page. <p>Use appropriate references to technical knowledge or experience to reassure people.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain changes in the body after exercise. For example, when participants are breathing heavily after an exercise, explain why it is happening and how to control it. 	<p>Provide regular training and CPD opportunities that are related to coaching the appropriate participant groups.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online training, work shadowing and mentoring are all examples of useful training beyond formal qualifications. <p>Provide coaches with information or access to resources to help when coaching participant groups with a high probability of health issues or fear of injury.</p>

5.2 Demonstrating Knowledge

Findings	Top Tips for Coaches	Top Tips for Organisations
Participants expect the coach to have a plan.	<p>Explain what the aims of the session are at the beginning, but always be ready to rearrange plans as situations change.</p> <p>Plan individual sessions that fit into a longer-term plan. After each session, make notes and adapt the long-term plan.</p> <p>Find out about your participants in advance if possible. (For example, are there any health issues you need to be aware of?) This will help with any modifications that you have to make to your session plans.</p>	<p>Provide support and tools to coaches to develop their skills to plan sessions effectively.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide some formal training on planning, or link them with an experienced mentor. <p>Allow time for coaches to develop session plans (as well as reflect and amend post-session).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage a reflective conversation after each session. What went well? What did they learn? What would they do differently?
Sometimes, the coach will need to be authoritative to manage disruptive behaviour.	<p>Be clear about the identity of the group or session you are delivering so as to manage people's expectations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use appropriate language to explain what will happen in a session. For example, 'We are a slow and social cycling group.' <p>Step back to try to understand reasons behind any disruptive behaviour before addressing it.</p>	<p>Provide coaches with the confidence to handle different situations and reassurance that they will be supported.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider training or provide information on emotional intelligence/soft skills/managing conflict.
More than anything, participants want to avoid getting bored.	<p>Empower participants to shape their own sessions, and change activities regularly to keep them fresh.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask participants to add their own variations to games formats. <p>Provide regular feedback to the participants, linked to their motivation, to keep them focused.</p>	<p>Encourage a culture of sharing new ideas among coaches.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise and reward creativity that is having a positive impact. <p>Provide networking opportunities for coaches.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a WhatsApp group for coaches.

5.3 People Skills

Findings	Top Tips for Coaches	Top Tips for Organisations
<p>Participants suggested four key skills of adaptable coaches are empathy, listening, being approachable and awareness.</p>	<p>Smile!</p> <p>Call people by their name.</p> <p>Ask about them and their life.</p> <p>Encourage participants to ask questions.</p>	<p>Consider desired attitudes as well as knowledge during recruitment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coaches with people skills who can be trained may be more valuable than people with knowledge but no willingness to develop.
<p>Supporting and encouraging participants will keep them in a session.</p>	<p>Always praise effort from your participants and find a positive from the session as a leaving note.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saying ‘well done’ for making it to a session can be as beneficial as rewarding achievement. • Recognise achievement, progress made or new challenges uncovered. <p>Provide nudges to repeat desired behaviours.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask questions to commit people to the next session: ‘So I will see you next week?’ 	<p>Review sessions with coaches to understand what makes them unmissable.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask what their unique selling proposition is. <p>Think about loyalty and reward schemes that would encourage participants to come back each week – for example, free sessions.</p>

Appendix 1 Methodology

Three focus groups were held in three cities: Birmingham; Liverpool; and Nottingham. Participants were recruited through contacts in local county sports partnerships or local authorities. This resulted in three groups that could be described as:

- focus group 1 – a group of people primarily active as part of their day-to-day life (looking after children, manual labour job etc) and a history of dipping in and out of sport and physical activity for short periods
- focus group 2 – a running group who were five weeks into a Couch to 5K programme
- focus group 3 – a group who have been regularly active and primarily focused on fitness rather than sport.

The focus groups were made up of between 8 and 18 people and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. 39 people took part in the focus groups in groups of 8, 13 and 18.

Each focus group was broken down into four broad sections covering the areas of:

- motivations to take part
- describing a preferred coach or leader
- what should happen in a session
- agreement with a series of competency statements.

The first three sections of the focus group used a photo elicitation methodology. Participants were given a selection of photographs that were designed to stimulate discussion. Working in groups, the participants spent time on their own discussing photographs before selecting the ones that resonated most with them (usually 3–5 photographs). They were then asked to talk through the photographs before a series of follow-up questions were asked.

The fourth part of the focus group was designed primarily for a second piece of research and involved participants ordering a series of statements linked to competency statements.

All the focus groups were transcribed and analysed using a thematic analysis. The methodology was both inductive and deductive in nature, in that the questions (and subsequent answers) were partly being driven by previous quantitative research. However, it still allowed a degree of freedom for the participants to express themselves as they saw fit. For example, it was often the case that participants found meaning in the photographs that took the researchers by surprise.

The final report was reviewed by subject matter experts at Sports Coach UK.