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Perspectives

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Coach development in esports: Where is the tutorial?

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Abstract

Coaches play a critical role in athlete development, yet coach development in esports remains limited and undervalued. Despite fulfilling functions similar to those of traditional sports coaches, esports coaches operate in a unique and emerging context, where learning is predominantly self-directed and competitive success is often treated as a proxy for expertise. In this perspective piece, we argue that the lack of engagement with coach development reflects not only limited provision but also a range of social, cultural, and structural constraints. Drawing on Côté and Gilbert's model of coaching effectiveness and Hodkinson and colleagues' concepts of horizons for action and learning, we examine how time pressures, career precarity, and prevailing learning cultures shape coaches' decisions.

Keywords

Coaching effectiveness, continuous professional development, expertise

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Introduction

Coaches occupy an important position within sport, serving as influential agents who guide athlete learning, performance, and welfare.[1] Their responsibilities encompass technical and tactical instruction, the design and delivery of training, management of team dynamics, and the cultivation of psychological and social environments that enable athletes to thrive.[2] Given the diverse skill set required for coaching and the constant evolution of coaching knowledge,[3] it is perhaps unsurprising that ongoing learning and professional development are regarded as essential functions of the coaching role.[4] Yet, in the world of competitive gaming known as esports, this function appears comparatively neglected and undervalued.[5,6]

Coach development as a broad term captures the process through which coaches learn to coach more effectively within their context.[7,8] This process incorporates engagement with various forms of experience, learning, and reflective practice which manifests in changes in knowledge across professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal domains.[1,9] In practice, coach development typically occurs within three contexts.[10,11] Formal learning takes place through structured, accredited programmes such as national governing body certifications or university-based qualifications, which follow a prescribed curriculum and offer official credentials.[12] Nonformal learning comprises organised but voluntary activities, such as workshops or continuing professional development events.[10,13] Lastly, informal learning occurs experientially through day-to-day practice, observation, peer dialogue, and reflection, often unstructured and initiated by the coach, enabling them to adapt their knowledge to real-world challenges.[14]

In more traditional sport settings, the relative value of these modes of learning has long been critiqued and contested, with contemporary scholarship recognising that each contributes to professional growth.[15] Indeed, a given coach development programme may include elements of each, for example by

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engaging coaches in group discussion after a period of curriculum-based instruction.[1] Accordingly, many national and international sport organisations have established systems to integrate them, combining formal certification with activities such as mentorship and communities of practice. For example, a coach development programme implemented in Singapore provided a variety of learning opportunities including self-reflection and self-directed learning, collaboration with other coaches, and formalised certification.[16]

Although esports coaches fulfil many of the same functions as their traditional sport counterparts, their role has evolved within a decentralised and commercially driven ecosystem that has roots in technology and entertainment.[17] Indeed, esports has only recently been situated within the arena of sport and lacks many of the hallmarks familiar to a more 'traditional' sporting audience (e.g., top-down governance, developmental levels, coaching qualifications). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, coach learning in esports is predominantly informal, self-directed, and shaped by experience, peers, and contextual norms.[5,6,18] Although this approach aligns with the bottom-up, barrier-free, and entrepreneurial traits of the esports industry,[17] allowing anyone to 'make it' as a coach, it does not appear to be optimal for preparing coaches. For instance, coaches report experiencing significant emotional strain in their roles,[5] pressure to deliver results within short competitive cycles (e.g., a single 'split'), and resistance when trying to introduce new training approaches.[19] These conditions tend to reinforce a narrow focus on coaches' game-related knowledge, to the detriment of more holistic (e.g., pedagogical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal) knowledge.[20]

Emerging evidence suggests that the self-directed coach learning culture is not simply a product of limited provision but reflects deeper assumptions about what is socially accepted and what constitutes legitimate coaching expertise in esports.[6] For coaches themselves, engagement with formal training may carry perceived risks, for instance, being viewed as less competent than peers who don't pursue training, less committed, or distracted from performance priorities. Amongst coaches, players, and managers, it appears that formal coach education is neither expected nor encouraged, with esports-specific development initiatives actively devalued in favour of experiential 'learning by doing'.[6] We have personally encountered a host of reasons that may contribute to these attitudes, including the valorisation of game knowledge, questions around the credibility of training providers, the absence of requirements from game publishers, financial constraints on teams preventing additional staff development, and even concerns that better-trained coaches will depart an organisation to work for a competitor. Consequently, coaches continue to shoulder the burden for their development and are expected to "prove themselves" through the performance of their players.[5,21] Although experience undoubtedly plays an important role in coach development, we contend that the widespread dismissal of coach education in esports reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of its purpose and, more broadly, of the coaching role within esports.

In this perspective piece, we therefore seek to highlight the potential value of coach development initiatives in esports, examine the contextual and cultural factors that shape coaches' engagement with developmental opportunities, and outline possible steps forward that could support more intentional, sustainable, and context-sensitive approaches to coach development in this emerging domain.

Areas and value of coach development for esports coaches

Before proceeding, it is necessary to briefly consider the areas in which a coach may be expected to develop knowledge and how they acquire it. According to Côté and Gilbert's[9] seminal model of coaching effectiveness, coaches draw from three interacting sources of knowledge: professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Professional knowledge refers to both game-specific knowledge (i.e., rules, tactics, and strategies) and an individual's understanding of sport sciences and pedagogy (i.e., how to teach sport skills). Interpersonal knowledge refers to the ability to develop social relationships and connect with others. Finally, intrapersonal knowledge reflects a coach's self-awareness and capacity to reflect on their practices, values, and beliefs.[22,23]

Research suggests that coaches primarily develop the foundations of this knowledge through prior experiences as both athletes and coaches, where in situ observation of coaches and coaching provides an experiential framework which informs their current practice.[3,14,24] These informal learning experiences are largely valorised across both traditional sports[25,26] and esports[6] to a higher degree than formal coach development provision. However, we advise caution before assuming that playing experience in esports indicates experience of coaching practice, and therefore attainment of coaching knowledge. Many esports players invest significant time in a game, reach a high rank, and even play on a competitive team without ever entering a structured coaching environment. Thus, with fewer encounters with coaches and coaching, players in esports are likely to acquire coaching knowledge informally to a lesser extent than their counterparts in traditional sports.

Given the importance of game-specific knowledge for coaches, the valorisation of playing experience is understandable as it appears to be a relevant.[6] However, games in esports are frequently updated with new characters, abilities, structures, and maps, often resulting in significant changes to the most effective strategy available (i.e., the META). As noted by Rekkles, one of Europe's most high-profile League of Legends players, certain game-specific aspects of one's professional knowledge can quickly become redundant in comparison to traditional sport, as the META can change frequently.[27] Of course, game-specific knowledge is also obtained through analysis, and many esports coaches invest significant time studying the

gameplay of successful teams and global META.[5] Such analysis provides a source of tactical learning and is useful in setting the focus of skill development, yet it provides limited value in terms of a coaches' overall development. Coaches must still design training tasks that bring these ideas to life (pedagogical), communicate them effectively to players (interpersonal), and continuously evaluate whether they are working (intrapersonal). In this sense, an abundance of game-specific knowledge may only inform coach decision-making with the "what", but not the "how" or "why" behind the coaching craft.

Several studies highlight that esports coaches draw on a limited set of tools to evaluate learning, structure training, and support holistic player development[28,29] (physical, cognitive, psychological, social). This may be a consequence of the lack of formal coach learning available,[5] which leaves esports coaches to rely on trial-and-error approaches akin to the practices observed in novice coaches across traditional sport.[30,31] Although formal coach development programmes can offer value here, we encourage readers to be mindful of their limitations, the lack of research in esports, and the opportunities for innovation in esports. Criticisms include a lack of alignment with theory, inconsistency of delivery, and programmes being decontextualised to the coaches' working contexts, making it difficult to translate learned knowledge into practical strategies.[32,33] Nonetheless, these programmes can provide coaches with opportunities to engage with content broader than game-specific knowledge[34] and a platform for coaches from various contexts to share challenges and to exchange ideas and experiences.[35]

Evidence from traditional sport has demonstrated how formal coach development can contribute to improvements across multiple domains of coaching practice.[36,37] A recent systematic review and meta-analysis indicated that coach development programmes can enhance coaches' knowledge, decision-making, and coaching behaviours.[36] Beyond knowledge acquisition, coach development has been shown to enhance coaches' ability to design effective learning environments and foster motivational climates that support athlete development.[38] Interpersonal coach development programmes have also shown significant effects on athlete outcomes by improving communication and relational quality.[39] Finally, coach development supports the development of intrapersonal skills, including self-awareness, reflective practice, and the formation of a coaching philosophy.[40] Collectively, these findings highlight that coach development can meaningfully enhance the core competencies underpinning effective coaching.

Horizons for action and learning: why do esports coaches fail to engage with (or see) coach development opportunities?

In striving to understand the reasons why esports coaches might choose not to engage with coach development opportunities despite their apparent benefits, the work of Phil Hodkinson and colleagues on careership and their cultural theory of learning would appear to be a useful interpretative lens.[41–44] In drawing upon the social praxeology of Pierre Bourdieu, Hodkinson and Sparkes[44] propose that individuals' decisions regarding their career development are enabled and constrained by their *horizons for action*, defined as "the arena within which actions can be taken and decisions made"[44p 34].

Horizons for action refers to how a person's background (i.e., their dispositions, experiences) interacts with their learning cultures (i.e., the social practices and norms they are engaged with) to inform how they act and the decisions they make.[42,44,45] A horizon denotes vision and whether a person can 'see' what they perceive to be possible and what they believe they can do both currently and, in the future, based on their position.[45] As opposed to what is seen to be objectively possible, horizons for action refers to what an individual subjectively feels is an appropriate choice given their circumstances.[44]

What esports coaches decide to 'do' regarding their development as a coach is enabled and constrained by their situated possibilities, which leads to rational action being taken.[13] Thus, two esports coaches might have access to the same coach development opportunities but act very differently towards them due to their horizons for action. Contributing factors might include:

- Time and precarity (i.e., the volatile nature of esports coaching may make coach development seem a luxury rather than a priority).
- Perceived measures of success (i.e., esports coaches might believe that success comes from results and experience as opposed to formal coach development).
- Learning culture norms (i.e., it might be perceived that formal coach development will not enhance a coach's credibility, as other attributes are more appreciated).
- Preexisting informal networks (i.e., esports coaches may primarily learn informally and may therefore be sceptical of formal mechanisms).

In addition to horizons for action, Hodkinson et al.[42,43] allude to the notion of *horizons for learning* which they define as "the possibilities a person has for learning, which are… neither fixed nor sharply demarcated"[43p 179]. Hence, if an esports coach's horizons for action poses the questions "what can I do and what options are available to me?" and the answer is 'learn', then horizons for learning asks the follow up question "what kind of learning is meaningful?". In contrast to horizons for action and the perceived available options, horizons for learning focuses on individuals' dispositions towards learning. That is, their preferences towards what 'good' or legitimate learning constitutes.[41,45]

This leads to a complex interaction between what is believed to be meaningful learning, alongside what is seen to be possible action within a bounded context. In practice, an esports coach might possess strong dispositions towards the importance of coach development (i.e., their horizons for learning), however, they may still decide to overlook formal qualifications if they do not perceive such opportunities to be possible within their current circumstances (i.e., their horizons for action). As contexts evolve, individuals adjust their horizons for action and learning accordingly, dependent upon their changing position and dispositions.[45] Therefore, horizons are not fixed, rather, they are reconfigured by transitions or critical incidents across one's career.[44] Within careership theory, Hodkinson and Sparkes[44] outline three turning points which might impact upon a person's horizons:

1. Structural turning points = changes driven by organisations or wider systems which alter what is viewed as possible (e.g., esports clubs/leagues make formal qualifications a requirement for coaches, professionalisation shifts, technological innovations).
2. Self-initiated turning points = these stem from individual reflection and deliberate action (e.g., reflecting on player feedback to enhance coaching practice, leaving a successful amateur team to join a developmental academy to continue developing as a coach).
3. Forced turning points = referring to immediate change triggered by shock and disruption from external people and/or events (e.g., an esports coach is dismissed following poor results, funding streams stop unexpectedly, a game publisher changes the META).

Horizons for action/learning evolve following changes to a person's dispositions and position.[46] Critical incidents or transitions are often a catalyst for these changes and are a powerful source of career-related learning and identity construction. Thus, within esports there would seem value in clubs and organisations encouraging coaches to engage in a process of narrative construction.[46] Here, esports coaches might begin to reflect upon their individual coaching trajectory, the learning cultures they inhabit, the wider esports ecosystem, alongside their personal transitions and critical incidents to date. Indeed, Hodkinson[46] argues that these practices of self-knowledge will encourage individuals to become more agentic and aware of their dispositions and positions, potentially leading to future engagement with learning opportunities.

What's next? - considering rhizomatic approaches to esports coach development

Current evidence suggests that coach learning in esports is predominantly self-directed and shaped by experience, peers, and prevailing social norms.[5,18] The absence of formal coach education offered, supported or required by game publishers may well be preserving this status quo and certainly does not incentivise coaches to seek out and pursue these 'traditional' means of training. Within this landscape, game-specific knowledge is prioritised, with playing experience, coaching experience, and competitive success treated as proxies for coaching expertise.[6] Consequently, coaches appear to invest heavily in accumulating game knowledge, often through extensive video review and analysis.[5] This orientation mirrors the wider "grind culture" of esports, where long hours of self-improvement are valorised despite associated risks of fatigue and burnout.[28]

One promising direction is to (re)conceptualise formal coach development as a rhizomatic process, that is, a distributed, non-hierarchical form of knowledge development that emerges through networks of practitioners and an array of valued experiences rather than through centrally prescribed curricula.[47] In this way, coaches retain a high degree of agency regarding what education to pursue, with knowledge generated through shared experiences, dialogue, and experimentation within real performance environments. While acknowledging that a rhizomatic approach might favour esports coaches who already possess some degree of prior coaching experience, this process appreciates the idiosyncratic nature of learning and might help to facilitate enhanced creative thought and engagement.[47]

Indeed, a rhizomatic approach aligns closely with the decentralised nature of esports. Unlike traditional sports governed by federations and regulatory bodies, esports operates within a fragmented ecosystem shaped by publishers, teams, and online communities.[17] In this context, it may be unrealistic or even undesirable to expect a single authority to define the knowledge required for effective coaching, thereby limiting formal opportunities for coach development and accreditation. Instead, coach development initiatives at this early stage could prioritise situated and collaborative learning, where coaches engage with peers to discuss challenges, reflect on practice, and collectively develop solutions relevant to their specific game and organisational context.

Importantly, a rhizomatic approach to coach development does not imply the absence of structure.[47] Rather, it requires facilitation and a broad mapping of what's possible and valuable in terms of esports coach education and training. Experienced practitioners, researchers, or coach developers may play an important role in initiating dialogue, connecting coaches across teams and regions, and identifying "blind spots" within coaching practice that may otherwise go unexamined. Mechanisms such as peer-mentoring

relationships, critical discussion groups, reflective practice forums, and online social learning spaces may therefore represent valuable and accessible forms of development within esports.

Pragmatically, this perspective piece suggests that the next step for esports coach development may not be the creation of rigid accreditation systems, but rather the cultivation of learning networks that encourage coaches to share knowledge, mentor one another, and engage in ongoing reflective dialogue about their practice. Of course, such approaches must be sensitive to differences across coaching contexts, for instance from school esports clubs to professional performance environments. There is currently scant empirical evidence examining these distinctions; however they likely require specific competencies akin to those associated with recreational, developmental, and performance coaching in sport.[48] For example, a school coach may need to communicate with players' parents, while an elite coach may need to manage an interdisciplinary staff. Furthermore, social learning approaches should be implemented with appropriate care and 'focused criticality' to avoid reproducing prevailing values from the social milieu.[49] This is particularly relevant in esports, where coaching is strongly shaped by a performance narrative.[5] While appropriate in some performance contexts, such values may be less appropriate across recreational and developmental settings. Context-sensitive grouping and skilled facilitation may therefore be important to ensure that prevailing assumptions are critically examined rather than simply reproduced.

Conclusion

Although coach development opportunities in esports remain limited and coaches are not typically expected to engage with formal development by stakeholders, coaches themselves have expressed a desire for more structured training pathways,[5,50] and the current performance landscape suggests clear scope for advancement in coaching practice.[51] Both esports coaches and stakeholders should therefore be invested in this area, as research indicates that coach development can enhance professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge,[36] while its absence risks constraining performance, undermining player wellbeing, and limiting the progression of coaching as a professional practice. Without such support, there is a danger that familiar patterns from sport coaching are reproduced; for instance coaches' seeing limitations in player development as faults of the athlete rather than reflecting on the performance environment and coaching itself.[52] Coach development across formal, non-formal, and informal modes therefore remains essential in equipping coaches to navigate the complex demands of esports.

Finally, in the entrepreneurial spirit of esports,[17] we urge stakeholders to consider how esports presents an opportunity to develop contextually grounded and innovative approaches to coach development. We encourage greater collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and industry stakeholders to strengthen the evidence base and to support implementation. This includes designing and evaluating creative development initiatives, supporting mentoring, and creating structural conditions that allow coaches to engage in learning as a valued component of their competence, credibility, and organisational contribution. If esports is to continue its trajectory towards professionalisation, the development of its coaches must become a collectively supported endeavour, embedded within the systems that shape participation and performance in this evolving digital domain.

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