

Transitioning From Player to Coach: A Self-Study

Brett Neiderman

Rosemont Center, Eagle Heights Academy

Keywords

Transition, Player, Coach, Respect, Professionalism, Separation

Abstract

Making the transition from player to collegiate coach can be a difficult process. Young coaches must make a conscious effort to become aware of some of the difficulties associated with this transition.



The purpose of this self-study was to examine my own transition from player to coach. Through my personal journal, surveys given out to other coaches, and interviews conducted with some of those coaches, I identified patterns that can be helpful to others who are also making this transition.

Table of Contents

Rationale	2
Context.....	2
Literature.....	2
Methodology.....	3
Personal journal	3
Coach Surveys and Interviews.....	4
Anonymity and Consent	4
Analysis/Findings	4
Gaining Respect.....	4
Separating from Players.....	5
Professionalism.....	6
Implications.....	7
References.....	9

Rationale

“The transformation to coach has at times been difficult. A lot of the guys on the team look at me as a friend before they see me as a coach. I have to find where to draw the line with respect to coaching and friendship” (Personal Journal, September 13, 2007).

I began my graduate assistant work with the men’s soccer team at Otterbein College in 2007, months after graduation. I had played on the soccer team as an undergraduate for four years and built some strong friendships with teammates from every class. As I took over the assistant coach position, I found it difficult to make the change from being a friend and teammate to being an authority figure. From the players’ perspective, I was a peer. I cherished the friendships I made in my time at Otterbein and wanted to keep them but also wanted to be respected as a coach. This self-study will look at the difficulties that arise from making the transition from player to coach.

Context

The setting of my self-study is the men’s soccer team at Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio. Westerville is a suburb of Columbus, Ohio, and has a population of about 35,000 people. Otterbein’s student population is largely white and middle class. Most students come from central Ohio. Otterbein is a Division III college that competes in the Ohio Athletic Conference (OAC). There are approximately 3,000 students at Otterbein with athletes competing in nine men’s varsity sports and nine women’s varsity sports. The men’s soccer program has 40 student-athletes on its roster. Some of these players are highly recruited individuals while others simply enjoy playing the game and have decided to join the team. Otterbein’s soccer team does not cut players but instead arranges a junior-varsity (JV) game schedule for those who do not make the traveling squad. About 15 players are on the JV team while the other 25 players dress for home and away games. As the assistant coach, I worked with both groups but was in charge of the JV team for games and practices. During practice, JV and varsity are often separated in order to keep the level of play for the varsity at its highest. On any given practice or game day, I worked with roughly 20 players, ranging from freshmen to senior status.

Literature

Coaches of all sports undoubtedly have to deal with certain difficulties that arise within their respective programs. Young people making the transition from player to coach have to deal with the particular difficulties that come with lack of experience. These difficulties range from gaining respect of the players to acting as a professional at all times. Because coaches who have recently made the transition into coaching have less experience than those who have coached for several years, it is important to become

knowledgeable about research that has been conducted on effective coaching and how it can alleviate some of the initial difficulties.

A study by Hardy and Loughead (2005) provided evidence that players view coaches as leaders and that they expect autocratic behavior from them. Autocratic behavior implied that the coach had the right to make the final decision on every aspect of the game. The fact that athletes viewed their coaches' autocratic behavior positively shows that there is a need for coaches to take charge and to separate themselves from their players.

In order to gain respect as well as to act professionally, coaches need to understand that their job comes with much responsibility. As a general rule, coaches must be experts in their sport. They were generally above average or excellent players at some point during their playing careers. This alone helps them to gain respect from the players (Moore, 1970). Players look up to the coach because of his/her personal accomplishments. Coaches must deserve respect before they can command it, and, by being an exceptional player at one time, they show they have put in the time and effort it takes to achieve positive results.

Players will also show respect for a coach who has demonstrated that he or she is not the player's buddy but rather their teacher and leader (Sabock, 1973). Coaches will often have to discipline players, and this becomes extremely difficult to do when the coach acts as a buddy rather than coach. They must be fair at all times and remain consistent with each and every player (Sabock, 1973). It is less difficult for a coach to treat each player fairly, to act as a professional at all times, and to be objective, if he or she does not act like a peer or become too friendly with the athletes.

Methodology

When I look closely enough at my practice, actions, and beliefs to question myself then I am taking charge of my on-going education. When I creatively formulate a plan to gather data to see what is actually happening and then spend the time to openly consider all that is there, then I am enlarging my knowledge. When I include others in my questioning and looking, then I am broadening my perspective and views concerning my questioning. And finally, when I require myself to articulate and record my journey, offer it to others to consider, reconsider my views based on their feedback, then I am sharpening my personal understanding (Austin & Senese, 2004, p.1232).

Personal journal

This self-study focuses on my transition from player to coach. In order to get a deep understanding of my transition, I kept a personal journal during the 2007 soccer season, the first season that I coached. I would write one or two entries per week in the journal. This journal serves as my primary data source as it describes specific dilemmas that arose throughout the season.

Coach Surveys and Interviews

I also gave out surveys and conducted interviews with coaches at Otterbein College. I gave surveys out to every coach in January of 2009 and then followed up with interviews in March of 2009 with those who were close to my age.

I interviewed all other graduate assistants at Otterbein College. Because I did not want to bias the answers that respondents gave, I intentionally asked vague, open-ended questions. I also asked a few structured questions to get basic background information on each participant. The open-ended questions provided the essential data for my research. It was important to get honest answers from all participants, so my questions were not leading in any way but rather allowed participants to give their own personal accounts of their transition from player to coach.

Of the 22 surveys given out, 10 were returned. There were 15 questions in all, eight of which were open-ended. I conducted five interviews after receiving survey responses. I asked nine questions for the interviews; four of those questions were open-ended while the other five questions were used to get background information

Anonymity and Consent

Those who agreed to complete the survey were reassured that anonymity would be preserved. Participation in this survey was voluntary. Those who agreed to be interviewed were asked to sign a consent form, thereby giving me permission to use their responses as part of my self-study.

“The transition from player to coach is difficult. It comes with problems like how the players respect me and how I deal with problems related to their behavior or attitude towards me.”

Analysis/Findings

After evaluating all of the data collected for my self-study, three specific themes emerged: (1) gaining the respect of the players; (2) separating myself from the players; and (3) acting as a professional at all times and taking on new responsibilities. These three themes emerged from my personal journal, surveys, and interviews.

Gaining Respect

I began writing in my journal in September of 2007 with no real direction other than to record some of the problems that I encountered and to problem solve as I transitioned from player to coach. Looking back at the journal, I noticed that I wrote a lot about needing to earn the respect of the players so they looked at me as a coach rather than a

friend or former teammate. “The transition from player to coach is difficult. It comes with problems like how the players respect me and how I deal with problems related to their behavior or attitude towards me.” (Personal Journal, October 5, 2007).

This issue of gaining respect emerged in the surveys I sent out as well. Other coaches mentioned how important it is to have players’ respect for the team to function well and make the coaching that much easier. When asked “What helped make your transition easier,” half of the respondents mentioned respect of the players and/or fellow coaches. Because the questions were intentionally vague and open-ended, the fact that half of the returned surveys mentioned gaining respect as vital to the transition shows just how important it is.

Respect was a major theme in two out of the five interviews. Interview participants were asked to offer advice for future coaches, and two responded that earning respect of the players was something that would help someone’s transition. One participant directly stated, “Earning player’s respect is so important in the transition from player to coach” (I-1, March 2009), thus reinforcing that coaches must be able to gain the respect of their players in order to make an effective transition into coaching.

Separating from Players

The second theme that emerged from my data focused on separating oneself from the players he/she coaches. From the beginning, I made it clear in my personal journal that this was one of the problems associated with making my transition. “I am much more approachable than Coach D is and I like the fact that the players look to me for advice. I just get worried that our relationship does not get too friendly. I want them to see me as a coach first” (Personal Journal, September 22, 2007). I noticed early that there needed to be a clear line separating me from my players. This, of course, was very difficult because I had been a friend and teammate to most of the players for so long.

After analyzing my survey results, it became apparent that this is a problem that all coaches must deal with. Four out of the ten surveys returned suggested that separating yourself from the players could help make the transition into coaching go more smoothly. One coach wrote, “It is important to distance yourself socially from your players. The player-coach relationship is too important to be clouded by friendship.” (S-9, February 2009).

The interviews I conducted reinforced this theme as well. When asked what the best advice for future coaches going through this transition is, four out of the five participants made it clear that distancing yourself from the players will go a long way in ensuring a healthy transition into coaching.

“It is important to distance yourself socially from your players. The player-coach relationship is too important to be clouded by friendship.”

Professionalism

The third and final theme that surfaced was that of professionalism. This theme of professionalism takes on all aspects of coaching in that it represents relationships with other coaches, players, and the day-to-day actions of the coach. Taking on the role of a professional is a gradual process, especially for someone who is making the transition from player to coach. I noted in my journal, “I have proved capable at times this season and need to continue to separate myself from them (the players) and to remain *professional*. This type of relationship takes a long time to develop and can easily be erased or jeopardized if not maintained” (Personal Journal, October 28, 2007). This helps illustrate the point that being a professional entails the relationship the coach has with his/her players. Separation from the players is important but can prove to be useless if the players do not view the coach as a professional.

From the surveys returned, six respondents directly stated how important it was to maintain professionalism at all times. When asked how his new role as a coach altered dealings with players, one coach wrote that he now had “a more professional role” (S-3, February 2009). Another coach answered the same questions by stating that “Discussions became more professional and I had to make decisions. As a player I could agree with everyone, but as a coach I have to take one standpoint (and stick to it)” (S-2, February 2009). This last quotation shows how that coach realized he had to become more professional in his new role as a coach. When he was a player he could joke around with his teammates about whatever topic came up; as a coach his discussion and conversations had to remain professional for him to be respected.

Four of the five interviewees suggested that making their relationships professional was one of the difficulties associated with the transition from player to coach. Three interviewees stated that their best advice for future coaches who will have to go through a similar transition was to act as a professional at all times. One coach summed up his advice for others by stating, “Establish yourself as a coach right away (early in transition) and be sure to act professionally. You will make mistakes...learn from them!” (I-5, March 2009).

“Establish yourself as a coach right away (early in transition) and be sure to act professionally. You will make mistakes...learn from them!”

I noticed that the three themes that emerged from my data all go hand-in-hand. In order to gain the respect of the players, a coach must act professionally. In order to act professionally, a coach must separate him/herself from the players. These key points have proven to be very important to the transition. The fact that I recorded my own personal observations in 2007 and then surveyed and interviewed coaches a year later and was able to make connections as to what needed to be accomplished to ensure a smooth transition from player to coach increases the validity of these themes. When I began my personal journal, I did so with no real goal in mind other than to record observations and to reflect on them. My surveys and interviews deliberately asked vague questions so as

not to lead participants in any direction with their responses. Even so, the answers confirmed what I had observed and recorded a year earlier.

Implications

This self-study has implications for others who want to get into coaching immediately after their playing career. To be honest, I was naïve when I was named the assistant coach. I figured I was a coach and would be just fine, based on what I had accomplished as a player and the knowledge I had of the game. I failed to take into account how much my role had changed. I had new responsibilities, and that meant I needed to be a professional at all times. No longer was I a player who only had to worry about playing well; I was now a coach who had to give direction to a number of players who needed coaching.

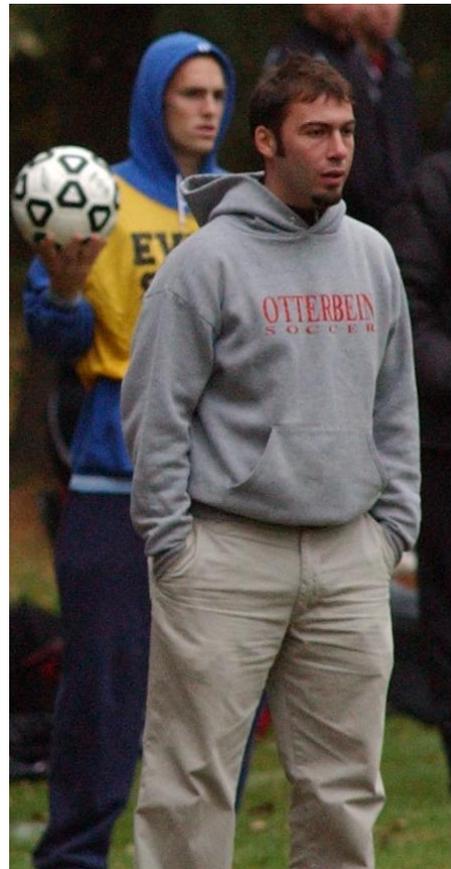
I would suggest to those wanting to make the transition from player to coach that they do some research prior to their season to make themselves as prepared as possible. Young coaches must be aware of the three themes that emerged from my self-study. They should understand that gaining the respect of the players, separating themselves from the players, and acting professionally are essential to any transition from player to coach. New coaches should collaborate with other coaches at their respective institutions to get advice on what has worked for them. It is hard for a new coach, especially someone with a history with the current players, to come into a program and not experience some difficulties. That said, through awareness of the themes identified in my self-study, young coaches can make a conscious effort to excel and become effective coaches.

Based on my findings and the current literature on coaching, I have outlined five keys to an effective player-to-coach transition.



To be honest, I was naïve when I was named the assistant coach. I figured I was a coach and would be just fine, based on what I had accomplished as a player and the knowledge I had of the game.

- A new coach must gain the respect of the team he/she will be coaching. Often, this is done based on previous awards and experience, but young coaches must also earn respect on the job. Young coaches earn respect from players based on their dedication to coaching and the endless hours they put in to making programs the very best they can be (Bolvin, 2009). Honesty and communication are critical as well. As one author puts it, “Respect for a coach never diminishes more rapidly than when the coach offers weak, dishonest, or deceptive explanations in response to students’ requests for information on matters of concern to them” (Tong, 1991, p.65).
- A coach must be able to separate him/herself from the players on the team and treat every player equally. Each player, no matter what previous relationships the young coach may have had with the player, must be treated the same as the next. Some athletes will undoubtedly be better than others but it is up to the coach to make each member of the team feel that he or she is worthy as an athlete (Blucker and Llewellyn, 1982).
- A coach must have passion for the sport. Allerand, Donahue, Jowett, Lafreniere, & Lorimer (2008) define passion as “harmonious” when the sport occupies an important part of one’s life but not an overwhelming space. Harmonious passion enhances the coach-athlete relationship. In short, when coaches and players share the same level of passion for their sport, their relationship is likely to be positive.
- A coach must be able to motivate his/her players. If players are not motivated to succeed the coach will not experience success. In a study evaluating motivational factors for athletes and team cohesion (Turman, 2003), techniques such as using motivational speeches, discussing the quality of opponents, and showing dedication benefited team cohesion and the player-coach relationship. Coaches must have the ability to motivate their players to succeed or the team as a whole will suffer.
- A coach must act professionally at all times. Young coaches will soon realize that they are in the public eye and that they represent their institutions. Many responsibilities come with being a coach. David Hoch, an athletic director at a high school in Maryland writes that “to be respected and treated as a professional, I had to look like a professional. Credibility and image were important, and first



impressions do matter” (Hoch, 2005, p.14). Hoch goes on to list sportsmanship, team attire, and the coach’s appearance as factors that contribute to acting professionally.

These five keys to success will help young coaches make the transition from player to coach. There will always be room to learn and improve, but it is extremely important to begin one’s coaching career on a positive note. I have learned that my transition was not unique. This shows me that all young coaches need to deal with difficulties that arise at the beginning of their career, but the important thing is to identify the difficulties and overcome them. After all, that is how a person achieves excellence in any profession.

References

- Allerand, R. J., Donahue, E. G., Jowett, S, Lafreniere, M-A. K., & Lorimer, R. (2008). Passion in sport: On the quality of the coach-athlete relationship. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 30 (5), 541-560.
- Austin, T., & Senese, J.C. (2004). Self-study in school teaching: Teachers’ perspectives. In M. L. Hamilton, V. K. LaBaskey, J. J. Loughran, & T. L. Russell (Eds.), *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (1231-1258). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.
- Blucker, J.A., & Llewellyn, J. H. (1982). *Psychology of coaching: Theory and application*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Burgess Publishing Company.
- Bolvin, P. (2009, April 8). New Memphis coach Pastner doesn’t need a moment’s rest. *USA Today*. Retrieved http://www.usatoday.com/sports/columnist/boivin/2009-04-07-boivin_N.htm
- Hardy, J., & Loughhead, T. M. (2005). An examination of coach and peer leader behaviors in sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 6 (3), 303-312.
- Hoch, D. (2005). Image is everything. *Coach and Athletic Director*, 74 (6), 14-15.
- Moore, J. W. (1970). *Psychology of athletic coaching*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Burgess Printing Company.
- Sabock, R. J. (1973). *The coach*. Philadelphia, PA: W.B. Saunders Company.
- Turman, P. D. (2003). Coaches and cohesion: The impact of coaching techniques on team cohesion in the small group sport setting. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 26 (1), 86-105.
- Tong, C. W. (1991). *Off the bench*. Claremont, California: Arete Press.