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Coaching Certification: Why Bother?

by Bill Tschirhart

Occasionally I find myself questioned about the value of the coaching certification process currently in place. Many times the questions come from competitive players who in the twilight of their careers are thinking about coaching and/or instructing.

I hear case after case of well-intentioned parents or competitive players who coach a junior team through the curling season only to arrive at a point in the playdowns to be informed that he/she does not have ice privileges due to a lack of certification.

The easy course for that individual is to jump all over the certification process and its philosophy, falling back on the time-honoured argument that he/she got the team this far, why aren't they qualified to take it the "rest of the way" to a provincial, national or even international title? It has been my experience as I travel the country teaching some of the very courses the author questions that *many teams win, not because of the coach, but in spite of the coach.*

Please don't misunderstand that last statement. Every dedicated coach, regardless of his/her level of experience will make positive contributions at some points during the season but sooner or later, the coach's team will meet an equally talented opponent coached by a certified coach who brings the whole package of preparation activities. That's when the former team and its coach will learn the hard way what certification means. It's not a very comfortable situation for the team and/or the coach to realize that they lost due to a lack of preparation and not talent. Do not

equate "lack of preparation" with an "unwillingness to prepare". Most teams would do virtually anything required to "be the best they can be". The problem with those teams so often is that they simply are unaware of the elements of the preparation package or if they do, they don't have the depth of resources to facilitate those elements. *Just as playing at the highest level is different, so is coaching!*

One high profile curler cited a session he gave on "strategy" to some of the top skips in the curling world on one weekend but on the next was denied ice privileges with his son's junior team in an event in which it was entered. Notice that on more than one occasion I refer to ice privileges. Un-certified coaches like to say that they are "prevented from coaching" the team due to a lack of certification. That's a ridiculous statement! Anyone can counsel a team in practices and/or before and after games. If a team wishes to listen to someone and heed his/her advice, they have every right to do just that.

I have some rhetorical questions for the high profile competitive player and in turn (no curling pun intended) for any of you out there who also feel that "a team should be able to choose anyone to coach them". Oh, by the way, on that often heard statement by the uncertified coaches, I would like to meet and congratulate the junior team who would recognize the coaching limitations of an uncertified coach (usually also a parent) and ask that person to get certified or replace him/herself with one who is. Right!!! The responsibility should be on the shoulders of the adult to do the right thing for him/herself and the team and get certified. But back to that player who presented strategy...

"When you presented your views on strategy to those elite skips, did you also educate them regarding the decision making process a team might employ?"

"Did you facilitate an activity whereby the teams could identify their team personality in relation to the strategic plan selected?"

"Did you illustrate with the teams that most of the strategy problems are really team dynamics difficulties and not shot selection?"

"Assuming you could answer 'yes' to the previous question, did you provide activities that a team might use to facilitate the appropriate communication process so that each player can contribute effectively in strategy decisions without causing unnecessary distractions to the team's overall performance?"

"Did you distinguish between tactics and strategy (they are both necessary but very different)?"

"Did you deal with the topic of strategy as a team activity or a responsibility that falls largely to the skip?"

"Did you also include in your presentation an examination of the factors that affect the decision making process?"

"Was most of your presentation based upon experiences that you had in your career or did you concentrate on empowering the teams to make their own decisions?"

I would hope that he could provide a resounding "yes" to all those questions.

Most uncertified coaches still feel that preparation means on-ice practices mostly based upon perfecting the perfect technical delivery. How short-sighted that is!

A certified coach recognizes that preparation includes, in no particular order, *technical development and maintenance, nutrition, physical preparation, game plan preparation, team dynamics and mental preparation.*

I sometimes hear that to deny "ice privileges" to an "uncertified" coach is inherently "unfair". Unfair to whom?" I would suggest that the victims of this so-called lack of fairness are the reasons for the whole endeavor in the first place, the athletes.

I frequently hear individuals ridicule the adage that "every athlete deserves a certified coach". Yes they do! It's the responsibility of the well-intentioned coach to also be "the best that he/she can be". That includes a willingness to acquire as many coaching skills as possible. When the team sees the coach willing to be better, it's the best way for the coach to encourage his/her

players to do the same. I would suggest, on the other hand, that when the team sees the coach with the opposite attitude, it sends a very different message to the athletes.

One attribute that most coaches want to instill in the players is to be prepared for all situations yet many coaches begin a season not bothering to read the "coaching rules" regarding certification among other things and then when the team reaches a level of success where certification is required, the coach cries "foul". The only foul is the coach's failure to prepare him/self for the task at hand.

When a certified coach is brought in to assist the team and its uncertified coach when certification is required, the certified coach will not "take over the team". He/she will provide the support activities and awareness of the subtleties that added together help to produce a good performance from the athletes. As a certified coach he/she understands the relationship that develops between the team and the coach and would never upset that relationship. The certified coach will, by example, act as a mentor to the team's coach and demonstrate the whole package of coaching skills that certification produces. I have never heard of a less than mutually beneficial experience when a certified coach is brought into the mix. If you are ever one of those uncertified coaches who finds him/herself in this type of situation, welcome the opportunity to work with a certified coach. You and your athletes will be the winners!

Many "coaches" who fall into this unfortunate category are competitive players who quite correctly could say that certification is difficult as they spend so much time preparing for their own competitive careers. That's a fair statement to a degree. The National Coaching Certification Programme, partly in recognition of that situation, is in the process of changing the NCCP to a competency-based programme. Instead of attending weekend courses, which have proven successful for a long time, an aspiring coaching/instructing candidate will receive some basic instruction, be that in the area of working with recreational curlers, instructing technical sessions with athletes or coaching competitive teams, they will be "teamed" with a mentor who will be able to recognize the candidate's experiences and natural talents and facilitate the complementary skills. In this way, candidates will be more efficient in their coaching/instructing

preparation.

Competitive curlers who, for whatever reason, find themselves in a coaching role with no certification need to fall back on their playing days for the right attitude that served them so well as a player. As a player they would never ignore anything that might make them a better, more effective athlete. Why then as a coach would they balk at anything that can make them a better coach?

On the other side of that coin is the individual who has never played competitively but who makes an outstanding coach. I am reminded of the Philadelphia Flyers of the 1970's, the "Broad Street Bullies". Even though many remember their success rooted in the "muscle" they exhibited, the true "genius" of the team was its diminutive, soft-spoken coach, Fred Shero, who by the way, never played in the NHL. A skilled cardiologist does not have to have heart disease to successfully treat heart patients and an oncologist doesn't have to have battled cancer to assist cancer patients in their challenge with that disease. Why then do so many assume that successful coaches must have been successful athletes?

Most coaches have a pretty good idea of what a team needs. Certification provides the coach with the modalities that he/she can do with the team to facilitate the skills effectively. Certification's greatest benefit is in simply making the coach aware of all the areas that are required to make a team successful.

Even experienced, certified coaches know that for an elite team to succeed it takes a "team" of individuals who each have expertise in an area, key to the development of the team. A certified coach will recognize this, and seek out these experts to assist him/her in the preparation of the team.

I wish I had a proverbial nickel for every competitive curler or experienced but uncertified coach who attains certification who says to me, "Wow that was great! I didn't know that coaching/instructing involved so much. Thanks for encouraging me to take those courses!"

Every athlete deserves a certified coach!

Enjoy working with your athletes and I'll see you soon behind a pane in the glass!"