

What makes the coach - golfer relationship work or fail



Can success be achieved by talent alone? Maybe it can. Though what is clear is that even the most talented and successful athletes have coaches to help and support them. While Tiger Woods, Lee Westwood and Phil Mickelson are among the most talented and skilled golfers in the world, they still need coaches. It begs the question, what do coaches do to be so successful with their golfers? It is commonly argued that the coach has the capacity to see what golfers can't see and has the ability to fine-tune their performance as well as help them focus their efforts and energies so they excel. However, without the coach-athlete bond, coaches' capacities, abilities and skills would be less effective. The coach-athlete bond provides a platform from which both the coach and the athlete pursue and ultimately achieve success.

In this article, I argue that the coach-golfer partnership is an important vehicle to golfers' (and coaches') performance accomplishments. This partnership may be more important than athletes' talent alone on one hand and coaches' skills, experience, and qualifications on the other. Not least because the partnership provides a sound platform for success, but also because it provides an important medium to feeling fulfilled, satisfied, and positive in the presence of a person that they often spend a significant and intense amount of time together.

David Leadbetter who coached Nick Faldo for 13 years and other distinguished pro golfers including Greg Norman, Ernie Els and Michelle Wie, highlighted the central place of the coach-golfer bond and described it much like a marriage, a trusting relationship and "meeting of the minds". Recently, my colleagues and I presented a model that aims to understand the complex nature of the coach-athlete relationship in a systematic and tangible manner. The model, known as the 3+1Cs, proposes that the basic ingredients of effective and successful coach-athlete partnerships include Closeness, Commitment, Complementarity, and Co-orientation. A degree of closeness in a relationship is reflective of mutual trust, respect, and appreciation, while a degree of complementarity represents co-operation, responsiveness, easiness and friendliness in the interaction.

Trusted and co-operative coaches and athletes are invaluable but clearly expendable. There are numerous examples that illustrate this in the sport of golf. For example, Leadbetter has been hired and fired by the biggest names in golf. Recently, Tiger Woods and Hank Haney parted ways following a six year partnership. Haney apparently resigned with no more than a text message to Woods. Nobody can deny the distinguishing dynamics of the coach-golfer bond, and its value is consistently and publically evaluated with a definitive score. No coach can make any athlete perform exceptionally well... tomorrow – successful performance takes months and years. Talent development and ultimately performance excellence requires a degree of commitment. It is the mutual commitment between golfers and their coaches reflected in their intention to stick together through good and bad times and ups and downs such as success, failure, injury, burnout, slumps that would contribute to their success(ful relationship).

While the coach has significant responsibility to do their best to nurture a strong, successful, and effective relationship with their golfer, it is by no means a one way street. Golfers need to personally invest in this relationship and help the coach bring out the best of them. Although not necessarily easy, it is critical that golfers and their coaches consciously build relationships that are effective by communicating in and crucially outside golf. Communication that involves openly conversing, observing, and learning about/from one another, as well as managing conflict and providing assurance, support, motivation. Communicating with one another allows both the coach and the athlete to know one another's thoughts, feelings, preferences, personality characteristics just to mention a few. Some coaches and golfers already do this to some extent, while others to a greater extent. Overall, communication is a "process engine" that allows relationships to grow and develop – without it there would be very little closeness, commitment and complementarity (3Cs). Moreover, communication promotes mutual understanding, a feature of co-orientation and an important building block of quality coach-athlete relationships. Understanding one another gives a window into how to better interact, build an effective environment, promote strengths and overcome weaknesses.

There is both anecdotal and empirical evidence to support that one of the most significant contributors to a top-level performance or a personal best performance is a strong, effective, high quality, coach-athlete relationship. It is imperative that this ever increasing body of scientific evidence is accurately transferred into coach education and athlete development programmes. Coaches, athletes and other support staff working in a performance enhancing environment must be effectively trained and appropriately briefed in the role and significance of the coach-athlete relationship – as the entire process of coaching and performing revolves around this key sporting partnership.

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