

THE DARK SIDE
OF SPORTS

Think Twice Before You Write

A look at a controversial article about overcoaching

When determining professional standards, pertinent articles that are published in peer-reviewed publications are considered very important factors. One such publication, and in fact one that I subscribe to, is the *National Strength and Conditioning Association Journal*. Although I am pleased with this organization's attempt to improve the standard of care in the field of athletic fitness training, I believe it was a mistake for the editors to publish the article on overcoaching that appeared in the April 2009 issue.

The title of this article was "Overcoaching in the Weight Room." The author, Jonathan Janz, says that overcoaching has a negative effect on "learning and training in the weight room." I have taught human movement classes for over 40 years and have been an expert witness in more than 300 litigations in the field of health and fitness, and not once have I ever heard this term used. And even after reading the aforementioned article, I am still not certain that I understand what "overcoaching" is supposed to mean.

That being said, the author explains that there are four primary causes of overcoaching: 1) confusion in finding an optimal teaching method, 2) overconcern for safety, 3) obsession with perfect technique, and 4) lack of confidence in coaching ability. Let's tackle each of these in turn.

Confusion in finding an optimal teaching method. In 99 percent of the litigations I've seen in which a coach has been accused of poor coaching or a school program has been accused of using a poor curriculum, the argument for the defense generally comes down to this: "No, we've coached great." These individuals may certainly believe they are great coaches, but the bottom line is that an athlete missed a skill. This could mean that the skill was not perfected



When it comes to coaching, especially in high-risk sports such as gymnastics, you can never be too safety conscious. Shown is gymnast Chloe Van Tussenbroek competing in the Junior Nationals this year.

or the athlete was not at a level of proficiency where they should have been doing it in the first place.

A basic rule in coaching is that "You never sacrifice execution for difficulty." For example, in gymnastics the ability to perform a handstand must be perfected before you can progress to master more-complex skills, such as a handstand on a balance beam. And you know what? There is only one way to properly perform a handstand – there is absolutely no confusion in the gymnastics community about what constitutes a perfect handstand or the optimal progression from a handstand into more complex skills. And this is true with all sports. Whether it's throwing a discus or landing a double Axel or even jumping motorcycles, the optimal teaching progressions are available to any coach who is willing to take the time to learn them.

Overconcern for safety. If there were such a problem as overconcern for safety, then why am I – and other experts – called in to testify in so many court cases in this field? If you diminish the safety component in a sport

training environment in any way at all, then the most likely result is that someone is going to get injured. You can't prevent all injuries, but what you can do is be vigilant by interacting with your athletes to make certain they are in an environment that is safe, effective and efficient.

Obsession with perfect technique. The bottom line of all sports movements is technique. Why do you think we study biomechanics? Why do you think we study kinesiology? How did Phelps win eight gold medals and break all those records? One reason is that his coaches analyzed him, and sport science has analyzed swimming even more. If Phelps hadn't trained to perfection, he would not have accomplished what he did. Likewise, many of the skills that are being performed in gymnastics today did not exist 10 years ago. This is because we are always looking for ways to perfect technique.

A lack of confidence in coaching ability. In all the years that I've coached gymnastics, I've never had an athlete question my ability to train them. If you lack confidence in coaching, how are you going to convey confidence to your athletes? One way to develop that confidence is to know anatomy, biomechanics and exercise physiology. If you're not willing to put in your homework, then you shouldn't be coaching.

To be a good coach you must understand how the body can move through space efficiently, effectively and safely. If you are not willing to learn the best ways to coach a sport but you *are* willing to compromise on technique and safety, then you should not be coaching. **ERS**

The Dark Side of Sports is a regular feature by Dr. Marc Rabinoff that answers questions about safety and liability based upon actual litigations.





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