

Musical Chairs and the Perils of Being a Pro Sport Strength Coach

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If you are like me and you have friends working in professional sports as strength and conditioning coaches, the end of the season is always a tense time. Your fate can be decided by something other than your direct performance at your job. At the end of the day, the number of wins and losses posted by the team will ultimately decide your future. And as we all know, wins and losses may have little to do with physical preparation and more to do with personnel, financial resources, team chemistry, player character and coaching decisions at critical times in a game. The strength coach can merely stand on the sidelines and hope that all of his work has made a difference in the performance of his team, with wins ultimately out-numbering losses.

I am a firm believer that proper physical preparation can be the difference between winning and losing, particularly over a long season. Some great strength and conditioning coaches have made their mark in professional sports by putting their teams and athletes in a position to win. However, greater forces can be at play when the game starts and sport specific ability and determination are thrown into the mix. Add into the equation the realities of collective bargaining agreements and the limitations of strength coaches to make an impact on players during the off-season, and now you have a situation where some coaches feel powerless to significantly effect change.

The fate of the strength coach is inevitably tied to the success or failures of the head coach. If you are working under consistently winning coaches with multiple championship seasons, it is highly likely that job security is not a short-term concern for you. It could also be said that the combination of a good head coach and a stable organization is even better. A successful, sensible head coach is always looking for a good situation to step into. While it may be noble to take the reins of a last place team and guide them to a championship with good coaching in two to three years, it never happens. As the 700 year-old knight said to Indiana Jones in the Last Crusade movie, "You must choose, but choose wisely! For as the true Grail will bring you life, a false Grail will take it from you."

I do find it interesting that strength coaches rarely enjoy the job security of other staff associated with a team. Athletic training and medical staff are often retained. Equipment managers, communication and marketing staff and other support positions almost always keep their jobs. I can understand why team coaching staff are almost always shuffled out with the head coach given the integrated nature of how things are done in a coaching environment. The strength coach, however, typically operates independently of what is mapped out and implemented for practices and games. Outside of weight room activities, they may be involved in directing warm-up or cool-down scenarios, as well as conducting return-to-competition duties with individual players. But they are not directly involved with, nor responsible for, strategy, tactics, skill

development or game management. Yet, if the coaching staff fails to win games, regardless of the physical preparation abilities of the players, the strength coach almost always gets shown the door along with the rest of the coaching staff.

I am not saying this is right or wrong. I am simply making an observation. There are reasons to keep a coach and reasons to let go of a coach. In a perfect world, everyone would be judged on their abilities, qualifications, experience, technical knowledge, character and results. The question is, who in a professional sports organization truly has the expertise to properly assess the abilities of a strength coach? I am going to go out on a limb and say “nobody.” They may think they know a good strength coach from a bad one, but let’s be realistic. They don’t really know. Thus, because of the complexity and time intensive nature of such an assessment, I believe that it is simply easier for an incoming head coach to release the current strength coach and bring in someone with whom they are more familiar.

I often hear the rationale that a head coach, “needs to trust his strength coach.” I am not a big fan of this oversimplified response. Are we to assume that the current strength coach would purposely try to sabotage a team and put the organization at risk of losing? A true professional would do no such thing and I would assume his loyalties would be with the team and organization paying his salary. There are a few isolated cases where strength and conditioning staff are retained, often at the urging of the administration. I know of a number of strength coaches who demonstrated their value within their organization, and have managed to survive head coaching changes. However, this is not the norm and, thus, the shuffling of strength coaches continues.

Are there good reasons to keep an existing strength coach when a new head coach is introduced? I am going to outline the rationale on both sides of the question: Should he stay or should he go? Although the discussion may not change attitudes on the subject in the short term, perhaps it can encourage the powers-that-be to apply a more analytical approach to staffing decisions in the future.

Why Should He Stay?

- **Continuity and Experience.** In the corporate world, when a new CEO comes on board and takes on the task of running an organization, mass layoffs are not the first step taken in the journey to revitalizing the company. Evaluation of personnel is obviously an important part of the process. However, the job is to find out who is contributing to the success of the company and who may need a kick in the pants. People who have been with the company for many years can be assets to a new leader, helping them gain a historical perspective on the successes and failures along the way. Some employees may have not flourished under the previous CEO because someone with exceptional leadership abilities did not guide them. Rather than simply dismissing these people, it is often more productive to assess their abilities and contributions, and then make a decision on their value moving forward.

- **Connections with the Players.** Often within a team, the strength coach is the one individual on the coaching staff that has some of the more frequent intimate conversations with the players. Practice and meetings are tightly scheduled with very little time for side conversations and lighter moments. Strength and conditioning sessions, while sometimes intense and testosterone-filled, often have recovery periods where conversations can take place and thoughts can be exchanged. These periods allow for a strength coach to connect with an athlete on a personal level. Over a number of years, strong bonds and a deep trust can develop between a strength coach and his players. These types of relationships can be hard to forge when staff turn over frequently, weakening established connections with players.
- **Performance.** How has the strength coach performed over his tenure with the team? There are many ways to evaluate the success of a strength coach. One of the most important qualities to evaluate is the strength coach's ability to communicate with other staff and work within a team environment. This includes his ability to motivate and convince players to complete the necessary training sessions, as well as voluntary work where possible. Quantification of performance in training sessions can also help to indicate successes by the strength coach, whether it is documenting loads lifted, velocities achieved in speed training or distances covered for aerobic training. In some cases, a review of injuries incurred in training sessions, practices and games can shed light on the success of the physical preparation program. If one year has had a rash of injuries, it may simply be a result of bad luck and coincidence. However, if injuries are a problem year after year, particularly of the soft-tissue variety, it may lead back to the methods employed by the strength coach. Another evaluation criteria for the strength coach may be how much effort is made by the individual to engage in professional development every off-season. Is he reaching out to other experts to supplement his knowledge, or is he doing the same thing year after year? If the strength coach is doing his due diligence on a regular basis and experiencing improvements on all of these fronts, it may be worthwhile to keep him on board despite the win-loss record.

Why Should He Go?

- **Poor Performance.** Some strength coaches may not be getting it done. Players may not be getting better, injuries may be an all too regular occurrence and there are no visible signs that any of this will change given the pattern of behavior of the strength coach. In these cases, a coaching change will be necessary because it will be all too apparent to players, other coaches and even to the strength coach himself that things are not working. While nobody wants to be the one to pull the trigger on the firing of any coach, in these situations it may be best for all parties to part ways. When things are not working for a coach, it is not an enjoyable situation. A fresh start in a different environment may very well be the best thing for that coach.
- **Incongruence with Coaching Philosophy.** Regardless of the skills of a particular coach, we must all be willing and able to adapt to new situations. The ability to deal with change

must be a honed skill for all coaches and staff. However, some coaches may not be able to adapt and integrate with the philosophy of a new head coach. If a head coach expects all of his staff to mirror his approach to dealing with players and managing personalities, the strength coach must also be part of that team. If the head coach likes to yell and scream at his players, you can bet that his ideal strength coach will also be a yeller and a screamer. If the head coach is more of an analytical type that likes to convey his messages to players in a systematic and logical fashion, his strength coach will likely also operate in that manner. Being on the same page can be crucial to the success of the team coaching approach.

- **Creating a Divisive Attitude Amongst Players.** It is human nature for coaches to have favorites, but sometimes this type of approach can create a rift within a team. It is imperative, particularly at the professional level, to have coaches on staff that are supportive of a cohesive team atmosphere. If any players perceive that a member of the coaching staff is not fully supportive, it can negatively impact morale. This type of situation can also have a viral impact in the locker room. In the case of a new head coach coming on board, discussions with players and their perceptions of their interactions with the strength coach must be evaluated. It is always best to speak with the team leaders on the roster to determine the most accurate opinions. There will always be a few players that express displeasure with a coach regardless of the contributions of that coach. The key is to filter out the superficial comments and get to the truth of the matter.
- **Not keeping up with advances in technology.** Regardless of whether we like it or not, society is heavily influenced by innovations in technology, whether it is the newest smart-phone technology, or tracking player movements with GPS. Even if it is not clear as to whether not the technology is advancing the team, it must be part of the picture if everyone else is using it. In many ways, it is a form of technology “peer pressure.” It is in the best interests of all strength and conditioning professionals to know the relevance and applications of emerging technologies. You may not have to use these technologies on a day-to-day basis, but you should be able to speak intelligently on their potential uses.

There will also always be the case when coaches lower down on the food chain are sacrificed to give the impression of “change for the better” to distract others from problems at the top. This is also an unfortunate case of not identifying the true problem. Is the strength coach the true source of turnovers, penalties, ineffective execution and players’ behavioral problems away from the team? While everyone can share in the successes, there must also be the willingness to share in the failures and not pass the blame.

There are no easy ways to do the right thing. Dismissing coaches for the sake of convenience or traditional practices is not necessarily the best way to do business. Good people can be overlooked through a simplistic approach of mass layoffs. It is always in the best interests of everyone to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of individuals and their performance when a change of leadership occurs. If, during the process of the evaluation, you find that an individual coach has not been providing added value to the organization, you now have a good reason for a personnel change. In addition, you have obtained useful information to pass on to that particular coach that may very well help him in his future career. It can be very easy for coaches to fall into

the same old pattern of doing their job. While losing your job can be an unpleasant experience, it also forces you to re-evaluate the way you do things – regardless of who is right or wrong. As William Baulch states, “Sometimes the path to enlightenment takes us down the darkest roads.”