

# Coaching as Teaching: Executive Summary

## Introduction

The LA84 Foundation funded a pilot project in 2007 called “Coaching as Teaching,” which developed and implemented an innovative curriculum for educating youth sports coaches, and evaluated the impact of that curriculum in a youth basketball league. The project was conceived and conducted by the Los Angeles Sports Foundation.

## The Coaching Education Curriculum

The curriculum was presented in six, five-hour workshops to a small group of coaches with little or no coaching experience. Participants spent half their time in the classroom and the other half on the basketball court. The curriculum adapted accepted teaching methods from successful classrooms. Coaches were asked to identify themselves as teachers as well as coaches.

Throughout the series of workshops, the coaches played a role in developing the curriculum. Many parts of the curriculum were built in real time around the needs and interests of the coaches who participated.

The curriculum emphasized experiential learning, mutual respect, effective communication, appropriate expectations of young athletes, and intellectual and ethical development. Coaches learned to write lesson plans, create clear objectives and to articulate their methods for achieving those objectives. In addition, the curriculum promoted the importance of coaches sharing authority with players, rather than relying on an authority-driven model.

In terms of basketball skills, the curriculum focused on individual skills including passing, dribbling, shooting, and moving and positioning without the ball. Set plays were not part of the curriculum.



## **Methodology**

To test the impact of the curriculum, the Los Angeles Sports Foundation created a co-educational basketball league for children ages 9 to 12 at the Lou Costello Recreation Center in the Los Angeles community of Boyle Heights. The league included 60 players and eight teams. Two independent, professional basketball coaches assessed the players' skill levels and formed balanced teams. Four head coaches who had completed the curriculum comprised the experimental group. The other four head coaches, who received no training, served as the control group. Each team played seven games. Although this was a pilot study, it employed multiple and sophisticated methods of data collection. Researchers filmed practice sessions and games, quantified player and team performances during games, observed and recorded spectator behavior during games, administered questionnaires and conducted post-test interviews with players and parents, as well as pre- and post-season interviews with coaches. These data collection methods provided information rarely found in studies of youth sports and have much potential for additional analyses in the future.

## **Findings**

The teams whose coaches participated in the workshops had a better over-all competitive record. The experimental group teams had a winning percentage of 57% compared to 43% for the control group. The two best teams in the league were the teams in the experimental group.

Young athletes on the experimental teams played differently from their opponents. They took half as many three-point shots as control-group players, while averaging more assists per game.

The team practices of the two groups were markedly different. The experimental-group coaches were more efficient in their use of practice time. Players on their teams were almost always engaged in learning activities. These coaches used lesson plans, solicited player feedback, gave homework assignments, encouraged players to critique themselves, and displayed empathy when working with players. Experimental coaches did not punish players with running drills or push-ups. Unlike coaches in the control group, experimental coaches did not offer players material rewards for behavior or performance. They had fewer conflicts with players during practices than their control-group counterparts.

Post-season interviews with players revealed differences in the way the two groups of young athletes perceived their teammates and coaches. Although boys and girls in both groups were generally happy with their coaches and

enjoyed playing in the league, players in the experimental group reported more harmonious relationships with their teammates than did control-group players. Experimental-group players, when asked why they liked their coaches, tended to say that their coaches did a good job of teaching them basketball skills. By contrast, players in the control group were more likely to say the coach was “fun.” Experimental players were far more imbued with the concept of teamwork by the end of the season. Whereas players in the experimental group perceived a responsibility to the team and their teammates, control-group players were likely to say that their primary responsibility was to follow their coaches’ instructions.

Observations of parents and other spectators at the games revealed no significant differences between parents of experimental- and control-group teams. In general, grown-ups at the games were positive, supportive and well-behaved.

The experimental-group coaches indicated in written and verbal evaluations that they were pleased with the curriculum developed in the workshops and with their experience as coaches in the league. They valued the workshops not only as a place to learn about basketball, but as an opportunity to learn about learning. Coaches in both the experimental and control groups evaluated the league positively, noting the collegial atmosphere among coaches and a general sense of community among all parties including players and parents.

## **Discussion**

“Coaching as Teaching” was a pilot program. It was not intended to be a large-scale, tightly controlled social science experiment that would yield definitive answers about the best ways to educate coaches. Nevertheless, the study yielded several significant findings. The most obvious one was that coaching education makes a difference.

The coaches in the experimental group won more games than coaches who received no training. Their practices were more task-oriented and produced fewer player-coach conflicts. Their players played differently and viewed their basketball experience differently from players whose coaches did not go through the workshops.

The type of coaching education that took place in “Coaching as Teaching” was unusual in several respects. Coaches were expected to be teachers and identify themselves as such. The project incorporated methods of teaching found to be the most effective in regular academic classrooms with pre-adolescent and adolescent students. Particularly notable among these methods was authority sharing, which gave young players an opportunity to contribute to the design of practice sessions and game plans. This approach clearly ran counter to the

dominant authoritarian model of youth sports coaching. Many coaches and parents will be reluctant to believe that what they mistakenly view as a “soft” or “touchy feely” approach to coaching can be effective. The findings of this pilot study, however, suggest that a non-authoritarian approach can produce teams capable of competing effectively.

In another departure from the dominant coaching model, two coaches in the experimental group employed an equal-time player-rotation system similar to one introduced by the curriculum. Other coaches used a more traditional rotation that substituted less skilled players for other less skilled players, and did not result in equal time. The two teams with the best records in the league, 6-1, were the teams whose coaches used the equal-time rotation.

Regarding the superior winning percentage of the experimental group, it is interesting to note that the team with the worst won-lost record also was in the experimental group. In the estimation of the researchers, the coach of this team, which finished with a 1-6 record, was the one person in the experimental group who would not or could not utilize the teaching methods introduced by the curriculum. That a coach in the experimental group was unwilling, or unable to employ the methods offered in the curriculum may indicate that even with training that is far more extensive than youth sports coaches typically receive, some coaches will be unable to abandon the dominant coaching model of giving orders and demanding obedience.

The behavior of parents and other spectators at the games was a positive aspect of the league. Some coaches in post-season interviews indicated that they had experienced significant difficulties with parents when coaching in other leagues. It is unclear whether the good behavior of spectators in the Costello Recreation Center league resulted from the influence of the experimental-group coaches, the “moral atmosphere” fostered by the league director or some other factor.

## **Conclusions**

The effectiveness of coaching education can be judged by its impact on athletes, their parents and fellow coaches. For many readers the most salient point about “Coaching As Teaching” will be that a coaching curriculum emphasizing experiential learning, mutual respect, communication skills and shared authority can produce teams that are athletically successful. Winning is the immediate goal in sports. It is a rare player, coach or parent who does not prefer winning over losing. The impact of the “Coaching as Teaching” project, however, should not be judged solely by the competitive success of coaches and teams.

The curriculum, it can be argued, had emotional, cognitive and behavioral impacts as well. It is clear that the coaches who completed the curriculum

derived a great deal of satisfaction from what they learned and how they applied it as coaches. Similarly, parents viewed the league in a positive light. While players on all teams enjoyed playing in the league, players on the experimental-group teams demonstrated a deeper understanding of the fundamentals of basketball, got along better with teammates and developed a greater sense of responsibility to their teams. In short, “Coaching as Teaching” contributed to a comfortable emotional and social league environment.

Youth sport is an endeavor that loses most of its participants by the age of 13 or 14. The reasons for the high attrition rates are multifaceted, but among the reasons cited by kids for dropping out of organized sports are the negative pressures imposed by coaches and parents. Anyone with even a passing acquaintance with youth sports leagues knows that abusive behavior by coaches and parents can be a serious problem. Nationwide, youth sports providers report a shortage of referees and umpires, who cite the misbehavior of coaches and parents as the number-one reason for quitting. Other factors, in addition to adult misbehavior, also may account for the drop-out rate. It has been suggested, for example, that most kids playing youth sports simply are not taught well by coaches. As a result, only those with high natural talent or significant parental encouragement (or pressure) continue to play. Youngsters who have not learned the fundamental concepts and skills of their sports, and therefore cannot compete well, are less likely to go on. Seen against this backdrop, the value of a coaching education program that enables coaches to more effectively teach sport skills while creating a positive, enjoyable sports experience for children and adolescents is difficult to over estimate.