Best Practices for Coaching the Ego-Oriented Athlete

Charlotte R. Stith, M.S.
Health and Human Performance
Oklahoma State University

Timothy Baghurst, Ph.D.
Health and Human Performance
Oklahoma State University

Abstract

One of the many challenges faced by coaches is being able to understand and support each athlete as an individual while simultaneously developing collective efficacy within the team. Individual athlete behaviors are typically categorized as ego-oriented or task-oriented. Although the motivational characteristic of an ego-oriented athlete is measured by their comparison to others, the task-oriented athlete is measured by skill improvement. Therefore, the development of collective efficacy requires the coach to observe ego-oriented and task-oriented behavior and apply strong leadership to foster task over ego. The purpose of this article is to identify the different characteristics of ego-oriented versus task-oriented motivation, how an ego-oriented athlete is developed, and how a coach can influence athletes toward task-oriented behavior by being a positive role model, creating a mastery environment, and developing a cohesive team setting.
Introduction

Consideration of athletes as individuals rather than categorizing them into groups of ego-oriented or task-oriented is the first step in developing a plan for the collective team (Chow & Feltz, 2008). Coaching athletes as individuals can result in a better understanding of the feelings, beliefs, and intentions of the athletes’ behavior (Roberts & Treasure, 2001). This article explores how a coach can influence ego-oriented athletes by being a positive role model, creating a mastery environment, and developing a cohesive team setting.

Overview

One of the criteria for team success is for coaches to understand each individual athlete’s requirements for motivation and achievement (Nicholls, 1984). Achievement goals are objectives that athletes target by estimation of specific targets or skill. There are two achievement goals identified based on personal competence: task and ego goals (Nicholls, 1984). An athlete that is task-oriented toward achievement goals base their success or failure on their ability to master a specific task (Roberts & Treasure, 1995). These athletes have a strong work ethic, believe that practice is required to develop their skill, and also believe effort causes success (Roberts & Treasure, 2001). Conversely, an athlete that is ego-oriented toward achievement goals base their success or failure on their ability compared to others (Roberts & Treasure, 1995). These athletes may appear bored in practice because they prefer to compete. Their primary objective is to be the best athlete at competition, and they believe ability causes success (Roberts & Treasure, 2001). Because an ego-oriented athlete is self-absorbed with their own success, creating team cohesion is difficult (Copper & Mullen, 1994). Coaching an ego-oriented athlete can be a challenge because team cohesiveness is not part of the athlete’s goals or objectives. Therefore, in order to best motivate an athlete, the coach must understand their achievement orientation and how that orientation is developed.

The foundation of an ego-oriented athlete can be defined by both modeling and expectations (Baghurst, 2015; Horn, Lox, & Labrador, 2001). Modeling is based upon Bandura’s social learning theory that individuals learn by observing other’s behavior (Bandura, 1997). Athletes observe someone they hold in high regard and will model that same behavior. In addition to modeling, internal and external expectations play a role in the development of an ego-oriented athlete (Horn et al., 2001). External expectations create a drive for success based on another’s expectations while internal expectations create perfectionism based on the individual athlete’s own expectations (Horn et al., 2001). Coaches can affect an athlete’s behavior with the use of modeling and understanding expectations of the athlete (Baghurst, 2015; Horn et al, 2001).

Causes of the Ego-Oriented Athlete

Individuals may be predisposed to ego-orientation (Duda & Frye, 1997), but it is believed that social norms, learning, and other situations can foster or develop ego-orientation (Roberts, 1993). An ego-oriented athlete can be created by modeling (Bandura, 1997) and through comparison of ability against another to determine their own level of skill. This in turn affects the perception of their ability and thereby their motivation to reach a goal (Roberts, 1993).
Coaching the Ego-Oriented Athlete

athletes do not believe they have the ability to reach a specific goal they either must change the goal or improve their ability. This may in turn create situations in which the athlete reduces effort, sometimes called tanking, in order to avoid direct comparison of ability (Murphy, 2005).

Bandura (1977) distinguished four components related to social learning theory, which are used to identify the difference between imitation and modeling. The third of the four components is the premise of this difference. During this component the learner, athlete, intimates the information received from the observer, coach, and has the opportunity to improve an observed behavior through feedback (Bandura 1986); Bandura refers to this as cognitive rehearsal. Athletes develop ego-oriented behavior by modeling the behavior of an ego-oriented athlete, coach, parent or other source.

Expectations should be considered as playing an integral role in the development of ego-oriented athletes (Horn et al., 2001). The four-step expectancy cycle (Horn et al., 2001) explained how expectations influence athletes. First, the expectations about the athlete are adopted by the perceiver. Second, the perceiver behaves toward the athlete in a manner which reflects the expectations are true. Third, the target interprets the perceiver’s behavior and behaves in a manner congruent with the interpretation. Fourth, the perceiver sees the athlete’s behavior as evidence of the exactitude of the initial impression. It can be a vicious cycle that continues to be fortified by society and those who have an influence on athletes such as the coach, peers, parents, and adults (Horn et al., 2001). Merton (1948) referred to this phenomenon as “the self-fulfilling prophecy” to explain “a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception comes true” (p. 194).

Just as external expectations lead to the perception that an athlete displays ego-oriented attributes, internal expectations can also influence the attributes of an athlete (Roberts, 1993). Specifically, an athlete that excels has higher personal expectations as well as from others, which leads to the likelihood these winners will make ego-oriented internal attributions (Roberts & Treasure, 1995). Perfectionism has been identified as a key characteristic required in elite athletes (Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002), but this motivation toward perfection is driven by either pride or shame. The athlete recognizes there is an expectation to excel which means they will either fail or succeed. Success results in a sense of pride and failure results in shame. Regardless of the motivation the outcome remains the aspiration toward perfection. This aspiration manifests in ego-oriented attributes as a protection of self-esteem (Gould et al., 2002).

**Practical Suggestions for Coaches to Alter Ego-Orientation**

Understanding that an athlete might be ego-oriented provides a coach with opportunity to preemptively address negative consequences that might be manifest by such an athlete. Although there are no simple answers to transitioning an ego-first athlete into a task-oriented one, presented are several practical suggestions which may prove beneficial.

**Coaches Use of Modeling**

First, it is important to recognize that the coach serves as a role model, and behaviors of the coach may be adopted by the athlete (Baghurst, 2015; Baghurst, & Diehl, in press). Bandura’s social learning theory emphasizes the significance of learning by observation or modeling (Bandura, 1977). The athlete intimates information received from the coach, and has
the opportunity to improve an observed behavior through feedback; this is referred to as cognitive rehearsal or modeling (Bandura, 1973). Therefore, the coach, through modeling, can be the athlete’s most influential presence in the development of their behavior, thoughts, and feelings. Studies have shown that athletes are more influenced by their coach than any other individual (Bredemeier & Stephens, 1996; Duda & Guivernau, 2002). For example, it has been shown that athletes typically aggress because they observe their coach aggress (Bredemeier & Stephens, 1996).

Coaches should be aware of the degree of influence they have with their athletes. Coaches can maintain fair play, reduce aggression during competition, and develop strong moral reasoning with the use of modeling (Roberts & Treasure, 2001). However, simply knowing how to behave does not result in the athlete demonstrating that behavior. Athletes want to know the coach is willing to employ what they are being asked to achieve (Baghurst, 2015). Practically, coaches can model task-orientation by focusing on the processes needed for success over win-loss outcomes.

Asking the coach to assume the responsibility of being a role model may be asking some coaches to do more than they are capable or willing to offer. There are coaches that believe winning is more important than the development of an athlete (Brawley, 1984). These are the same coaches that are more concerned with their own personal success than the success of the individual athlete or even the team. Just as an athlete will model positive behavior of coaches they will also model the negative behavior. An athlete will become aware of the fact their coach considers winning and/or personal success more important than the team or individual athletes (Bredemeier, 1985).

Create a Task-Oriented Climate

The climate created by the coach engenders task-oriented or ego-oriented attributes in athletes (Roberts & Treasure, 1995). Coaches can influence the behavior of an ego-oriented athlete by creating a mastery-oriented climate versus an ego-oriented climate (Roberts & Treasure, 1995). Behaviors of the coach, such as a focus on their personal success and winning at all costs, are most salient in an ego-oriented climate (Roberts & Treasure, 2001). An ego-oriented environment is one in which the athlete expects punishment for failure, and that an athlete with a better skill level will receive preferential treatment (Chow & Feltz, 2008). A mastery climate is one in which the coach promotes success as determined by improvement and effort (Chow & Feltz, 2008).

Creating a mastery environment requires the coach to offer the athlete positive reinforcement based on the athlete’s work, improvement, and contribution to the team (Roberts & Treasure, 2001). An ego-oriented environment is one in which the coach rewards athletes based on skill and encourages the team to win at all costs (Roberts & Treasure, 2001). Therefore, a coach must design specific situations in which task success and improvement is fostered and rewarded. The use of individual goal setting, for example, may help an athlete to set personal targets that demonstrate improvement rather than making ego-based comparisons to the accomplishments or improvements of other athletes. Individual goal setting has been shown as a reliable method for improving performance (e.g., Baghurst, Bradford, & Mulekar, 2012; Baghurst, Tapps, & Kensinger, 2015).
Use the Team and Others

If the ego-oriented athlete is part of a team, the coach can and should consider encouraging collective efficacy within the team. One of the most important variables linked to team performance is cohesion (Copper & Mullen, 1994). Collective efficacy refers to a group that shares beliefs in themselves, their abilities, and are capable of executing the necessary actions to achieve the team’s goals (Bandura, 1977). When a team has shared beliefs it influences collective behaviors such as effort and persistence (Chow & Feltz, 2008). The team then becomes collective in their results, expectations, and goals.

Practically, if the coach can deliberately foster a collective efficacy focused on task outcomes, the ego-oriented athlete may transition from thinking as an individual to thinking as part of the collective (Chow & Feltz, 2008). Thus, the ego-oriented attribute of comparing self as an individual against others will shift to comparison the team against others. This may lead to each individual athlete investing in the group which, in turn, decreases ego-oriented attributes (Bird, Foster, & Maruyama, 1980). Even in failure teams with a high collective efficacy have a positive outlook regarding the future (Eys et al., 2015). When an ego-oriented athlete begins to believe and behave as part of a collective they display less ego-oriented attributes and the team benefits with a higher level of production (Chow & Feltz, 2008).

Coaches can use small wins – here referring to improvements not necessarily directly associated with outcomes – to help the team learn success. By creating wins, big or small, at the beginning of the season will enhance the team’s development of collective efficacy (Chow & Feltz, 2008). Wins can be defined as winning games, measuring improvement and effort, or achieving pre-determined goals; each of these are examples of ways the coach can help develop collective efficacy.

Socializing as a team outside of the sports arena may also improve collective efficacy (Copper & Mullen, 1994), which may explain why coaches have social events at their homes or at venues outside the environment in which the athletes would typically spend time together. Knowing that coaches can influence beliefs and affect ego-orientation gives them an abundance of power with the athlete. Coaches who are able to discern positive influence versus control of an athlete differentiates them as good versus bad leaders, and a strong collective efficacy is present through good leadership (Horn et al., 2001).

Discussion

The ego-oriented athlete determines success as measured by their ability compared to others (Roberts & Treasure, 1995). Bandura (1977) postulated that ego-oriented versus task-oriented behaviors are learned based on the belief that all interactions between individuals can lead to changes to beliefs and behaviors through modeling. Understanding the importance of a role model, the external and internal forces of motivation, and how to create a mastery environment can assist the coach in finding the appropriate methods to guide these athletes.

As a coach, knowing if the athlete had a peer, parent, or coach that modeled ego-oriented behavior affords the opportunity to use influence and expertise to alter the ego-oriented attribution (Roberts & Treasure, 1995). It is also important to recognize that expectations from society, coaches, peers, parents, and adults all play a role in developing or influencing behavior, and the coach should learn the ego-oriented athlete’s responses to these expectations (Horn et al., 2001).
Coaching the Ego-Oriented Athlete

2001). If the athlete is affected by external expectations such as socio-culture norms, parents, or other variables, then the coach should use their power of persuasion to alter those expectations (Horn et al., 2001). If the athlete is affected by internal expectations such as a drive toward perfectionism, then the coach should foster cohesion and a collective efficacy if within a team in order to change those expectations (Gould et al., 2002). The coach should also use their leadership qualities to develop a mastery oriented and cohesive environment (Roberts & Treasure, 2001). When ego-oriented athletes begin to believe and behave as part of a collective they display less ego-oriented attributes and the team benefits with a higher level of production (Chow & Feltz, 2008).

References

Coaching the Ego-Oriented Athlete


