

The University of Birmingham, Advanced Certificate in Golf Coaching

# Coach Expertise in relation to 'Top 25/50/100 Golf Coach' lists

Advanced Coaching Theory Assignment, Essay - 1600 words

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## INTRODUCTION

In almost all endeavours, some people are performing at a significantly higher level than others. These individuals are often recognized and labelled as experts. (Schempp, 2003) The aim of this assignment is to critically discuss the 'Top 25/50/100 Golf Coach' lists produced by the popular golfing press and the relevance and value of these as a measure expertise in golf coaching.

Every two years Golf Magazine issues the Top 100 Teachers list. Instructors apply by filling in the application form and are considered if they have a minimum of 12 years of full-time coaching experience, spend a minimum of 1500 hours doing other activities related to the coaching profession. Applications are assessed against 15 criteria, including recommendations and references, awards, student portfolio, student results, growth of the game and other. Former and active Top 100 coaches followed by the Selection Committee (which consists of GOLF 's instruction editors, Top 100 Teachers and alumni), evaluate applications on communication skills, swing knowledge, innovation ideas, willingness to share knowledge, success with players etc. (Golf.com, 2018)

Golf Digest list of 50 Best Teachers in America is published every 2 years. The list is produced by surveying more than 1000 teachers, proposing their recognition among their peers. Before the voting, candidates are selected by encouraging coaches on the previous year's list to nominate new candidates. The PGA is consulted to nominate those who they think should make the list and Golf Digest staff also may nominate. Many of these coaches are specialists in certain areas, like short game gurus and swing biomechanics specialists. (Golf Digest, 2017)

In 2004 UK's Golf Monthly first time issued a list of Top 25 golf coaches in the UK, and since then these coaches have provided advice printed out in that magazine. In 2015 the readership nominated 6 new coaches and after assessment (applications on knowledge, years of experience, teaching and perspectives), in 2016 the list was updated. For publishing the list, Golf Monthly undertakes a different approach, also acknowledging the subjective nature of the list and lists the top 25 coaches without ranking them. (Golf Monthly, 2016)

## DISCUSSION

From the introduction of these lists, it is evident that all three “top coaches” lists heavily take in consideration years of experience. According to Schempp (2003), for gaining expertise in coaching golf, both playing and teaching experience might have a significant role. Playing experience may help coaches in understanding and appreciating a player's effort and performance, and may help in establishing a relationship. Teaching experience is identified by Colclough, D. J. (2009), as a primary source of knowledge among expert coaches, but it should be noted that by Erickson, Côté and Fraser-Thomas (2007), coaches take different pathways in gaining experience, so informal routes often lead to significant experience deficits in some areas.

All three “top coaches” lists heavily take in consideration the coach's success with top elite players. Players have their own view on expertise. Through the reflective journal, in the study by Toner et al. (2012), it is nicely illustrated how players may not be fully objective in evaluating the coach's expertise and can harshly judge coaches against their own perception of expertise, without acknowledging the limitations of the coach's influence on them as players. According to Toner et al. (2012), successful coaching process is inevitably a result of not only a coach's expertise, but also a player's trust and commitment. Players are ultimate decision makers on who will coach them and their potentially flawed perception of expertise can result in choosing an inadequate expert-coach.

The importance of relationship and “likeability” factor is pointed out by Hank Haney and Butch Harmon. It may be interesting to note that Butch Harmon, who was voted 9 out of 10 times as no. 1 by his peers for the Golf Digest ranking lists (Rudy, 2017), is not a member of the PGA of America and has failed a golf teaching examination early in his career as is described by Jenkins (2014) in his work. A long-lasting coaching relationship with Tiger Woods as a phenomenon had inevitably influenced a perception of his expertise among his peers, among the public and most certainly among players. Nevertheless, Butch Harmon's portfolio of players who heavily improved under his coaching (Greg Norman, Phil Mickelson, Dustin Johnson and others), his approach to them “as a person” might be a key to his extreme success and recognition as a coach.

Although these coaches work on the highest level of performance and have most likely earned their reputation, their relationship with players could potentially substitute for a lack of knowledge in certain areas of coaching. According to Jenkins (2014), Sean Foley, for example, admits that he “screwed up” numerous players due to lack of knowledge about sports science early in his elite-coaching career. If a coach has a successful long relationship with an elite player it may not necessarily mean he is generally an expert in the field of coaching, although he most likely is an expert in that context, with that player. This example shows that simply coaching top elite players may not be necessarily associated with the highest form of expertise.

As Cassidy (2004, p. 47) states, a public perception of expertise in coaching is based on widely available material like very popular coach biographies, articles and purely their success in what they do, rather than evidence-based knowledge and skills validation. By Cassidy (2004, p. 47), research conducted on 200 students where they were asked to describe a “good coach” with a list of characteristics, an inventory also included characteristics like patient, motivator, experienced, has a sense of humour, has a loud voice, adventurous etc. The question which arises is how far the general perception of expertise in coaching is from what may be a true expert. A “Top coaches” lists may, therefore, be more oriented towards influencing the general perceived value of coaches (public, players and sports practitioners) in relation to their “common sense”, than to point out true experts.

As not all publicly announced top coaches have a respective academic background, the role of science in sports coaching should be considered. Scientists have models and instruments of

observation, experiments, statistical and computing tools to extend human reasoning capabilities, peer reviews and such, all of which are a genuine help to coaches as Jenkins (2014) states. Besides, utilizing a scientific approach encourages rigour, critical thinking and skills everyone involved with teaching should possess to a certain extent. But quite often methods of natural sciences are not adequately transferred to social sciences, and as Haack, S. (2005). has nicely stated, no matter how sophisticated scientific methods are we will hardly ever predict human/player behaviour. Nevertheless, although these techniques and methods are imperfect and fallible, acting based on scientific evidence is undoubtedly helpful. (Haack, 2012) This supports the role of science-based education in the formation of experts in coaching.

Evaluating coaches on content knowledge may not be straightforward and sufficient. A study by Grant et al. (2012) on Top 100 GOLF Magazine's coaches in North America shows that coaches don't fully agree on what students should learn. Based on data collected in that study, two groups were identified, "Element Instructors" agreed on fundamentals of golf and "Compound Instructors" did not. Although that research was related towards coaching fundamentals of golf, it highlights that there are different opinions among coaches in North America, so more significant variation on that matter can be expected across cultures around the world. Content knowledge can be evaluated through knowledge examinations, but it appears there is a likelihood of disagreement between experienced successful coaches on coaching content as such.

In the context of "ranking" coaches it may be worth exploring how professional organizations assess and evaluate expertise and quality of teaching. Researchers identified various conceptual foundations for developing criteria for evaluation coaches. According to Ingvarson and Rowe (2008) (cited in Cassidy, 2004), those foundations which are based on questions "what profession says a teacher should know and be able to do", were found most appropriate in a coaching context. They further point that standards as such, developed by teachers themselves through professional organisations, support professional principles and values, assure tools for making judgements and provide context, so useful and reliable judgements can be made. Nevertheless, standards are not rankings. Standards are used to assure and identify levels of expertise. Popular top coaches' lists are not exclusively limited to those who meet these measurable standards.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, as Toms, M. (Ed.). (2017) also states, an "expert" is a contested term, although it is common to see those with a blend of highest certification, years of experience, recognition or professional relationship with top elite players to be widely perceived as top experts among public and their peers. But can the list be definite and can these characteristics be quantified for ranking experts? There may be no definitive explanation, therefore ranking "experts" on a wide range of criteria as Golf Magazine and Golf Digest may not be sensible. Well-designed standards based on rigorous holistic assessment, produced by professional coaches and coaching associations most likely highlight expert-coaches which can hardly be ranked. This may to some extent support the approach the Golf Monthly magazine undertakes by not ranking their selection of Top 25 coaches.

Producing a list of top coaches based on nomination by peers as Golf Digest does has a strong political aspect. But those entering that are very aware of that. Nevertheless, qualities like the ability to establish a relationship, cooperate with peers and even developing business and marketing strategies may be as important as presumed characteristics knowledge and experience. Therefore, being nominated by those who understand the importance of these hardly measurable factors may be indicating, although coaches will at the end most likely base their votes on what they talk about most - tour players winning events.