Sports’ disciplinary legacy and the challenge of ‘coaching differently’

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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
Sports’ disciplinary legacy and the challenge of ‘coaching differently’

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ABSTRACT

Be empowering. Be athlete-centered. Be autonomy supportive. These are three related topics currently being promoted by sport psychologists and sport pedagogists in an effort to recognize athletes’ unique qualities and developmental differences and make coaching more holistic and coaches more considerate. This has led us to ask, how likely are such initiatives to lead to coaches putting their athletes at the center of the coaching process given that coaches’ practices have largely been formed through relations of power that subordinate and objectify athletes’ bodies through the regular application of a range of disciplinary techniques and instruments [e.g. Barker-Ruchti, N., & Tinning, R. (2010). Foucault in leotards: Corporeal discipline in women’s artistic gymnastics. Sociology of Sport Journal, 27, 229–250; Heikkala, J. (1993). Discipline and excel: Techniques of the self and body and the logic of competing. Sociology of Sport Journal, 10, 397–412; Gearnity, B., & Mills, J. P. (2012). Discipline and punish in the weight room. Sports Coaching Review, 1, 124–134]? In other words, to try to develop athlete-centered coaches capable of coaching in ways that will empower their athletes without also problematizing the discursive formation of coaches’ practices concerns us [Denison, J., & Mills, J. P. (2014). Planning for distance running: Coaching with Foucault. Sports Coaching Review, 3, 1–16]. Put differently: how can athlete empowerment initiatives be anything more than rhetoric within a disciplinary framework that normalizes maximum coach control? It is this question that we intend to explore in this paper. More specifically, as Foucauldians, we will argue that coaching with greater consideration for athletes’ unique qualities and developmental differences needs to entail coaching in a less disciplinary way and with an awareness and appreciation of the many unseen effects that disciplinary power can have on coaches’ practices and athletes’ bodies.

Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons? (Foucault, 1995, p. 228)

Introduction

Be empowering. Be autonomy supportive. Be athlete-centered. These are three related topics currently making their way in and around coach development courses, clinics, conferences and workshops in an effort to help coaches of all levels recognize and appreciate their athletes’ unique
qualities and developmental differences. In fact, as early as 1994 Canada passed a number of sport policies to help develop an athlete-centered sport system from youth through to high performance (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994). Since that time a number of researchers have argued that an athlete-centered coaching framework is the most effective way to empower athletes and foster more holistic and considerate coaching practices (e.g. Douge & Hastie, 1993; Kidd, 2006; Kidman, 2001, 2005; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Launder, 2001; Light, 2004; Light & Evans, 2013; Light & Harvey, 2015; Light, Harvey, & Mouchet, 2014; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Williams & Hodges, 2005).

There can be little doubt of the well-intentioned nature of the athlete-centered coaching movement. Coaches after all are realistic: they know that attention to tactics, strategies, conditioning and technique will only go so far in making their athletes or teams better. They also know that to be effective they need strong interpersonal and intrapersonal skills (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). And following a boom in psychosocial coaching research, coaching scholars have clearly demonstrated that for coaches to be successful regardless of whether they coach at a school, a club or at a professional level they need to be open to multiple points of view, including perhaps most importantly their athletes’ views. So it is no surprise that researchers, coach developers, sport administrators, high-performance directors and others whose actions and decisions—whose power—help to establish dominant ways of thinking and doing in sport have championed the importance of coaches becoming more athlete-centered.

But do all of these good intentions actually transfer to coaches coaching with their athletes at the center? Along with some of our colleagues we are skeptical (e.g. Jones & Standage, 2006; Nelson, Cushion, Potrac, & Groom, 2014). However for us, skeptical does not mean cynical. We have made strong calls for coaches to coach with an awareness of the operation and effects of power in order to develop engaged and thinking athletes (e.g. Denison & Mills, 2014). We have argued that ‘burnout’ or underperformance, for example, as opposed to indicating an athlete’s character flaws or weaknesses could be the result of many everyday and taken-for-granted coaching practices related to how a coach uses his or her power (Denison, 2007). In other words, instead of the athlete being the ‘problem’ in these cases maybe part of the problem concerns the formation and application of coaches’ knowledge of how to coach (Denison, 2010a, 2010b)? As a result, rather than coaches questioning their athletes’ character, commitment or confidence when problems arise, maybe they should question their own methods and practices?

However, in arguing that coaches question ‘how they know how to coach’ in order to begin to coach in ways that can better facilitate the development of engaged and thinking athletes we never underestimated how difficult this can be. For example, based on the long-standing work of Heikkala (1993), Johns and Johns (2000) and Shogan (1999), we know that coaches’ practices are to a large extent maintained by a host of complex power relations that circulate in and around every coaching context. And more recent sociocultural sport and coaching research has reached the same conclusion (e.g. Andrews, 2008; Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Gearity & Mills, 2012; McMahon, Penney, & Dinan-Thompson, 2012). Accordingly, our concern with the pronouncements of athlete empowerment that have been said can result from an athlete-centered coaching framework (e.g. Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2006; Kidman & Hanrahan, 2011; Lombardo, 1999; Lyle, 2002) is the disregard of wider operations of power that can serve to subordinate, normalize and objectify athletes’ bodies and as a consequence limit and constrain athletes not empower them.

In other words, to believe it is possible to develop athlete-centered coaches capable of coaching in ways that can enable their athletes to take greater responsibility and ownership of their development without also problematizing coaching’s discursive formation that for the most part casts coaches as leaders and athletes as followers, and the well-documented consequences of this understanding—the formation of a specific type of athletic body that is normalized and docile (Denison & Avner, 2011; Phillips & Hicks, 2000)—is to ignore how coaching is primarily a social process bound by a number of contextual influences (Denison, Mills, & Jones, 2013; Jones, Glintmeyer, & McKenzie, 2005). Put differently: how can athlete empowerment initiatives be anything more than rhetoric within a context that normalizes maximum coach control?
It is this question that we intend to explore in this paper. More specifically, as Foucauldians, we will argue that to coach with a greater consideration for athletes’ unique qualities and developmental differences, or what we call ‘coaching differently’, a coach, whether he or she is a parent, a volunteer or a paid professional, could benefit from a greater understanding and awareness of the effects that disciplinary power has on his or her knowledge and understanding of how to coach. To make this argument we begin by mapping onto sport Foucault’s (1995) analysis of ‘the gradual extension of the mechanisms of discipline throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, [and] their spread throughout the whole social body’ (p. 209).

**Discipline and utility**

While Foucault was hesitant to be categorized or placed into a specific ‘academic box’, few would dispute labeling him a historian of thought (Markula & Pringle, 2006). After all, Foucault was interested in understanding how ideas developed and how certain practices became accepted as ‘normal’. For example, in his extensive analysis of disciplinary power, and the widespread use of various disciplinary techniques and instruments across a number of institutions, Foucault (1995) carefully examined the utility of these techniques and instruments to try to discern their purpose. From this analysis he was able to conclude that discipline as a form of ‘modern power’ applied directly to the body helped to make citizens more useful and productive.

Critical to Foucault’s (1995) analysis of how disciplinary power operated to make individuals useful was his understanding of *panopticism*, a concept he based on Jeremy Bentham’s architectural figure of the panopticon. According to Foucault, ‘the panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately’ (p. 200). Thus, Foucault argued, it was the formation and deployment of specific spatial, temporal and movement arrangements that led individuals to know themselves in very specific ways, a specificity that ‘assured the efficient and automatic functioning of power’ (p. 201). As a result, individuals began to govern their thoughts and behaviors in line with particular ‘rules’, procedures and ways of being; clearly defined and arranged spaces, and knowing what to do in those spaces, replaced the locks, bars and chains of the past. The panoptic schema, therefore, made any ‘apparatus of power more intense; it assures its economy; it assures its efficacy’ (p. 206).

From the total force of Foucault’s (1995) analysis of disciplinary power, it became clear to see that in large social institutions where disciplinary regimes were prevalent, such as the workplace, the military, schools or hospitals, people could easily become cogs in a system where interaction, learning and personal growth were subservient to strict practices of control. In short, ‘discipline fixes; it arrests or regulates movements; it clears up confusion; it dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways; it establishes calculated distributions’ (p. 219).

And in so doing, disciplinary power produces very specific meanings because its application came with a very specific knowledge of the ‘right type’ of individual: his or her behavior, state of mind and gradual improvements. In other words, discipline established an apparatus ‘for the formation of clinical knowledge’ about an individual (p. 249). As a result, discipline’s different techniques and instruments—its details—became indispensable in preventing potential disturbances to the increasing modernization and industrialization of society.

To illustrate how discipline exerted its control through greater mechanisms of efficiency and rationalization, and helped to solve a number of problems that were beginning to sweep across Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the economy grew, wealth escalated and the population exploded, Foucault (1995) offered a number of historically grounded examples. One of these examples was the threat that nomadism, or the possible floating of an increasingly growing population, could have on the economy. Without a permanent and stable workforce how could industrial production continue to increase? Accordingly, steps were taken to fix populations in specific places, such as the construction of housing stock close to factories. Or consider the threat that disobedience, looting and illness posed for factory owners? As a result, increasing
measures of surveillance and automation became routine. Further, the employment of various discipli-
nary techniques, such as partitioning and ranking, served to reduce desertion from the military that
if left unchecked could undermine a nation’s strength and its economic growth. Similarly, discipline’s
utility spread to education to ensure that pupils mastered the necessary skills to keep the economy
growing. Students were organized and taught in ways that were seen as conducive to establishing a
massive docile yet productive workforce. Discipline also helped reduce the costs of production as the
economy expanded and became more complex. For example, time was organized in ways to extract
only useful moments from workers’ labors. Likewise, to ensure the production of ‘new’ knowledge
and keep the economy growing, science, with its fixed and rigid procedures, became the one
‘true’ way to know how to do anything. Discipline’s procedures also promised a healthy workforce,
or healthy enough workforce, by providing (and controlling) the spaces, times and activities appro-
priate for workers’ leisure. And disciplinary power illustrated great utility through various procedures
—the combination of forces—that were intended to make everybody part of a multi-segmentary
machine: a machine designed to neutralize dissent and constrain any resistant activities ‘that
might establish horizontal conjunctions’ (p. 219).

However, most central to Foucault’s (1995) analysis of disciplinary power’s utility was his examina-
tion of the prison. Importantly, Foucault made it very clear that the disciplinary procedures of the
prison were not natural or ‘born’ out of a preconceived notion of what a penal system should do:
its specific legal apparatus or codes. Rather, through his analysis of the birth of the prison, Foucault
demonstrated the ‘newness’ not the naturalness of the various procedures shaped by discipline’s
techniques and instruments and how they were intended to transform useless, unproductive and
imprisoned bodies, into useful, productive and free bodies. So critical is this insight from Foucault
that we believe it is worth quoting him at length.

> Procedures were being elaborated for distributing individuals, fixing them in space, classifying them, extracting from them the maximum in time and forces, training their bodies, coding their continuous behavior, maintaining them in perfect visibility, forming around them an apparatus of observation, registration and recording, constituting on them a body of knowledge that is accumulated and centralized. The general form of an apparatus intended to render individuals docile and useful, by means of precise work upon their bodies, indicated the prison institution, before the law ever defined it as the penalty par excellence. (Foucault, 1995, p. 231, italics original)

As one can see from this passage, Foucault (1995) was trying to make the point that the transform-
ation of prisoners’ bodies through a range of disciplinary procedures was not initially sanctioned or
invented by the law. Rather, these procedures emerged through the transition to modern power as a
way to punish, control and reform individuals through a machinery that could function as efficiently
as possible to achieve greater production and obedience of a fast growing and potentially disorderly
population.

While the promise of transformation that disciplinary power offered could arguably be justified as
a way to ensure that society’s various public institutions functioned smoothly and served the health,
safety and educational needs of a growing population, we believe it is worth considering how well
discipline’s forces align with the purpose of coaching. On the one hand, the regular application of a
range of disciplinary techniques and instruments can make athletes’ bodies useful, and yes this can
aid in the production of winners (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Denison, 2007). But winning, it must
be remembered, is relative to excellence and performing up to one’s potential. In other words, a dis-
ciplined athlete may not necessarily produce his or her optimal performance (Denison, 2010b). In this
way, the association between discipline and coaching, and the similarities in the practices used to
organize and transform the bodies of workers, students, patients, soldiers, prisoners and athletes
could be problematic. Moreover, just as Foucault (1995) discovered when he examined the origin
of discipline’s techniques and instruments to transform the imprisoned body, so have numerous
sports historians shown that the association between discipline and coaching is not natural but the
result of a number of political and social contingencies (e.g. Heikkala, 1993; Pronger, 1995;
Shogan, 1999). However, rather than repeat those well-established arguments here, we want to
turn our attention to the implausibility of becoming an athlete-centered coach without also being able to problematize the century-and-a-half legacy of the association between discipline and coaching: a legacy that has indelibly shaped and formed coaches’ practices and produced all manner of effects on athletes’ bodies, many of which are incommensurate with the idea of athlete empowerment (Denison & Mills, 2014).

**Discipline, coaching and the body**

Consider the following questions emanating from Foucault’s (1995) historical analysis of discipline to transform the body: Do coaches need to manage the same problems faced by military leaders and factory owners? Is dissent a problem coaches are trying to prevent? Or looting? Or desertion? Do coaches, many of whom work as volunteers in club, community or educational settings, need to be concerned with maximizing profit or making life and death decisions? Are practices that were designed to serve as a ‘general formula of domination’ (p. 137), ‘a policy of coercions’ (p. 138), ‘a calculated manipulation of [the body’s] gestures, [and] its behavior’ (p. 138) in order ‘to render individuals docile’ (p. 231) relevant to effective coaching? Examine any definition, prescription or model of effective coaching offered by any coaching researcher over the last half-century, whether it be for youth sport coaches or high-performance sport coaches, and nowhere will you see reference made to an effective coach as someone who dominates, coerces, manipulates and makes athletes docile. So then why are coaches’ practices, as Shogan (1999) and more recently Mills and Denison (2013) have so clearly illustrated, basically a blueprint or handbook for the transformation of athletes’ into disciplined bodies?

To go a step further with the seemingly contradictory association between discipline and coaches’ practices, do coaches need to manage the same problems faced by prison wardens? Is recidivism a concern for coaches? Or violence? Or anger? Or troublemaking? Or rage? Because in effect a coach is saying, ‘these are problems that concern me’, when he or she employs the various techniques and instruments of discipline that Foucault (1995) outlined made the prison ‘the modern instrument of penality’ (p. 228). We recognize this analogy might seem extreme, and clearly coaches are not prison wardens, but allows us to explain further the connection we are trying to make and why we believe it is important to consider if coaches indeed wish, as they repeatedly say they do, to coach in ways that can increase their athletes’ engagement and ownership over their athletic development.

We acknowledge that most coaches believe they encourage their athletes to think for themselves, and that for the most part they try to coach every one of their athletes as individuals who can think for themselves (Mills & Denison, 2013). But is true ‘thinking for oneself’ or individualized coaching really possible within an overarching framework or discursive formation designed around the repetitive constraints of constant control that presents limited opportunities to think for oneself? As a distance runner, how can knowing that you have to run all 8 of your 400m repetitions in under 60 seconds for a workout to be deemed successful by your coach encourage independent thinking? Or as a soccer player, how can knowing that you have to maintain your ‘disciplined’ position on the field encourage the sorts of spontaneity that an inspired performance requires?

Clearly, we are not denying that there are situations when coaches need to exert their influence and be prescriptive with regards to setting a specific training protocol or tactical approach to a game. Nor are we denying that athletes do not ever experience pleasure or satisfaction from disciplining themselves to work hard and push their bodies (Gerdin & Pringle, 2015). But in general does disciplinary power need to be such an ever-present feature of coaching? Actually, Foucault (1978) would argue, it never really can, given that power is inherently complex and capillary-like and more like a dense web, a thicket or a swarm full of polymorphous techniques than something fixed and predictable. Accordingly, where there is power there will always be resistance; there will always be contradictions, blockages and twists and turns even when a coach believes that he or she is coaching in a way that takes into consideration his or her athlete’s particular needs. Sure, coaches may design and
develop unique, creative or ‘free’ workouts from time to time, and perhaps even more so when working with experienced or high-performance athletes, but these workouts are still likely to be disciplining given that the overall strategies of power will likely remain the same. In other words, a coach’s so-called empowering workouts are unlikely to counter the problematic effects that disciplinary power has been shown to have on the body without an accompanying understanding of how disciplinary power is present and active in all places and at all times and how these ‘presences’ and ‘activities’, as Foucault so clearly demonstrated, for the most part go unseen.

Therefore, despite a coach believing that he or she is coaching in an autonomy supportive, holistic or athlete-centered way, he or she is unlikely to develop the type of engaged or open-minded athletes he or she is intending to if at the same time he or she is not problematizing the docile-making effects of disciplinary power that have come to frame almost everything a coach does. To believe otherwise is to ignore the workings of disciplinary power and its effects on athletes’ bodies. It is akin to ‘doing’ the same thing but expecting a different result. Foucault (1995) argued similarly in his discussion of the extremely high rates of recidivism in French prisons in the mid-nineteenth century. Despite prison programs designed to reform, he argued,

The prison cannot fail to produce delinquents. It does so by the very type of existence that it imposes on its inmates … it is supposed to apply the law, and to teach respect for it; but all its functioning operates in the form of an abuse of power. (Foucault, 1995, p. 266)

Accordingly, if a coach truly values developing thinking athletes or coaching each of his or her athletes as an individual (and again we want to emphasize that we believe many coaches do), then his or her specific practices—the workouts and practice plans he or she designs—need to reflect this aim. Slogans, truisms and other types of behavioral or motivational interventions intended to foster and develop thinking, responsible, resilient, self-compassionate or self-regulating athletes will largely be ineffective if they are not accompanied by practices that disrupt sports’ disciplinary legacy and the many unseen effects that disciplinary power has on athletes’ bodies. More to the point, through Foucault (1995), and as a supplement to the recommendations put forth by athlete-centered researchers, for coaches to truly coach in holistic ways and not just pay lip service to this idea, they will need to destabilize specific relations of power present in their everyday practices that can make athletes docile.

As a specific example of the contradiction between the association of coaching and discipline, and the attempt to promote more athlete-centered coaching practices without accounting for the complexities of power, consider the increasing technocratization and scientization of what is claimed to be good coaching pedagogy through the use of various surveillance and monitoring systems like video analysis. These technologies are repeatedly justified and wholly endorsed by many sport scientists and high-performance managers for their potential to nurture and develop more engaged and competent athletes: to enhance athletes’ learning. However, as an increasing number of scholars have begun to show, the use of such technologies do more to control not empower (e.g. Mackenzie & Cushion, 2013; Manley, Palmer, & Roderick, 2012; Williams & Manley, 2014). For example, according to Williams and Manley (2014),

the technologies of control utilized to monitor player performance can be viewed as further micro-processes deployed within the institution that seek to alleviate the threat of resistance. In this instance, any attempts at organic solidarity become ruptured through an enhanced mode of comparison and a clear emphasis on demarcating the individual. This is brought about through a regime of managerial control which invests heavily in promoting individual competence, thought to be advantageous through retracting efforts to unify against authority. Through this unremitting micro-management any humanistic approaches to learning appear de-centred, and thus relations between the learners, learning and knowledge became fabricated and de-socialized. (pp. 14–15)

Williams and Manley (2014) also showed in their study that coaches’ pedagogically holistic intentions to help players recognize their strengths and weaknesses through the use of video analysis actually resulted in athletes feeling more like data sets than independent learners. Consequently, players viewed their coaches’ intentions to use these technologies as ‘suspicious’, resulting in
many players beginning to distrust their coaches. This is not to suggest that coaches intend to erode their players’ trust through the use of video analysis. What it does suggest is that if coaches are not regularly evaluating how their everyday practices can serve as techniques and instruments of discipline it can become very easy for players’ enthusiasm to disappear as they begin to perceive themselves more and more as ‘mere functionaries’ (p. 19) or workers stripped of any sense of their own ambitions, pleasures or embodiment.

Returning to our prison analogy, Foucault (1995) said that in contrast to the school, the workshop or the army, the prison must ensure ‘an exhaustive disciplinary apparatus: it must assume responsibility for all aspects of the individual, his physical training, his aptitude to work, his everyday conduct, his moral attitude, his state of mind’ (p. 235). In this way, and similar to modern sport, which has seen a proliferation of methods and experts to advise and control athletes (as well as coaches), sport can also be said to be ‘omni-disciplinary’ (p. 236). For as Foucault (1978) noted, modern power was something that was administered or required management procedures. In other words, power works not just to control what is known about certain subjects, but to produce an entire machinery for controlling what is known about those subjects. Consider the idea of the 24-hour athlete, or sport academies, many of which are residential, or Integrated Support Teams: they are all highly managed and administered systems to establish a more exhaustive disciplinary apparatus around athletes (and again, around coaches) to ensure that athletes are constantly applied to improving their performances and transforming their bodies correctly. As Foucault wrote about the prison: it has no ‘exterior nor gap; it cannot be interrupted, except when its task is totally completed; its action on the individual must be uninterrupted: an unceasing discipline’ (p. 236).

Paradoxically, therefore, for a coach to believe that he or she can empower his or her athletes by adopting what might seem to be a liberating practice—providing them with greater knowledge, resources and information—is to fail to consider how such practices at the same time can ‘fix’ athletes into specific ways of being that through their specificity actually ‘dismPOWER’ athletes. For as Foucault (1995) said, in regimes [teams] where individuals [athletes] believe they need to be ‘empowered’ by another [their coach] to learn and know more about themselves they are actually becoming ‘dismPOWERed’ in the very process of ‘self-empowerment’. In other words, as individual subjects, there is no transcendental position from which we can become ‘empowered’; there are only particular discursive positions within power/knowledge formations that we can occupy (Edwards & Usher, 1994). Such an understanding, of course, is entirely absent from the athlete-centered literature. Never do these scholars bring into question the formation of subject positions through discourse. Rather, they assume that ‘real’ identities exist, for example, a coach, an athlete. As a result, a coach developer or sport psychologist can only design ‘empowerment interventions’ within the fixed boundaries of humanism, an ontological position that Foucault and others such as Derrida and Deleuze have critiqued extensively given that what people say, and relatedly who people become and what they do, mostly echoes and repeats dominant discourses.

Moreover, what does it really mean to most coaches today to empower their athletes? Is it not that their athletes can now be trusted to pursue what is actually already known and practiced? In other words, an athlete is empowered to regulate him- or herself in the same way that his or her coaches would: by following the dominant narrative laid out in the ‘good athlete’ story (Tsang, 2000). More insidiously, athlete-centered coaching practices can also be used to absolve a coach from any responsibility of an athlete’s poor performance while at the same time protecting his or her reputation as a considerate or ‘good coach’. For instance, take an athlete who succeeds under a supposed athlete-centered coaching regime. His or her success makes his or her coach look good despite the fact that the coach’s so-called holistic and empowering coaching practices led the athlete to produce ‘on her or his own’ exactly what the coach would have had him or her do anyway. Whereas an athlete who ‘fails’ under a supposed athlete-centered coaching model is clearly not mature or responsible enough to produce the correct result on his or her own and therefore needs to have his or her coach reassert or increase his or her control. In this way, opportunities for athletes to fail and learn or to experiment and ‘be different’ become fewer and fewer. And as a consequence, we would argue that athletes are
actually further from succeeding, not closer. However, given a Foucauldian understanding of the specific limits that disciplinary power places on coaches and athletes this is not surprising. For as Foucault (1995) said, through its various procedures discipline induces forms of normality.

Clearly, there is a need for a coach development framework that problematizes the idea of the coach as an agent of normalization and the illusion of athlete empowerment through so-called athlete-centered coaching practices: practices as Foucault (1983, 2003) said in commenting on the rise of the neoliberal society that only ever occur alongside the ever greater need for regulation and social control. As a result, given sport’s disciplinary legacy and its strong neoliberal association, what it would mean for a coach to coach differently and actually succeed at empowering his or her athletes can be difficult to conceptualize and put into practice. Moreover, as we previously pointed out, given that with discipline can come great satisfaction and pleasure, such as the rewards and benefits that follow winning, it can be a real challenge for a coach to abandon these ‘known’ and ‘sanctioned’ ways of coaching and coach differently. This is why we are not suggesting an entire undoing of disciplinary power. This would hardly be Foucauldian. For as Foucault (1980) argued,

if power was never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really believe that we would manage to obey it? What gives power its hold … [is that] it does not simply weigh like a force that says no, but that it runs through and produces things, it induces pleasure. (p. 119)

In a similar argument to the one we are making here concerning the challenge of empowering individuals within an overarching disciplinary framework, McDonald and O’Callaghan (2008) critiqued the ‘truth claims’ or promises of the positive psychology movement ‘to redress the balance in psychology from a preoccupation with illness and pathology toward a ‘new science’ based on positive subjective experiences, positive traits, and positive institutions’ (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 8) by illustrating through Foucault, ‘the power relations of social control operating in positive psychology’s discourses’ (p. 128). According to McDonald and O’Callaghan, far from liberating psychology from its history of pessimism and a focus on the negative and pathological, ‘it [positive psychology] has instituted a new set of governmental and disciplinary mechanisms by means of defining what is ‘positive’ in human existence via a prescriptive set of constructs’ (pp. 128–129). For example, positive psychology’s promise of superior human functioning, well-being and happiness (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) has been taken up by many managers as a way to cultivate workers’ ‘unique’ talents and ensure they are happy on the job. But interestingly, this cultivation of individuals’ so-called special talents never seems to include talents like ‘irony, resistance, justice, constructive criticism, reciprocity, and equality’ (McDonald & O’Callaghan, 2008, p. 137). Rather, as a large body of research on workplace management has shown (e.g. Birch & Paul, 2003; Casey, 1999; Hughes, 2005), managers only seem to be ‘interested in talents that conform to the neoliberal values of individualism, competitiveness, independence, enterprise, entrepreneurship, dynamism, productivity, and flexibility’ (McDonald & O’Callaghan, 2008, p. 137).

Therefore, similar to the athlete empowerment movement, through positive psychology’s dictates a very specific type of individual is being created: one whose characteristics conform to society’s dominant ideals and needs. In other words, as it currently stands, empowering athletes is actually more about making athletes obedient and responsible not critical, questioning, independent and creative—qualities that supposedly run counter to excellence in sport. As a result, athletes’ differences are increasingly erased as teams’ cultures more and more reward and promote conformity. Athletes who possess the correct characters and are ‘coachable’—who are not ‘problems’—are favored and invested in by these procedures of regulation while everyone else is left to feel inadequate or ill-suited in some way. And given the unlikelihood of an athlete problematizing sports’ disciplinary legacy for making him or her feel this way, he or she is often left with no choice but to blame him- or herself as somehow lacking what is needed to do sport the ‘right way’.

In a similar play on the complexities of power, the possibilities that a coach has to cultivate and support true difference and diversity within his or her team are difficult to conceive within the prevailing neoliberal discourse of coach competence that is forwarded by almost every national or
international coach development framework or curriculum. Within these tightly organized and controlled frameworks, there is almost no space for a coach to generate alternative views, knowledge or practices (Jones & Denison, in press). With sanctioned athlete-centered coaching practices, in fact, comes closure as coaches are tied to very specific ways of being and thinking. Consequently, even when many coaches believe they are thinking ‘outside’ the box, so totalizing is coaching’s dominant discursive formation that they fail to recognize how they are actually still thinking within that box. As a result, truly innovative, creative or progressive thinking is for all intents and purposes denigrated, dismissed and silenced as theoretical, irrelevant, ridiculous and academic.

We have experienced this type of dismissal first-hand in many of the workshops we have organized for coaches on how they might develop more engaged and not such docile athletes by beginning to problematize many of their taken-for-granted disciplinary coaching practices. Invariably, coaches become anxious, nervous and even defensive when we ask them to consider implementing some of the many Foucauldian-inspired coaching practices we have developed (see Denison & Mills, 2014). However, as we discuss further the effects that discipline can have on the body, and how relations of power that run through all that coaches do come with all manner of consequences, the atmosphere and mood almost always turn. Slowly we become less of a disruptive force to the coaches’ traditional beliefs and more of a catalyst for them to think differently as they begin to realize that many of the behavioral problems they confront on a daily basis related to their athletes’ training and performance, problems they have tried to solve using various psychological interventions such as visualization, goal setting or positive self-talk, always seem to return. It is at this point that the coaches begin to understand the futility of expecting many of the long-standing performance problems that their athletes routinely experience such as nervousness, hesitation, anxiety, underconfidence, doubt and insecurity going away without also considering the power/knowledge relations that have been integral in forming the wider context—their team culture—within which these problems occur and exist. Now, whether these coaches go on to actually coach differently following our workshops is another thing, and at present is the focus of our current research. However, what is important to illustrate for the purpose of this paper is how new ways of coaching, including athlete-centered ways, are really only possible when they are accompanied by changes to the power relations present in a coach’s coaching context.

Accordingly, to develop thinking not docile athletes—or soldiers, workers, machines or prisoners—capable of performing in exquisite ways not just useful or productive ways, coaches need to become critical of sports’ disciplinary legacy and begin to develop practices that are not tied so directly to the techniques and instruments of discipline associated with the military, work and particularly the prison (Denison, Pringle, Cassidy, & Hessian, 2015). Otherwise coaches will continue to render bodies docile and reproduce ‘body as machine’ thinking. And what part does excellence, creativity or ‘liberty’ play when programming the functioning of a machine (athlete)? Very little actually on the part of the machine (athlete). This is why coaching differently for us involves supporting coaches to continually problematize what they do—the details of the practices they consistently follow, the types of relationships they form—and what they say—the metaphors, analogies and examples they use, the instructions they give, the questions they ask, the points they emphasize and of course the questions and points they do not ask or emphasize.

However, as we indicated in our introduction, and as Denison et al. (2015) illustrated following their analysis of a Foucauldian-inspired coach development program designed to help an elite rugby coach begin to coach in a less disciplinary way, given that power can be both restrictive and productive, and that discipline can be both limiting and enabling, it can be extremely challenging for a coach to begin coaching in a way that affords opportunity and choice when needed and constraint and control when needed. Which again, as we have tried to make clear throughout this paper, points to the shallowness of the athlete empowerment movement as instructing an athlete to ‘take ownership’ or ‘think for him- or herself’ can be interpreted as an act more akin to a command than anything else. Foucault (1995), of course, recognized how challenging it can be to use one’s power not as a repressive or dominant force but in an ethical and responsible way,
and indeed went on to say about the prison, ‘We are aware of all the inconveniences of prison … yet one cannot ‘see’ how to replace it. It is the detestable solution, which one seems unable to do without’ (p. 232, italics our own). But when one realizes that the widespread transformation of the body that was seen as being needed for the military, for example, to eliminate its inefficiencies and to function effectively, is irrelevant to what coaches should be aiming to achieve, then perhaps coaching differently as we have defined it here becomes easier to accept and adopt. As our final point, Foucault said the following about the prison,

it is intrinsically useful, not as an activity of production, but by virtue of the effect it has on the human mechanism. It is a principle of order and regularity; through the demands that it imposes, it conveys, imperceptibly, the forms of a rigorous power; it bends bodies to regular movements, it excludes agitation and distraction, it imposes a hierarchy and a surveillance that are all the more accepted, and which will be inscribed all the more deeply in the behavior of the convicts. (1995, p. 242, italics our own)

Perhaps then to move past sports’ disciplinary legacy and to help coaches truly foster engaged athletes it is time for us to reframe sport as intrinsically useless?

Conclusion

Our point in writing this paper has not been to accuse coaches of being unethical and intentionally controlling their athletes in order to make them docile; quite the contrary, in fact. We admire and respect coaches for the work they do and believe in almost all cases their intentions are good and noble. Rather, our concern is with the rhetoric of empowerment, autonomy, holism, resilience, self-responsibility and self-compassion sweeping through coach development circles without an accompanying critique of disciplinary power and a broader awareness of all that coaching does to athletes’ bodies. As a case in point, Miller and Kerr (2002) claimed that the primary goal of athlete-centered coaching is to enhance ‘the holistic health and well-being of the athlete, through the pursuit of excellence in sport’ (p. 147). Similarly, Lombardo (1999) argued that athlete-centered coaching ‘addresses the whole person who is the athlete and encourages athletes to reflect upon the subjective experience of sport’ (p. 4). But as we have tried to explain throughout this paper, such humanistic-oriented promises, with their strong neoliberal underpinning, are unlikely to have any real or lasting impact without the full consideration of the effects of coaching’s disciplinary legacy on coaches’ practices and athletes’ bodies. In other words, to promote coaching practices with the force to truly empower athletes we believe coaches need to begin thinking in more Foucauldian ways about the body, power and knowledge.

Naturally, we appreciate that change is never easy and can be very challenging. At present, however, it is quite easy for coaches to say that they coach in an athlete-centered way without changing much at all—how they organize and manage (read discipline) the bodies in front of them every day. This is largely because of the power that sport psychology has acquired to provide coaches with ready-made approaches to becoming more effective (Denison, 2007). But these approaches for the most part tend to be quite simplistic, and for those in a dominant position of power, such as a coach who claims to put his or her athlete’s needs first, easy to promote and implement, rooted as they are in increased personal responsibility and accountability on the part of the less powerful, for example, the athlete. As a result, coaching’s dominant discursive formation largely goes untouched. Moreover, if the responsibility to change always falls on the individual athlete what is there for coach developers to do to help coaches coach better? Whether coaches would be receptive to real change—the transformation of their everyday and taken-for-granted disciplinary coaching practices and the relations of power that underpin those practices—remains to be seen. However, as we previously mentioned, we are currently collaborating with a number of coaches to do precisely this: help them learn how to coach with Foucault to reduce their dominance and control over their athletes’ bodies. And up to this point, every coach we have worked with has been excited to learn how to coach this way. And why would they not when you think about it? Why would a coach want to adopt and promote practices that fix, arrest and regulate the body’s movements as Foucault (1995) so clearly
showed that discipline does? Nowhere is this a definition of effective coaching; in no way is this coaching differently. Therefore, as we have tried to argue throughout this paper, coaching differently—coaching with Foucault—is possible. All it means is reimagining what coaching could look like outside of its traditional liberal humanist form. Granted this is an ambitious goal that will be challenging and likely filled with false starts, uncertainty and apprehension: the creation of new knowledge or new subjectivities always is. But it is a goal we are excited to pursue in an effort to reduce the making of docile bodies in sport. For as Foucault (1970) said, what is the point of doing anything if it is not to say something new.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**References**


