

Tips for the Novice Coach

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1. Introduction

In 2003 I was asked to coach the Auckland North team for the National tournament in Dunedin. Having never been on the coaching side of the fence before I was a novice to this post. It seemed rather daunting, especially when tasked with taking a team so far from home.

While stressful at times the experience was rewarding and I managed to pick up a few tips for others that may be placed in a similar position in the future. If nothing else then this paper may provide a basic checklist of things to consider before embarking on the role of novice coach.

2. Qualifications

To be a successful coach the only qualifications needed are charisma, enthusiasm, commitment and the desire to push your team members to reach their potential.

To be a coach you have to be committed to the team and helping each member achieve their best. If you can't commit the time don't take on the role. It is unfair to the team members and unfair on you.

Technical excellence in Taekwon-Do ("TKD"), or a host of competition medals is helpful but will not ensure that someone will be successful at coaching a group of others to achieve their top performance. (note that I started from the position where I had neither)

3. Team Selection

Generally if someone has made the representative team they have the drive to want to be there. Unfortunately this is not always the case. When selecting the team it is very important to identify who doesn't really want to be there to excel at TKD and are just going through the motions because it is expected or because they have nothing else better to do.

From experience if you have people on the team who don't want to push themselves then they are a very disruptive element to the remainder of the team and depending on their personality can bring the team dynamics down. While not the nicest job you should try and keep the "free riders" off the team. It is better to have someone of lesser ability who is willing to push themselves over the free rider.

My tip for team selection is therefore look at both skill and attitude. All places on the Auckland team were earned and had to be maintained by commitment. If members did not have commitment to the team (i.e. turn up to trainings and give 100%) then they forfeited their place.

Whilst we ended up having empty divisions, the team we took to Dunedin all wanted to be there and all knew that they had earned their places. This appeared to make the team bonds much tighter than in previous years I have been involved in competitions which made travelling and competing far away from home (and supporters) much easier.

4. Items for Success

Success is a relative measure. To be a successful coach does not mean that the team takes away an impressive haul of medals, although it is satisfying when that happens.

To me a successful coach is one who can form the team into a cohesive unit that will inspire and take care of one another while making sure each person is pushed to achieve their best.

A successful coach will ensure that the team is well equipped and can learn from individuals who have particular skills in areas that need attention rather than trying to be the guru or fountain of knowledge for all aspects of TKD tournaments.

For ease I have listed some key items for success that I have found useful. These are by no means applicable to all situations but as a general rule of thumb you should at least consider each of these.

4.1. Administration

As tournaments get bigger and more complex the administrative requirements seem to grow to match. For coaches who are new to this role never underestimate the time you will need to fill out forms, liaise with tournament organisers, ensure all team members have the appropriate limitation of liability forms signed, have parental approval for competition and chaperones organised (if there are members under 18), account for tournament fees and any travelling expenses, handle fund raising... the list is endless.

In order to ensure that you are indeed coaching and not weighed down in organisation you need to have a capable team manager. This person needs to be highly organised and have the ability to make non TKD related decisions such as where to stay, how much money each person will have to raise etc. When appointing the team manager it is a good idea to go through the role of coach and that of manager so there are no surprises or blurred boundaries.

Basically the coach gets the team ready for competition while the team manager gets them there (and hopefully back). The less time the coach has to spend on administration means more time can be put into planning and actual coaching.

4.2. Team Bonding

Once the team has been selected it is important that everyone becomes acquainted with the each other as soon as possible. If someone does not know how to address another then they are more likely not to interact with that person. This does not make for a close team and can lead to a divided team full of cliques.

The best technique I have come across to break this social barrier is the use of name games. However you decide to approach this, the idea is to ensure that after the second training each person can name all members in the team.

The next step is to ensure that you undertake at least one activity that is not TKD related during the course of preparing for the tournament. This can be as simple as a barbeque or arranging a pre tournament camp. The idea is to get the team interacting on a non-TKD level, the intention being to get the members to know each other better. This moves them from being acquaintances to being friends. In my experience this creates a better functioning unit where members look out for each other and also makes the whole tournament experience much more fun for everyone involved.

4.3. Assess Teams Strengths and Weaknesses

The first step needed before coaching begins will be to assess the teams strengths and weaknesses to see what areas need to be worked on. Once you have an idea of what you need to improve (e.g. patterns, fitness, ring dynamics or sparring combinations) you can start preparing a workout plan. If you do not have the skills needed for a particular event you will need to commence the search for assistant coaches who can provide what you need. If you cannot find someone that commit to being an assistant, try and arrange guest coaches or find some good reference material.

As mentioned at the beginning, being coach does not mean that you have to be skilled at TKD. If you have the necessary planning skills and can obtain the other skills from elsewhere you can achieve the same results. Note that in most cases it is a good idea to have at least one assistant coach. This not only provides a back up when you can't make it to trainings unexpectedly but also allows for a bit of variety for the team.

Besides having an assistant coach I tried to bring in a number of "experts" in particular disciplines for one off trainings. This turned out to be beneficial as I would give indicate what areas I wanted covered and leave them to it. This allowed me to split the team into smaller groups and have different events being taught at the same time, maximising our training time. It also allowed the team to get different insights from different instructors.

4.4. Plan Team Trainings

One of the most useful things that I found in training was preparing a book of training exercises and having detailed training plans prepared. The exercises in my book were from trainings I had been part of, from others I knew were experienced competitors or coaches and from reference material.

My training book was grouped into various sections so that I could quickly access exercises and drills covering specific topics. There was a section on warm up exercises, fitness exercises, sparring drills targeting hands, feet and moving around the ring. There were also notes on what to look for in specialty competitors and power competitors that I got from talking to successful practitioners in those events.

Prior to each training I would prepare a written outline of the key areas that needed to be covered that day with references to the drills in the book. While a training plan is important as a foundation of the training it must also be flexible.

Flexibility allows the coach to adjust the lessons based on the response from the team or if a previously unanticipated area needing attention manifests itself during the training. Having a training manual was an easy way that I could reference an exercise to target the problem. Of course if the problem needing attention could not be addressed quickly I would note it for next time.

5. Understanding Drivers of Team Members

Just like in the real world each team develops a "team personality". This is how they relate to each other when in a group and how they relate to the coach.

As coach you need to look at how the team responds to certain levels of discipline, types of drills and what motivates them. If you can keep the motivation levels up and ensure that everyone is enjoying the training then their commitment will be there and they will respond to you better.

As important as looking at how the team responds is the need to look at how the individuals respond. Not everyone will be motivated by the same drivers so you need to be prepared to target individuals if they do not respond to the general team motivational techniques.

It is also important to note that at training the team will get their energy from the coach. If the coach is tired and lethargic then the team will be too. At training the coach needs to maintain enthusiasm and positive vibes.

6. Fun Time

One of the most useful things that I had in my training book was a list of games that could be played to break up training. As the tournament approaches and the number of trainings increases, people start to get tired and need a break.

When the energy levels were down or after a particularly hard training the previous session, I would allow the team members to let loose by selecting a game.

The games were all physical and TKD related (which meant that they were still getting some benefit) but this gave the team members a chance to unwind and interact socially.

After playing the games the team's performance at trainings was always much higher.

7. Summary

Like many sports Taekwon-Do ("TKD") relies on the generosity of practitioners and people affiliated with the sport in some way to provide the human resources that enable tournaments, camps, seminars and the like to be made available to members of our organisation.

Without people giving up their valuable free time and energy there would be far fewer TKD related events and opportunities to learn from senior Dans than there are today. Events that were available would cost much more than present as organisers would need to be paid a commercial wage for the time spent arranging the events.

While our sport needs people to step up and give of their time, a large number of students who are willing to give back have the perception that they have nothing to offer as they are not "good enough". In this paper I have outlined a few tips that I learnt from coaching the Auckland North team in 2003. Prior to this I had never coached before and I was far from being a highly decorated tournament participant. To say I was nervous about taking on this role is an understatement, however, what I learned was that my instructor's words rang true.

I was told "you don't need to be the technical best. As long as you have good planning skills, the commitment, drive and desire to see the team do well then half your battle is won. The other half comes from having a good team manager who can do all the admin."