

Sports Coaches are the Skill Acquisition Specialists: A Commentary on Otte et al. (2024) "The Role of Skill Acquisition Specialists Within Sports: Why Every High-performance Sports Organization Needs These Experts!"

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Introduction

I read with interest the work by Otte, Yearby, and Myszka (2024), “The Role of Skill Acquisition Specialists Within Sports: Why Every High-performance Sports Organization Needs These Experts!” I commend these authors for their passionate advocacy for the role Skill Acquisition Specialists (SAS) could play in high performance sport. However, while I have previously shared these authors’ perspectives, I now consider that the inclusion of SAS into high-performance sports organisations is likely premature. Through this commentary I will argue that the real skill acquisition specialists are sports coaches and hence, currently, SAS would be superfluous in many organisations.

The Counterargument

The central premise of my counterargument to Otte et al.’s (2024) work is twofold. First, the very nature of coaching involves a deep and iterative engagement with the process of skill learning, in this case the skill learning of others. Experienced coaches therefore possess a wealth of experiential knowledge, built over thousands of hours of observation, intervention, and reflection. This means that their intuitive judgments are not random but highly-tuned heuristics developed in the complex, dynamic environment of real-world sport. It is through this continuous cycle of practice and feedback that many coaches naturally gravitate toward the most effective methods for skill learning, regardless of the theoretical underpinnings of that method. After all, ineffective methods are often “weeded out” and replaced by more effective ones over thousands of hours of

modifying practice. To suggest that a newly defined specialist role is required to support coaches to design “alive” or “representative” practice environments is to ignore the fact that many high-performance coaches have been doing precisely this for many decades, albeit perhaps without the specific academic jargon we assign to it today.

Second, the case made by Otte et al. (2024) largely rests on the assumption that skill acquisition science offers a body of evidence so robust that it can effectively augment, and in some cases even surpass, the methods developed through coaching experience. However, I contend that currently this is far from substantiated, and moreover, that the opinions of scientists, while valuable, should not automatically trump the hard-won expertise of coaches.

While frameworks like Ecological

Dynamics presented by Otte et al. (2024) are indeed theoretically compelling, the translation of their principles into applied interventions with proven, transferable, and superior outcomes in elite sport is still in its infancy. At the time of writing, there is simply not enough credible high-level evidence from robustly designed studies to confidently assert that the interventions developed through academic skill acquisition science (and hence implemented by SAS) are more effective than the time-tested practices of expert coaches. As such, the current evidence base simply does not justify the broad assertion that scientific approaches should inherently supersede or dictate coaching methodologies. Additionally, even if it did, it is unlikely that currently there would be enough SAS capable of translating that research evidence to improved skill acquisition across high performance sports.

Finally, I want to focus my counterargument on the very essence of Evidence-Based Practice (EBP). EBP models, such as the Evidence-Based Medicine model proposed by Sackett (see the editorial in *Spine* by Sackett [1996] for a short overview), emphasise the value of three components of EBP: (1) the ability to rely on the best available external evidence; (2) the practitioner's clinical (or in this case, coaching) expertise; and (3) the client's (in this case the athlete's) values, preferences, and goals. The argument put forth by Otte et al. (2024) appears to create a hierarchy that places academic research at the top with the SAS, as the primary interpreter of this evidence for the coach, being considered the specialist.

It is my opinion that the model proposed by Otte et al. (2024) is fundamentally misaligned with many interpretations of EBP because the SAS model undervalues the critical pillar of practitioner expertise in two ways. First, it risks disempowering the very individuals who hold the most contextualised and practical knowledge (i.e. the coaches), and second, it relies on the SAS to implement the fairly premature evidence for the application of skill acquisition science for the learning of sports skills. For example, a recent scoping review of randomised controlled trials related to the learning of sports-related

skills (Choo et al., 2023) revealed that across 130 randomised controlled trials using skill acquisition interventions to influence the learning of sports-related skills, more than a quarter examined golf skills, all examined closed skills in predictable and controllable settings, and only 20% of studies investigated recreationally active or experienced athletes. They concluded that, as a result, it would be challenging for skill acquisition specialists to design evidence-based skill acquisition interventions in high performance sport.

In conclusion, unless and until the field of skill acquisition science can produce more robust evidence, and at the same time ensure there are sufficient SAS who can implement this research in sports practice, their recommended inclusion in *every* sporting organisation as per Otte et al. (2024) is premature. At this time, I must therefore logically conclude that coaches, whose expertise is ecologically valid and performance-proven, should be considered the real skill acquisition specialists in sport. Hence, Otte et al. (2024)'s suggestion to embed an SAS in every high-performance sporting organisation, although commendable, may at present be merely a solution in search of a problem.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The author declares that he works as a skill acquisition specialist in professional sports practice. There may be a (perceived) conflict of interest as a result.

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