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If Not *Now*, Then *When* for Skill Acquisition Specialists? A Response to Fransen

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Abstract

This paper responds to two recent papers by Dr. Job Fransen (2026a, 2026b) arguing that integrating Skill Acquisition Specialists (SAS) into high-performance sport is "likely premature" and "too soon for the big leagues" due to limited evidence and potential conflicts with coaching expertise. We challenge this position by demonstrating that SAS offer unique value by ensuring that principles of skill acquisition science are not only understood but also effectively applied in practice. Furthermore, rather than competing with coaches, SAS play a complementary role, supporting them in designing representative learning environments and purposefully manipulating constraints in practice to promote adaptable performance during competition. Though evidence may be relatively limited at the moment, the success of SAS within high-performance sports organizations that are early adopters of the role is promising. As even more qualified individuals find themselves within SAS roles, the state of the position will continue to evolve and adapt, being (re)defined over time.

Keywords

skill acquisition specialist, skill adaptation, coaching, ecological dynamics, pracademic, high-performance sport

Introduction

In our 2024 position paper (Otte, Yearby, & Myszka, 2024), titled *"The Role of Skill Acquisition Specialists Within Sports—Why Every High-performance Sports Organization Needs These Experts!"*, we proposed several arguments for why Skill Acquisition Specialists (SAS) are essential within high-performance sport organizations. Specifically, we encouraged key decision-makers in sport to recognize the benefits of SAS while outlining the potential responsibilities associated with the role. Our position prompted Dr. Fransen (2026a) to publish a short commentary on our paper in this issue of the *Journal of Expertise*, where he argues that the inclusion of SAS in high-performance sport is "likely premature" and that such roles "would be superfluous in many organisations" (p. 78). He further develops these arguments in a more extensive editorial (Fransen, 2026b) in which he outlines several arguments against the inclusion of SAS within high-performance sport organizations.

In that editorial, Fransen (2026b) states, "Collectively, for our burgeoning field, the message seems clear: It is just too soon for the big leagues" (p. 3). While we appreciate the stance taken and perspective shared from his experience, we strongly disagree with Fransen. Simply put, in our view, his message is far from

clear, especially based on the unique pillars that he outlines, and we will address each argument in turn with a short rebuttal, inviting both interested readers and decision-makers across sports to make up their own minds on the potential of the role of SAS to become a prominent one in the near future in high-performance sports. As we proceed, our response focuses on the three central arguments he offers in his editorial (Fransen, 2026b).

Fransen's First Argument: There is Not Enough High-Level Credible Evidence in Skill Acquisition Science

In his first argument, Fransen (2026b) argues that there is not enough credible high-level evidence from robustly designed studies in skill acquisition science to be able to make a SAS a viable enough contributor to a sports organization ecosystem. However, couldn't the same be said about nearly every single position and role in a professional sports organization (e.g., sport psychologists, strength & conditioning coaches, or even more specific positions on teams—shooting, goalkeeping, or quarterback coaches)? Even with tremendous data involved to support one's practices and approaches towards a specific role, there will always be uncertainties and room for needed growth and enhanced understanding over time within any field.

No matter the amount of empirical or anecdotal evidence, there will always be disagreements about best practices and the way(s) one approaches the various nuances of their role based on their unique, individual perspective. For example, sport coaches (e.g., head coaches, coordinators) will contend that one tactical system is superior to all others and/or stand up for the nature of their play-calling (e.g., whether or not to be aggressive on third down). Position coaches will argue about specific techniques and intentions of the athletes in their group. Strength and conditioning coaches may debate if they should use Olympic lifts, if their athletes are better off squatting in a bilateral or unilateral fashion, and if it is better to place more priority on the development of speed or conditioning (among many other points of contention within the field). Nutritionists differ as to proper macronutrient timing and breakdowns (e.g., higher or lower carbohydrate consumption). Sports scientists continue their pursuit of accurate player tracking, attempting to find the best methods of assessment and measurement of sports performance, frequently trying out the latest tools and gadgets to advance their perspective and enhance the benefit for the athletes of the organizations they partner with. Yet, as we know, every high-performance sports organization still has a specific professional practitioner in place, usually in an empowered role, from each of these niche fields, despite there often being inconclusive or contradictory evidence regarding the best possible practices.

However, Fransen (2026b, p. 2) argues that "…the integration of skill acquisition specialists … without more robust, high-level evidence to support their practices—is surely putting the cart before the horse." Yet, each of those aforementioned practitioners and professionals in those other roles lean on both science *and* art at all times. Additionally, the early adopters (both organizations and individuals) paved the way for things to be done differently, not only within the team itself, but also across the entire landscape of the sport collectively.

Someone always has to be first and act as a pioneer of sorts—such as in the field of strength and conditioning (S&C) when Alvin Roy (S&C Coach with the San Diego Chargers of the NFL in 1963) and Boyd Epley (S&C Coach at the University of Nebraska of the NCAA in 1969) became employed as team strength coaches in high-performance sport organizations. In the latter case, Epley would go on to organize the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) in 1978, which led to an explosion of growth in that field, advancing professional practices related to enhanced physical performance of athletes across sports. Now nearly every team in professional sports employs an entire staff of qualified strength and conditioning practitioners.

Next, Fransen (2026b) seems to suggest that randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are needed to provide more substantive evidence for the field of skill acquisition to stand upon.

However, in high-performance sport, this likely is not feasible due to the level of competition faced by every organization at that level of competition, each doing everything possible to find the smallest margins towards gaining and maintaining a competitive edge. This means that even if a SAS was hired, and a team saw significantly greater success from employment of the SAS, it is highly unlikely that the organization would support or encourage the results and findings from this experience to be published more publicly in a research journal. RCTs are simply not realistic or feasible in many highly competitive high-performance sport environments, such as the English Premier League in soccer or the National Football League in American football.

Furthermore, Fransen (2026b, p. 2) also states, "This raises a key question: How applicable are the findings in the skill acquisition literature related to sports skills to the learning of expert performers in highly complex, dynamic, and open skill sports?"

We agree that there is opportunity for more exploration and research on skill acquisition in high-performance and elite sports. However, some work has already explored nuances of the nature of perceptual, cognitive, and motor skill execution and skill acquisition and could have relevance and applicability for practitioners looking to shape the skill learning experiences of expert athletes (Duarte et al., 2012; Esteves et al., 2011; Morris et al., 2022; Parry et al., 2025; Yearby, Myszka, Grahn, et al., 2024; Yearby, Myszka, Roberts, et al., 2024).

Given the constant balancing act for practitioners to negotiate between deeply entangled processes of development *and* performance (Otte, Davids, et al., 2024), no researcher, practitioner, or SAS has discovered a universal best-practice solution to skill learning. A myriad of contextual factors—such as managing individual athlete's physical loads in crowded game schedules, balancing between practice, travel, and recovery schedules, increasing access to advanced technology, artificial intelligence and big data—provide more and more opportunities and challenges for pracademics when thinking of evidence-based athlete development. So, while we agree with Fransen (2026b) on a need for more research to support the SAS role, this does not, by any means, justify an argument against immediate implementation of SAS in high-performance sport. In fact, this would justify the opposite; i.e., SAS implementation *now* using existing knowledge about skill acquisition to help coaching practitioners understand contextual real-world challenges in high-performance sport, utilise new tools, and negotiate new knowledge of elite sports environments.

If Fransen (2026b) had his way, and we waited for science to catch up, there might never be enough scientific evidence to support the work of the SAS. How will we know when enough scientific evidence is enough?! If high-performance sports organizations take Fransen's (2026b) point of view and say "we are not ready yet" or "we do not need a SAS because there is simply not enough evidence," then we will always be waiting for those in the SAS field to have the positive effect that they are likely already equipped to make.

Some teams have been willing to go against the grain of traditional trends, making the bold choice to leap despite the lack of substantial evidence that Fransen (2026b) points out. For example, storied organizations such as the New York Mets, Boston Red Sox, and Chicago Cubs of Major League Baseball (MLB); the Cleveland Cavaliers and Oklahoma City Thunder of the National Basketball Association (NBA); American football programs at institutions such as West Virginia University and Brown University competing in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA); and expansion teams like the Portland Fire of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) have all chosen in recent years to employ practitioners with expertise in skill acquisition. These organizations are betting on intuition and logic that there is currently enough evidence to suggest that someone with expertise in skill acquisition can help to positively influence how they function, ultimately leading to enhanced performance in competition.

Comments from sport staff at one of these MLB organizations suggest that working with the SAS employed by their team has yielded positive results. A team manager at one of the club's complexes stated the following:

> "Working alongside a Skill Acquisition Specialist significantly deepened our understanding of skill acquisition and how it shapes professional baseball practice. Instead of isolated drills, we now design competitive, game-like environments that challenge players to perceive, decide, and execute under realistic conditions. By adding variability and keeping feedback simple and outcome-focused, we're developing athletes who can truly transfer their skills from practice to performance."

The team's pitching rehabilitation coordinator added this:

> "After becoming aware of ecological dynamics and skill acquisition principles, the players I work with have become more adaptable and prepared for competition. This is through more thorough design of practice and looking at the training environment through an ecological dynamics lens. This would not have been possible without having direct access to a Skill Acquisition Specialist."

Fransen's Second Argument: Skill Acquisition Specialists Compete With Coaches' Skill Acquisition Expertise

In his second argument, Fransen (2026b) contends that skill acquisition specialists could be in direct competition with coaches regarding best practices or within the hierarchy of ideas surrounding skill acquisition in an organization. He writes, "Skill Acquisition Experts could compete with coaches who already possess significant skill acquisition expertise, potentially diluting, rather than enhancing, their hard-won intuition" (p. 1).

In our opinion, the sentiment shared by Fransen (2026b) here is shortsighted. Why would it be necessary to appeal to the authority of the coach, as if their knowledge and expertise should take precedence over all others in the organization—especially over someone who has spent significant time immersed in the study of a very specific area (e.g., skill acquisition)? Certainly, every support staff member has a personal stake in seeing the organization flourish and achieve the greatest levels of success, as each individual's job security depends on it, particularly "in the big leagues." Maintaining control over the quality of practices oriented around skill enhancement should be each party's objective, and there should be checks and balances in place to ensure this becomes a reality. In this regard, some head coaches and organizations may allow an employed SAS to take more ownership right away, while others may require smaller steps for the SAS to gain the trust of invested stakeholders while assisting in pushing practices forward at a slower pace.

Secondly, can we truly say that all coaches, or even most coaches, possess "significant skill acquisition expertise," as Fransen (2026b) suggests (p. 1)? This assumption is further reflected in a claim made in his 2026a commentary, where he states that "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…" (p. 78). Quite the contrary, coaches are not always adequately equipped with the theoretical and empirical knowledge necessary to inform skill acquisition practices, and may become overwhelmed when attempting to engage with this rapidly evolving field. As a result, they may rely on approaches that are outdated or insufficiently grounded in theory and research. Coaches also frequently require athletes to perform the same drills they completed when they were players themselves or that were passed down by prior coaches. To

magnify these shortcomings, many coaches at the highest levels are more focused on tactical strategies and evolving team principles of play to maximize their team's personnel than on ensuring that the practice environment reflects a place for learning, individual player development, and further skill adaptation.

Questioning—and, in some cases, rejecting—the value of SAS overlooks the variability in coaching practices across sports and performance contexts. Observations of practice environments in sports such as baseball, basketball, and American football often reveal sessions dominated by isolated technical drills or "coach-prescribed" movements performed outside representative learning environments (Parry et al., 2025). While these approaches may have merit in certain situations, they do not consistently reflect principles rooted in contemporary skill acquisition science.

Furthermore, resistance to the addition of SAS may reflect hesitation toward a transdisciplinary approach to athlete development. As noted above, coaches' roles have traditionally concentrated on understanding tactics and shaping collective team behavior. The inclusion of a SAS—potentially multiple specialists—would complement this expertise by ensuring that diverse perspectives inform the design of effective practice environments.

Fransen (2026b, p. 2) suggests that "Many experienced coaches already embody the principles and practices central to skill acquisition science…" While some coaches may indeed integrate these principles, it may be optimistic to assume this is common across high-performance sport. Many coaching hires, particularly at the professional levels, are influenced by prior playing experience rather than by formal education in motor learning or skill acquisition. This reality strengthens the argument that specific expertise in skill development warrants professional representation within performance teams.

Regardless of differing viewpoints, research also indicates that coaches are interested in engaging more deeply with skill acquisition theory and pedagogical concepts that positively shape practice design and athlete development. In Yearby's (2024) doctoral thesis, which investigated the perceived impact of online education underpinned by ecological dynamics, coaches and practitioners reported significant changes in how they understood skill development, designed practice, and supported athlete adaptability. The following selected quotes from the study's participants building the argument for the presence of SAS working alongside coaches in high-performance sport organizations. For example, one coach reflected on the clarity they gained from working with the SAS, stating, "I feel much more confident now because I have a clear rationale for why, what, and how we do it… It increased my confidence in my ideas for putting theory into practice" (pp. 121–122). Another coach emphasized the practical benefits, saying, "It has been helpful in distilling abstract concepts and making certain terms far more understandable... The additional understanding has given me more confidence to pursue these ideas in practice" (p. 122). A third coach reported, "I feel I possess more 'strings to my bow' in my coaching tools—pre-session, during the session design process, during the session, and in post-session analysis" (p. 99). When specifically discussing constraint manipulation, one coach stated that doing so was no longer guesswork: "It is now no longer a 'shot in the dark' when I manipulate constraints. I have a greater self-realisation of why 'I need to change this constraint' and the benefits behind it" (p. 107). Another coach explained a shift in perspective: "This has changed my perspective on coaching tremendously. I now zoom out and look at all the factors to see what is influencing a movement. Then that helps me guide the athlete to come up with their own solution vs. me providing the solution for the athlete and enabling their ability to problem-solve" (p. 100). Collectively, these reflections support the integration of SAS into high-performance environments by providing coaches with a deeper understanding of skill acquisition science and practical tools to enhance athlete adaptability.

To be valuable within any high-performance sport organization and to complement the

expertise already possessed by sport coaches, Fransen (2026b) argued that a SAS would need to fulfil two key responsibilities (we have previously proposed several additional responsibilities; see Otte, Yearby, & Myszka, 2024): (a) enhancing coaches' judgments about effective practice design through a deeper understanding of motor learning principles, and (b) translating complex theoretical concepts into practical strategies. He suggested that a SAS would serve as a bridge between coaches and the science of motor skill learning. However, he also noted that accomplishing this may be difficult at present due to what he described as "confusing—not convincing—language" within the skill acquisition literature (p. 2). We appreciate Fransen's (2026b) acknowledgment of the potential effect of a SAS when the role is carried out in this manner, as these objectives align directly with the key responsibilities and benefits we outlined for a SAS in our proposed job description (Otte, Yearby, & Myszka, 2024).

Fundamentally, the SAS would aim to support teams and coaches in designing and facilitating effective learning and training environments (Otte, Yearby, & Myszka, 2024). Their presence is intended not to compete with the coach, but instead, to collaborate closely with the coach and offer support to ensure that the practice environment reflects best practice methods. By 'coaching to learn'—gaining experiential knowledge of the performance environment—and 'learning to coach'—advancing knowledge of skill acquisition science and athlete development (Otte, Davids, et al., 2024)—SAS can take on a multitude of roles within an organization to formally and informally assist, support, and guide coaches. These roles can be subtly adjusted based on coaches' willingness to open up, adapt, and communicate.

Certainly, many sport coaches may not have the time, desire, or even domain-specific knowledge to interact with the latest research findings or recent theoretical developments as would someone with more specialized expertise in the area of skill acquisition—yet, we can be certain that coaches want to ensure that they are staying on the cutting edge of employing the latest advancements in motor learning methods. While the primary role of the SAS is to serve as a "quality control in practice design," the SAS would also be entrusted with leading an organization-wide strategy for skill development (Otte, Yearby, & Myszka, 2024).

In preparation for the 2025 college football season, the Brown University Bears football program of the Ivy League hired Tyler Yearby—the second author of this response and a specialist in skill acquisition. Among Dr. Yearby's responsibilities was advising on practice designs aligned with nonlinear pedagogy. To address Fransen's (2026b) second argument and to reassure decision-makers who may be hesitant to integrate such expertise into their staff, we share reflections from Coach Dan Mulrooney, Defensive Coordinator of the Brown Bears.

When asked whether having a SAS available for collaboration and idea exchange was valuable, Coach Mulrooney responded as follows:

> "Yes, having someone to collaborate with was a game changer. Having someone trained in the field made me confident explaining the 'why' behind the exercise or skill design. As a coach, once you feel prepared and confident in how this helps your athletes improve, it changes your entire mindset."

He added this:

> "The collaboration was definitely supportive of my coaching as it relates to player development. I like learning new ideas, and the whole concept makes sense. Ultimately, coaches are judged by results—and I can say confidently that this collaboration produced better outcomes. Allowing athletes to train using game-like skills produces better results. Skill acquisition is the future."

These comments illustrate that SAS need not compete with coaches' expertise; rather, their

integration can amplify it. Collaboration with such specialists can enhance coaching effectiveness, strengthen the rationale underpinning practice design, and support the development of adaptable skills for athletes. Importantly, the hire was not intended to replace seasoned professionals who collectively possess decades of coaching experience, but to support them in designing more representative and effective training and practice environments.

Fransen's Third Argument: The Premature Professionalization of Skill Acquisition Specialists

In his third argument, Fransen (2026b) cautions against the premature professionalization of skill acquisition specialists, arguing that "hasty professionalization … could create restrictive frameworks and exclude out-of-the-box thinkers crucial to the field's development" (p. 1). Yet, professionals operating as SAS in sport is not new per se. Across the sporting landscape, many individuals are already pushing the envelope in understanding skill development and enhancing performance through innovative approaches to practice design. However, these out-of-the-box, innovative thinkers and practitioners often struggle to drive wider adoption of contemporary ideas within high-performance sport organizations. This could be due to the persistence of others who remain attached to outdated practices and traditional ways of thinking about skill acquisition.

Until recently, there have been no clearly defined minimum standards for the knowledge or skills required to operate effectively as a professional SAS (Runswick et al., 2026). This is likely due to several factors, most notably the lack of consensus regarding the nature of the role and its responsibilities. This situation has contributed to the underutilization of qualified individuals within sport organizations—professionals who possess significant expertise in areas relevant to skill acquisition and who could further enhance the legitimacy of the SAS role and the overall professionalization of the field.

Though the field of skill acquisition is still in its relative infancy as a professional domain—and it is still rapidly evolving—skill acquisition has obviously been studied extensively, from various theoretical perspectives, over several decades (e.g., see Gentile, 1972; Renshaw et al., 2010; Seifert et al., 2012; Williams & Hodges, 2005). Research conducted by Runswick et al. (2026, p. 5) recently attempted to reach expert consensus among those currently working in skill acquisition roles across the world, defining the field of skill acquisition as follows: Skill acquisition is an applied science addressing the performance, learning, and refinement of perceptual, cognitive, and motor skills across the spectrum from novice to expert performers.

Furthermore, another important consensus emerged from this work (Runswick et al., 2026) in identifying the key responsibilities of a SAS to be oriented around practice design, individualized skill development, and education at the organizational level. Ultimately, these findings present a needed step towards establishing a framework for professional development and high-quality, evidence-based skill acquisition practices across the field.

Solidifying the growth of the field as it moves toward further professionalization, several educational programs with skill-acquisition-oriented initiatives have been established. These include the recently founded MSc in Skill Acquisition for Sport, an accredited program offered by Munster Technological University (MTU) in Ireland. In addition, other advanced degree pathways and international research programs in skill-acquisition-related disciplines continue to strengthen the field, supporting coach and athlete development through contemporary research. Notable examples include programs at SpertLab (Sport Expertise & Performance Laboratory), based at the University of Lisbon within the Faculty of Human Kinetics (FMH) in Portugal; the Sport and Physical Activity Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University in the United Kingdom; the National Performance Support Systems at the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS); and collaborations between High-Performance Sport New Zealand

(HPSNZ) and domestic universities such as Auckland University of Technology.

Finally, on an annual basis, various educational conferences and gatherings oriented around skill acquisition exist that span across the globe. These include events such as the Sport Movement Skill Conference (USA), the International Motor Skills Conference, the Expertise and Skill Acquisition Network, and the Australasian Skill Acquisition Network Conference. Occurring for well over the previous decade, these events bring together academic experts, researchers and theoreticians, coaching practitioners, and students, all threaded together with a personal stake in skill acquisition science, existing at the intersection of theory and practice to push ideas forward and further legitimize the professionalization of our field.

Even with so many attempts to increase the level of training, raise required expectations in the field, and evolve our collective practices, it seems as though Fransen (2026b) is somewhat threatened by these initiatives. In fact, he stated that it "poses a significant risk of fostering a flawed, restrictive system, in which accreditation or certification bodies decide who can and cannot be a skill acquisition specialist or which activities skill acquisition specialists can and cannot undertake" (Fransen, 2026b, pp. 2–3). However, let us now call out the large elephant in the room here: a specific certification that a professional has earned, a degree that someone has attained, or the individuals within one's network has never solely determined, or significantly limited, the choices they ultimately make within their practice. The practitioner still always has the agency to take the necessary courses of action they feel are best based on their own thoughts, experiences, expertise, studies, and authentic intuition. For example, just because a strength and conditioning coach is a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS) through the National Strength and Conditioning Association does not mean they follow every set and rep scheme from the study materials or that they cannot modify exercise technique based on the constraints demonstrated by the athletes in front of them. We believe that the same will be true for skill acquisition practitioners working in the field as professionalization and accreditation increase.

Conclusion

For Fransen (2026a; 2026b) and others who may agree with his position, we ask when would it be an appropriate time for SAS to make it to the big leagues? How will we know that it is truly the time and that the field is ready to contribute on such a stage? We say that the time is now! In high-performance sport, teams are always looking for every edge they can get to maximize their players' talent and effectively develop the those on their roster. We believe that more decision-makers in high-performance sports organizations will continue to recognize the potential benefits of employing a SAS to collaborate with other staff members within the organization in a transdisciplinary way. Doing so could act as 'quality control' for practice design, player development, and all skill acquisition-related actions unfolding across the organization. Certainly, as more qualified individuals continue to find themselves in a SAS role working within high-performance sports organizations, the role of the SAS will continue to evolve and adapt to the needs of sports organizations, being defined and redefined over time.

Disclosure Statement

Authors Shawn Myszka and Tyler Yearby are employed by Emergence, LLC, a movement skill education company that offers certification to Skill Acquisition Specialists (SAS). Fabian Otte declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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