



Navigating Cultural Landscapes: A Coach's Diary Approach

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Abstract

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<p>This diary-based thesis focuses on the author's journey as they navigate through the world of cross-culture coaching in Slovakia. This thesis follows a year of coaching under a work placement contract set by Haaga-Helia in the Degree Program of Sports Coaching and Management. The author is going into their second year of coaching in competitive artistic gymnastics in Slovakia and is documenting the process through a diary-based thesis.</p> <p>This thesis is based around three developmental themes that are the basis to the author's personal and professional growth. The themes are cultural understanding and adaptation, adapting training approaches to cultural norms and building strong communication channels. The objectives of these themes will be covered throughout this thesis, and they will ultimately benefit the author in their road to professional growth.</p> <p>This thesis developmental journey will be covered in an 8-week observation period, during which the author will cover various themes required towards professional growth. The observation period started on the second week of October and ended on the final week of November 2024, allowing ample time for progress to be recorded. At the end of each week, a weekly analysis was conducted in order for the author to reflect on that time period and to discuss the themes mentioned. Towards the end of this process, the author placed focus on the main topic of this thesis; cross-culture coaching.</p> <p>Throughout each theme, the author reflected on their behavior throughout the week insofar as how they related to each topic and discussed courses of action for development. The findings from this paper are ultimately for the benefit of this author as they continue their journey as a coach following this season in Slovakia. Understanding the dynamics and discrepancies between cultures will guide the author in assimilating to this new coaching culture.</p> <p>The author will tackle common themes in coaching such as coaching cues, providing appropriate feedback and mental health in sports, all the while relating these themes to cross-culture coaching.</p> <p>The author was able to deeply understand the importance of each topic, which ultimately led to their personal and professional growth at the end of this process.</p>
Keywords Culture, Coaching, Diversity, Development

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1 Introduction

This diary-based thesis follows my personal growth as an artistic gymnastics coach navigating coaching in a foreign country. This thesis is conducted during an 8-week observation period, during which I will be tackling weekly various topics pertaining to my professional development with the emphasis on cross-culture coaching.

My roots are in Finland and having had prior experience of coaching in Finland, it opens opportunities for me to discuss the differences in coaching culture between Slovakia and Finland. In this thesis, I will be touching on the subject of cross-culture coaching from the eyes of a coach with experience in coaching abroad and how it translates into coaching in a foreign environment.

During the time of writing this thesis, I am coaching through the 2023-2024 competitive gymnastics season. The first observation week will start on the second week of October and will end on the final week of November. Each practice session as well as competition day will be logged in order to track my progress as well as to gather data about cross-culture coaching. There will be 2 observation days logged every other week and 4 observation days on those preceding weeks during competition weeks.

For privacy purposes, information of the gym, coaches as well as the gymnasts' personal names and details will not be provided for this thesis. Some general information will be present in order to retain relevancy and for the reader to gain an idea of the author's intentions. The employer is a gym that is located in Žilina, Slovakia. The town of Žilina is located in the north-western part of Slovakia and boasts a rich sporting history. The language used in this city in Slovakia is Slovak with a minority of Czech and Hungarian speakers.

The club I am working in is the biggest artistic gymnastics club in Žilina. It recently underwent a location change, in which it became one of the largest and most well-equipped gymnastics arenas in Slovakia. In addition to artistic gymnastics, there are other sports available in this gym included for a variety of different demographics.

Although the coaching staff is relatively small, the diversity and expertise of these coaches make up for the numbers. Each coach is competent in a multitude of sports and have a wide range of knowledge pertaining to medicine, psychology and management. There are coaches coming from different cultures, which brings forth a diverse perspective and knowledgebase for the team. In addition to the coaching staff, receptionists, managers and owners play a huge role in this club's success.

My responsibilities as a competitive gymnastics head coach in charge of gymnasts aged 5-11 include skill and holistic athlete development, ensuring the safety of the gymnasts through injury prevention, being able to communicate effectively with all members of the club and to adhere and uphold the values of the club. Having a deep knowledge of the sport and some basic knowledge of technology is also required in this role.

2 Description and Analysis of the Initial Situation

This position initially came to light after my work placement contract ended in Bratislava the prior season. Through that workplace I gained valuable contacts, which referred me to the current club that I am working in now. The process of gaining this position started out with a face-to-face interview during which I described my previous work experience, my education background and my favored position within the club. During the time of my application, the coaches and managers were coming up with a schedule for the upcoming season and they discussed with me where I would fit into the club. Initially the concern came from my language skills, since I would be coaching younger athletes, who did not speak any English. They called me back for a practice session in which I would be coaching a variety of age groups and based on my performance, they would be choosing an appropriate age group for me to coach. The coaches were satisfied with my coaching during the trial training session and were pleasantly surprised by my language skills. This ultimately landed me the position of head coach of the 5–11-year-old competitive gymnasts in the club.

My work started after the summer holidays in September, during which I was introduced to the ins and outs of the club. They guided me through my first workdays and allowed me to get accustomed to the environment and their values as a club. I am working with an assistant coach throughout this season, since we have a large group of gymnasts and since my language skills are not in top shape yet.

2.1 Analysis of coaches' work

On top of being the head coach, I also periodically work with the older age groups when necessary. My job description is highly versatile, on top of being present at every practice, I also accompany my gymnasts to competitions and do planning outside of my work hours. I collaborate with other coaches to create routines for the gymnasts and to share ideas and goals for each individual gymnast. Initially when the season started, we sat down with the whole coaching staff and talked about their vision for this season and what they wanted to improve from last year. I was filled in with how the gymnasts performed last season and what goals should be set for the future.

2.2 Off-season work

In terms of off-season work, coaches will take on a multitude of responsibilities varying from coaching-related work to managing duties. Most commonly, coaches will begin preparations for the upcoming season through creating annual plans and individual goal setting for each individual gymnast. There are one-on-one as well as group conversations that are held between coaches,

gymnasts or parents. Additionally, development camps, teambuilding workshops and coaching clinics are generally encouraged during off-season work. During this time, the goal is to get all of the necessary questions and concerns addressed in order to make the transition into the season as smooth and seamless as possible.

Annual Plan

The annual plan outlines the approach taken in order to most efficiently train, compete and recover. The design of an annual plan should be simple enough to read and understand and should cover all the basis for the season. “An annual training plan is a living document that needs to be monitored, maintained, and modified throughout the year” (Amiri, 2020). The phases of an annual plan can be divided into macrocycles, which is your season in its entirety, mesocycles, a particular block of training during the season and microcycles, which is the smallest unit generally lasting a week (Holmes, T. n.d.).

Goal Setting

Goal setting is an essential part of pre-season planning. It ensures that you have a direction and ultimate goal to look towards throughout the regular season. According to Eva Monsma, there are 12 principles of effective goal setting: (Monsma, 2007).

1. Make goals specific, observable and measurable
 - Being specific in your intentions for the goal will allow the athlete to better visualize the task ahead. Observable goals are both specific and measurable. A measurable goal is quantifiable and will give athletes a general time frame in which the goal needs to be achieved.
2. Clearly identify the time constraints
3. Use moderately difficult goals
4. Write down goals and regularly monitor progress
 - Keeping a journal or a public chart can help the athlete and other to stay on task
5. Use short range goals to achieve long range plans
6. Set practice as well as competition goals
 - Being able to understand that what happens in practice translates into competition will allow maximal effectiveness
7. Make sure goals are internalized by athletes
 - Goals should be taken seriously by the athletes in order for them to reach them
8. Consider personality and individual differences in goal setting

- Being able to differentiate each athlete as an individual will allow for a most personalized approach when setting goals
- 9. Set positive goals as opposed to negative goals
 - This will help athletes focus on success rather than failure
- 10. Identify a goal-achievement strategy
- 11. Seek support for your goals
 - This can come in the form of your coaches, teammates parents or other member of staff
- 12. Set team as well as individual performance goals

2.3 On-season work

When the season starts, there will be a lot of conversations between gymnast and coach. It's the coaches' responsibility to check up on their physical and mental health and to begin determining their goals for the season. Coaches will look back on the gymnasts' previous season and talk about where they would like to be level-wise and whether or not their goals are attainable for the upcoming season. Additionally, considering the age group, parents should be involved in conversations about commitment and strategy for the season.

Practice Plans

Utilizing the annual plan created during the off-season, practice plans will be created based on what phase the gymnasts are in in every cycle of periodization. It is essential for the coach to recognize when to pull back on the intensity during certain training sessions and when to ramp up the intensity.

Every practice plan should include a detailed warm-up protocol in which every muscle group is being targeted. Warm-ups should be engaging and can be sports specific in order to mimic certain movement patterns being performed during training. In gymnastics, including animal movements in the warm-ups are a fun way of increasing mobility and practicing certain shapes that relate to the sport (Whiles, G. 2023).

When it comes to the practice itself, coaches should consider what they are trying to achieve during the practice and what time of the season it is. For example, when the season starts, emphasis should be put on skill building, strength and conditioning and increasing mobility and flexibility. These are all key aspects in competition preparation. In gymnastics a common phrase used is "drills make skills". Setting up stations with drills to target the movement patterns required to execute a skill will aid in the understanding of the mechanics required to reach their goal skill.

At the end of every practice, cool-down is required in order to avoid injuries and to begin the recovery process. Coaches should ensure that after every practice, gymnasts are knowledgeable about the recovery protocol required to stay healthy before coming into the next practice. Nutrition, sleep and other recovery methods should be discussed with the coaches and can be personalized based on the gymnasts' needs.

Meetings

Meetings with members of the coaching staff should be held periodically, even when there seems to be no matters to discuss. By keeping every member of the staff updated on the gymnasts' progress as well as how progress is going during the season will build strong team relationships and will provide useful insight. Bringing the staff together creates a sense of togetherness and will make each member of the team feel valued (British Gymnastics, n.d.).

Aside from holding meetings with coaches, holding discussions with your athletes should also be considered. These meetings can be both formal and informal, as well as one-one-one or in group settings. These discussions can be pre-planned or sporadic depending on the gymnasts' or coaches' needs. Some examples of the topic of these meetings could be about the gymnasts' performance, their mental health, team friction or can even be positive matters, such as reaching their goals.

The parents of the gymnasts are a vital piece to the puzzle of upholding the club. They are financing their children's right to be competing as well as paying for all miscellaneous fees. Coaching gymnasts in a younger age group means involving the parents as much as possible. Having discussions with the parents are their children's goals and performance, as well as their overall feelings about the sport are important in order to gauge their commitment and future plans.

Evaluating performance

The most efficient way to track a gymnast's progress is to periodically evaluate their performance. During the start of the season, standardized tests should be conducted in order to gauge a starting point for their season. At the end of the season, these tests should be performed again to gain an idea of their progress throughout the season and possible improvement points looking towards the next season.

The Gymnastics Functional Measurement Tool (GFMT) is a tool used to measure a gymnast's overall fitness level. Through the use of GFMT coaches will gain a better idea about any possible physical deficiencies that need to be addressed and is useful in preventing injuries (Sleeper, 2012).

Table 1 Individual Items Comprising the GFMT (Int J Sports Phys Ther., 2012)

Item	Targeted Area(s) of Fitness Assessment	Units of Measure for Raw Score
The Rope Climb Test	Strength and endurance, as well as trunk control	Seconds*
The Jump Test	Lower extremity power	cm
The Hanging Pikes Test	Abdominal strength, hip flexor strength, and flexibility as well as grip strength	Number of reps
The Shoulder Flexibility Test	Shoulder complex flexion flexibility	cm/arm length
The Agility Test	Speed, endurance, and agility	Seconds
The Over-grip Pull-up Test	Upper extremity strength and muscular endurance	Number of reps
The Splits Test	Pelvis and lower extremity flexibility	Sum of cm split clearance/leg length
The Push-up Test	Shoulder and upper extremity strength	Number of reps
The 20-Yard Sprint Test	Speed and power	Seconds
The Handstand Test	Upper extremity strength and endurance as well as balance in a head-down position	Seconds

The table above highlights a variety of exercises used to measure flexibility, speed, power, strength, muscular endurance, and balance (Sleeper, 2012).

Aside from the standardized tests, gymnast's performance can be evaluated throughout the season in more informal ways. For example, leading up to competition days, coaches can mark their routines and give a rough idea about what their score would look like for when they compete. This will allow smaller changes and tweaks to be made during practice, so that they are physically and mentally prepared for when the competition day rolls around.

2.4 Stakeholders

In this portion, I will be introducing the stakeholders that are present in the club I am working in. These stakeholders are critical to the growth and success of the organization. The first stakeholders involved are the club owners. The owners oversee the management of the club and handle the finance, marketing and regulations responsibilities. They direct the hiring process of new staff members and ensure that everything runs smoothly within the organization.

Another internal stakeholder comes in the form of the coaches. These coaches oversee the planning and training of the gymnasts and provide individualized goals for each athlete. They communicate with all members of the organization, whether it is with the gymnasts, other members of the coaching staff, owners or parents. They ensure the safety of the gymnasts during practice and in competition.

One of the most important stakeholders that make that the organization is based around are the athletes. The gymnasts and athlete embody the organization and uphold the values directed by the club. They represent the team in competition and participate during trainings. They are mentored and trained by the coaches and comply to the rules set in place by said coaches.

Another stakeholder that ensures the income of the organization are the parents of the gymnasts. They pay for the fees of the club and attend competitions, charity events and other inter-club events. The parents work as a channel of communication between the coaches and the gymnasts and understand the importance of their gymnast's safety and attendance within the club.

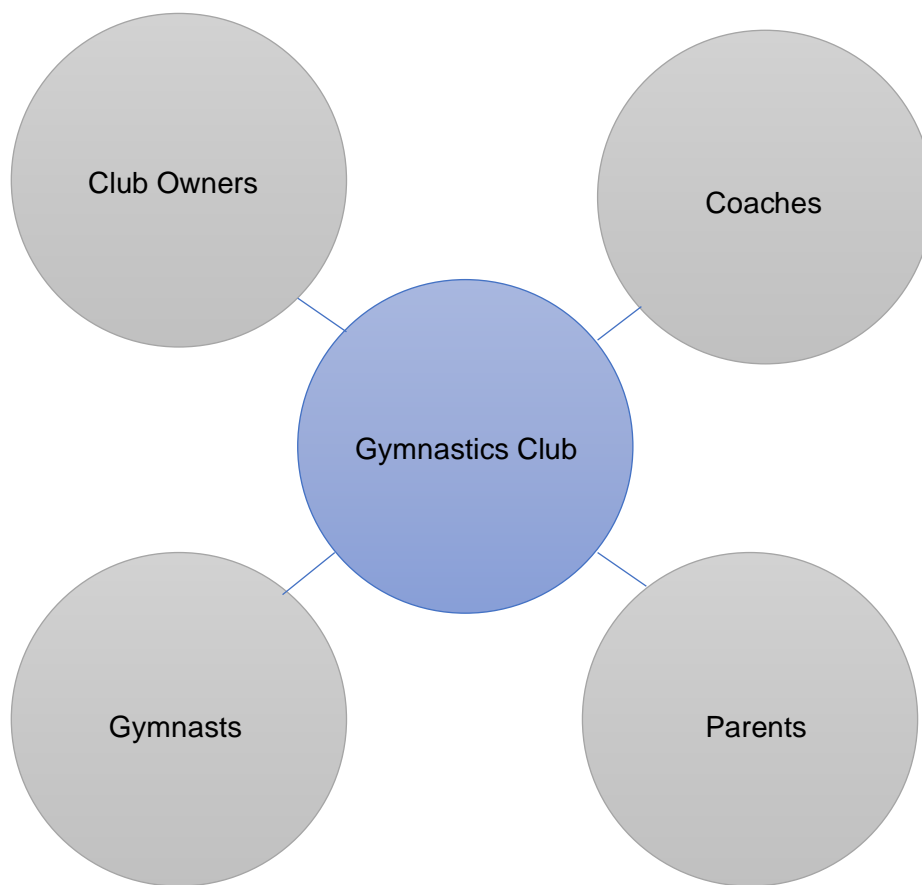


Figure 1 Stakeholders of the gymnastics club

3 Knowledge Base

For this portion of my thesis, I will be covering the three central themes that will guide my work towards professional development. The themes I have selected to introduce are cultural understanding and adaptation, adapting training approaches to cultural norms and building strong communication channels. These themes will directly translate to the central theme of this thesis paper, cross-culture coaching.

3.1 Cultural Understanding and Adaptation

Cultural competence plays a vital role in being able to effectively communicate and interact with people, whilst respecting and valuing cultural differences (Ballard, 2024).

Before you can reach the stage of adapting to a new culture, it is essential to have a deep understanding of the culture you are living and working in. This all begins with self-reflection. Thinking about your own cultural background, what values and biases you might have will help you will allow you to be more self-aware going into a new culture (Mitchell, 2024). Instead of trying to find the differences and using a negative approach when navigating a new culture, going into it with an open mind will provide opportunities for growth and understanding. Realizing that every culture is highly individual and that you are allowed to stay true to your own values, whilst respecting another culture's values will lead to full understanding and eventually adapting to the norms of that culture (Stockton University, n.d.).

Building your knowledge on the culture surrounding you through attending events, gatherings and even through your workplace will help you gain a deeper understanding of the traditions set in place by the local people. Communicating freely from people with a different background and actively listening to their opinions will broaden your mind and break down cultural barriers (Mitchell, 2024).

“Culture operates like an iceberg, with some elements visible on the surface, such as language and traditions, while others remain hidden beneath the surface, such as beliefs and values” (Mitchell, 2024). Being open to learning the local language will bring you one step closer to fully understanding the culture. Every culture is highly appreciative of foreigners attempting to learn the local language. Being proactive in learning on your own time, not being afraid to ask questions and putting yourself out there will also aid in the learning process. Also being aware of non-verbal cues that might be normal in another culture will allow you to gain a deeper understanding of the habits of the local people.

Cultural understanding is one thing, being able to fully adapt is another, this is a process that takes time and patience. Asking questions and gaining valuable feedback from your peers will set you on the right path to being more culturally aware. Understanding that there is always room for improvement and that this kind of process does not happen overnight, will help you stay grounded when attempting to navigate cultural adaptation.

3.2 Adapting training approaches to cultural norms

Coaching styles and cues are highly individual when it comes to coaching across cultures. Environment, values, biases and history all play a role in how these ideas have been shaped across time. Cultural norms have been set by not only the country as a whole, but also in smaller circles such as singular organizations. Whilst one club might have different coaching styles and values, another club might not share those same views. The effectiveness of a coaching style focuses on the unique needs, preferences, and personalities of the athletes. Understanding that every athlete is different, a successful coach will tailor their approach accordingly (Gallardo, 2024).

People from various cultures will have adapted to certain social cues and non-verbal language that may come as a surprise for other culture looking from the outside in. Coaching styles can be used by an organization as a whole or can come down to a singular coach's view. The first step to gaining an understanding of the training approaches of a new culture is looking into what coaching styles are being utilized. For example, in Slovakia coaching styles have generally leaned towards the more authoritarian old-school style of coaching. Authoritarian coaching is allowing the coach to make all the decisions and drives on the concept of learning discipline (Berzman, 2024). Accepting the differences between coaching styles and finding a good balance between your own personal style of coaching and the club's own coaching style will allow for smoother adaptation.

Additionally, being aware of the language in coaching as well as verbal and non-verbal cues of the culture you are coaching in will provide the athletes more comfort when being coached by someone from a different culture. There are three different forms of non-verbal communication: the touch/ haptic communication, kinesic communication and proximal communication (Coach, 2020). Understanding what works in certain cultures will allow for easier communication between coach and athlete.

Finally, in terms of coaching cues, there are three that are most commonly used in sports coaching: internal, external and normal cues. Internal cues focus on the body movement associated with the skill (swing the arms back). External cues are more focused on the outcome of the skill (absorb the floor). Finally, normal cues don't require instruction and will allow the athlete to complete to skill with only the knowledge given to them prior (Bartholomew, 2023).

Once you have successfully gained knowledge on the cultural norms in coaching in terms of the coaching style, language in coaching and coaching cues, it will be easier to adapt your training methods accordingly. It will prove to be more effective when combining your previous knowledge of the sport with the new ideologies learned than if you were to stick to your own style of coaching. All of this being said, it is important not to stray too far away from your own values in coaching, but rather adapt smartly and take the best practices from each coaching culture and build your own personal coaching style.

3.3 Building strong communication channels

Being able to effectively communicate in a new culture is a gift, because by being able to do so, you are enriching your knowledge and sharing ideas that can aid in future development (Berkeley, n.d.). Communication in cross-culture coaching can happen within the club, whether it is with your athletes, members of the staff or other coaches and outside of the club, whether it is in competition or during training camps and other sporting events.

There can be some barriers when it comes to cross-culture communication, mostly namely the language barrier. These differences can lead to misunderstandings and friction between coaches and athletes (Editorial, 2024). Being motivated to learn and effectively communicate in the native language of the country you are coaching in can strengthen your relationships and create deeper bonds (Middlebury Language Schools, 2023).

When coaching, the daily communication channel that is the most vital as your role as a coach is one between coach and athlete. Being able to build trust and mutual understanding in this relationship takes time and language barriers can hinder this process. There are other ways in which communication can happen between coach and athlete and that's where non-verbal communication plays a role. Non-verbal communication breaks the boundaries between cultures as gestures and facial expressions are for the most part universal. This being said, the ultimate goal and the key to truly understanding your athlete is through active listening and a want to constantly improve yourself. Considering your athletes' feelings, whether they are physical and mental and being present to aid them through these difficulties will strengthen your bond with them (University of Massachusetts, n.d.).

In addition to communicating with your athletes, relationships with the parents and other members of the staff should be always present, since they are the cornerstone to every sports organization. Having constant open channels of communication with these stakeholders will allow you to become more aware of the ongoings within the club and will ultimately lead to the success and growth, not only of the club, but also for yourself, as a coach. When holding meetings with

members of the staff, all opinions should be taken into consideration, and any disagreements should be discussed away from the athletes (Human Kinetics, 2024). When consulting with the parents of the athletes, expectations should be made clear from the get-go and understanding that the parents only have their children's best interest at heart should be taken into consideration.

In order to further enrich your knowledge of cross-culture coaching, it is vital to look outside of the organization for new communication channels. For example, during competitions being proactive and networking with other coaches and judges can be useful in gaining contact in the field of your sport. Sharing new ideas and opinions can ultimately lead to personal and professional growth.

4 Diary Entries

4.1 Observation week 1 – Providing feedback to foster development

Monday, 07.10.2024

The first observation day began with a regular training session with the category C girls aged 5-11. We are currently a month into our competition season and the gymnasts had just come back from a competition the weekend before this current week. Our general strategy after competitions is to take time to go through their results and to analyze their routines, as well as make corrections before the next competition.

At the start of our Monday session, we sat down with our gymnasts, went through their score sheets and observed the deductions as well as their positive outcomes from each routine. Here we ensured to maintain a safe and positive environment in order to encourage our gymnasts to share their feelings about their possible worries as well as their triumphs from their competition. Seeing as the age group consists of younger athletes, it is essential to take into account the tone and language being used when providing feedback. We ensured to create personalized feedback for each of our gymnasts, taking into account their skill level. Using language such as “Next time, try to follow the beat and rhythm of the floor music, in order to keep the flow of your routine” instead of “Don’t fall off beat, because you will receive deductions” can work wonders with encouraging young gymnasts.

Additionally, we wanted to apply the sandwich method when providing feedback, since it allows the gymnasts to also realize their strengths as well as understanding where they can improve. The sandwich method consists of initially providing positive feedback, following up with constructive criticism and finishing off with more positive feedback. According to a study written about the sandwich feedback and the empirical evidence of its effectiveness, “Beginning and ending with praise should build the recipient’s trust and comfort, increase the recipient’s receptivity to negative comments, mitigate the effects that negative feedback might have on the recipient’s self-image, and increase motivation, receptivity and engagement” (Parkes et al., 2013). An example of a sandwich method that I used with one of my gymnasts was “Your overall performance this competition was exceptional considering this is only your second competition. For the next competition, focus on pointing your toes through every movement, straightening your legs when necessary and keeping the tempo in each routine. I believe if you apply these to the next competition, you will notice a significant difference in your deduction score and you might even find yourself on the podium”.

Wednesday, 09.10.2024

The focus for this session was strength and conditioning and introducing new skills with the next competition being two weeks away. Keeping in mind our individual feedback session from Monday, my gymnasts went into this training with a hunger to train hard for the next competition. Since this training session was meant to be more challenging conditioning-wise, we ensured to encourage our gymnasts to come and discuss with us their thoughts during and after the training session in terms of stress and fatigue on their bodies. We had a couple of gymnasts with minor injuries coming back from the competition, so we provided them with appropriate variations and strengthening exercises to ensure full recovery.

During the training, we focused on applying sports-specific strength exercises to aid them in their skills and overall technique towards the sport. We did drills with hollow holds, superman shapes and gym ladder drills to put towards their tumbling and bars. The two most important shapes in gymnastics are the hollow and arch shapes that can be seen in every event. The gym ladder is a tool that is commonly used in gymnastics to build flexibility, grip strength, shaping techniques and overall strength.

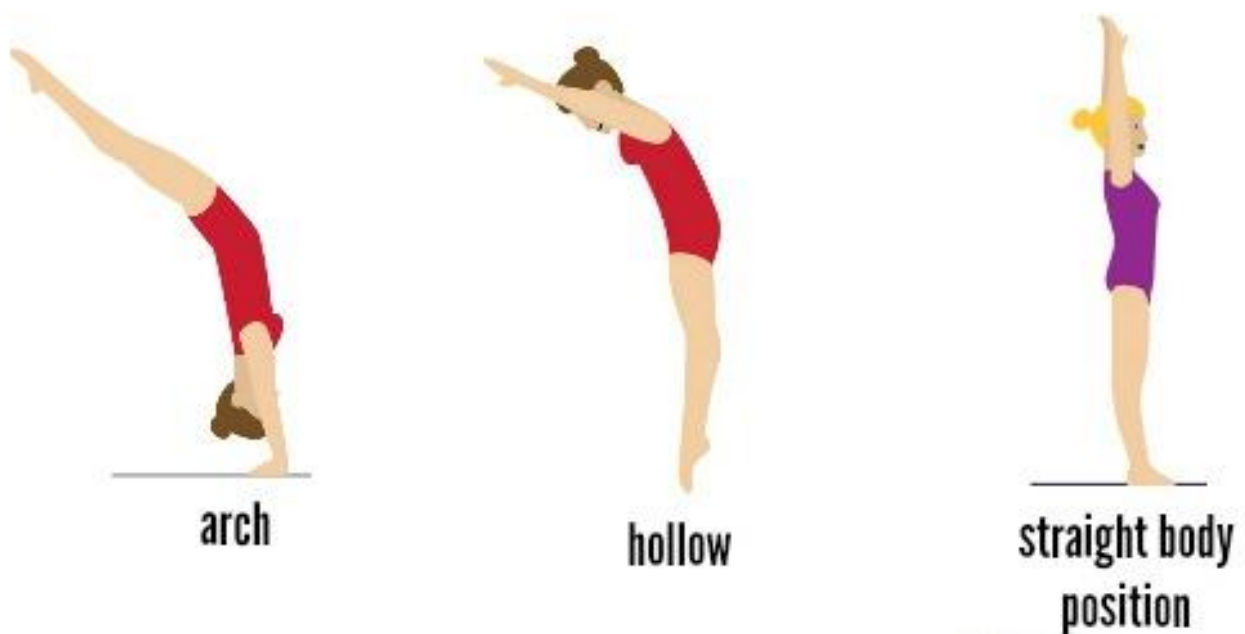


Figure 2 Basic shapes in gymnastics (Gymnastics HQ, 2023)

We provided our gymnasts with an RPE (rate of perceived exertion) sheet, that they filled out after the session. Your RPE refers to how hard your body thinks it is pushing itself during exercise, this therefore makes the matter highly subjective to each athlete. We used the Modified Borg CR10 RPE scale to measure our gymnasts (Cleveland Clinic, 2024). This was followed up with an open

discussion with our gymnasts about their feelings and thoughts on the training. This would allow us coaches to gain an idea about our practice and to make any necessary changes in the future. We encouraged our gymnasts to be as honest as possible when providing feedback, since we want to ensure their safety as well as to avoid possible injuries or burnouts.

Table 2 Rate of perceived exertion table, as filled out by my gymnasts

Gymnast (Age)	Rating (0-10)	Perceived Exertion Level
Gymnast 1 (aged 5)	9	Very hard
Gymnast 2 (aged 5)	8	Very hard
Gymnast 3 (aged 6)	10	Maximum effort
Gymnast 4 (aged 7)	9	Very hard
Gymnast 5 (aged 8)	8	Very hard
Gymnast 6 (aged 8)	7	High
Gymnast 7 (aged 9)	9	Very hard
Gymnast 8 (aged 10)	8	Very hard
Gymnast 9 (aged 10)	7	High
Gymnast 10 (aged 11)	6	High
Gymnast 11 (aged 11)	7	High
Gymnast 12 (aged 11)	7	High

We reviewed the results after practice and concluded that our practice was mostly successful. Our aim was to have our gymnasts in the high to very high category after practice, since the aim was to build strength and endurance. We made sure to also individually talk to our gymnasts after practice about any potential fatigue, they might be feeling after a high strain workout. We ensured to mention proper recovery procedure, such as stretching, foam rolling, nutrition and sleep.

Weekly Analysis

Our objective this week was to create an environment that is open and safe for the gymnasts to hold open discussions with the coaches as well as us providing them with constructive feedback.

We had a number of talks after the competition through analyzing their routines and ensuring that they are feeling confident in their results. We made use of the sandwich method when providing feedback as well as using the appropriate language and tone to our specific age group of gymnasts.

Reflecting back on this week, I found that I could have been more specific in certain feedback sessions, when it came to how they could improve towards the next competition. In the future, I will look towards using more specific and deliberate language when addressing my gymnasts. Additionally, I would like to have my gymnasts come to me more freely when they feel the need to discuss something, as opposed to me having to ask them firsthand. In order to improve this, I will look towards developing the bond and trust between myself and the gymnasts first, before expecting them to come to me.

In terms of the RPE chart that was filled out by my gymnasts, it seemed to be a success with the athletes, since they were able to express their thoughts about the training without having to put it into words. Also allowing them to fill out the chart in private, ensured that they were not being put under pressure by the coaches or their teammates. This is a practice that I would put forth in the following training sessions as well.

This week we began to build on our communication between the athletes and coaches through the use of coaching language in feedback. Through creating individualized feedback for each gymnast, it allowed room for inclusivity and creating stronger bonds between each respective party. Through the use of the RPE chart, I was able to gain a better understanding of my athletes and their limits during practice, so that in the future I would have better knowledge when creating individualized plans.

4.2 Observation week 2 – Coaching cues: Refining technique and optimizing performance

Monday, 14.10.2024

For the second observation week, the focus was being put on preparing for the next week's upcoming competition. This meant that we were looking towards refining the gymnasts' skills, putting attention to detail and making the finishing touches to the gymnasts' routines. Since the gymnasts have already started their season, we are no longer going to be making any changes to their routines. At this point the gymnasts will be focusing on consistency and repetition. We started the training with a warmup and a quick rundown of the plan for the week. We put most of the focus on this day's training to individual skills within their routines, which mostly included tumbling.

Since each gymnast had a unique routine with different skills in each event, we warmed up on the floor with some basic tumbling. We then moved on to the specific skills that they would be performing during their competition. During this time, we emphasized providing specific cues to the gymnasts in order for them to understand the mechanics of each skill.

There are three main types of coaching cues: internal, external and normal. An internal cue draws the athletes focus to their body movement associated with the skill. For example, you could tell a gymnast to straighten their legs, point their toes or reach with their arms towards the ground. This type of coaching cue always refers to a specific body part, whether it is the arms, legs or knees. However, as mentioned by an article from Science for Sport “Internal cues are thought to disrupt movement and control because the athlete has to ‘consciously’ organize their body” (Bartholomew, 2023). This pertains to the fact that internal cues can sometimes be counterproductive when given to the wrong kind of athlete.

The next type of coaching cue and the one I use most often are external cues. External cues focus the attention on the outcome of the skill. An example that I use in gymnastics is “imagine that a string is being pulled from the top of your head” when performing pirouettes. This allows the gymnasts to imagine the sensation of staying as tall as possible when doing turns. “External cues are believed to allow the athlete to subconsciously ‘self-organize’ their body during movement” (Bartholomew, 2023).

The final coaching cue is known as a normal cue. This refers to the athlete’s independent thinking when performing a movement. When a cue is not given or when athletes have to refer back to a cue given to them before, it allows them to think back to an internal or external cue given before.

The cue that is most commonly used in our gym is the external cue. In most artistic sports, thinking outside of the box has been known to boost an athletes’ movement skills. Considering the age group that I am currently working in, younger gymnasts can benefit from the use of external cues, as it allows them to be think about the outcome of their movement.

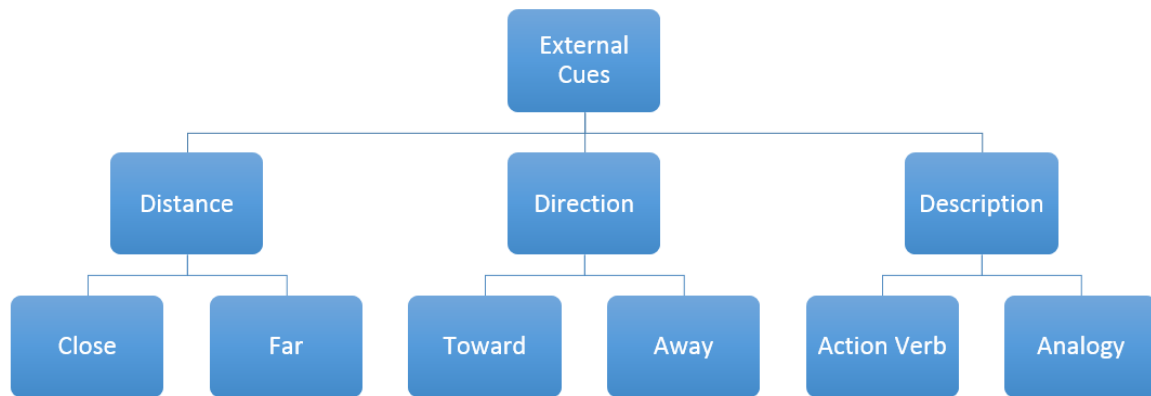


Figure 3 Types of external cues (Bartholomew, 2023)

External cues can be split into three categories: distance, direction and description. When speaking about distance in an external cue, you need to be specific about whether you want the athlete to go close or far with their movement. For example, I could tell my gymnast to “explode towards the ceiling”, which would entail that they would need to go as high as possible with their movement. The next category, direction, refers to the athlete either going away or towards something with their movement. For example, if you wanted you gymnast to move away from something, you could tell them “Focus on getting as far away from the line as possible with your jump”. The final category is description. Descriptive cues can be split into two categories: action words (punch, explode) and analogies (rise like an airplane during take-off). These are particularly effective in allowing the athlete to imagine the desired outcome of the movement.

Wednesday, 16.10.2024

Since Monday’s focus was on refining tumbling skills as well as overall power in their movement, today we focused on the artistic side of the gymnasts’ routines. This refers to the dance elements in their routines, rhythm and flow and leaps and jumps. On days when we focus on the artistic aspects of the sport, we tend to have a ballet session beforehand. After doing a quick barre warmup, we move to perfecting the artistic skills in every gymnast’s individual routine.

Artistic gymnastics is for the most part a subjective sport since judges are deciding the outcomes of a competition, however there is a clear scoring system to decide the gymnasts’ abilities. In the case of my gymnasts, they are using a different scoring system from other higher-level athletes. The gymnasts have a start value of 10.0 and their final score is calculated after adding in possible deductions from their routine. Some example deductions that can be given to gymnasts from beam, floor and bars are:

Legs separated when they should be together: up to .2

Balance errors: up to .3

Bent arms or legs when they should be straight: up to .3

Changing, reversing or omitting a small part of the routine: .1

There are also miscellaneous deductions that can be taken from a gymnast such as, not saluting to the judges before or after the routine, stepping out of bounds, being spotted by a coach or going overtime in a routine.

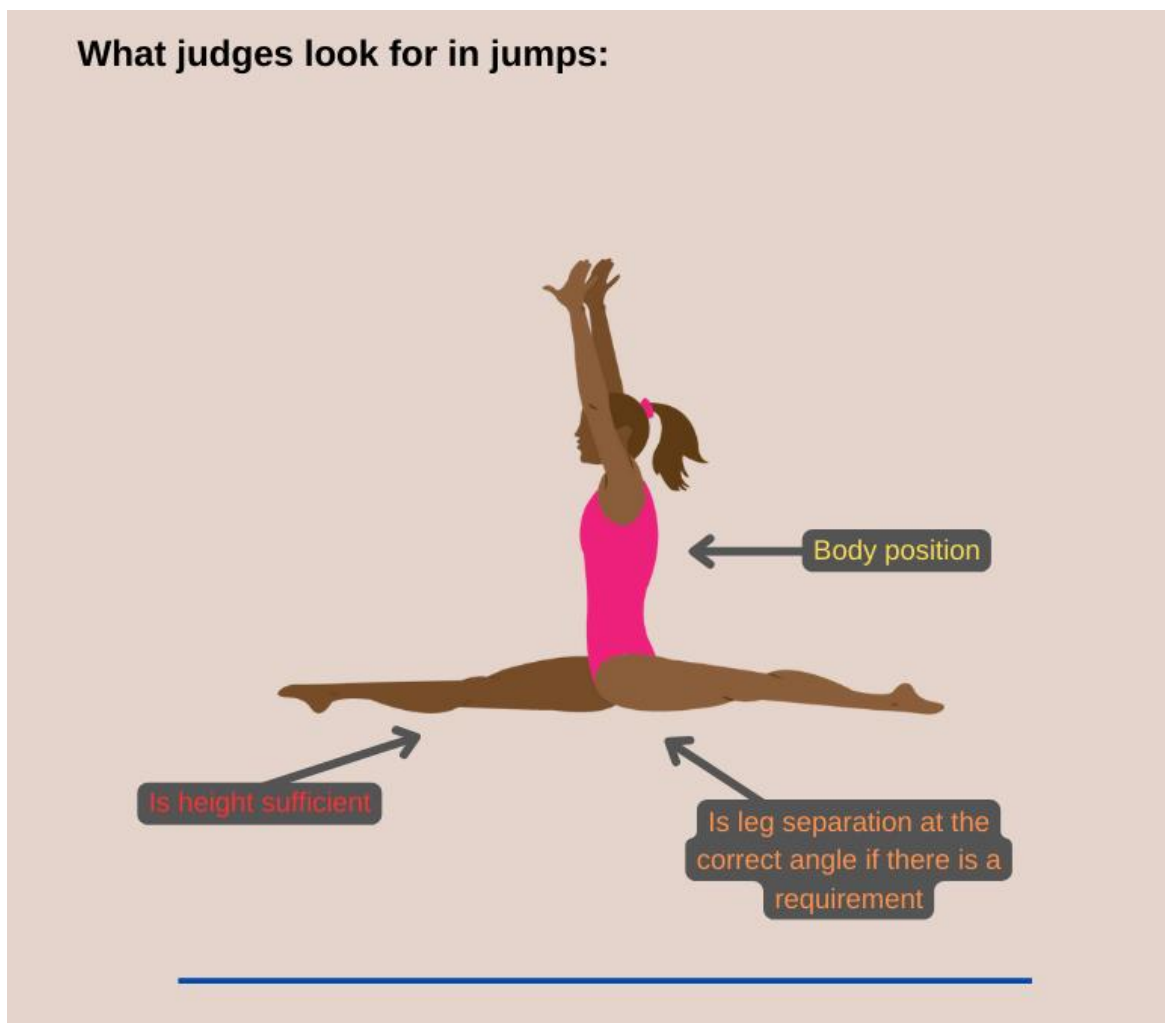


Figure 4 Body positioning in leaps (Gymnastics HQ, 2024)

In this example diagram of a leap in gymnastics, the three different colored texts are associated with different degrees of deductions. The yellow text bearing “body position” refers to smallest deduction, the orange text is a medium deduction, and the red text refers to the largest deduction.

It is essential that every gymnast understand the basis of the scoring system, so that they can look towards achieving the highest score possible in every routine. Since this day's focus was on artistry, we ensured to point out little details that might cause possible deductions towards the girls' artistic score. This meant making sure their movements were dynamic, that they were staying on tempo with their routines and that their leaps and jumps were reaching the required 180-degree angle.

For these practices, we tend to make use of taking videos, since the gymnasts are able to get a better picture as to what corrections they need to make. Additionally, filming their routines will get them a better picture as a whole and will allow them to see it from a judge's perspective as well.

Weekly Analysis

This week's focus was on providing the right kinds of coaching cues to put towards the upcoming competition as well as revising the scoring system with the gymnasts and coaching staff. "Every coach uses coaching cues, and different cues can have a big impact, but very few coaches give them a second thought" (Bartholomew, 2023). Understanding that weight of your choice of words as a coach is essential in bringing out the best in your athletes.

My ultimate goal this week was to get creative with my choice of language and to see which cues bore the best results. I found that using external cues has been the most helpful in allowing my gymnasts to understand how their skills should look like. This being said, something that I still struggle with is figuring out the individual learning styles of my gymnasts. This would require from me more time and patience in order to give the best possible cues to each individual athlete.

This week was mostly dedicated to refinement and preparation, which also concluded with individual and open discussions with each gymnast. We provided each gymnast with individual recovery and mental preparations to be done at home and outside of practice. For some gymnasts this meant reviewing videos taken of their routines, additional stretching at home, mental imagery practices or keeping a journal about their mindset and practices.

Providing appropriate coaching cues in the context of cross-culture coaching was challenging, since the practice environment differs to the ones I have coached in previously. Considering each gymnast as an individual as well as their past experiences in the sport in accordance with their culture was a challenge for me this week as a coach. Keeping open lines of communication with the gymnasts as well as other coaches aided in my understanding of using appropriate cues.

4.3 Observation week 3 – Mental health in competitive gymnastics

Monday, 21.10.2024

This observation week started with preparations towards the upcoming competition. On competition weeks, we sit down with our girls and discuss all of the logistics involving the competition, such as schedule, travels, accommodation and what they should be bringing for the competition. We also revise their routines and make any necessary tweaks and changes prior to the start of practice. We started the training with our competition warmup, since it gets the girls to imagine the kind of environment and space they will be working with on the day. We then go into every gymnast's individual routine; first by warming up individual skills and then performing the routine as a whole. It is then the coaches' job to provide realistic feedback and to prepare them mentally for the day.

Once the girls had executed their routines, we took them aside individually and provided them with the score that we think would be given to them during the competition. Using this information, we then make corrections from the deductions and give them a chance to practice the individual skills in which they received the deductions. For example, on a floor routine, one of my gymnasts received a 9.2. She received a .2 deduction for leg separation on a tumbling skill, a .3 deduction on bent legs on a leap, a .1 deduction on dance and a .2 deduction on her arm positioning. With this knowledge, we then go through the mistakes and correct them on the spot, so that it is still fresh in her mind.

After the practice, we always have a discussion on their feelings about the practice as well as the upcoming competition. Our focus is to prioritize their mental health and to ensure that they are in a good headspace coming out of the training. We allow the gymnasts to have individual ways in which they can practice mental health at home. For example, some gymnasts choose to keep a journal in which they log their practice, eating and sleeping habits as well as their thoughts about each day. Other gymnasts may choose to practice mental imagery, which means that they are visualizing their routines in their minds and focusing on hitting a perfect routine. Another option available to the gymnasts is to come and have discussion sessions with us, where they are free to speak their mind about anything that may be troubling them. We find that it's important to allow the girls to have the freedom of choice when it comes to their mental health and not to push any of these mental practices on them.

Wednesday, 23.10.2024

This was the last practice day before going to the competition. We gathered the girls before training and talked about any last-minute details or questions that might be relevant towards the

weekend competition. We warmed the girls up and went straight into preparing them on each individual apparatus for the competition. We spent the whole training rotating through each apparatus and ensuring that they were getting enough repetitions without making them feel too strained after the practice.

Since the goal for this week was to ensure that the gymnasts were mentally prepared for the competition, we put to practice various psychological techniques throughout the week. When supported by sports psychologists, athletes, coaches, and even parents will benefit most when underlying theory informs their practice (Kremer, Moran, & Kearney, 2019). Some of the practices that we have been putting into place with our gymnasts prior to competition days have been reflection and relaxation techniques.

In terms of reflection, making use of a list where you can visually understand needs for improvement can greatly affect how you perform in the future. The list can have various points for improvement made by the athlete, and they will give each point a score out of 10. Through creating a list, it is possible to focus mental energy and direct training, development, and growth (Sutton, 2021).

Table 3 Reflection table, as filled out by one of my gymnasts (aged 11)

Area	Now	Future	Action needed
Nutrition	7	9	Keep a food diary and log eating habits
Flexibility	4	7	Take 10-15 minutes out of each day to stretch at home
Ability to cope with pressure in competition	3	6	Practice mental imagery routinely
Sleep	5	7	Set a strict sleeping time and stick to it

Setting realistic goals that are achievable in the future is important to understand, because it can cause the opposite effect if the athlete is faced with an unattainable goal. We ensure that our gymnasts are aware of this when filling out this chart and we go through each point together and check in periodically to make sure they are making progress.

When it comes to reflection techniques, there are two approaches to coping: problem focused, and emotion focused. A problem focused approach is when the pressure is within the athletes' control,

for example in a race. This will allow planning time to keep the athletes' mental state in check. An emotion focused approach is how the athlete reacts when put in a high pressure situation.

Some ways that we like to combat these situations are through meditation and mindfulness exercises as well as having a pre-competition routine. Meditation and mindfulness exercises work best when put in a problem focused situation, because it allows their mind to redirect the pressure in a positive light. At the end of our practice, we took 10 minutes to do some relaxation with our gymnasts to calm their nerves for the upcoming competition. Pre-competition routines are beneficial for emotion focused situations. These routines are highly individual and work well for keeping the athletes' mind calm before the competition. For example, one of my gymnasts likes to listen to her floor music on her headphones on the drive over to the competition, since it allows her to imagine her routine in her head.

Saturday, 26.10.2024

On the first day of the competition, I drove with my assistant coach to the competition arena and arrived 2 hours beforehand in order to allow time for myself to prepare and get to know the layout of the arena. The first day was dedicated to the younger age groups, which meant I had only 3 gymnasts competing today from our club. When the gymnasts arrived, we awaited to be called for our allocated warm up time, before which I had talks with my gymnasts in order to figure out their mindset for the day.

The girls warmed up on their first apparatus, which was vault. I provided them with some general feedback from their warmup in order to ensure that they weren't getting an overload of information before their actual competition vault. The girls performed their vaults and moved immediately to their next apparatus, which was the uneven bars. They completed their warmups, performed their routines well and moved to their third apparatus of the day, the balance beam. It is commonly known that the most mentally challenging apparatus is the beam, since if you have any nerves, they are most likely to show on this event. Whilst the girls were waiting for their time to warmup, we practiced some breathing exercises to clear their mind as well as mental imagery to envision their perfect routine. The girls competed well on this event, with only one of the girls having a fall on the beam, but she recovered well after the fall and finished off strong on the event. The final event of the day was floor exercise, which the girls were the most excited for. They warmed up, competed and we awaited their results together.

During this time, we discussed what they think went well today and what possible worries they might have had from their routines. The results came back and one of my girls received first place in the all-around category. In situations when not all of the gymnasts receive medals, I find it

important as a coach to praise them for their efforts no matter the outcome and to ensure them that there is always room to improve and to look towards the next competition.

Sunday 27.10.2024

For the second day of the competition, the rest of the gymnasts arrived the day before and stayed overnight at the location in order to get a good night's rest before the day. The older categories were competing today, which meant I had 8 gymnasts competing. I arrived at the arena an hour before the competition and gathered with my girls to discuss their feelings about the day.

We put to practice the theory of focus with my girls before the competition. "You can think of attention as a spotlight; its focus can attend to one of the following" (Strycharczyk & Clough, 2015):

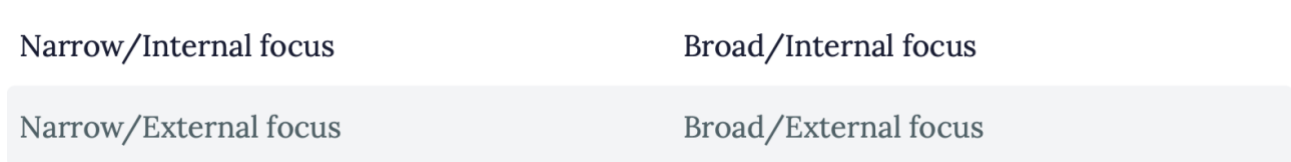


Figure 5 Types of Focus (Sutton, 2021)

This chart refers to the types of focus a human is able to concentrate on during a single given time. Our focus tends to wander due to distractions but being able to put your focus towards something specific can aid in understanding what needs to be done. An example that I gave to my girls today for the competition was to focus on their breathing before their beam routine. This is an example of a narrow internal focus, and it allows them to think about a single aspect before their performance.

My gymnasts had a different rotation to the girls competing yesterday. They started on the beam, moved to the floor, performed their vaults and did uneven bars as their last event. The day went by well and the girls had a positive mindset and were stayed focused throughout the competition. In the end, one of my gymnasts placed second and another placed third in the all-around category. During our talk after the competition, all of my gymnasts mentioned that they were pleased with how they performed and that they were looking forward to bettering themselves in their next competition.

Weekly Analysis

This week's focus was on the gymnasts' mental health during a busy competition week. We provided the gymnasts with individual approaches in terms of working on their mental health inside and outside of practice. They were given options like keeping a journal, using mental imagery,

having one-on-one discussions with the coaches, meditation and mindfulness exercises as well as logging their goals for the future.

As a coach I feel as though I did my part in providing them with enough resources and educational information to aid them in their nerves leading up to the competition. During the competition, I feel as though I was able to provide more individual feedback and attention on the first day, since I only had 3 gymnasts competing that day. Something that I would want to improve in the future would be to also allow my other gymnasts the same opportunity of attentive coaching, even if I may have a larger group to look after during competitions.

Seeing as I am the only coach attending these competitions with my gymnasts, I should look towards being more mindful of which gymnast requires more attention when it comes to competition day. I have already gotten to know my gymnasts on a deeper level, so I should know by now who has more competition anxiety than another. In the future, I will work on providing my expertise and attention where it is necessary at the time, whilst also not casting out the rest of the gymnasts even though they might appear to be calm on the outside.

Mental health is viewed differently in cultures across the world. In some, mental health can be viewed as taboo and can be completely disregarded altogether. Understanding that each culture holds mental health at a different esteem, will allow the coach to tweak their approach accordingly. Youth are more susceptible to experiencing stress and anxiety, since they tend to fear failure. Ensuring that you as a coach are creating a supportive team environment, emphasizing balance in all aspect of life and educating your athletes on mental health will already make a difference to your athletes' well-being (McLean, 2024).

4.4 Observation week 4 – Culture dynamics in coaching

Monday 28.10.2024

The day after the competition, we decided to hold a relaxed shorter practice for the gymnasts. We spent the start of the practice discussing their results and their feelings after the weekend. During this time, we tried to get feedback from the girls about what psychological practices aided them best on the week leading up to the competition as well as during the competition day. Their answers varied and we took into account what worked and what didn't and we finetuned some of the practices according to what they felt. For example, one of my gymnasts mentioned that she was keeping a journal about her practices and her mindset daily, but she found that it wasn't very useful when it came to keeping her nerves in check during the competition day. We ended up providing her with some useful mindfulness podcasts that we thought would aid her in getting in the zone during competition weeks and also outside of competitions.

This week I decided to put my focus towards my style of coaching. During my time in Slovakia, I have found that the coaching styles here tend to lean towards autocratic or bureaucratic coaching. In the autocratic style of coaching, the coach has all the power and authority over their athletes, meaning they decide how practices will be conducted, and the athletes will look towards the coach for guidance (Maryville University, 2021). Bureaucratic coaching is considered “old-school” style coaching. It is very structured, rigid and requires discipline (evercoach, 2018).

I feel as though I currently fit into the category of holistic coaching. I like to know everything about my gymnasts, whether it is their goals in their sport, their future ambitions or their views on the world. I like to act as their support system through good and bad and I push them with only their best interest in mind, with the ultimate goal of wanting them to grow as a person and a gymnast. I have found some minor conflicts in my style of coaching and the usual coaching style of the country I'm working in. My gymnasts have adapted to a certain regime before I began coaching in this club and it shows especially during practices after competitions.

I found that having a relaxed practice after competitions can allow the gymnasts to recover both mentally and physically, however that is not the mindset of every coach. Some believe that you should work even harder coming out of a competition and to fix all of your mistakes immediately. My gymnasts can take my more relaxed style of coaching for granted sometimes, since they feel as though I am not as much of an authoritarian figure as they are used to, which can lead to unproductive practices. Today I faced that after our discussion session at the beginning of the practice. My gymnasts had a lot of energy and decided they did not want to do some of the exercises that I provided for them. I decided that my goal after the practice today was to go into Wednesday trying to find a better balance of coaching styles in order to reach the right state of practicing hard and also allowing my gymnasts to still feel comfortable in speaking their minds and sharing their feelings.

Wednesday 30.10.2024

Coming into practice today, I decided to assess what kind of attitude I wanted to bring into practice considering the timeline of our season. We have another competition in the upcoming week, which means that I need to bring my gymnasts attention back to the competitive state of mind.

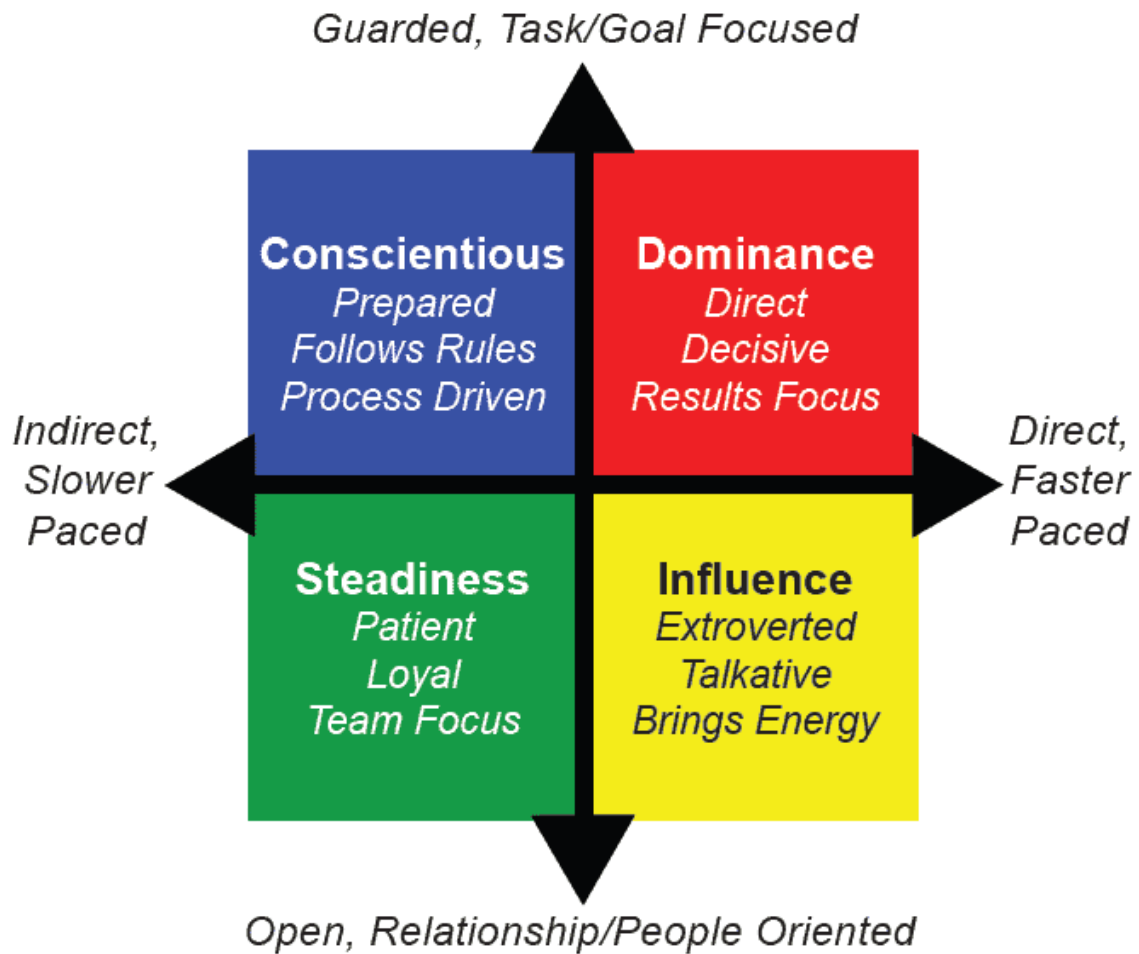


Figure 6 Athlete's DISC Style (Hanson, 2016)

I currently stand between the style and influence styles of coaching, however after analyzing the situation from Monday, I decided to place my focus more towards the direct and faster paced style of coaching through dominance and influence. The dominant style should be used when there is an absence of time and when you need to produce results in a short time. I wanted to keep the influence style of coaching, since this is something that I believe strongly in, and it works as a way of motivating athletes during tough practices.

Keeping these ideas in mind, I went into practice utilizing the best from both styles of coaching. Through the dominant style of coaching, I set the tone for the practice and made my gymnasts aware that it was time to start working hard again, due to the time constraints we had leading up to the next competition. I gave them direct instructions and monitored them throughout the practice, providing them with constructive feedback when necessary. Since I am working with younger athletes, I found that this style of coaching was beneficial in some respects, due to them not being

at the stage of being fully independent during practice yet. On the other hand, I also brought in positive energy from the influencing style of coaching, motivating them to better themselves by having talks throughout the practice in both individual and group settings.

After this practice, I found that some gymnasts respond better to the dominant style of coaching, whilst others worked better with the influencing style of coaching. I took notes for myself throughout the practice and concluded that the younger gymnasts seemed to work better with the dominant style and the older gymnasts with the influencing style. There were of course some exceptions within the group, but the general consensus came down to this. I reminded my gymnasts at the end of the practice to follow their usual recovery procedure over the weekend and to mentally prepare themselves for the upcoming competition week.

Weekly Analysis

This week I really looked into myself and who I am as a coach and as a person. The goal was to try and find a healthy balance in my coaching styles and to figure out what style would suit what individual gymnast the best. There were some struggles in the beginning of this week, due to the fatigue of coming back from a weekend competition, however I found that after Monday's practice and the talks I had with my gymnasts, the energy and motivation came back for them on Wednesday.

Some of the struggles I was facing this week was trying to put myself in a more dominant position as a coach, since I am used to a more holistic approach when it comes to coaching. I came to realize that the culture of the country you are coaching in can greatly affect the effectiveness of your individual style of coaching. Being able to find that equilibrium of staying true to who you are as a coach, but also respecting the style of coaching in the country you are working in is still going to be a work in progress for me. However, now that I am more aware of the way my gymnasts respond to the different styles of coaching, I will tweak my approach accordingly, whilst trying not to stray too far from my values.

Another aspect that I found difficult was when coaching in a large group of gymnasts with varying age and level groups, I had to find an approach and style of coaching that would work for the group as a whole, whilst also catering to the individual needs and desires of each of the gymnasts in a one-on-one situation. In the future, I would like to be able to transition more naturally between styles when needed and to be able to figure out what coaching style is needed in what situation. This would require from me to be more attentive and to have more discussions with my gymnasts in order to learn what works best for them.

As I delve deeper into this season, I realized that although approaches in coaching can be identified according to a culture as a whole, the athletes' individuality will make up for this commonality. It is vital to understand the history of your athlete in order to truly be the best version of yourself as a coach (Curnow, K. 2006). As shown throughout this week, different athletes responded to different styles of coaching. As I continue to build my understanding of Slovak culture, I realized that there are three layers in which approaches can be taken into consideration. The outermost layer is the culture of the country as a whole; these are the norms created by the population living in the country. The second layer is the culture in coaching created by a single organization. These can vary from club to club depending on the coaches' views. The innermost layer are the athletes as individuals. Their individuality is what sets them apart from others and the coach's ultimate focus should be to recognize and play on their individuality.

4.5 Observation week 5 – Language of coaching

Monday 04.11.2024

This week I decided to observe language in my coaching. Living and working in another country with a foreign language has posed some challenges for me, since effective communication is the key to any coach-athlete relationship. Over the year and a half that I have been living in Slovakia, I have noticed a significant improvement in my language skills when it comes to coaching, however I notice that I am still lacking in communicating outside of gymnastics terminology. I have found a solution for this problem in the past by using other coaches as my translator whenever facing more challenging conversations with my gymnasts.

Being able to converse in your athletes' native language opens more doors to the culture and perspectives of the country you are living in. In doing so, you are able to adapt your communication styles, coaching strategies and approaches accordingly. By being multilingual, you establish stronger connections with your athletes and coworkers as well as expand possible career opportunities for yourself. (Gill, 2024).

During this practice, I put emphasis on trying to get out of my comfort zone and have some more difficult conversations with my gymnasts in Slovak without the help of another coach. In terms of normal gymnastics terminology, I found this to already be natural for me, since these are terms and phrases I use every day at practice. The challenge I faced however, was when I had one-on-one talks today with my gymnasts about the upcoming competition this week. With one of my gymnasts, she mentioned that she wanted to be better at keeping her nerves at bay, especially when competing on the beam. She tends to have troubles with having multiple falls and balance checks during her routines in competition, because she cannot get out of her head about being

nervous. During our talk there was certain terminology that she used relating to psychology that I did not initially understand, however we got through this conversation mostly by the usage of body language and occasionally google translating certain words.

There are statistics that show that over 50-65% of conversations become lost or meaningless with the absence of body language. “Subconscious gestures with hands, facial expressions and body language can often communicate more clearly the ‘true’ meaning” (Coach, 2020). There are different forms of communication and learning when to use them in what situation can determine how well your message comes across.

Touch/ haptic communication – This form of communication is the most intimate of the three and is most seen in friendships or close relationships. This form can be used to grab someone’s attention or to express empathy.

Kinesic communication – This is a form of non-verbal communication in which your facial expressions, gestures and proximity from the other person play a part in what kind of message you are trying to send with your conversation.

Proximal communication – This form talks about your body positioning when talking to someone. This can mean either the degree of proximity (close or far away) or the angle of your body (turned towards or facing away).

(Coach, 2020).

A lot of my conversations with my gymnasts tend to stem from kinesic communication, since we can sometimes face a language barrier, whether it is culturally or verbally. By understanding and using kinesic communication, we are able to understand one another in a way that is not always needed with just words.

Wednesday 06.11.2024

Observations of my language in coaching continued into today’s practice. We are currently preparing for the upcoming competition with the girls and our goal was to get the girls back in the competition mindset. Having a competition almost every other weekend has been stressful and tiring for the gymnasts and we have been trying to set appropriate loads each practice in order to prevent burnout.

Today we decided to hold an easier practice in terms of strain and repetitions. We did our usual rotation of each apparatus, warming up at each and then doing a few repetitions of their routine and tweaking individual skills whenever necessary. We decided to put more emphasis today on

quality rather than quantity, so that meant performing less repetitions, but ensuring that each repetition was competition-standard. This proved to be more motivating for my gymnasts, since they knew that in order to do less repetitions, they had to put effort into each and every routine.

Today I faced some difficulties with getting my gymnasts to concentrate during practice. Majority of learning happens during training, whether it is before (through videos and explanations of drills), during (feedback, usage of coaching terminology) or after (during reflection sessions) (GJ, 2020). Thinking back to Monday and how I been trying to better myself in my communication skills during practice, I decided to put forth different types of reinforcement.

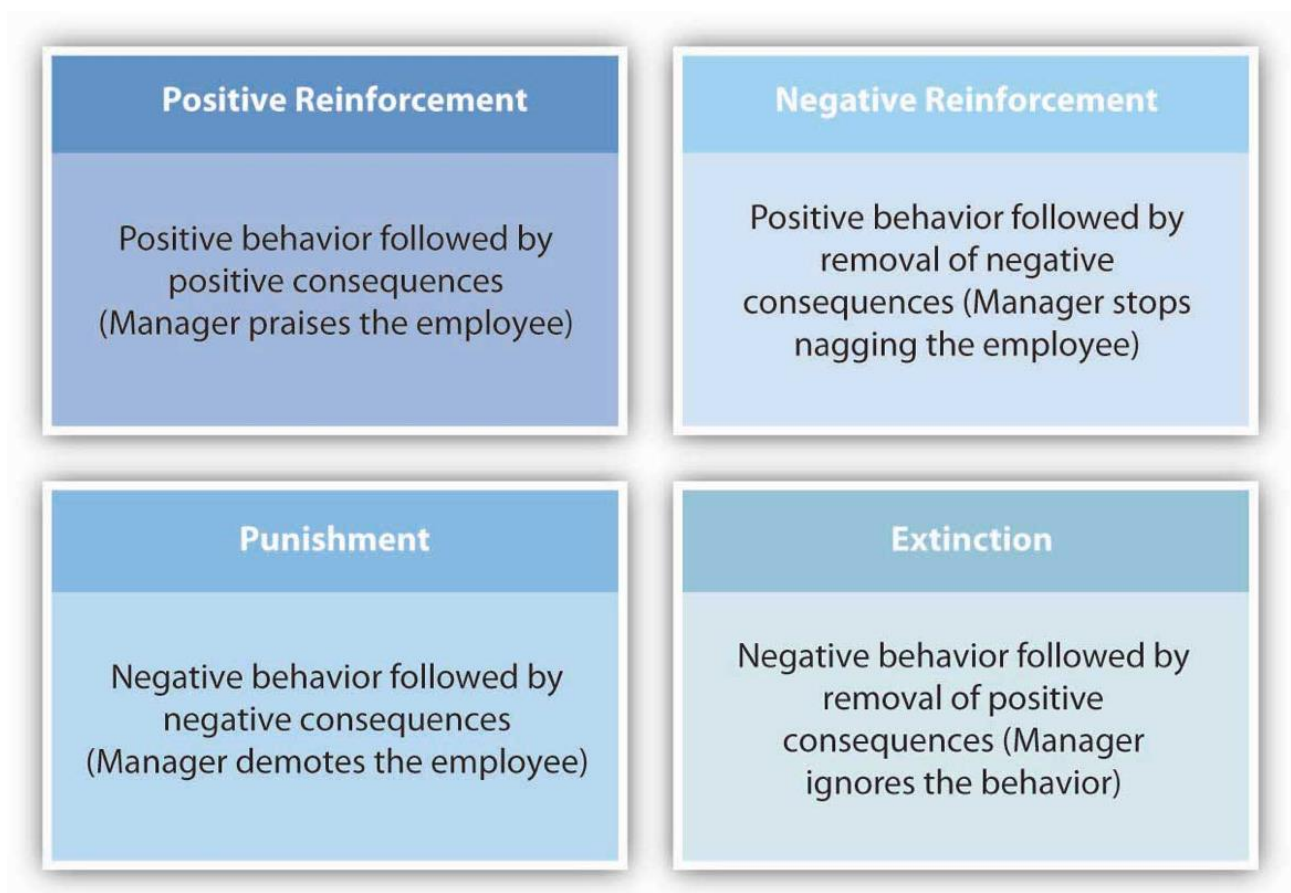


Figure 7 Types of reinforcement (GJ, 2020)

Considering the cultural environment and the upbringing of my gymnasts, I felt that the most effective form of reinforcement during the practice for this day was positive reinforcement and extinction. Taking into account the ages of my gymnasts, I decided that any form of negative reinforcement could lead to further bad behavior and loss of motivation towards the practice. For example, a couple of my gymnasts were supposed to be practicing drills whilst waiting on their turn to use the uneven bars, but decided they were playing around and chatting amongst themselves. In this case, I used the form of extinction, which meant that they would not be able to have 10

minutes of free practice after the training but would instead be working on their routines and drills for a longer time. This kept them motivated for the rest of the practice, since they realized the consequences of their actions and how their negative behavior led to having a reward taken away from them.

Saturday 09.11.2024

Today was another competition outside of our home arena. The younger gymnasts are competing once again on this day and the older gymnasts will be competing tomorrow. I arrived two hours early to the venue and got everything set up for the day. The girls arrived an hour before the competition and got warmed up in the warmup zone. My goal for today was to try to be conscious of my body language as well as my language in coaching.

People are by nature empathetic, which means that they tend to mirror other people's emotions, especially if it is someone who they look up to. I kept my body language very open and inviting to show that I was available for them to talk to if they needed. I also paid attention to my facial expressions and kept it as relaxed as possible to show that if I was not nervous, neither should they.



Figure 8 Body language in coaching (Coach, 2020)

The figure above represents the various body languages that a coach could be conveying to their athletes and how it might affect their mindset and performance. Crossed arms and raised fists convey aggression and hostility. Burying your head in your hands could mean that you are showing signs of disappointment. I tried to stray away from these non-verbal signs and instead looked towards a more open body posture and being aware of my proximity to my gymnasts. Staying far away from your gymnasts when talking, could come across as being disinterested in what they are saying or how they are doing. When having talks with my gymnasts throughout the competition, I made sure to stay close to them, keep good eye contact to show that I am actively listening and to keep positive and empathetic facial expressions.

Today I had four gymnasts competing and all of them ended up competing in all four apparatuses. The order of the events today were floor exercise, beam, uneven bars and vault. After every routine I always applauded them along with the rest of the audience, gave them a hug and made sure to show that I was pleased with their performance, no matter the outcome. When it came time to award the medals, one of my gymnasts got third in the all-around category and another came fourth. The gymnast that came fourth was visibly upset because she was so close to medal contention, but just fell short. I pulled her aside after the ceremony and listened to her and her concerns about this, but I ensured her that medals did not dictate your performance as an individual. She looked visibly more relaxed after our talk and agreed that she tried her best today and that that was enough.

Sunday 10.11.2024

Today was competition day for the older gymnasts. We arrived together at the arena today after having breakfast together in the morning. During our breakfast, I tried to keep the conversation light and to make the goal for today about having fun and trying their best. In this group of gymnasts, I have a couple of girls who had had some problems in the past with calming their nerves during the competition, especially when competing on the beam. At the end of last week, I set them a few breathing exercises that could be practiced at home and at the competition, today we put it to the test.

The rotation for the gymnasts today was uneven bars, floor exercise, vault and beam. Having beam as the final event of the day can be the most nerve wracking, since they have to wait until the end of the day to compete on it. This allows them time to overthink and can sometimes lead to increased nerves and falls on the event.

Throughout the day I tried to keep their nerves at bay by talking through their emotions and by reminding them of their breathing exercises. When it came to the last event of the day, the beam, I let the girls choose whether they wanted to practice their breathing exercises, imagery, to sit in silence or to talk to me before competing. Since every gymnast has an individual approach on competition days, I gave them the autonomy to make that decision. Majority of the girls sat on their own and either did their exercises or sat in silence, but two of them decided that they felt more comfortable talking to me. The conversations that I had with the girls did not end up relating to gymnastics, but rather about the atmosphere and more light topics. I realized that they wanted to take their mind off the daunting event ahead of them by talking about something not relating to what was to come. I indulged them in this idea, since I realized that they were starting to calm down just by talking.

The final event went by smoothly for the most part, a couple of my gymnasts were still visibly shaking on the beam, but they managed to fight through their routines. During the medal ceremony, one of my girls placed third in the all-around. I could tell that some of my gymnasts were starting to get frustrated by them not placing in every competition. After the competition day was over, I took my gymnasts aside and told them that I can see that they are trying to the best of their abilities and that placing in such a large competition like this is a huge feat and is not something that will come instantly. Progress takes time and being able to see results will come through hard work and dedication. I finished off my talk by telling them that hopefully they will come back to the gym with an even bigger desire to train hard and to focus on the next competition.

Weekly Analysis

This week I set for myself the goal of being aware of my language in coaching, both verbal and non-verbal. Coaching is a transfer of knowledge, language provides a bridge between the coach and athlete, ultimately corresponding with the athlete's performance (Von, GJ. 2020). With the verbal side of coaching, I still have a long way to go, since having conversations in a foreign language isn't something that will be mastered overnight. I have been trying to push myself this week to have more difficult conversations in my gymnasts' native language without the help of another coach in order for our conversations to feel more personal.

I have also been observing the culture of coaching in Slovakia and to adjust my style of coaching accordingly. I found that finding the appropriate balance between the liberal style of coaching in Finland and the more old-school style of coaching in Slovakia has been a challenge. Being able to bring together the best of both styles has shown to be effective with my gymnasts, since they are able to still have fun, but to work hard when necessary.

In terms of non-verbal communication, I wanted to be aware of my body language when I am coaching as well as in competitions. Body language is something that can be sometimes unconsciously done negatively and I found that I should put more emphasis in being aware of it. During the competition, I tried to keep my body language relaxed and open, despite feeling nervous on behalf of my gymnasts. Being able to put my own emotions and worries aside for the benefit of my gymnasts has been tough at times, but staying conscious of my movements at all times has aided me in realizing that my gymnasts really feed off of the energy that I give to them. Reflecting back on the competition weekend, I found that after having the goal of being conscious of my verbal and non-verbal communication, I was able to give more deliberate feedback to my gymnasts and to make them feel more comfortable during this competition week.

All of this comes down to the culturality in coaching. In order to be the most effective in your actions, you have to understand how your body language comes across depending on the culture you are living and coaching in. Understanding your athletes as well as the other coaches first, will help you gain an idea of what practices work best in certain situations. Non-verbal language can vary across cultures, however for the most part there tends to be a connection between facial expressions and gestures (ESoft Management Consultants, n.d.). Being aware of how your body language can come across will benefit in creating a mutual understanding and building trust with your athlete.

4.6 Observation week 6 – Positive sports coaching

Monday 11.11.2024

This week I wanted to focus on positivity in my coaching. Coming into practice today, there was a certain gloom hanging in the air coming from the gymnasts. They are feeling the effects of being in the swing of the competition season, working hard on their routines and practicing extensively. I decided that this calls for a little encouragement and positivity coming from both the coaching staff as well as from the gymnasts themselves. I started the training by introducing our goal for the week which was “positivity week”. Their objective for this training was to point out at least 3 positive things that their teammates are doing throughout the practice and to encourage them if they are noticing a dip in motivation.

I am following a program created by Matthew Scholes on Positive Sports Coaching. The PSC model follows a positive psychology approach. Scholes claims that through practicing positive psychology, athletes will display greater resilience and optimism, which will result in better overall performance as well as mental stability. developed what he calls the four pillars of Positive Sports Organizations, which focus on coaches, athletes, administration and supporters.



Figure 9 The four pillars of a positive sports organization (Scholes, 2011)

According to Scholes, the focus should be on the coaches, however the model is enhanced by the other stakeholders. In the case of our club, some examples of administration would be the receptionists, the owners as well as other members of the staff. The supporters in our club are mostly the parents that are paying for their children's usage of the facilities, equipment and other miscellaneous expenses.

During the practice, we put some upbeat music to liven the mood, and we started with a game to warmup. The game encouraged teamwork and seemed to lift the gymnasts' spirits and got them ready for the practice ahead. The coaches emphasized today on the positives that were happening during the training and were being conscious of the use of language when providing feedback. For example, instead of saying "don't do this", we used more encouraging words such as "as a reminder" or "try this instead".

From the perspective of the gymnasts, it seemed as though encouraging each other and pointing out the positives to their teammates seemed to bring them closer and gave a sense of comradery. After the training, I got the girls together to recount some of the positive affirmations that they gave to their teammates. One example a gymnast gave to me was that she told her teammate "I am proud of you for getting through the strength exercises today. I could see that you were trying your best". Before the gymnasts left the gym for the day, I set them a task that they would do for the entirety of our positivity week. They will keep a journal in which they will write 5 things they are

grateful for everyday of the week and at the start of the next week, they will share what they wrote down to the team.

Wednesday 13.11.2024

The overall mood coming into the gym today seemed to be a lot more upbeat and optimistic. The girls were excited to get the practice started and were already sharing some of the things that they have been writing down in their journals for positivity week. One of my gymnasts mentioned that she felt grateful today for her coaches, her teammates and being able to train today.

After the last training, I looked back at Scholes' PSC model and decided to utilize one of the tools for coaches to help foster this positive mindset in their athletes.



Figure 10 Positive sports coaching wheel (Scholes, 2011)

This wheel represents the structure in which coaches should be following during training sessions as well as during competitions. Some of the feedback given by other coaches according to Scholes have been: "The players are more energized and responsive", "The positive approach got our team ready to cope with pressure games" and "Focusing on the positives made me realize the

opportunities for learning that I was missing” (Scholes, 2011). Hearing about all of this positive feedback given by other coaches from different sports made me realize that this is a useful tool to bring forth in my coaching as well.

I decided to put this to the test today during our training session and followed the model when giving feedback. For example, when dealing with the negative I tried to go into it with an optimistic mindset. With one of my gymnasts today I found that she was struggling to land one of her skills on the beam, even though this is something that she has done confidently many times before in practice. I knew that she was going through a mental block, and this is something that many gymnasts face throughout their career. For some gymnasts it can take a single practice to get through a mental block and for others, it could take months. With this thought in mind, I decided not to rush her progress, but rather listen to what was worrying her about the skill. With the thought of a positive mindset, we broke down the skill slowly by going back to the basics first and slowly working our way up towards the skill itself. We first worked on the skill on the floor, then we moved to the low beam and then finally back on to the high beam with me spotting her. By the end of the practice, she was not able to get the skill done by herself, but I told her that she was in no rush to complete the skill today and that she already made tremendous progress in this training session alone.

At the end of the training session, I reminded the girls to keep filling out their journals throughout the week and that we would then go through it during our next practice on Monday. We also discussed how they felt after our positivity week and whether or not it has been beneficial in getting them more motivated looking towards the next competition weekend. Some of the feedback given by the gymnasts was that they have been enjoying keeping journals and that they would like to have more games as warmups in the future. I took all of this into account and decided to implement these practices periodically in the future.

Weekly Analysis

This week’s focus was on bringing a positive mindset into practice and to encourage the gymnasts to speak freely about their feelings. Using both the “four pillars of a positive sports organization” and the “positive sports coaching wheel” model by Scholes, I was able to gain a better understanding of how to bring positive psychology into my training sessions. Giving the gymnasts the task of keeping a positivity journal also encouraged them to practice a positive mindset outside of practice.

In the future I would like to look towards involving the two other pillars of the four pillars of a positive sports organization (administration and supporters). These pillars also play a vital role in

upholding the values and structure of the gym and I would have liked to involve them more in this week's positivity week. In terms of the supporters or namely the parents in this case, I would like to hold a parents meeting, where I could discuss possible means of practicing the positive mindset with their girls at home. If the gymnasts are able to have a safe and positive outlet to share their feelings, it will also translate to their performance during practice and in competition. Additionally, in terms of the rest of the coaching staff and other members of the gym (administration), the gymnasts should feel comfortable in confiding in them and being able to ask them for anything they might need.

Overall, I feel like this week's theme was important since the competition season has been long and stressful for the gymnasts so far and it allows them to take their mind off of it for a while and to channel their thoughts into more positive ones. I felt a lot of the gymnasts opening up and enjoying the sport more as opposed to feeling like it was a chore or burden for them. One of my biggest values as a coach is to always maintain the love for your sport. If the gymnasts aren't enjoying what they are doing, I would feel as though I have failed as a coach. In saying this, the girls and myself as a coach benefited greatly from the week and we are looking towards the next competition weekend with a more positive and clearer mindset.

4.7 Observation week 7 – Embracing cultural diversity in coaching collaboration

Monday 18.11.2024

This week I decided that I wanted to focus on being culturally aware in my coaching. I wanted to ensure that I am being sensitive enough when approaching my gymnasts, other members of staff or parents, since I am coming from a culture different from theirs. This is a point that I did not put a lot of emphasis on in the past, but having an upcoming competition coming in a more rural part of Slovakia, I realized that I would have to adapt accordingly to the culture of the organization hosting the competition.

An aspect that is closely related to diversity within a team is inclusion. This simply means allowing others the freedom to be and express themselves without the worry of judgement (National Exercise and Sports Trainer Association, 2022). I have noticed in previous training sessions that there have been certain groups forming within the team and that some gymnasts have been left out of certain activities. I decided to bring this topic up with my gymnasts today before the training and suggested some team building exercises to bring the closer together. With the competition coming up this weekend, I found that it was vital to have every gymnast feel a part of the team, so that they have more confidence going into the weekend.

We did some gymnastics specific team building exercises, so that it was relevant to the sport and so that they could do some conditioning without feeling the boredom of repetition. The girls enjoyed the exercises, and I made groups with more unlikely gymnasts in order for them to get to know each other on a deeper level.

Going into this week I decided to put my focus into the three components to cultural competence:

Cultural awareness —an understanding of one's own cultural beliefs, attitudes, values, and biases

Cultural knowledge —knowledge and understanding of other cultures

Cultural skills —ability to communicate and interact in a culturally appropriate way (Anderson, 2000)

Wednesday 20.11.2024

For our training session today, we started to work on the gymnasts' routines again for the competition on the weekend. Today I tried to observe the differences in the authority coaches have in Slovakia. Generally, since the style of coaching leans towards the old-school style, it is natural for the coaches to demand respect and to have a sense of authority over their athletes. I have found that my relationship with my gymnasts have been more friendly than what is considered normal here, however I have tried to shift that relationship slightly in order to accommodate with the culture here.

The girls spent the entire training session working on their routines and we reintroduced the different mental practices that should be done at home and leading up to the competition. After every practice it is normal for my gymnasts to hug me, since they have started to perceive me as a friendly figure in their lives. I decided to bring this topic up with the other coaches and to ask if this was in their opinion appropriate behavior. Most of them agreed that generally that would prefer to have boundaries with their gymnasts and that they should have clear authority as a coach. We then went on to discuss whether they felt as though I should also maintain these similar boundaries with my girls, but they agreed that every coach has their own approach and that as long as I am coaching to my best abilities, this should not be a problem.

Reflecting back on this day, I felt as though I came one step closer to understanding the culture in my workplace and that having the willingness to ask these important questions can get you one step closer to accepting the culture as a whole.

Saturday 23.11.2024

For this competition, our venue was in a more rural part of Slovakia. I heard from the other coaches that generally most of the people here did not speak English. I was a little wary of this thought, since my Slovak has been improving over time, but was still not perfect. I took it upon myself to practice certain conversations with some of the other coaches that might come up during the competition, so that I could properly converse when the time came.

I arrived at the gymnastics arena early and waited for my gymnasts to arrive. This competition followed the same structure as the rest, with the younger gymnasts competing today. They got warmed up and competed on the uneven bars, beam, floor exercise and vault. Today one of my younger gymnasts was not competing on the vault, since she was having troubles with her ankle. We made this decision with her on the day of the competition, since she was unsure of it during our last practice. With situations like these, I feel that the decision should ultimately be up to the coach, since the gymnast is still too young to understand the consequences of competing on an injury.

The day ended with one of my gymnasts placing third and she was especially pleased with her results, since this was her first time standing on the podium. After the competition, I talked to the parents of the gymnast who did not end up competing on the vault and I made sure to explain the situation as sensitively and clearly as possible. My initial thought was that they were going to react negatively to this news, however they were very understanding and were grateful that I was looking out for their daughter. Looking back at this, I realized that I should not have stereotyped parents of athletes and that now I understand better what my gymnasts' parents' values are.

Sunday 24.11.2024

Today was the last day of the competition. We arrived with my older gymnasts to the arena and got warmed up. The girls competed in a different order to the gymnasts yesterday, they started off on the beam, moved to the vault, competed on the bars and finished on the floor. My gymnasts had exceptional energy today and were excited to be competing again. Overall, the day went well and two of my gymnasts made it to the podium.

After the competition, I decided to do some networking with coaches from other clubs. I was interested to hear how their approach to coaching was like and to gain some tips from them. Something that one of the coaches told me really stood out. I was talking to her about how I envisioned coaching gymnastics in Slovakia to be mostly more in the style of a coach being the authoritarian figure and the structure of trainings to be rigid. She however, contradicted me by saying that there is definitely change happening in the world of gymnastics in Slovakia. Coaches are becoming more aware of new research and ways of coaching and are willing to put the old style of coaching to rest. She then went on to say that this does not necessarily mean the same for

every club in Slovakia, but there are certain coaches that are catching on to more modern styles of coaching.

I found the insight from my talks with the coaches very useful, since I did not have a lot of perspective outside of the gym I was working in already. Networking with the other coaches also gave me the sense of community and connecting with their culture.

Weekly Analysis

The goal of my observation week was to first understand Slovak culture on a deeper level and then to embrace the differences and to pick out the positives from each separate culture. If I had to reflect back on this week, I felt as though the process of understanding the beliefs, values and biases of the culture was long and took time for me to process fully. I feel as though I still do not understand it fully, but I am willing to take the time to learn.

I wanted to get the perspectives of different kinds of people I work around, namely my gymnasts, the coaching staff, the parents of the gymnasts and coaches working in other clubs. I realized that even though most of them shared a lot of similarities when it came to their values and beliefs, I could still find differences in their answers based on their age, gender and what part of the country they came from.

My biggest challenge came over the weekend when I tested out my cultural skills after having built knowledge about the culture over the time I have been living here. When conversing with coaches from different clubs around Slovakia during the competition, I heard a variety of perspectives and noticed that everyone was very accepting of each other's viewpoints. Similarly, they were interested to hear about my own thoughts about their culture as well as my own and appreciated me coaching and living in a foreign country. It felt nice to receive recognition from other coaches and to share our cultures with each other.

4.8 Observation week 8 – Assimilating and accepting the culture

Monday 25.11.2024

For the final observation week, I decided to review how far I have come in my journey of coaching abroad. The competition held last week was the final competition of the season and now we have one more month of practice before the Christmas holidays start. This meant that the girls would have relaxed trainings for the remainder of this month.

We took the practice today to try out new skills and to play around with different skill combinations. The girls enjoyed this practice, since they were able to have more autonomy when it came to

choosing the event and the skill that they wanted to learn or practice. At this point, I feel as though I have reached a comfortable enough place with the gymnasts as well as the staff and that we have a mutual understanding with one another when it comes to practice plans and how we would like each day to look to like in terms of goals and progress. The gymnasts were looking forward to making new additions to their routines in the start of next year when competition season time rolls around. We took this day to look through the rules and point systems of each competitive category and to possibly upgrade each of the gymnasts' routines for next year.

We sat down with the girls individually and asked them what they would like to achieve for the upcoming year and what possible skill additions they would like to be making to their routines. According to their answers, we decided to start on learning and honing these new skills before the break in order to get them excited for the upcoming competition season next year.

Looking back at our practice session today, I noticed that the gymnasts have become more comfortable in conversing with me about their aspirations and worries about their progress and goals. In my perspective, I also felt as though I have become more competent in conversing in their native language, and I have learned to respect their desires in a way that we had no problem meeting in the middle with our conversations.

Wednesday 27.11.2024

For this final observation day, we continued with the same routine of preparing the gymnasts for new skills through drills and exercises. Using individual methods that I have been developing over the course of my time coaching with these girls, I was able to effectively communicate through coaching cues and mental practices in order to relay my message across to them. For example, as mentioned before, one of my gymnasts has been struggling with progressing on the beam due to a mental block that she has been having from time to time. I realized that she is a visual learner and by showing her videos of the skills being done as well as taking videos of her while she is performing the skill, she was able to better understand what corrections needed to be made.

After going through each of the gymnasts' goals and aspirations for the upcoming season, as well as figuring out what level they would like to progress to on Monday, we decided to take the time during this practice session to do the same with the coaches. We went through each gymnast and talked about whether or not their goals were realistic and attainable and what needed to be done during our pre-season next year in order for these goals to be reached. We have reached a point in our relationship with the other coaches in which they believe in my competency and I in theirs, that coming to a consensus on each of the gymnasts' goals was not met with any friction.

We ended the practice today with interactive games which also included the other coaches as well as other gymnasts from different age and level groups. Being able to collaborate and enjoy some free time outside of training was highly enjoyable for all parties, since we were able to get to know each other better. Talking with the gymnasts after practice, they mentioned that although they were looking forward to the Christmas break, they also had a bittersweet feeling about the competition season ending for this year. They also mentioned that this meant that they were looking forward to coming back to practice, perfecting new skills and creating new routines with their coaches.

Weekly Analysis

This week I decided I wanted to analyze my progress throughout these 8 observation weeks and to see how far I have come in terms of assimilating to both the culture of Slovakia as well as the coaching culture here. In the beginning I was more unsure of what was deemed acceptable socially, value-wise and even in coaching standards. Overtime, I learned that by being proactive and openminded, integrating into a new culture will come naturally.

According to an article by Celine Rethore, the benefits to cross-culture coaching are improved communication, productivity and efficiency and long-term success (Rethore, 2023). When coaching in a different culture, you learn different forms of communication, especially since in my case I was coaching and communicating in Slovakia's native language. Through cross-culture communication you learn to be more openminded and becoming more aware of the social norms and behaviors of the local people as well as break down the barriers of prejudice and common misconceptions. Through actively listening and truly understanding what is being communicated to you, it opens doors to deeper understanding of the culture of the culture you are living in.

Cross-culture coaching also increases your productivity and efficiency. Through working with other coaches who grew up coming from different cultural backgrounds, you learn their ways of thinking, style of coaching and organizational methods. By learning to become a cohesive unit with your coworkers, you are able to share the best of every culture, which in turn will give you an advantage over for example other gymnastic clubs in Slovakia.

Finally, cross-culture coaching can ultimately lead to long-term success. Being able to network with coaches from other countries will provide you with numerous perspectives, knowledge and expertise. By having access to these contacts, it will be benefit you when attempting to navigate the global market (Stout-Rostron, S. 2017).

Overall, I feel as though although I have not fully become accustomed to every aspect of the Slovak culture, having the opportunity to coach at this gym has opened more doors for me in the coaching world, since now I feel comfortable knowing that I am competent enough as a coach to

navigate coaching in a different culture. This being said, I know that there will always be challenges when trying to integrate to a new culture in the future but having this experience under my belt has boosted my confidence and shaped me into the coach I am today. I have been able to take the best practices from each coaching culture and to become a versatile coach.

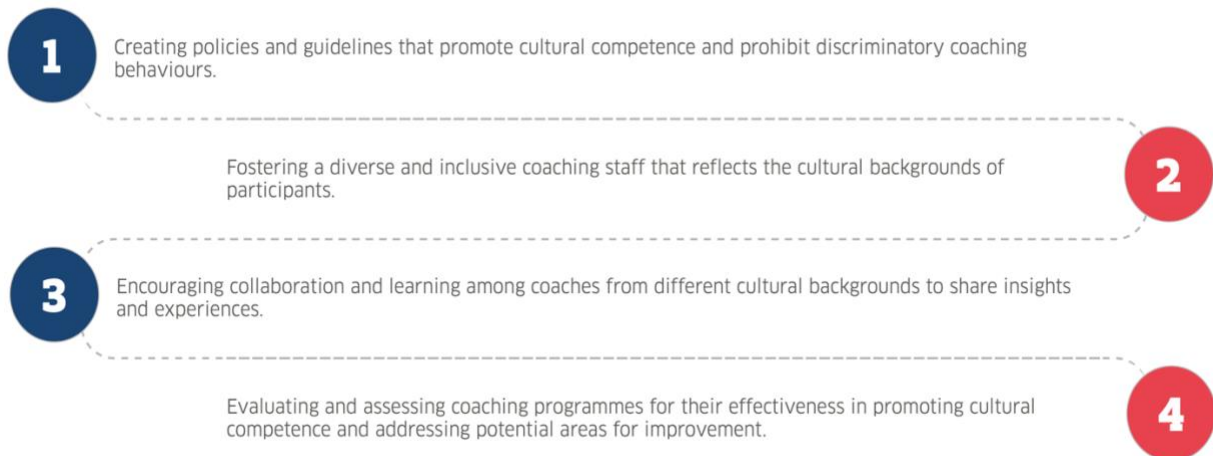


Figure 11 How to build a culturally competent environment (UK Coaching Team, 2023)

Reflecting back on this week, I decided to confer back to the figure shown above and to compare my experience in cultural competence. As a coach, I have been striving to create a safe and inclusive environment, where all ideas and opinions are welcomed. This extends not only with my own athletes, but also with how I interact with the organization as a whole. The initial process of creating these values continued on into the season with constant reminders and reflections within the team and other members of the staff. Disagreements were treated with care and understanding and through active listening and an open mindset, discrepancies were resolved.

Collaboration was present throughout the entirety of this experience, whether it was collaboration within the team, with other members of the coaching staff or outside of the gym in competitions. Collaborating proved to be effective in reaching common goals, reaching mutual understanding and sharing different points of view.

The ability to become fully culturally competent is a long process and one that needs to be honed and fostered in order to understand it fully. Self-reflection as well as group reflections are steppingstones to success. Also, understanding that there is always room for improvement will keep you grounded and will contribute to your personal and professional development.

5 Discussion

This diary-based thesis followed an 8-week observation period, during which three central themes were explored for my professional development. As mentioned in the knowledge base portion of this paper, the central themes were cultural understanding and adaptation, adapting training approaches to cultural norms and building strong communication channels. Reflecting back on this process, these themes were present throughout the process and constant reflection and development was recorded. At the beginning of the season, policies and values were placed upon the coaching staff, gymnasts and other members of the organization. These values were enforced during the season and reflecting back on it, they were well honed throughout the season. My ultimate goal was to observe cross-culture coaching and to fully understand it as well as put it to practice through my work. Coming from a different cultural background provided valuable insights to this organization and encouraged collaboration. Initially, the process of integrating into the coaching culture of my workplace was daunting. Every club is highly individual and have their own visions and values when it comes to coaching, communicating and setting goals. I slowly eased myself into the environment by initially watching and learning, then by asking questions and having regular discussions, which eventually led to me understanding the coaching culture as a whole.

In this portion of the thesis, I will be discussing the three central themes that relate to my professional development, how they were present during my 8-week observation period and whether or not I believe I developed over time as a coach. The first theme, cultural understanding and adaptation, was present from the moment I began coaching in my new club. From the first observation week, I practiced providing appropriate feedback, whilst keeping in mind the cultural standards of my workplace. Through providing personalized feedback, I got to further deepen my understanding of each individual gymnast, and I learned what type of feedback motivates each athlete. Throughout this process, I held regular discussions, both one-on-one and group talks, which aided in strengthening my bond with my peers and provided useful insight on their culture.

Communication was an essential part of understanding and integrating with the local culture. This required from me a lot of self-reflection after conversations as well as proactive work inside and outside my workplace. Throughout this process, I have been actively trying to better myself in my Slovak language skills through conversing on my free time with friends and seeking outside help to better this skill. This played a huge role in my professional development, since by being able to understand and converse in the local language, it made me feel closer to the Slovak culture and allowed for more closer relationships in my workplace to form. Considering the age group I was working with; I did not have much choice in the matter when it came to learning the language. I

realized that by putting myself out there and not being shy to converse in Slovak to the best of my abilities, it broke down barriers and strengthened the coach-athlete relationship.

Coming from the perspective of a coach from Finland, I realized that although both cultures have their differences in coaching, learning to choose the best practices from each culture was vital in my professional development. Initially coaching in a new environment was daunting, but through maintaining a positive and growth mindset, I learned to make the most of the experience given to me. Looking back at my experience, I feel as though I have not fully adapted to the culture as a whole, since I have only been living in Slovakia for 2 years now, but through hard work and persistence, I feel like I am one step closer to feeling a part of the culture. Even though I personally do not feel fully encased in this culture, I feel fully accepted by all members of the organization of my club, which is in itself already a huge achievement.

The second central theme surrounding my thesis was adapting training approaches to cultural norms. This theme is closely linked to the first theme mentioned beforehand. Without full understanding of the culture first, the ability to adapt your training sessions according to cultural norms can be tough to do. This required from me some background research as well as conversing with other coaches about their approach and methods to training plans. Overtime, I learned that coaching cues, language in coaching and mental health were treated differently depending on the culture.

In terms of coaching cues, it was important to understand the differences between each cue and how they affect the way of the athlete's thinking process and how it directly relates to their performance. I found that some gymnasts responded better to internal cues, since it was the most straightforward method, and it allowed them to pick up the skill quicker. On the other hand, some gymnasts worked better with the use of external cues, since it helped them envision the skill in a more creative sense. One of the biggest challenges I faced when it came to coaching cues were relaying what I was envisioning to my gymnasts in their local language. Overtime, I picked up the terminology and noticed a positive response from my gymnasts through using individualized cues.

When it came to language in coaching, I wanted to be more aware of both my verbal and non-verbal language. Verbal cues were most vital during competition days, since it provided my gymnasts with encouragement and useful pointers that aided in their performance. Understanding that some gymnasts preferred to be left alone during stressful situations required from me self-awareness and understanding of non-verbal cues. In terms of non-verbal language in coaching, I had to study how other coaches reacted to certain situations both in practice and competition. Posture, gestures and proximity all played a role in the gymnast's mental state, since they look up to their coaches for support and guidance. I strived to keep my body language calm and open

during competitions to display that I was not stressed and that they could approach me whenever they needed.

Mental health is vital in sports, since it drives the athletes love for the sport and affects their performance. Holding periodic talks and open discussions with my gymnasts was a must, since it was important to check in from time to time how they viewed their motivation levels. This all comes back to creating a safe and accepting environment that encourage gymnasts to be able to feel comfortable to talk to their coaches. I provided my gymnasts with a variety of tools that they could practice both inside and outside of the gym. Journals, meditation and relaxation exercises as well as discussions were all encouraged for the gymnasts to practice. Understanding how each gymnast responds to these practices is highly individual, allows the coaches better insight into what kind of person they are.

The final theme of my diary-based thesis was building strong communication channels. During this 8-week observation period, I kept close contact with the gymnasts, parents as well as other members of the staff. These relationships are essential, since they provide a sense of community and togetherness within the organization. Having shared goals and aspirations drives the success of not only the gymnasts, but also the club as a whole.

The parents of the gymnasts play a huge role, especially in this particular age group I was working in. The gymnasts are highly reliant on the support of their parents and are likely to share their feelings and motivations towards the sport to their loved ones. Keeping the parents updated on the progress of their gymnasts as well as discussing regularly important matters deepened the bond within the team. Apart from the parents, having close relations with the other coaches allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of not only the coaching culture, but also the culture of Slovakia as a whole. Having others to rely on inside and outside of practice made us work like a well-oiled machine. Whenever I had questions or concerns about practice or competition situations, I knew that talking to another coach and gaining their insight on the situation aided in my development as a coach.

Overall, I feel as though the experience of logging my work weeks and having professional development points was enriching for my success today and in my future work to come. Allowing myself to be vulnerable and coaching in a culture unlike my own, broadened my horizons and helped me understand that although we may have very different views on coaching and life, we can all come together towards a common goal. Professional development will forever be an ongoing process, but during this 8-week process, I have come to learn a lot about cross-culture coaching and I know that wherever I decide to coach next, I will have a wider range of knowledge to bring forth to the next team.

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