The Philosophy of Coaching: What is the Democratic Coaching of Hans Lenk?

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Abstract

This paper examine the concept of democratic coaching, which will be able to provide an effective solution to the problem of corporal punishment and athlete's second career, and examining how this idea could be used to resolve real situations in modern sport. The word "democratic" was first used to describe the coaching style in West German rowing from the late 1950s to the 1960s. The author will examine the term "democratic" not in its most common connotation but by examining real historical cases of democratic coaching in the world of sport. It is concluded two points. First, Lenk's work has shown us that there is a coaching style that can enhance performance without resorting to corporal punishment and violence. That style is called democratic coaching. Second, it has also shown us how team consensus can be reached through discussion and dialog, which can also help to nurture intellectual activities among athletes. Sport performance and intellectual activities are normally regarded as very different things. However, both qualities may be enhanced through the working of discussion and dialog. This does not contribute to a possession of knowledge. It is the fostering of thinking skills that involves the discovery and resolution of problems. Democratic coaching is ultimately a training method for those thinking skills.

Key words:philosophy of coaching, democratic coaching, discussion and dialogue

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1、Introduction

In recent years, physical education and sport in Japan have been troubled by reports of corporal punishment and violence (Suzuki, 2014, Matsuda, 2016). This issue caught public attention in 2012 when a high school student has committed suicide. Corporal punishment administered by the student's basketball coach cause to the tragedy. In addition to the intensity of competition, sports demand more physical training than any other cultural activity. The amount of physical contact required in sports is paralleled by neither literature nor music. Hence, there has always been question whether sport is a close field to corporal punishment and violence. This is especially true in the case of competitive sports where daily training and team experiences are directly aimed at achieving victory (Sekine & Hata, 2012). For victory, athletes and coaches may resort to all manner of means. Sometimes, this may even include the restriction of individual thought and freedom. The most difficult problem in modern coaching is to preserve individuality and humanity of athletes while coaching aims at winning itself. It is the denial of humanity in athletes (schoolchildren) through corporal punishment and violence that has caused such public bashing in Japanese society.

This leads to another social problem in Japan, namely, what happens to athletes after they have retired. The most memorable example of this issue is the arrest of a retired Japanese professional baseball player due to substance abuse a few years ago.

It is thought that coaching today is faced with two major challenges. The first is the need to establish a coaching style that does not rely on corporal punishment or violence (Nishiyama, 2014). The second is the coaching methodologies expect to be helpful to athlete's later second career. These two tasks are important to preserving the social value and integrity as well as the educational value of sport. This paper examine the concept of democratic coaching, which it will be able to provide an effective solution to the

previously mentioned two challenges, and examining how this idea could be used to resolve real situations in modern sport.

2、Karl Adam's Democratic Coaching

Terms such as "running a team in a democratic manner" or "democratic coaching style" are generally associated with a more athlete-centered style of team management. It has a peaceful and idyllic air, nothing image of violence. However, is such a coaching style really feasible in the world of competitive sports where victory is the ultimate pursuit? Historically, the word "democratic" was first used to describe the coaching style in West German rowing from the late 1950s to the 1960s (Lenk, 1982). The author will examine the term "democratic" not in its most common connotation but by examining real historical cases of democratic coaching in the world of sport.

The following passage is taken from *The Amateurs* (Halberstam, 1985), a book by the American journalist David Halberstam, which describes four oarsmen's quest for an Olympic gold medal:

> *It was as if he were caught between two conflicting sets of coaches, his eastern ones and his western ones, who reflected the schism in the world of U. S. rowing. His eastern coaches, Harry Parker and Tony Johnson, were disciples of men such as Joe Burk in this country and Karl Adam, coach of the famed Ratzeburk crew in West Germany. When Adam's crew, made up of basically Ratzeburk oarsmen, had won in the 1960 Olympics, he had become an influential figure in America. (142)*

Karl Adam, who Halberstam names here, practiced democratic coaching. Hans Lenk born in 1935 was an Olympic gold medalist at Rome, and he is also a philosopher. Lenk won the gold in men's eight rowing at the 1960 Rome Olympic Games. He later became a professor of philosophy at the University of Karlsruhe, Germany. It was during the Rome Olympic Games that Lenk

(1982) received democratic coaching from Karl Adam. After having had that unique experience, this is how he described the philosophy of coaching:

> *The ideal models of the so-called "emancipated and enlightened athlete" ("mündiger Athlet"), of his "sovereignity" and of the so-called "democratic" (i.e., conceptionally participatory) style of coaching have been elaborated in the realm of practical coaching crews at Ratzeburg during the 1950s and '60s. (94-106)*

While "democratic coaching" suggests a number of different coaching styles and methods, we shall limit the scope of its discussion to the particular type of democratic coaching mentioned by Hans Lenk in his book on the philosophy of sport. The term "democratic" in this paper shall be used in a limited sense, referring to real historical cases of democratic coaching and not its general connotation.

According to Lenk (Lenk, 1986), democratic coaching is "a type of coaching proposed or suggested through a common discussion between manager, coach, and athlete, which enables the athlete to participate in the decision-making process" , and it does not rely on external force or violence. For this coaching style, for example, it pointed out that, "it is inevitable that an athlete and his/her coach will form a self–others relationship not unlike that between a child and a teacher at school" (Sekine et al., 2006), underlining the educational aspect in this type of relationship.

It is clear that the essence of democratic coaching is a mutual decision involving both the coach and the athlete. We shall now deal with this concept in more detail.

3、Lenk's Definition of "Democratic Coaching"

3-1. Three Types of Coaching

To first describe the facts, the author will begin by describing the classification of coaching styles put forward by Lenk (Lenk, 1987, 73-76). He divided coaching styles into three different categories. These are (1) authoritative coaching, (2) laissez-faire coaching, and (3) democratic coaching. In authoritative coaching, all instructions are given by the coach, and such instructions must be closely followed whether it is regular training or whether game strategies are being drawn up. In laissez-faire coaching, in contrast, everything has to be resolved by the athlete with absolutely no guidance from the coach. Democratic coaching is based on joint discussions between the athlete and the coach.

3-2. Characteristics of Democratic Coaching

Lenk says that the "most evident characteristics of democratic coaching are mutual decisions and the fact that advisory instructions are only given to help promote self-supervision" (Lenk, 1977, 111). In authoritative coaching, decisions are handed down to athletes by the coach regarding everything from the training program to team line-up to game tactics. The athletes are not allowed to resist such decisions. However, in democratic coaching, the coach is not necessarily required to attend regular trainings and the athletes are encouraged to express their opinions.

Lenk describes the democratic coaching as "building and supervising your own training program within the bounds of a larger framework," (Lenk, 1977, 111) that "the trainer is only present during very important competitions, which should be discussed by all members on the night before and a strategy based on both the athlete's opinion and the coach's own experience should be drawn up" (Lenk, 1977, 111). In spite of its appearance, democratic coaching does not seek to achieve friendly comradeship but the

ultimate goal of victory or higher performance. In fact, such results (victory, performance) have appeared as achievable as in authoritative coaching.

Lenk (1977) says as follows:

> *In recent examples, rowing teams coached under strong authoritative influence (direct and strict supervision) and rowing teams coached democratically (direct supervision in moderation) have each yielded optimal results competitively. In other words, both coaching styles have brought winning results at the Olympic Games, world championships, and European championships. Hence, top-level success can be achieved through either style. For sporting achievements, neither type of coaching has demonstrated an overwhelming success over the other. (112)*

As seen in the above passage, extracted from Lenk's *Leistungsmotivation und Mannschaftsdynamik* (1977), democratic coaching appears to have had a similar performance to authoritative coaching. In terms of victory democratic coaching has not produced less desirable outcomes. Lenk (1977) has also noted the ineffectiveness of *laissez-faire* coaching in terms of the performance it produces. Another important feature of democratic coaching is the weight given to joint discussion. The following is a description given by Lenk (1977):

> *The crucial thing is whether the athletes are given the possibility of co-designing and voluntarily influencing their trainings through discussions between athletes and their coaches. Of course, there are also cases where athletes do undertake training based on the suggestions and experience of their trainer without any discussion. This type of coaching can still maintain a certain democratic quality if the trainer is willing to listen to the athletes whenever there are disagreements and if equal consideration is given to athletes' feedback. (107)*

For democratic coaching, it is important to assure a chance of discussion.

Athletes can say their opinion and reach the consent about training and tactics.

4、Merits and Demerits of Democratic Coaching

From the above outline of democratic coaching, one suggestion can already be drawn on coaching methods in sports. As far as sports are concerned, methods such as laissez-faire coaching, where athletes are allowed absolute freedom, are simply implausible in practice. When it is done outside competitive sports, played among friends, laissez-faire coaching could be considerable. But in victory-driven competitive sports, where democratic coaching is considered the ideal approach and authoritative coaching is sometimes used as an effective method, laissez-faire coaching is never thought of as a credible option. Especially at the forefront of sports coaching, the choice is always between the authoritative and democratic styles (or to what degree the latter should be used). When trying to maximize performance in competitive sports, it is always easier to resort to authoritative coaching. Unlike laissez-faire coaching, the functionality of authoritative coaching can never be ignored when aiming for victory in competitive sports, even if democratic coaching is the ideal option.

Here the question remains as to whether democratic coaching is actually practicable for coaches and teams in competitive sports, particularly in top-level sports. Although it is an ideal way to improve competitiveness, the success of democratic coaching is conditional. It is not effective for all levels of competition. According to Lenk, “while the ‘democratic’ method may be suitable for intellectual college teams with higher performance, it is not suitable for amateur teams of young adults or beginners” (1977,115). The effectiveness of democratic coaching is limited to certain groups of people. Hence, democratic coaching is by no means an omnipotent method: the age

and social attributes of those being coached must be taken into account. Particularly with children, adult-led authoritative coaching may be the better option in terms of performance achievement.

On the other hand, democratic coaching has had a dramatic effect on those who are suited to its style. Let us assume a team of college students. In their own specialized academic fields, college students acquire knowledge and reasoning through means such as attending lectures, reading, and experiments. Using their intellectual resources, they also develop methods toward victory by adapting technical theory, physiology, or training theory learned from their specialized studies. This leaves us with one question: will students with such intellectual quality be turned into “performance robots” and “muscle machines”? Or will they be able to achieve the desired level of performance through innate motivation spurred on by intellectual discussion and dialog? Democratic coaching is certainly the key to the latter. Such intellectual quality would be wasted on student athletes whose coach prefers an all-controlling, authoritative style. However, if the coach chooses democratic coaching, students can utilize that intellectual quality not only to improve individual competitiveness but also to increase the possibility of final victory.

In spite of that, not all coaches favor this style. Lenk (1977) described democratic coaching as follows:

> *“This style is not suitable for those who are unwilling to shed the traditional belief that ‘the folly of an oarsman can always be ignored as long as he is strong.’ Democratic coaching is by no means an easy approach: it is a highly complex method and demands progressive thinking. The ‘democratic’ method cannot be prescribed for all situations.” (115)*

As Lenk claimed, democratic coaching is not a panacea but a powerful drug that can achieve dramatic effects under certain conditions. Having experienced democratic coaching as a member of the West German rowing

team during the 1960s and later turning it into a formal theory, Lenk believed that it is not a program suited to the teaching of younger athletes, who are still comparatively immature. In terms of possible range of application, democratic coaching seems less ideal as a coaching style for sports. Because it is not useful for all attribute of athletes. When it is applied to secondary education age it might to lead to weak performance and less discussion. Democratic coaching seems to be influenced by some conditions.

What effect does democratic coaching have on athletes? What can be expected from sports through the use of democratic coaching? These questions lead us to our next discussion.

5、Team's victory becomes victory for each individual

Even though democratic coaching can have a tremendous impact on the nurturing of character, Lenk does not appreciate it for its educational value alone. This is because contest is inevitable in sports. Beyond being a gold medalist in Rome, Lenk also led the German rowing team to final victories at European and world championships as a coach. It would be impossible for him to overlook the influence of coaching style on the improvement of competitive skills. However, the gradual build-up of individual skills itself is not sufficient enough to secure victory in competitions. While quantitative abilities such as muscular strength and endurance are essential for winning competitions, these are necessarily affected by social interactions. For example, what happens if the rivalry between team members for a regular position leads to emotional frictions? In such a case, the team would not be performed even if his/her physical strength is enhanced.

Can democratic coaching have a negative impact on a team when it is actually practiced and not only preached? Would it impair the effect of the training if team members conflicted over the training plan in group

discussions? By the same logic, democratic coaching can also decrease team spirit or unity when opinions are divided during game plan meetings. This is the so-called issue of “internal conflict and performance.”

Lenk (1977) describes as follows:

> *“Tension and conflict can occur in teams that are coached in the ‘democratic’ style. It is not unusual to find infighting and collision among team members. However, such conflict are rare when the trainer is an authority figure revered by all” (113).*

In fact, the German rowing team, in which Lenk was a member, experienced of infighting. The team coached under democratic style was not friendly comradeship. Lenk (1977) himself recalled one such episode:

> *“In that small boat, it is natural to compete with your teammates or a substitute member who has similar abilities to yours, so athletes must prove their value on a regular basis. The more you feel the pressure of competition that demands constant performance, the pressure from coach that exhausts both your mind and body, and the fear of not knowing when you would reach the breaking point, the more time and energy you will waste. These could all be contributing factors to that peculiar frustration that you begin to experience toward your team members, or even outsiders such as the trainer or other staff, especially halfway through the season” (142).*

Despite conflicts between athletes, Lenk’s rowing team still managed to win Olympic gold medal, and he then even coached another eight team to triumph at the world championship. Clearly, internal conflict due to democratic coaching did not lead to any decline in performance. Next, it should be considered the significance of inner conflict or confrontation. Groups suited for democratic coaching are often those motivated toward the same goal. The type of experience must be distinguished from just any gathering of ordinary people.

According to Freud (2001, 85), intellectual activities are collectively repressed within groups. To avoid this, or rather to eliminate the intellectual drawbacks caused by the formation of groups, Freud (2001) suggested the following:

> *"The problem consists in how to procure for the group precisely those features which were characteristic of the individual and which are extinguished in him by the formation of the group" (86).*

Freud (2001) further thought a "unorganized group" (85). It has lost intellectual character. He said that:

> *"Hence its behavior is like that of an unruly child or an untutored passionate savage in a strange situation, rather than like that of its average member; and in the worst cases it is like that of a wild beast, rather than like that of human beings" (Freud, 85).*

If this is true, a group trained under democratic coaching may be considered "a highly organized group." In such a group, how to retain individuality becomes a vital issue. Thus, it would be impossible under democratic coaching for team members to remain unified or reconciled from the beginning to the end. This is because, if a team is formed by complete integration or conformity, the group comes to a low intellectual life as Freud referred. Conflicts and internal struggles are unavoidable for highly organizes groups that practice democratic coaching. This means that highly organized groups cannot afford to indulge in any harmonious relationship. In addition, the group is characterized by strong personalities. Conflicts and internal struggles arise from the inclination to preserve one's identity. Each member must possess pride, self-esteem, and a will to reach self-realization.

For the athlete, self-realization can interpret many things, but it is what one should achieve; in the context of democratic coaching, that would mean victory and improvement in performance. However, a team could never reach any kind of consensus if the members were allowed to carry themselves with

pride and excessive self-esteem. This is where discussion and dialog can effectively work. Discussion and dialog can channel pride and self-esteem to a self-realization that is founded in team victory. In doing so, victory for the team becomes victory for each individual through discussion and dialog. This is not the working of religious psychology but the result of discussion and dialog. Ultimately, under democratic coaching, consensus within a team can only be reached through the use of language, that is, discussion and dialog, rather than external force or religious faith.

6、Conclusion and Future Perspective

Democratic coaching, which was first practiced by Karl Adam and theorized by Hans Lenk, would appear to be a attractive coaching method in terms of its educational value for both coaches and athletes as well as its practicality in competitive achievement. However, considering the limitations noted by Lenk, it is not a perfect coaching method. It can be applied unconditionally to any type of subject as it only functions as a sort of powerful stimulus.

It is concluded in two points. First, Lenk’s work has shown us that there is a coaching style that can enhance performance without resorting to corporal punishment and violence. That style is called democratic coaching. Second, it has also shown us how team consensus can be reached through discussion and dialog, which can also help to nurture intellectual activities among athletes. Sport performance and intellectual activities are normally regarded as very different things. However, both qualities may be enhanced through the working of discussion and dialog. This does not contribute to a possession of knowledge. It is the fostering of thinking skills that involves the discovery and resolution of problems. Democratic coaching is ultimately a training method for those thinking skills.

Today, as computer search systems continue to develop, knowledge alone is no longer adequate for the workforce. At the same time, the number of new problems seems to rise. It cannot be solved through the possession of knowledge. At the present time, the educational method that focuses on the acquiring of knowledge is the most widespread method in the world, and it has been practiced throughout history. However, in modern society, this knowledge-based education has great limitations in both vocational and moral education. In these circumstances, the training of discussion and dialog through democratic coaching has become important for the career planning and character building of modern athletes in the present day, even more so compared to the late 1950s and 1960s when Hans Lenk first experienced it.

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