

Coaching the coaches

At the top of sports coaching in India, behind the empty incantations of the guru-shishya parampara, there lie patches of silent darkness

Sharda Ugra



Athlete Reeth Abraham (in black). Photo: Anshuman Poyrekar/Hindustan Times

In Bengaluru last week, I attended an event featuring a champion heptathlete, hockey players who had represented their state and country, and an Olympian swimmer. Added to the list were the men behind India's most successful swimmers in recent history and a golfer currently enjoying the oxygen-depleting heights of the world game. They weren't there to be "felicitated", put on a pedestal, given some garlands or a memento and sent on their way. They were there to talk to others like them. Sports coaches all, gathered to discuss their trade and its tools. Athletic druids if you like, mulling over the magic of their potions, sorting out the real from the illusory. Involved in athletics, tennis, football, basketball, swimming, hockey, golf, at many levels of their game—schools, clubs and academies.

At the top of sports coaching in India, behind the empty incantations of the *guru-shishya parampara* (teacher-student tradition), there lie patches of silent darkness. Around the need for power and control, due to which coaches never let their star athletes go. Around the intense involvement of parents, siblings or spouses in an athlete's coaching, in which restriction can sometimes dominate reward. The full potential of many successful Indian athletes, it's believed, could not be maximized because their coaches wouldn't let them go to a higher-level mentor.

Young Indian coaches sometimes complain that the old do not easily share knowledge. Or even recognition. A well-known, instantly recognizable Indian coach is known to whisper rather loudly that awards for coaches should be limited to Indian coaches, rather than including the best—who could be from overseas—hired to work with our top athletes across Olympic disciplines.

In an environment so often sharply segmented, where knowledge and talent, expertise and skill can be hoarded or left to curdle, the gathering in Bengaluru opened many windows. It was the first meeting of the GoSports Foundation's Bangalore Coaches' Forum and it did what it had intended to: It brought together coaches across sport for a couple of hours to listen and talk to the best professionals in their city. These included Reeth Abraham, multiple times national champion in the heptathlon and other events and, currently, Masters athletics medallist; Nihar Ameen, Dronacharya award-winning swimming coach; and Vijay Divecha, corporate executive-turned-golf coach and, as he describes himself, "lifetime learner".

Listening to their discussions, you began to understand how a network takes shape. Divecha, coach to world No.51 golfer Anirban Lahiri, among many others, turned his keynote address about a "development model" for Indian coaches into a conversation. The questions he asked contained worlds within worlds. Why have we taken up this work? Divecha asked. Passion, was the reply. What do the many coaching certifications imply? The theoretical knowledge of a sport's technical foundations, he said, is a mere starting point in the race that involved their lives. From then on, coaching involved widening the knowledge base, reaching out to *gurus* about the stuff not found in the manual and getting into what is, in fact, the meat and potatoes of coaching. Teaching over merely issuing instructions, and with an awareness that teaching involves, at its heart, the art and science of learning and understanding how learning itself takes place: What do you know you know?

Divecha gave a message that can echo in our lives too: “Nobody has any secrets.” To true masters in most fields, he said, if you “go with enthusiasm...they will give you more than what you think you’re going to receive.” Secrets begin to be suspiciously sniffed, he said, “when you don’t ask”. What do you know you don’t know?

GoSports Foundation, a seven-year-old non-profit that tries to get funding and professional help for junior Olympic and Paralympic athletes, had organized the forum after highly successful athletes’ and coaches’ conclaves. The audience at the forum last week contained a fascinating mix of professional and amateur coaches, including a few school physical education teachers, Verghese K. John and Shanmugham Pandurangan, volunteer coaches at the Jude Felix Hockey Academy, which promotes the sport among underprivileged children. The Paralympian swimmer in the mix broke the Indian record (naturally, P.T. Usha’s) for most medals—six—in a single multi-discipline game, at the 2014 Asian Games in Incheon, South Korea.

Sharath Gayakwad has just dived into coaching himself and is co-founder and director of his own start-up company, Gamatics, which focuses on swimming. Gamatics sells competitive swimwear and training equipment and goes a step further, identifying the nearest accessible pool, club, swim coach and camp in Bengaluru.

Ameen told the audience that he was on his way to a national coaching conference to be held at the National Institute of Sports (NIS) in Patiala and asked for feedback about the NIS’ methods and measures. The replies were quick, ready and plenty: Streamline and specialize the short-term courses—which athletics coach wanting to do a short-term course could possibly end up as an expert in both throws and jumps over six weeks? Try online courses in regional languages, update the syllabus available and please clean up your campus, damn it. Swachh Bharat, to start with, before getting worked up about the Bharat Mata stuff.

There was, it was established, no single “development model” available for Indian coaches to lean on. Indian coaches found their way in a varied country with varied athletic priorities through history, trial, error and drive. “It’s up to us,” Divecha said, “to develop this model”, using collective experience. Many models could be debated, it was hoped, by the forum meeting once every two months. Coaching was, in Divecha’s words, a “continuous education” with an impact. “That should be felt by the people you teach. That you are relevant to them no matter where they reach,” he said.

Shanmugham, who has returned recently to India after coaching the Qatar national hockey team for around two years, said that coaching, to him, was like the “ocean”. It drew you in and, as you tried to teach, it taught you. “Today you learn, today you see new waves coming and hitting you, and you have to adapt to them.” Divecha made a statement both daunting and inspiring—that sports coaches had a responsibility that needed to be taken responsibly. “One of the things we do, all of us,” he said, “is that we change people’s lives.”

What a modern athlete needs from his or her coach is not generic manual instruction, but, rather, individualized “deep learning”. So that as they rise through various levels, they learn the “development of expertise”, making them better at their sport. It requires, both from the coach and the trainee, determination, self-belief and the willingness to get into what Divecha calls “uncomfortable zones”.

“Like I say to everyone who comes to me,” he smiled, “this is not meant for the faint-hearted.”

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