



Significance of Sport Theory and Education for a Handball Coach- case of SLOVENIA

By: Marta Bon, Marko Šibila, Primož Pori

ABSTRACT

Handball is one of the more highly developed sports in Slovenia. In terms of performance on the international scale, it is perhaps the most successful Slovenian sport. This is undoubtedly true in team sport competition. A coincidence? Slovenian handball is closely connected to the Institute of Sport within the Faculty of Sport at the University of Ljubljana. This is probably one of the key factors contributing to the fact that the results of research into sports science are available to handball coaches in the form of expert advisory services. Highly trained experts also participate in a relatively widespread system of testing and monitoring national team candidates. Two other factors are an appropriate education system and the fairly demanding licensing procedure. It's necessary to add: handball successes reveal themselves in top-level results. It seems, though, that a lot still has to be done with handball in schools and its related mass popularity.

1. Introduction

Over the past few years Slovenian handball has enjoyed great success, particularly in elite and competitive handball which is most often the motivating power of this sport. Is necessary to add, that totally only around 5000 players are playing handball in all age categories in Slovenia. The successes of the senior men's and senior women's national teams and clubs, young national teams' regular participation in large competitions and, in recent times, the winning of medals, high-quality league competitions etc. are proof that the established material and organisational conditions are adequate and that the expert work in this field is top quality. Slovenian sports science is closely connected to the Institute of Sport within the Faculty of Sport at the University of Ljubljana. This is probably one of the key factors contributing to the fact that the results of research into sports science are available to handball coaches in the form of expert advisory services. Highly trained experts also participate in a relatively widespread system of testing and monitoring national team candidates. Two other factors are an appropriate education system and the fairly demanding licensing procedure.

In Slovenia, at least the second education level is required to work in sport, same is valid for handball. On the other hand, one may work in sport after completing a licensing seminar organised by the Slovenian Coaching Organisation each year. An analysis of Slovenian licensing seminars conducted over several years quite clearly revealed the expectations and



desires of coaches. The majority of them prefer practical demonstrations and trainings, thinking: 'This is a great exercise. I will use it tomorrow during my training.' Many think that the educational requirements and licensing seminars are a purposeless burden. However, times are changing and sport is no exception. It seems, though, that ever more coaches are becoming aware of the significance of sports science as well as the related sciences (sociology, psychology, sports medicine, physiology etc.) in the field of coaching. Coaching is an extremely sensitive area primarily because it is about interacting with people – most often youngsters – leading, guiding and instructing them. It is a process that moulds their knowledge as well as their views and values. To teach a player is a science, but to educate a player is an art. Frequently a coach comes across some exceptional sportspeople but, as a rule, these are young, unique people in their excitable and perhaps most sensitive period of life. That is why a coach bears an even heavier responsibility, and striving to acquire knowledge to help them manage these processes is in itself a professional commitment. A commitment for the reason that we have to search for ways to achieve excellence in our work. Not merely to win. Knowledge is also important because it prevents us from making mistakes when working with young sportspeople. Such mistakes are multidimensional; some may even be irreparable and may firmly stay with a sportsperson for the rest of their life.

1.1. Science, theory etc.

Science is only based on measurable and thus describable and repeatable phenomena. Whatever is objectively measurable and describable is of interest to science; subjective experiences and feelings in scientific research within the pure meaning of the word are inadmissible and misleading. Every scientific theory must be objectively verifiable, every experiment repeatable. It is explicitly required that the experiment is separated from the experimenter – from their feelings and intentions. Therefore, subjective experience is beyond the reach of science – it is immeasurable and thus indescribable and devoid of interest (Kononenko, 2005).

Scientists work by applying their reason. In doing so, they limit their work to objectively measurable and describable phenomena. The purpose of science is to describe the reality by using the logical, rational reasoning. Science is interested in HOW something (space, for example) functions and aims to describe this. It studies the material, measurable aspects of the world. On the other hand, people showing an interest in the spiritual component of the world (mystics) perceive reality by using their inner sense, their 'heart'. They aim to feel and be aware of the reality by harnessing their intuitive intellect. And this is beyond any measurement; we evaluate things subjectively, we cannot measure things (Kononenko, 2005). This area is of great importance to a coach: even if they are a self-declared practicalist, a coach (also) works by intuition: it is only a question of whether this occurs on a conscious or unselfconscious (subconscious) level. Our intuition and, consequently, some decisions are mostly based on knowledge rooted in our own past experience.

2. Success in handball is not (is) a coincidence

Handball is one of the more highly developed sports in Slovenia. In terms of performance on the international scale, it is perhaps the most successful Slovenian sport. This is undoubtedly



true in team sport competition. A coincidence? Definitely not. The performance of a given sport is evaluated by different factors: international comparability is clearly one of them, while the successes of national teams in large competitions probably represent the main factor. The rest may be squeezed into the concept of the 'general development' of this sport both around the world and in Slovenia.

In Slovenia, handball successes reveal themselves in top-level results. It seems, though, that a lot still has to be done with handball in schools and its related mass popularity.

One assumption used in evaluating such a performance is that it stems mainly from adequate expert work. An analysis of Slovenian sports practice reveals that handball is characterised by a strong correlation between the successes of national teams and elite clubs and the services provided by the competent institutions. Over the past few years, it is particularly the national teams of all age categories that have taken part in the system for testing and monitoring sportspeople, with the latter being based on measurements that in Slovenia are mainly performed by the Institute of Sport within the Faculty of Sport. One should not forget that these measurements have been predominantly financed by the Ministry of Education and Sport. Nearly all coaches have used the results of these measurements as a major source of their information about candidates for national teams. It is a fact that the results of such measurements and the so-called theoretical knowledge are by no means recipes or magic wands that a coach can use to find solutions to certain problems. These are plain data which a coach MAY incorporate within the overall essential knowledge and cognizance of a given competitor and competition.

On the other hand, the results of this testing are an important source of information for those involved in sports research. After having completed an adequate methodological data-processing procedure, one arrives at specific scientific conclusions which are usually a premise for making some changes, mostly to the theory of sports training. Indeed, many coaches have a sharp eye when it comes to the empirical recognition of specific qualities or, put simply, they immediately see which problem a player has or what is the reason for a team's poor performance. Some may even find the answer or solution to the problem empirically. Research findings are particularly important for such coaches as well. The least they can gain from this is the confirmation that they have a good ability for observation.

The idea of showing coaches the results of research activities has been around for quite some time. It is very clear that not all people will use such research findings. There are various reasons for this. Some coaches simply do not have an affinity for such co-operation. Again, different reasons for this are involved. Some would be interested but they work in areas where such services cannot be used, mainly due to financial limitations. Another impediment may be a lack of time dedicated to training and the pressure of other priorities set by the coach or club management. Of course, it is not our intention and it is not within our power to judge whether it is more important to participate in a large number of preparatory matches or tournaments or to devote one's time to testing and monitoring players' development.

On the other hand, one should NOT overlook the possibility that some coaches reject such co-operation because they lack knowledge of sports training basics and thus cannot follow the results nor interpret and incorporate them in their empirical know-how. This is not meant to be a criticism or disparagement of anyone. I have deep respect for all handball enthusiasts and coaches with no formal education but who have an innate pedagogical and social sense and an immense love of both the sport as such and their own trainees. I believe that these coaches are indispensable for the development of handball as a sports branch. It is problematic, however,



if one becomes a self-proclaimed judge, arguing (even very loudly) that an extensive expert (and theoretical) knowledge is valueless. Such 'harsh' criticism is typical of those coaches who have no formal education and are short on empirical knowledge. Some coaches are more inclined to the quantity of work and forget that quality is most often the decisive factor. Some coaches are still of the opinion that working in sports requires no education or professional training whatsoever. Some will never accept the fact that, just as any person cannot be a hairdresser or a butcher, not just any person can be a coach for this involves working with children and adolescents.

Hopefully, this reflection will not be interpreted as an 'advertisement' for theory or for testing, since testing is not the only thing worth considering. That is definitely not the case here. We are all well aware what the gist is of coaching in Slovenian handball. Theoretical knowledge may only help us to find answers to ever emerging questions about a team and its players. New knowledge forces us to reflect and perhaps helps us avoid the situation about which Morten Arvidson spoke during a seminar at Rogla (2005): 'If you think that as a coach you know everything, you are a dead coach'.

It is also a fact that in-depth research belongs more or less to the elite level. At the basic level, where the majority of Slovenian coaches work, it is of the utmost importance that players learn how to run, catch and pass the ball etc. and it is only later that moving on to specialised areas is reasonable (e.g. a kinematics analysis of a player's shot), as these generally fall within the scope of research. On the global scale, there are many areas and sub-areas of sports to which different sports experts have devoted their attention. The list below includes those areas which are researched in greater depth in Slovenia.

TOPICS

- Player movement analysis – SAGIT
- Biomechanics
- Kinematics
- Tensiometry
- Physiology
- Motorics/Motor abilities, morphology
- HANDBALL testing at the Institute of Sport within the Faculty of Sport



2

3. Conclusion

Theoretical knowledge and research as such do not guarantee that one will be a good coach. The various hypotheses and research theories should only be regarded as additional information, mere utensils and most times details. However, at the elite level details may bring about a decisive advantage. It is also true that focusing on narrow fields of expertise may result in an inability to see problems in a complex way (i.e. seeing the trees but not the



forest). Broad-mindedness is a characteristic that is indispensable in the coaching of an elite handball team.

Life (and coaching) teaches us that one has to confront one's inner self and that every individual is important and unique (in terms of their appearance and character). In this, the people involved always play a decisive role. Sometimes we are lucky and we are surrounded by people who have much to give, who help us tremendously and encourage us. They either have theoretical prowess or practical experience, some might have both and some might even hold great wisdom. However, they cannot do anything instead of us because it is left up to us whether or not we accept their help.

4. References:

Bon M. (2005): Teorija v roketu – zakaj? (Theory in handball – why?) (presentation at the seminar for coaches, Rogla, 2005):
Kononenko I. (2005): Objective science and subjective spirituality are complementary: article – conference materials, Ljubljana. [http://www.kvarkadabra.net/](http://www.Quotes from the World Wide Web: <u><a href=)