

The Power of Pictures in Coaching

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In this article the powerful effects of using metaphors in coaching is introduced. I'm sure many of you have used pictures or stories in your coaching. If you are using them, you're on the right track!

A metaphor can be seen as understanding that is transferred from one situation to another. Metaphors can use any picture or story that will help to bring understanding to a concept that you want to bring across to your athlete(s). Research seems to indicate that the use of metaphors is strongly linked to our capacity to process concepts and understanding. This capacity allows you and your athlete(s) to verbally elaborate on the metaphors, enhancing the understanding of the concept you want to bring across.

For example, the metaphor of "earning" in the context of a profession has associated with it that through hard work you earn a living by being rewarded financially. This metaphor can easily be applied to the concept of confidence in sport. An athlete must put in the hard work and so earns his/her confidence. This metaphor can be elaborated on even further. A certain amount of self-confidence is expected for an athlete to perform well in a high pressure situation. If the athlete has worked hard, earned confidence, and saved all this confidence in a confidence bank account, he/she will be able to withdraw the confidence required to stay calm and do well when the pressure situation arises.

Metaphors are also a creative way to encourage and facilitate change in athlete(s). The flexible nature of metaphors allows for understanding as well as behaviour to be changed. Certain metaphors will have certain behaviours associated with them. By altering or changing the metaphor the behaviours associated will also be changed.

For example, using the metaphor of a Spanish bullfight where the bull gets charged up by the matador using the red cape likely has associated with it behaviours of high energy, short bursts of speed, and an almost 'mindless' form of attack from the bull. An athlete that tends to get worked up before competing and that participates in a sport that requires constant tactical thinking will not benefit from the associated behaviour of this metaphor. A metaphor that portrays calm, analytical behaviour will facilitate change in the athlete that will have a positive effect on performance.

Metaphors can create positive conversations between coaches and athletes. If a coach needs to challenge an athlete's thinking or behaviour, doing so as part of the metaphor will be much less provoking and likely be met with a less defensive response. Examples can include questions like; did you play according to the metaphor we discussed; what would you change about how you employed your metaphor today, was your behaviour towards the opponent in line with the metaphor we discussed?

Metaphors can be generated by both the coach and the athlete. Coach generated metaphors will be used more for educational purposes where a concept is presented to a player and then the players understanding of the metaphor can be assessed. If the athlete does not buy into or understand the metaphor it will not serve its purpose. Player generated metaphors will be used by a coach to better understand the players understanding and perspective of the sport, tactics or concepts. When working with a player generated metaphor it is important for the coach to show respect, understanding and empathy for the players' metaphor, helping the player further develop their own metaphor rather than forcing his/her own opinions.

The following steps have been identified in the use of players' metaphors:

- Identify the metaphor.
- Explore the understanding of the metaphor.
- Expand on and develop the metaphor to allow for change to occur.
- Bring the metaphor back to reality.

Metaphors are also easy to remember. Instead of the athlete having to remember steps 1-5 in a competitive situation, if a shared understanding exists of the associated thinking and behaviour of the metaphor the athlete might only need to be reminded of the

metaphor and when successfully applied, understanding and behaviour will fall into place.

To further illustrate the use of a metaphor let's look at a metaphor that came to mind in a cricket context when watching Chris Gayle construct his innings' in the 2012 IPL tournament. There is little arguing the impressive feats that Chris Gayle reached in the IPL 2012. He was the top run scorer in with 733 runs at an average of 61.08 and a strike rate of 160.74.

The metaphor that came to mind is that of driving a Ferrari and seeing what the top speed is. To start moving forward you need to put the Ferrari in 1st gear and start to accelerate. You then proceed to move through the gears, each time unleashing another 20% of the Ferrari's capabilities, until you can push the Ferrari to the limits of what it can do. Gayle's approach to his innings' seems to follow this same process. He starts off in 1st gear (60%), changing gears when he feels the time is right, until he can approach his innings in 5th gear, batting at 100% of what he's capable of. This approach to his batting made him effective because it struck the balance between taking his time to get himself in and ending with a destructive display of boundary hitting.

Some of the finer elements in the Ferrari metaphor to construct an innings could include:

- To give the batsman the best chance of consistent success by getting in first, start in 1st gear at 60% of your capabilities. This does not mean at a 60% strike rate, on the contrary, you can bat at a 100+ strike rate. It simply means to play your percentage shots and leave the high risk shots for later.
- As the batsman moves through the gears he/she starts kicking on and scores more freely, reaching 5th gear in the last few overs of the innings.
- Changing gears is determined by the team's game plan and reading the state of the game. At 150/0 you would expect the two batsmen to bat in at least 3rd or 4th gear. At 150/6 the two batsmen would need to stay in 2nd gear for longer before changing gears towards the end of the innings.
- This metaphor is equally relevant for an opener as it is for someone in the middle order. All that will change is the amount of balls you can face in a certain gear before changing up a gear. (Consider for

a moment a very clever Indian player in M. S. Dhoni and how often he adapts to the state of the game, some days spending only a few balls in 1st gear, and other days fighting a troubled start of innings by spending any number of overs in 1st gear).

In summary, the benefits of metaphors in your coaching include:

- To help understanding and applying of concepts.
- To facilitate change in understanding and behaviour.
- To help coaches and athletes collaborate and come up with a solution together.
- To create a positive conversation when critically reflecting after a performance.
- Easy to remember.

I hope that including more metaphors in your coaching helps your players respond and continue with the positive changes in their game!

