



The European Athletics
Coaches Association

EACA Coaching Conference 10 – 12 November 2006 Dublin, Ireland

The Coach as Team Leader and Team Player

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In days gone by, the racing driver was a real maverick figure. Racing drivers did not live in the real world. They had no regard for personal safety and did not understand the word “future” because for them it was “here and now”.

They had a “go to hell” attitude, “I’ll take my chances” and on Sundays risked life and limb in a lethally dangerous game. They were real heroes for the fans. Men wanted to be them and women wanted to be with them.

A person who was a stalwart of that lifestyle was James Hunt, the 1976 F1 World Champion (a person I knew well through our association in the Marlboro World Championship Team Young Driver Programme for whom James was an advisor).

James often made more headlines “out” of the car than he did in it; his style was not unique but certainly a sign of the times. In fact, when he was first given his “official attire” to be worn at Marlboro functions, he so eloquently responded in his Eton accent:- “If, in the unlikely event I ever come to one of your functions, I’ll wear whatever I chose”, which would most likely have been jeans, bare feet and a T-shirt!

I am sure you can look back into the history of your own sports and see parallels between the leading lights then and the current stars of today, and this is not just the athlete or driver but down to every last person involved in the sport.

Clough & Chapman

Like previous racing drivers, the coach or in my case my car engineer, was also a maverick, a loner who lived by the seat of his pants, scribbled down minimal information and certainly did not conform to standard practice. As sports are now more complex, I cannot imagine the likes of Colin Chapman (Owner and design genius of Lotus Cars in their heyday) who set the technical standard in the 60’s and 70’s or Brian Clough (Nottingham Forest’s legendary manager who took them to 2 European Cups) believing that current formula 1 teams can have over 1000 people and spend over 250 million dollars a year or that Cloughies first ever £1 million

pound transfer payment for Trevor Francis is only a few months wages for top players in today's world.

20 years ago, the Chapman's and Clough's were very instinct led, had a very good basic skill in all areas of the game and were "finely tuned up" in a few others, allowing them to be the best as well as effectively being a one-man band. But now, not least with the precise information gathering and effective data analysis we have, the days of designs and team sheets on the back of a cigarette packets are long gone.

And this is what I want to talk about today... how in my sport - the world of high performance racing cars where we constantly strive to defy the laws of physics - it is the high performance individuals that make the difference between winning and losing, not the machinery.

Problems

I think modern sports all have very similar problems with their historic "business models" whether it be Motor sport, track and field or golf. Some of the problems we are facing are:-

- Increasing competition at every level.
- We have already become or are becoming part of larger organisations and have to function in that wider environment.
- The performance gains we search for are now not just rounded up, but measured by more than two decimal points.
- To achieve performance gains, the areas of expertise are becoming more refined than ever.
- Increasingly, we have outside "non sporting" influences such as management or sponsors.
- The role of the coach is changing and increasingly in today's world we cannot survive on our own.

Coach/engineer

I said earlier that my engineer is my coach. I would like to expand on that.

My car engineer, Howden Haynes, performs the same role as a coach in most other sports. He is the person that effectively coaches me throughout my race weekend. He is my technical car guru, my first point of call for basically everything, he is my access to the team support network and he knows how our team ticks.

We have a strict schedule of meetings and structure that must be adhered to by everyone and a clear chain of command that is similar to your coaching structures.

Howden is my link to the larger team and the various experts behind the scenes. This starts with a pre-brief before and a de-brief after each session detailing what we will do in the session or race and to debrief obviously to discuss what happened during.

He liaises directly with the engine, the chassis, the electronics, the data, the tyre and the strategy engineers who are in charge of their own department but report directly to him, similar to your providers. He collates all information that we need and then filters out the parts I do not need to worry about allowing me to use my capacity for the race.

The relationship we have is like a marriage. He has to know instinctively what I am feeling - as the handling of the car is talked about in feelings. My hand movements and intonations are the key to his ability to translate that into figures that he can see on the data.

That requires trust on both sides, and that trust extends throughout my team. In a pit stop, there are 11 people re-fuelling 90 litres, changing tyres and checking the car in a blink of an eye. I need to trust them to put on my wheels correctly. If not, it can be very dangerous at the first corner. My life is in their hands. There is no room for an enlarged ego's here and only a well-oiled machine can do this.

Specifically skilled individuals

But today the engineer or coach still has to have the qualities of the mavericks of the past. But, with so many highly skilled individuals providing specialist support to them or their athlete then the occasion has arisen where the supplier (provider) can be more skilled in their own individual area than the coach themselves. However, those very individually skilled people in turn are also lacking in other skilled areas meaning it is becoming increasingly difficult to be a "one man band" and never before so important to have a "leader".

This has been a problem area in several teams where they took candidates purely on their academic achievements and found quickly they had maybe the brightest brains in the paddock but needed a GPS system to find it. The result was that no-one had the global view with all pieces of the jigsaw in place.

The world of data analysis

This is an area that has become extreme to say the least in Motor sport and one that my engineer spends a ridiculous amount of "paperwork" time on, and I think one that will increasingly - if not already - form a major part of your careers as well.

When I first drove an F1 car, it was just after I met Frank Dick back in 1989, it was a McLaren Honda with Ayrton Senna as my "driving coach", so we are talking about the elite of that time. When it came to comparisons, it was all done on the old faithful stopwatch as the data was mainly engine monitoring and very basic. In fact, we could not put two pieces of information on the same page so had to print separately and hold them up to a light to see the variances. Believe it or not, it was the best available at the time.

Today, on our Le Mans Winning Audi R10 TDI Sportscar, we monitor over 1000 pieces of data “live” at any moment. It is monitored by a room full of engineers in what I can only describe as something similar to an intensive care unit, but instead the patient is outside running around at 200 mph. They are split into three main areas, engine, chassis and “lifelines”; the engine and chassis to evaluate performance, lifelines to make sure all the major organs are functioning correctly. This information will again be split between critical and less critical information. The department chief will watch the critical information and lesser critical information will be watched by his assistant. During the race, my engineer watches the “race” critical data which is up to 100 pieces of information so that he can make the right calls in the race. The suppliers give him their specific information to assist in that process and he makes decisions from that.

Communications skills

This is another major part of the evolution, as teams are getting bigger by the day. For example, in Colin Chapman’s day over 20 years ago, F1 teams had a total work force would be around 50 to a maximum of 100. He/the coach knew everyone by their names and generally saw each one daily so any issues were solved immediately and face to face. Today, that figure is between 700 to a maximum of 1100 - with some of the larger teams having over 50 people working purely in one area of the chassis department, thus making communication much more complex.

The coach, or in this case the technical director at the factory, has to have a global view of each specialist area and how they intertwine to create the maximum performance out of the car and people involved and must have the ability to communicate in a clear and concise way with all departments (suppliers) in an effective manner to get the jobs done. This has meant that back at base, the coach is doing a lot more desk bound paperwork than ever before, which is very much against their tradition, but it is the only way he can be fully equipped with the knowledge to fight the battles when he gets to the track. This point has effectively meant the death of the “weekend warrior” in top class Motor sport as he is ill equipped when he turns up for competition - the job is now a “lifestyle”.

Another communication skill dictated by the coach at the competition is to their team and especially driver. Personally, my engineer is the only person ever to speak to me on the radio during competition; it is then only ONE voice, ONE accent I hear and deal with at over 180 mph. He is the one who gives me and our team the specific information required during the race and this is strictly controlled to the point where very limited personnel even have radios capable of transmission.

Our friends, the Media

The coach now has many other outside influences as well, such as the media intrusion into “our world”.

Now engineers, mechanics, in fact nearly anyone involved with the programme are no longer seen as “backroom staff” but “key individuals” in the media and marketing led TV ratings war.

For drivers and some athletes, it may be common practice for the media to want an interview seconds before the flag drops to get that “real feel” experience. And with 2012 approaching, this is going to be more commonplace for the coach and his staff working directly with the individual or the team to have these sorts of requests.

In fact, at my last race in Laguna Seca, California, my race engineer was being asked live on TV, at extremely critical moments throughout the race about our strategy. As well as having his mind fully focused on all the areas of the race he has to control, he had to answer the question *without* really answering the question and giving away our strategic advantage. This is a skill on its own.

When it works, it is dynamite

When a good coaching structure is successful then it can mean domination for many years. A good example of both sides of the fence is Ferrari and the old Jaguar F1 team.

Ferrari had raced for 21 years without a world title until Schumacher won in the year 2000. From 1994, they put together a team for the future. People in key areas 6 years before a championship victory, starting with Team boss or head coach Jean Todt. He then went out and recruited personnel like Technical Director Ross Brawn, Chassis Designer Rory Byrne and Engine Designer Paulo Martinelli and so on, then finally, Michael and Eddie Irvine.

In this building process, they did one thing differently to any other team on the grid at the time. They kept all their dirty washing in house, never any public debate, always working on their weakness and supported each other when there was a problem. They coached each other.

In 2000, 01 & 02, it was relatively easy as the competition was not strong enough in depth. However, in 2003 they again eventually won the title even although tyre supplier Bridgestone were comprehensively beaten by Michelin but they stuck by them. Others jumped ship and immediately defected. Bridgestone fought back and redressed the balance and in doing so Ferrari and Bridgestone created and even deeper relationship by turning a negative into a stronger working relationship.

When they started to win, it took 5 years for anyone to stop them - total dominance and incredible to see.

By comparison to Ferrari, Jaguar was bought from Jackie Stewart who ran a small, agile little team with strong leadership that had just won a race in its brief 4 year F1 career. From then until it's final demise at the end of 2004 when it become Red Bull, it was constantly restructured, had four leadership battles in four years, with each new management bringing a design staff change and unsurprisingly no holy grail of a race win, never mind a title. When Ford finally pulled the plug, they had apparently paid or were paying \$24M in severance pay.

Obviously, with this type of management upheaval, every year meant that there was no stability. With that, there was no integration of design philosophy as designers brought their own ideas and personnel in - invariably, a clean sheet is started, and

12 months later they were themselves replaced, and then it became a spiral downwards until each department blamed the other for all the problems. It was real house of cards and not the predicted “Ferrari in British Racing Green”.

In their quest to be instantly successful and beat Ferrari, they - and I have to say so many other teams as well - have failed to look at the “market leaders” and how they have slowly built on good foundations, integrally including the role of technical director/coach as a “key “ in the top management of a major international company.

So now in my opinion, the most important quality that a head coach has to have is one of team leader and team player with an ability to lead an increasingly large group of professionals and to pull them all together.

My Coach

What I look for in my coach is someone that, first of all, is a racer at heart who will fight by my side until the chequered flag falls and who, whether successful or not, will go back and try to improve our unit to be more prepared for the next race. I don't want a real “techy” specialist in a given area but someone with a global view of the whole car and race picture.

The coach has to lead our extensive team of people at a race and direct many more back at base. He has also to work closely with our closest competitor and often bitter rivals - our “team mates” in the sister car. He has to be aware of the politics of sport and be able to work with management and sometimes their decisions, which we do not always agree with. Coaches also have to be able to work with some of the most ego driven people in the world, the driver or athlete!!!

Personally I think he must want to be the best out there and to constantly strive for it, because as the old saying goes,

“When the flag drops, the bullshit stops”.

And then we either “win” or “lose”.