

CONSCIOUS COACHING

THE ART & SCIENCE OF BUILDING BUY-IN



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FOREWORD

I am delighted to write this foreword, not only because Brett Bartholomew has been a friend and colleague for many years, but also because I believe deeply in the value of providing coaches with solid material aimed at helping them better understand the “art” of communication. It turns out that the “art” of communication is every bit as much a science as that of the physical training of the body. *Conscious Coaching: The Art and Science of Building Buy-In* is a detailed exploration into the science behind the art of communication, and a critical addition to the toolbox of all coaches.

Brett is the perfect person to write this book. He’s paid serious dues in his evolution as a coach, working his way up from unpaid intern, to graduate assistant, to team coach, and now works in world-class training centers, coaching top athletes as well as military men and women. Brett is known for his ability to connect with everyone around him—he doesn’t just live *Conscious Coaching*, he researches, speaks, and teaches about it, too. That’s why I was so excited when I heard he would be coalescing his firsthand experiences and findings into a single book.

This book is needed, and its time is now.

In my own role as an educator, coach, center director, and endless researcher in sport for over 40 years, I have had the honor and distinct pleasure of traveling around the world, meeting with many top-shelf practitioners in sport. Even after visiting hundreds of nationally and internationally top-performing organizations in a variety of settings, and meeting and learning from thousands of successful leaders in sport performance, I was *still* excited to learn of Brett's treatise discussing what many call the "soft side" of coaching. The topic is wanting for a good, thorough, and comprehensive treatment.

A current issue in sport is what I call the problem of modernity. We have a tendency to rely on mainstream information, technology, and science to alter behavior and enhance performance. In doing so, we often pick specific areas and put our focus there, unfortunately overlooking a more balanced approach. Brett bridges this gap because for him, it's not about science *or* art. It's about science *and* art.

Conscious Coaching provides insight into the practice of individuals who excel consistently at the highest levels of administering sport performance. At the same time, *Conscious Coaching* overviews the latest research on the foundational elements of building buy-in. After reading this book, coaches will no doubt improve relationships with their athletes—and improved relationships mean improved performance.

This book details the four components of the coaching compass: buy-in, relationships, social intelligence, and time. It explores why it is not just enough to know your athletes; you also have to know yourself. Brett also offers 13 concrete strategies to

enhance your day-to-day coaching and also shares his thoughts on how to achieve longevity—and build a legacy—in your career.

Brett writes that ego is often the enemy in coaching. He practices what he preaches by including thoughts from other well-respected coaches and researchers to produce a powerful resource that belongs on the bookshelf of every high-performance coach.

It is my hope that this book helps coaches and performance staff members learn, teach, and practice the art of *Conscious Coaching*. There is compelling evidence that a core teaching practice like *Conscious Coaching* can be learned, but not without serious and sustained effort. The effort is worth it! What better way to strengthen the quality of teaching and learning in our workplaces than by being engaged in *Conscious Coaching*? Read on, and I'm convinced you'll find the answer is that there is no better way.

Dan Pfaff

Education Director/Jumps Coach, ALTIS

10 Olympic Games

49 Olympians (9 medalists)

51 World Championships competitors (9 medalists)

57 national record holders

INTRODUCTION

By wisdom a house is built; and through understanding it is established.

—Proverbs 24:3 (New International Version)

For far too long, performance coaches, both current and aspiring, have found themselves at various stages of their career asking: "What books or articles should I read to learn more **about** _____?" The blank, of course, is usually filled with some combination of science-based topics including speed, agility, periodization, energy-system development, movement screening, plyometrics, strength training, nutrition, and recovery. In addition to this ongoing search for technical knowledge, performance coaches are also constantly questioning what credentials or certifications they should attain and what conferences and workshops they should attend. Taken together, performance coaches are hungry to improve their technical skill set, build their science-driven knowledge, and develop their "coaching compass," or the set of principles and general path they'll follow. When this insatiable appetite for learning is coupled with a devotion to serve athletes and teams (a 24-7 job in and of itself), it becomes easy to see how the modern-day performance coach is often overwhelmed with information.

Thus, we find ourselves indulging in a circuitous cycle of scouring countless books, articles, and podcasts to store in our digital or physical hard drives. When we create the time to dive in—often sacrificing sleep to do so, something we'd never have our athletes do—we learn about the myriad of ways to make athletes bigger, faster, stronger, and more powerful; the latest and greatest approaches to movement assessments and injury prevention; and how to optimize nutrition and recovery. By the time we have finished reading stacks of research, attending conferences, debating with

one another, and listening to podcasts on the way to work, we find our toolbox full of strategies for successfully dealing with programming, but almost empty when it comes to strategies for successfully dealing with people. Ask a performance coach to recite the history or originators of specific training methods or theories and they will talk your ear off for hours. But ask them to name thought leaders on influence, communication, and human interaction, or to describe how everything from our environment to our body language affects those around us, and you'll struggle to find someone who is up for the task. This is unfortunate because athletes are not robots. They are people. And in order to get *athletes* to move physically, we must first get *people* to move psychologically and emotionally. Recent technology may be advancing what we are able to measure and manage, but the best training programs are not driven by technological connection. They are driven by human connection. Put simply: there is no gadget that can inspire and ignite an athlete like an emotionally-tuned coach can.

Unfortunately, while it is obvious that performance coaches (which I also refer to as strength and conditioning coaches throughout this book) have many resources to enhance their knowledge as it pertains to physiology and physical training, they lack resources to enhance their ability to create effective “buy-in” with their athletes. Every day, strength and conditioning coaches talk to their athletes about proper training and recovery, but they don't always communicate in a language or manner that the athlete understands or connects with on a personal level. Because of this, far too often athletes fail to engage at the intensity required for them to obtain the full benefits of their training. Instead, these athletes go through the motions on autopilot simply because

their training is “required” and has been routinized as part of their day-to-day sporting lifestyle. Other athletes train without a full understanding of the purpose of their program, which leads to confusion and a sub-standard effort compared to what is possible when an athlete and coach are fully aligned and working in harmony. As a result, potential is often left untapped, athletes become apathetic, and many highly skilled coaches find themselves frustrated with their inability to convince athletes to “care.” Even the best physiological programming is useless if it can’t be properly implemented.

The interpersonal dynamic between coach and athlete is central to the coaching process. Thousands of coaches, including myself, have longed for a book that explains how to master this side of the coaching equation. A book that teaches us how to enhance athlete engagement through a better knowledge of their behavior. A book that shows us how we can truly get inside the mind of an athlete to gain a clearer understanding of their perspective. A book that we can lend to an intern or young coach to assist them in lighting the internal spark within an athlete, which, of course, is every bit as important as targeting accurate loads for strength and hypertrophy. A book that explains how to manage a difficult athlete or organizational culture, or how to effectively build trust and adapt communication styles to individuals with diverse sporting, socioeconomic, and psychological backgrounds.

One might think this book would have already been written. The study of effective communication is anything but new. It spans nearly 5000 years, with classics like the *Precepts* dating back to Egypt in 2675 BC. Today, we have entire academic

departments dedicated to communication and behavioral science. Even so, when it comes to easy-to-access and practical information *geared toward maximizing athletic performance*, there is next to nothing. Sure, you might point to the “self-help” or “leadership” aisle of your local bookstore as a destination for this type of material, but such books are strong on rhetoric and idealism and weak on science, let alone the realities of working in a high-performance athletic environment. And while there are plenty of memoirs of world-championship coaches and motivational tomes relating to athletics, hardly any of them focus exclusively on human behavior and how to influence it in athletes.

This book strives to fill the gap.

I wrote this book to remind fellow strength and conditioning coaches of the critical importance of recognizing, remembering, and optimizing the human element of what we do. In order to maximally enhance performance, delivering no-nonsense, evidence-based training techniques is a must. But it’s also important that we *communicate at an elite level*, as a training program is only as good as an athlete’s willingness to buy into it.

In the pages that follow, you’ll find tools that will help you improve your ability to close the gaps that may exist between your athletes’ internal drives and your personal coaching practices. You’ll learn about the science of communication and behavior change in a manner tailored to strength and conditioning coaches. And most importantly, you’ll see via numerous examples—including from the experience of some of the world’s best performance coaches—of how this science can be applied in day-to-

day coaching. And although this book was written with the performance/strength and conditioning coach in mind, the insights uncovered transcend domains and can be put to good use by just about anyone in the business of motivating other people.

What this book will *not* do is claim to have all the answers, nor will it peddle any quick fixes. Coaching is a journey, a hands-on process in which there are no shortcuts. Along those lines, the concepts in this book are only as valuable as your willingness to act on and personalize them in a way that fits with your unique coaching style. I promise that I'm not withholding any "secrets." This book contains all of the knowledge I've amassed through research, relationships, and practice. But it's worth reiterating that this book's real value doesn't just come from reading it, but also from bringing what you learn to life in your interactions with the athletes you coach. And, as you're about to learn, the first step in doing so is understanding the destination we are striving for: becoming what I call a *Conscious Coach*.

Becoming a *Conscious Coach*

The style and skills of strength and conditioning coaches span a wide spectrum. On one extreme, there are uneducated and unregulated coaches who run amuck, applying training techniques that don't fall in line with best practices and also put athletes in harm's way. These individuals are master swindlers, peddle quick fixes, and almost always fail to see long-term results and performance improvement. On the other end of the spectrum, there are coaches who are informational cookie monsters. These coaches believe that the science of training alone is the key to their success. They think

out every last detail of their training program but cannot figure out for the life of them why their athletes never seem to stick to it.

Somewhere in between lies what I call a *Conscious Coach*. For a long time, I used the term “master coach,” but I stopped using it after reading a quote from Ernest Hemingway. “We are all apprentices in a craft in which no one ever becomes a master,” he wrote. Hemingway hits the nail on the head. There is no such thing as a “master coach.” The best coaches are the best not because they think of themselves as a master, but because they always want to keep learning. So, the term *Conscious Coach* was born.

A *Conscious Coach* is someone who sees the big picture and is able to balance the science and art of coaching. Someone who understands all the technical material but is also comfortable adapting it for a given athlete’s needs. *Conscious Coaching* is about figuring out an athlete’s purpose and matching it with an evidence-based coaching process. It’s focused on understanding what really drives our athletes from the inside out so that there is a shared enthusiasm for what we’re trying to accomplish, the level of effort and dedication necessary in order to make it happen, and how we can best surmount and adapt to the obstacles that we’ll inevitably encounter along the way. Pay close attention to conscious coaches at work and you’ll notice everything they do is strategic yet natural: from the way they alter their tone of voice, to how they explain a drill or exercise, to where they stand in relation to an athlete, to how they hold their own bodies.

Conscious coaches don’t coach to athletes—they coach *with* athletes. When a conscious coach is at work, you won’t find any evidence of an authoritarian relationship.

Conscious Coaching occurs through a connection. Conscious coaches teach athletes how to teach themselves by enhancing an athlete's awareness of the training method and its desired outcome. At the same time, they focus explicitly on building rapport with their athletes through small talk, humor, and inviting questions. Conscious coaches understand that successful training is more than just the sum of various physical drills and exercises. Success depends upon the interactions of the physical, psychological, emotional, and social components of a training program. Thus, a conscious coach must understandably be comfortable with all of those elements. It is my opinion that the attainment of this diverse skill set is what helps performance coaches turn what is otherwise a lifeless training program written on paper into a catalyst for physical transformation.

Conscious Coaching relies foremost on trust. The coach-athlete relationship needs trust to survive in the same way humans need oxygen. When you combine trust with an understanding of how to more effectively communicate with those around you, the outcome is almost always positive. Trust, combined with strong communication skills, is an alchemy for excellence. It's a mixture that allows you to gain a sense for what makes an athlete tick so you can design an evidence-based program with that information in mind and communicate it in a way that makes sense to, or strikes a chord within, the athlete. It is a skill set that current and future performance coaches will need to build and acquire if they want to truly impact lives within—and beyond—the world of sport. We spend so much time learning about the history of an athlete's body (*e.g.*, previous injuries, mobility limitations, etc.) but far too little time learning about the

history of an athlete's mind. Perhaps that's because in many ways, learning about the history of someone's body is easier than learning about the history of their mind. The latter requires trust.

Want to set yourself apart from others in the industry for the *right* reasons? It's worth remembering that in the eyes of the athlete, the successful demonstration of this balanced skill set, of the alchemy of excellence, is what will help you do so. This all makes sense to us intuitively, yet many struggle with this or lose their way at some point in their career and we often don't know why. This is in part because building trust and communicating effectively are not skill sets that are clearly defined or understood, let alone adequately taught, developed, or passed down by elite-level coaches.

Instead, we often refer to issues within this domain as the "art of coaching," pair it with vague descriptions of what that means, and then stop right there. This makes for a nice presentation and draws a decent crowd at a conference, but it does not adequately do the term justice. We act as if the *art* and the *science* are separate entities, when in reality the two are inextricably linked more than most understand. As a matter of fact, there is a science to the art itself. The roots of the "art of coaching" are found in the science of connecting with others and making the information that we share with them more meaningful. This is true whether we are meeting someone for the first time, coaching them during a training session, or consoling them in the midst of a hardship. It's also true whether we are working with an NFL MVP, an Olympic-caliber boxer, or a 55-year-old woman trying to lose a few pounds. In all of these cases, successful interventions begin with successful interactions. And in order to understand

what makes for a successful interaction, we must learn how to blend the latest insights from the academic literature regarding behavioral science into our unique coaching situations. Our ability to become conscious coaches depends on it.

TESTIMONIALS

“Conscious Coaching is a must read for those just entering the strength and conditioning profession, or simply seeking to become a better coach. Brett takes you on a journey of his pinnacles and pitfalls while weaving in relevant and real-world lessons applicable to modern-day coaching. This book leverages insights on management, leadership, learning, and social behavior from a number of prominent books and research studies. With this information, Brett creates a wonderful narrative specific to improving the performance of others while also improving one’s self.”

Brandon Marcello, PhD
High-Performance Strategist

“In this highly diluted industry, rife with negativity, internet experts and gimmicky frauds, Brett is a beacon of positivity, professionalism and authenticity. Coach John Wooden stated, “A coach has not taught until the athlete has learned.” ‘Coach as a teacher’ is a role that Brett expertly fulfills, and I am proud to call him my friend.”

Stu McMillan
Performance Director and Lead Sprint Coach
ALTIS

“Our profession gets caught up in the “numbers” of coaching. Numbers don’t have personalities or lives. Conscious Coaching exposes us to how an elite level coach thinks and performs! Devour it!”

Bob Alejo

*Assistant Athletics Director/Director of Strength and Conditioning
North Carolina State University*

“Brett has given me the best years of my football career. Athletes want a coach that not only makes them better physically, but also one that understands our world and communicates in a real way- Brett does that. For me it’s about the combination of smart training and good communication, and what I love and most of all is he is not just my coach, he is my friend. I’ll be working with him until my career is over.”

Patrick Chung

*Two-time Super Bowl Champion
Safety – New England Patriots*

“Conscious Coaching offers insight into a truly valuable leadership model in which compelling authority runs thin but influence and interpersonal skills are paramount. I’ve known Brett for over decade and his professionalism, expertise, and leadership make him the perfect person to write this book.”

Rob Bollinger

*Colonel
U.S. Army, Special Forces*

“Brett Bartholomew is one of the leaders of our profession today. He understands that the strength & conditioning industry is part ‘art’ and part ‘science’. We live in a world today where we have many internet ‘gurus’ that get the science, understand the physiology and biomechanics. However, the defining element of ‘coaching’ lies in a coach’s ability to interact with an athlete or group of athletes — understand where they are at, and how to motivate and move a group of athletes forward. Brett’s book will give you some insight into the ‘art’ of how to do this. Creating the environment to teach,

motivate, and inspire is a 'must' in today's modern coaching world. Anyone that has seen Brett coach live, or otherwise, sees his passion and energy immediately. Young coaches starting their journey into this profession (or anyone who's been in for years) would do well to soak up the experiences and learn the applied side of coaching. I can't recommend Brett's book enough. It delves into essence of what separates the good coaches from the great coaches."

Dave Tenney

High Performance Director

Seattle Sounders FC