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Citation:

Gould, D and Pierce, S and Cowburn, IHJ and Driska, A (2017) How Coaching Philosophy Drives Coaching Action : A Case Study of Renowned Wrestling Coach J Robinson. International Sport Coaching Journal / ISCJ, 4 (1). pp. 13-37. ISSN 2328-918X DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1123/iscj.2016-0052>

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**How an Elite Coach's Philosophy Drives His Coaching to Facilitate Psychological Skills  
Development of Young Athletes: A Case Study of J Robinson <sup>1</sup>**

Revised

Date of Submission: August 31, 2016

Author Note

The authors would like to thank J Robinson and his intensive wrestling staff for being so willing to have their program evaluated and the tremendous cooperation we received that made this study possible.

### **Abstract**

This case study was designed to examine the coaching philosophy of J Robinson, one of the most respected and successful NCAA wrestling coaches in the United States, and the founder of J Robison Intensive Wrestling Camps. Recent research has that shown that his camps foster short and long term psychological development in its youth participants (Authors, 2016). He has established a well-delineated system for developing psychological skills in young athletes. The researchers were therefore interested in understanding the link between his coaching philosophy and coaching behavior, and in identifying factors that have influenced the development of this coaching philosophy over his lifetime. Using a case study approach, in-depth interviews at several points in time with Robinson were conducted. These were supplemented with interviews with camp staff and observations of the camp and Robinson's coaching at the camp. Results revealed that Robinson had a clearly defined philosophy, is very intentional in terms of developing mental skills, and has clearly thought out rationales that guide his coaching actions. The coaching philosophy and approach to developing youth psychologically evolved over 35 years of implementing these camps and from Robinson's own life experiences. Implications for studying coach development and delivering coaching education are provided.

**Key Words:** Coaching, Psychological Skills Training, Coaching Philosophy

## **How an Elite Coach's Philosophy Drives His Coaching to Facilitate Psychological Skills**

### **Development of Young Athletes: A Case Study of J Robinson**

A coaching philosophy is defined as those beliefs, principles, and values that guide behavior and characterize one's coaching practice (Jenkins, 2010). Hardman and Jones (2013) also contend that any coaching philosophy should focus on four philosophical concepts: axiology (what a coach values), ethics (what a coach judges as moral or immoral), ontology (the meaning of coaching), and phenomenology (thoughts about the experience of being a coach). So in a practical sense, a coach's philosophy is his or her orientation or world view of coaching.

The development of a sound coaching philosophy has been acknowledged as being critical to coaching success (Burton & Raedeke, 2008; Hardman & Jones, 2013; Martens, 1996) because values and beliefs help coaches set priorities and guide their coaching actions and behaviors. For example, Martens (1996) contends that the emphasis coaches place on winning, fun and development influences their coaching actions and interaction with their athletes. Furthermore, if a coach has well thought out values and beliefs he or she is going to be more consistent in his or her actions. Hardman and Jones (2013) also suggest that taking the time to reflect and articulate one's coaching philosophy helps guide coaches ethical choices and the determination of what moral values to emphasize. For all these reasons, most coaching education programs use the development of a coach's philosophy as a foundation of their coaching development efforts. It is not surprising, then, that a number of researchers have shown interest in learning more about the philosophies of coaches, especially highly successful coaches (e.g., Gavazzi 2015). Nor is it surprising that coaches themselves, such as highly successful American football coach Pete Carroll, have acknowledged the importance of having a strong philosophy for guiding coaching practice (Voight & Carroll, 2006).

Several studies have examined the philosophical beliefs of entry level coaches. McCallister, Blinde and Weiss (2000) interviewed youth baseball and softball coaches with little formal training and found that they identified a wide range of values and skills they felt were important to teach their athletes. However, it was also found that these coaches had difficulty explaining how they implemented these values into their coaching and did not convey clear strategies for doing so. These coaches, then, had lofty intentions but lacked clear strategies for implementing them into their coaching.

Analyzing the written philosophies of 35 pre-service coaches Collins and Barber (2011) found that these individuals discussed coaching priorities, the meaning of success, development, expectations, fun, life lessons and relationships. However, these pre-service coaches were much less clear in identifying their specific roles in achieving these priorities. The authors concluded that more needs to be done to identify and help entry coaches identify strategies that link to their coaching priorities.

At the high school level, Collins, Gould, Lauer and Chung (2009) studied highly successful football coaches, all who had won awards for changing players' lives. They found that these coaches had well thought out coaching philosophies that placed primary importance on the personal development of their athletes. The philosophies of these coaches were also driven by clearly identified core values. Deviations from those values on the part of the athletes were not tolerated.

Following up on the Collins et al. (2009) investigation, Camiré, Trudel and Forneris (2012) replicated and extended their findings showing that nine Canadian scholastic coaches had well-developed philosophies that placed considerable importance on student athlete development. These coaches also reported that they developed their philosophies when they

realized the influence they could have on their athletes and worked hard to align their philosophies to the greater mission of their schools.

Miller, Lutz, and Fredenburg (2012) surveyed 48 male and female high school coaches averaging over 27 years of experience. These coaches reported they held high expectations of their athletes, felt establishing strong relationships was critical, emphasized the importance of character development, fairness and consistency in one's coaching.

In a series of recent articles, the practices of exemplary coaches of elite athletes, including elements of their coaching philosophies have been assessed. Yukelson and Rose (2014) reported that Russ Rose, Penn State University women's volleyball coach whose teams won 6 NCAA titles, believes it is very important to recruit athletes who fit his program, hold them accountable for their actions, focus on quality practice and pay attention to detail. He also believed that engaging in open, honest and direct communication was critical to coaching success. Employing competitive simulations to help athletes learn to deal with stress was also deemed essential for sustained success.

For Pete Carroll, his philosophy places considerable importance on instilling optimism in players and helping them develop personal responsibility for their behavior as individuals and as a team. Consequently, Coach Carroll reported that for him to accomplish these player outcomes, it is critical that he be authentic, focus on establishing relationships with players, and treat them as individuals (Voight & Carroll, 2006).

Finally, Gavazzi (2015) recently studied the coaching practices of Urban Meyer, highly successful Ohio State University football coach. Gavazzi reports the Coach Meyer's philosophy is based on setting clear expectations and guidelines for this players that emphasizes team accountability and player responsibility. Most interesting was the incentive system Meyer

developed that prompted players to progress from less disciplined and less responsible boys to men of character and responsibility. Athletes were required to meet ‘behavioral commandments’ (e.g., classroom success) as progressive rites of passage built into the football program.

While interesting, these three manuscripts focusing on highly successful coaches could not be classified as scientific reports because no detailed methods or data analysis techniques were reported. Therefore, there is a need to study outstanding coaches using more scientific approaches. As an example of an excellent and methodologically rigorous case study, Hodge, Henry and Smith (2014) presented an investigation of Graham Henry and Wayne Smith, head and assistant coaches respectively, of the New Zealand All-Blacks, the most successful rugby franchise of all time. Hodge and his colleagues clearly identified their paradigmatic stance as researchers, used multiple data sources, discussed the researcher as an instrument and enhanced the credibility of their findings by employing member checking, a critical friend and audit trail procedures. These coaches were characterized by a philosophy that shared leadership responsibility with their athletes and focused on autonomy supportive coaching. Most interesting, was the discovery that these coaches changed their coaching philosophy after experiencing a critical incident when the team was going through an unsuccessful period and engaging in undisciplined behavior like binge drinking. This caused these two coaches to focus on what became a critical part of their philosophy during their highly successful stint at the helm of the team – that is, “better people, make better All-Blacks” and focusing on the idea that athlete character leads to team success. They also changed from a more top down hierarchical coaching approach to one that was more autonomy supportive.

While these reports and studies are interesting and speak to the importance of establishing coaching philosophies and identifying key values and priorities of top coaches such

as establishing relationships, holding clear expectations and emphasizing accountability, they are not without limitations. In many of the studies coaching philosophies were examined but never explicitly defined, whereby the elements of the coaching philosophy were not delineated nor were specific results of what coaches exactly said about their philosophies (versus coaching strategies) reported. Additionally, as previously stated only a few studies reported steps taken to maintain methodological and conceptual rigor, although Hodge et al (2014) provided an excellent example for doing so.

Perhaps the most academically-oriented and rigorous critique of the coaching philosophy literature was conducted by Jenkins (2010). In addition to discussing definitions of coaching philosophy, he outlined three directions for future research. First, more research is needed. Second, more needs to be learned about how coaches develop their philosophies over time and how they are shaped by education, previous experiences and influences in the coaches' own lives. Third, the link between coaching philosophy and coaching behavior needs to be further explored. Careless and Douglas (2011) also indicate that little focus have been placed on the contexts that coaches work in, especially contextual pressure and constraints. They also emphasized how story-telling and identifying critical incidences or major events in one's life can be very helping in understanding coach's philosophies and their development. Hence, there is certainly a need to more specifically study the philosophy of coaches and, in doing so, begin to fill these gaps in the literature.

In the present study the investigators were especially interested in examining how one's coaching philosophy may play a role helping coaches both place a priority on and develop psychological skills in their athletes for sport and for life. This link is certainly not new to the coaching science literature. Researchers have found that effective high school coaches have



guiding athlete-centered philosophies for coaching life skills (Camire et al., 2012; Gould et al., 2006). Further, a number of sport scientists (e.g., Gould, 2006; Tharp & Gallimore, 1976) and popular press writers (e.g., Wooden & Carty, 2005) have examined John Wooden's Pyramid of Success as a guiding philosophy to developing athletes. In relation to specific coaching behaviors, strategies for developing psychological attributes have been identified, such as providing clear and consistent rules, direct teaching and instruction, and providing opportunities to use skills have been identified (see Gould & Carson, 2008 for review). While it is logical to prescribe the alignment of coaching philosophies with appropriate psychological and life skill development coaching strategies, the specificity and complexity of the coaching philosophy-coaching behavior link in further need of study (Jenkins, 2010; Lyle, 2002).

As one complex element of this link, Camire, Trudel, and Forneris (2012) found the development of a coaching philosophy and coaching practices is a process that evolves over time and among other things requires reflection of one's experiences. Similarly, Nash, Sproule and Horton (2008), in an interview study with 21 coaches, found that coaches who had greater levels of experience and higher qualifications displayed a greater understanding and depth of their coaching philosophy. Gilbert and Trudel (2001; 2005) have also proposed an experiential learning model, where coaches' role frames, experiential learning, access to peers and stage of learning influence reflection, development and ultimately coaching behaviors. Additionally, Erickson, Côté, and Fraser-Thomas (2007) have identified five career milestone stages (diversified early sport participation, competitive sport participation, highly competitive sport participation and introduction to coaching, part-time early coaching, and high performance head coaching) characterizing the development of a coach. Based on the previously reviewed literature a coach's experiential developmental pathway influences how he or she views their

coaching and how he or she act as coaches, and thus, researchers should seek to understand how development relates to philosophies and behaviors.

One such example of an experiential developmental pathway was discovered in the some research of one of the most successful wrestling coaches in the U.S., J Robinson, and the J Robinson Intensive Wrestling Camps<sup>1</sup> that he has organized for youth ages 14-18 for over 3 decades. The camp in particular involves intense training and focuses on mental and physical development, helping participants develop seven psychological skills and attributes including hard work, dedication, discipline, sacrifice, accountability, responsibility, and service (J Robinson Intensive Wrestling Camp, 2016). Recent research has found that the camp facilitates the short and long term development of psychological skills in its youth participants (Pierce, Gould, Cowburn, & Driska, 2016). From this study, it was clear that Robinson played a critical role in developing the skills of young athletes and has developed a well-delineated system to do so. For this reason, Robinson emerged as an individual case who could provide valuable insight about the link between coaching philosophy and coaching practice.

The overall purpose of this manuscript is to understand the link between Robinson's coaching philosophy and coaching behavior and to identify specific factors from coach education and research that have influenced the development of this coaching philosophy over his lifetime. Our research team was particularly interested in learning about his axiology (values), ontology (meaning) and phenomenology (conscious experience) as it specifically pertains to his over 30 years of experience coaching his intensive wrestling camps. Four research questions were posed: (1) what is Robinson's philosophy, especially as it relates to facilitating psychological skills in youth? (2) What actions and behaviors does Robinson use to develop psychological change? (3)

What is the link between Robinson's philosophy and his coaching actions? (4) How has Robinson coaching philosophy developed over time to guide his coaching practice?

## **Method**

### **Case Study Design**

To understand the link between a coaching philosophy and coaching practices, a single case study of Robinson and his intensive wrestling camp was deemed an appropriate design. A case study is not a methodological choice, rather a choice of what is to be studied (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), and a design to catch the complexities of Robinson and his coaching philosophy and actions (Stake, 2005). The case study design utilized multiple sources of data grounded in an interpretive paradigm to understand and illuminate the meaning of Coach Robinson's experiences and behaviors (Smith & Sparkes, 2012).

### **Participant/Cases**

**Coach J Robinson.** The case study focused on Robinson who is the owner, founder, and director of J Robinson Intensive Wrestling Camps. He was born June 7, 1946 in San Diego, California. His mother was a secretary and his father was a highway engineer. Robinson's father was an All-American hurdler. He played football and wrestled in high school, and went on to wrestle at Oklahoma State University (OSU). In 1969, Robinson was an ROTC Distinguished Military Graduate from OSU. After college he attended U.S. Army Airborne and Ranger School, as well as Jungle Warfare School (Honor Graduate). Robinson served in Vietnam War in 1971.

Although Robinson wrestled at Oklahoma State, he quit over a disagreement with his coach his senior year. He later came back and helped coach the team. Robinson continued wrestling after college and earned four national wrestling titles (2 freestyle, 2 Greco Roman) and

was a World Team Member (4<sup>th</sup> in 1970; 5<sup>th</sup> in 1971). Robinson wrestled in the 82 kg weight class in the Greco Roman competition and placed 4<sup>th</sup> in the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich.

Robinson got his first formal coaching position when he became an assistant coach at the University of Iowa and held that position from 1976 to 1984. He left coaching for two years after a quarrel with the athletic department over administrative control of the summer intensive camp. He re-entered coaching in 1986 when he became the head coach at the University of Minnesota, the position he holds today. Robinson served as the head coach of the Pan American Games wrestling team in 1983 and has been a four time Olympic Team Assistant Coach.

Robinson is currently the head wrestling coach at the University of Minnesota where he has guided his teams to three NCAA Division I wrestling championship and numerous top five finishes. He is a five time National Coach of the year and is a seven time Big 10 conference Coach of the year. Robinson is also the owner, founder and director of J Robinson intensive wrestling camps. He is married to Sue Rubens and has two adult children from a former marriage.

Robinson started the intensive wrestling camps while an assistant coach at the University of Iowa in an effort to show how the highly successful University of Iowa wrestlers trained. At the time of the study, Robinson was in his 37<sup>th</sup> year of directing the intensive camps. These overnight camps last either 10, 14 or 28 days. Each camp typically involves approximately 200 wrestlers ages 14 to 18. The particular camp observed for this investigation was 14 days in duration and had 225 participants. Two hundred and five wrestlers completed the entire 14 days of the camp and 185 earned the coveted "I did it t-shirts" signifying the accumulated a specified number of points which are earned by meetings certain standards and observing specific camp rules (e.g., came to sessions on time, had a filled water bottle at all sessions). Like all intensive

camps this camp operate on “the principle that intense challenge bring about significant change” and are based on the protocol of US Army Ranger School.

**Camp support staff.** While the focus of this study is on Robinson and interviews with him were the primary source of data, he was not the only participant. Four camp support staff also participated in the study to provide additional interpretations of Robinson’s philosophy and practices. Staff included the 60 year old male camp assistant director who had been involved in running the camp for 30 years, a 25 male camp coach who was a collegiate wrestling coach and former collegiate wrestling national champion, a 20 year camp counselor who was a current collegiate wrestler, and a 22 year female athletic trainer who was in her third year working at the wrestling camp.

### **Sources of Data<sup>2</sup>**

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the case of Robinson, multiple sources of data were utilized (Hodge et al., 2014). Thus, this case study sought to examine, observe, and understand the meaning of the Robinson and his coaching from multiple viewpoints. The primary source of data included in-depth interviews with Robinson, while the secondary source of data included interviews with camp support staff, observations of the J Robinson Intensive Camp, and the educational materials used at the camp. Specific details of each source of data are provided in Table 1. The case study data collection was conducted in three phases over a six month period, occurring two weeks prior to one of the J Robinson intensive wrestling camps (pre-camp), during 14 days of the camp (during camp), and six months following the camp (post-camp).

**Robinson interviews.** A series of interviews were conducted with Robinson to address all four research questions and understand his perspective of his coaching philosophy, behaviors,

and development. The pre-camp interview was conducted two weeks prior to the wrestling camp, and followed a semi-structured interview guide and focused on understanding the camp, his coaching philosophy and coaching behaviors (e.g., what are your goals for the camp?). During the wrestling camp, five interviews were conducted with Robinson, using observation-driven questions about his coaching philosophy and behaviors in current time (e.g., why did you give athletes a lecture on personal responsibility?). Approximately six months following the camp, Robinson also participated in two additional life history interviews. In the first interview, a developmental timeline was drawn out on paper by Robinson. He was prompted to identify, write down, and explain the key moments in his life that impacted his development as a coach and as a person with follow-up questions asked (e.g., how did your experience as an army ranger influence your coaching?) . This approach was designed to address research question four, and understand Robinson's life story, through his personal perspective (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). In the second interview, questions were designed based on literature related to coaching philosophies and coaching behaviors for athletic performance and positive youth development (e.g., Collins et al., 2009; Jenkins, 2010) to gain further insight about how he developed the camp, his behaviors, and the philosophy behind his approach (e.g., how would you describe your own personal principles and values?) . While both interviews were semi-structured, they were conversational in nature to allow emergent ideas from Robinson.

**Support staff interviews.** Four interviews were conducted with the support staff to gain multiple viewpoints of Robinson as a coach and person, and his philosophies and actions (e.g., how would you describe Robinson as a person? What are Robinson's goals during the camp?). The assistant camp director, two coaches, and the head athletic trainer were purposively

selected after being identified by Robinson as being experienced as support staff for the camp and were interviewed during the 14 day camp.

**Camp observations and materials.** During the 14 day camp, two researchers were embedded in the camp who had training and experience in qualitative research. Observations were non-participatory and focused on the second and third research questions, examining Robinson's specific coaching philosophy, actions and behaviors. The direct observations consisted of Robinson's camp lectures and active coaching sessions, as well as some coach-athlete interactions and coach/counselor interactions, totaling 524 minutes. At times when Robinson was not directly coaching, observations were made from a holistic viewpoint, generally attuned to the broader context of the camp and its activities (Patton, 2002). The two researchers participated in regular informal reflective discussions and memo writing related to objective observations and interpretive reflections of Robinson's actions, behaviors, and interactions at the camp (Patton, 2002). Daily field notes included descriptive accounts of events that occurred at the camp, and initial interpretations of Robinson's coaching philosophy and behaviors. In addition to the observations, copies of the educational camp materials (e.g., athlete journals, the camp 'story of the day' posters, list of camp rules) were also collected by the researchers.

### **Data Analysis**

Following the collection of all sources of data, all of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and field notes and camp materials were collated. The first phase of the analysis focused on the eight interviews with Robinson and addressed all four research questions. The interviews with Robinson were compiled in chronological order (pre-camp, during camp, and post-camp) and two of the researchers engaged in a thematic/categorical content analysis

(Sparkes & Smith, 2014) This analysis directed the examination of the content of Robinson's thoughts, perspectives and experiences, and allowed patterns in his narrative to emerge (Sparkes & Smith, 2014; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashlach, & Zilber 1998). The two researchers read and re-read the interviews to get a scope and context of the key experiences and perspectives from Robinson. Each researcher wrote initial thoughts and then individually identified, and coded tags to statements that related to the four research questions. These raw data responses were then organized into patterns of like responses (e.g., belief that youth are "hard learners", youth need to be self-motivated to learn) to create more meaningful groupings or themes (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). During this phase, researchers identified the beliefs, behaviors and life events that had the most meaning for Robinson and that he interpreted as most important. The two researchers then met to reach consensus on the themes and sub-themes that best represented the data from Robinson's interviews. Points of contention were discussed and agreement was reached to create summary labels for each grouping (e.g., beliefs about youth learners). As a key step in the case study analysis, a rich story was created for each theme and sub-theme to ensure the participant's full story was captured and not fragment (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

The second phase of the analysis focused on the support staff interviews, observations and camp materials to address the second and third research questions. These secondary sources of data were analyzed deductively to find support, or to challenge the perspectives from the Robinson interviews. All support staff interview transcripts, field notes and camp materials were reviewed by one researcher who identified and recorded similarities and differences from the thematic outcomes from the first phase of the analysis. To ensure the accuracy of the case study, the thematic outcomes related to Robinson's coaching philosophy and coaching actions were required to be supported by at least one secondary source of data (i.e., support staff interviewee,



researcher observation, or camp material) to be included in the final results. . For example, behavioral consequences for youth emerged in the thematic analysis and was supported by observed when Robinson enforced camp rules and support staff reflections on Robinson's goals and behaviors. This analysis was critically reviewed by the other researchers with points of contention discussed and evidence of support clarified. As a form of member checking, the preliminary findings were sent to Robinson to ensure the accuracy of the findings, specifically related to the timing, details, and specific of life events (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). His suggestions were minor.

## **Results**

To present the case study of Robinson's coaching philosophy and coaching practices, his development as a coach will be presented first. This will be followed by a description of his personality. Robinson's coaching philosophy will then be presented and, finally, the link between his coaching philosophy and coaching actions delineated.

### **The Development of Robinson as a Coach**

Our investigative team was interested in identifying the major influences that Robinson identified in his development as a person, and relative to his coaching philosophy and approach to coaching. Across the various interviews we conducted with Robinson, a number of individuals and institutions that influenced his development in general, and his approach to coaching in particular were identified. Each of these will be discussed below.

**Parents and family.** Robinson identified his parents as having a major influence on his development. Specifically, he learned about unconditional love from them and felt that his mother and father modeled a hard work ethic and taught him that work is a virtue ("if you can outwork 90% of people you can be in the top of everything"). They also gave their children

responsibilities in terms of varied chores such as weeding between the fruit trees in the yard or helping build a summer get-away cabin. This not only reinforced the value of hard work and having responsibilities for Robinson but it also taught him that there were consequences for not meeting one's responsibilities. In his words, the most feared words for his brothers and himself were "wait until your father gets home".

**Sport participation.** Robinson played high school football as a freshman but had to sit out his sophomore and junior years because of his poor grades. He wanted to play his senior year so he studied and was able to do so. This experience reinforced the importance of consequences for him and the importance of learning from failure. He also wrestled in high school and was not initially successful but worked hard and later gained considerable success, winning what would be comparable to a state championship his junior year. He indicated that the recognition that he received from his high school coaches helped him see the importance of a work ethic.

At the 1972 Olympics Robinson roomed with Dan Gable, one of the most successful wrestlers of all time who was viewed as one of the hardest working athletes in any sport (Gifford & Mangel, 1976). He credits that experience with helping "make connections" about what it took to be the best and motivated him to "get to the top of the mountain" of success. Lastly, Robinson was devastated by coming in 4<sup>th</sup> at the Olympics, feelings that lingered with him for over 20 years. However, after attending an Ernie Larson psychology seminar in his 40's, he came to understand the importance of time, reflection, and what is really important. He indicated that he realized "it's not about the destination, it's about the journey."

**Coaches.** Robinson credits a number of coaches with influencing both his personal development and development as a coach. His high school coaches rewarded him for his work ethic and helped instill the attitude of "be the first one to practice and the last one to leave."

Robinson's high school wrestling coach also taught him that "there is no such thing as bad kids, there's only bad coaches," while another high school coach believed in him and in doing so, "became a huge deal in my life." Finally, his college wrestling coach, Myron Roderick, instilled in Robinson the idea that you must have a philosophy for wrestling and life, which may explain why he is such a philosophically driven coach. Robinson constantly talks about the importance of "putting the pieces of the puzzle (of wrestling and life) together."

**The military.** The military was a major influence on Robinson. First, his involvement in the service taught him that people were the common denominator in all problems. Interestingly, Robinson thought the military was "so screwed up" and then when he was in the university he realized it was the same. The common denominator for him was understanding people – what motivates them and how they make decisions. His Army Ranger School experience was especially powerful as evidenced in the following excerpt.

Ranger School had a huge impact...61 days at 19.5 hours a day drove skills into you. Ranger School is still influencing me today. It stretches you like a rubber band but you never return to the same size.

Robinson credits Ranger School as changing his life and feels it still influences him today, especially in his coaching and the design of the intensive camp experience. It taught him the importance of establishing standards, the need to have time and intensity to drive in skill learning, the need to reward those who work as it makes them feel special, and that people learn from stress and from mistakes. One of his commanders, Major Uswa, would not accept excuses for failed assignments and would always stress the need to "take the blinders off" and find a way to get the job done. This was a lesson instilled in Robinson. A Major Mathews was also a significant influence in that he taught Robinson how to be a mentor. In Robinson's words, the

major was “a hard ass...but someone I could talk to.” Finally, his involvement in the Vietnam War resulted in four lessons about understanding people and situations: (1) understand who you are working for; (2) understand the enemy; (3) the other side dictates the rules; and, (4) always maneuver yourself in a position where your decisions determine the outcomes. These military experiences, then, helped shaped Robinson’s assumption about human nature (which will be discussed later in the coaching philosophy section of the results) and what is needed to motivate people which in turn helped shape the way he coaches and designed the intensive camp experience.

**Coaching experiences.** His own experiences as a coach taught Robinson a number of things. When he had a difference of opinion with the Iowa Athletic Administration over how the summer intensive camps ran (at the time the camps were run through the university), he elected to resign which resulted in two years away from coaching with the exception of running the summer intensive camps outside the university. J indicated that during the two years away from coaching he lost his personal purpose (“my deal is in coaching” and I lost it). At the same time, that experience taught him how to stick to his principles and highlighted the differences between friendships and acquaintances as some people maintained contact with him while others were no longer interested after he resigned his position. Finally, when he returned to coaching he indicated that he found purpose in “trying to find ways to find an edge” on his competitors.

**Significant others.** A number of significant others influenced Robinson. When he did not believe in himself in high school, Robinson indicated that a girlfriend had a major influence on him because she believed in him and supported all of his athletic and academic endeavors which provided a source of confidence for him. In college, Robinson’s roommate and champion wrestler, Bobby Douglas, further reinforced the idea that hard work will pay off someday.

Douglas also taught him that life is made up of “blue moments – times when you are more alive” and you need to find those moments. This helped Robinson continue to work hard and search for moments and environments to excel in. The idea for holding intensive wrestling camps was first conceptualized with a roommate from Iowa as they thought kids needed to learn how to develop a “how to train” attitude. Originally the focus was on teaching a work ethic but over the years it evolved to include other psychological skills, which today are the J7.

Later in life, an investment manager friend taught him about finance. These lessons were transferred into the camp curriculum, as researchers witnessed a talk on finances and how interest rates work, where Robinson explained the notion of compounding interest rates to the wrestlers warning them not to be at the mercy of the credit card companies and banks. More recently, a woman named Joyce Bardyce helped Coach Robinson realize that service to others is a choice and a learned skill. This spurred him to teach about service in his wrestling camps and associate his intensive camps with a nonprofit organization that raises monies to surgically repair facial deformities in impoverished children, named the Smile Network. One of the reasons he selected this charity is because he feels empathy is hard for adolescents to understand but it becomes visible when they see photos of a child’s deformed face repaired and know that the monies they donated were the reason why.

**Key life experiences.** Robinson raised some life experiences that he believed shaped his views and behaviors. First, while growing up he felt his participation in the boy scouts taught him the skill of responsibility. A self-proclaimed marginal student in high school, Robinson indicated that he did not see the value of education, although now he has become a lifelong learner and is constantly trying to identify ways he can improve as a coach. This has influenced him to help the young athletes he works with understand the purpose behind what they are

learning. During the two years he did not coach, Robinson was involved in a real-estate company, and that experience reinforced that human nature is the same in all environments. This motivated him to go back to coaching, where he “found his deal” and could help young people understand human nature. Finally, in his forties, Robinson attended a leadership seminar that he credits for teaching him about how others develop identity and self-esteem. In Robinson’s words you “gotta believe in the process, and trust the process.”

**History/reading.** One thing that emerged from multiple sources of data was how reading about history, great leaders and leadership influenced Robinson. For example, he recommended that the investigative team read, *Gates of Fire* by Steven Pressfield (1998), a novel that discussed Spartan life and their unshakable virtues against the backdrop of 300 Spartans heroic stand at the Battle of Thermopylae. He also discussed *Passion of Command: The Moral Imperative of Leadership* – a book by Marine Colonel B. P. McCoy. Moreover, Robinson frequently talks about historical books and is especially fond of Civil War and World War II historical figures. He does not limit his reading to these books, however. Robinson has read an eclectic mixture of leadership and self-help books like *Chicken soup for the soul* (2013) that gave him the idea for having the campers write thank you letters to people who helped them. The list would also include the *Bible*.

### **Robinson’s Personality**

Robinson described himself as a high achiever who wants to pursue excellence. This was reflected when he was discussing the camp and indicated, “I don’t want to waste my time with people who don’t want to be good; don’t want to be a baby sitter at a five day camp.” However, his focus is not just on competitive excellence but personal excellence helping each young wrestler to become the best he or she is capable of being. Robinson is also a highly confident,

take charge individual as reflected when he said “It may sound arrogant but I think I’ve already found it” in regards to knowing how to better understanding people. At the same time, he is humble and does not brag about his many accomplishments.

One of the most interesting things we learned about Robinson was his somewhat paradoxical nature. At first glance he appears to be a hard, militaristic and controlling coach. However, after digging deeper it becomes clear that he is very caring and service oriented, and does not believe in controlling others, only bringing the best out of them. In fact, when asked to describe Robinson’s personality, all four of the support staff interviewed were quick to respond. “He’d go out of his way to help somebody”, one coach said, “without question, anything, he’s there for you”, stated another. Each member of the support staff emphasized the caring and empathetic support for them as professionals and as people. With the wrestlers, he constantly talks about learning to challenge themselves and learning to improve themselves by “1% every day”. His service orientation was reflected in his comments when he told us that “I have been given a lot so I have an obligation to give a lot back.” In addition, throughout the camp he constantly talked about and gave athletes choices. There is also a stubborn side to Robinson. He self-describes it as being more focused or unwavering when it comes to standards. He also told us that he can initially resistant to change but in the end changes (“sometimes I think about it a day and then change my mind”).

Finally, Robinson is an extremely reflective individual who understands the importance of time on learning what is important and relevant. Quoting Mohammed Ali, Robinson said “the man who views the world at age 50 the same way he did at 20 has wasted 30 years.” A camp coach stated, “[Robinson] is always thinking, his mind is always turning.” Robinson, then, is constantly thinking about ways to improve himself and his coaching and told us that “reflection

allows you to see where you want to be.” This is especially true when it comes to the intensive camp where he is always trying to think about ways to better accomplish its goal of creating an environment where youth are developing psychological skills through direct teaching and experiential learning. For example, during the first years of the camp, he was discussing goals with campers who started to write them down on used pizza boxes. This prompted Robinson to reflect on his goals, study the principles of effective goal setting and to emphasize goal setting in his lectures and create a camp workbook for campers to use to set goals through and following the camp. Additionally, after having the campers write thank you letters, he recognized that he had not done so. This spurred him to do so.

### **Coaching Philosophy**

Robinson has a clear and well-defined philosophy of coaching. This philosophy is depicted in the first three columns of Figure 1. An inspection of this figure reveals that his philosophy began with basic or first assumptions that he has about society and human nature and about himself and his purpose in life. Guiding principles also emerged from the conversations both about teaching young people and young people as well as how young people learn. Finally, the specific psychological skills and dispositions he feels are most important outcomes for young people to develop were identified.

**Assumptions.** We were able to garner information about Robinson’s life assumptions relative to society, human nature, and his role and perceived purpose in life. These assumptions serve as foundation Coach Robinson’s philosophy and consequently dedicating himself to the development of the summer camps.

***About society and human nature.*** Robinson had strong views about how society and human nature influence the development of young people. He felt contemporary society does not



give young people a chance to fail and that members of society are afraid to do anything to challenge young people. Robinson also believed that society is trying to make everyone feel positive, but in his mind this is a mistake because not everyone will be similarly rewarded in the workplace and life. A lack of societal standards, in Robinson's mind, creates weak people because as societal standards are not enforced, many young people are not developing the characteristics needed to cope with the challenges of life. In short, Robinson feels that society is not taking the time to teach young people important life lessons. He extends these assumptions to the educational system where he feels there is failure to teach fundamental skills like responsibility. According to Robinson, this occurs because young people are not given the skills to be responsible and do not experience consequences for their actions. This results in little behavior change. These thoughts are best reflected in the following quote:

The worse thing we do for kids is not enforcing our standards. Today, in high school, if you take a test three times and fail they still graduate you – makes no sense. We have a whole society of weak people because we don't want standards.

Relative to assumptions about human nature, Robinson felt that adolescence is a time where people are very open to change, but in the current educational system, young people go their own way because they do not have people they can trust. They are also given unrealistic expectations that everyone can be good at everything so they do not know what is important.

***About self and purpose.*** Robinson was totally committed to coaching because, in his words, "I found my deal in coaching." Expanding on this point, he indicated that he sees himself as a "planter of seeds" and his purpose in life is "to plant the field (develop young people through wrestling) and get the seeds in the ground and plant not one but 100 acres (develop 100's of young people through his camps)."

Relative to his own development as a coach, he indicated he is very good at taking what other people do and making it work for his situation. For example, he explained his extensive reading on imagery and visualization and subsequently included daily imagery sessions for young athletes in the camp. Robinson also indicated that reflection was critical in this process as it allows him to see who he is, where he has been and where he wants to be. Lastly, he emphatically indicated that in his educational role he “will comprise on strategy but NEVER on the principles.” These principles are what he has built the intensive camps around.

**Guiding principles about teaching and learning.** Along with general assumptions, Robinson detailed the philosophical underpinnings of his coaching by identifying guiding principles about teaching young people, and about how young people learn. Robinson felt that it is absolutely essential that young people need to learn, not only sport skills, but life skills from their participation in athletics. He also felt that a key to teaching young people was realizing that everyone wants to feel special. In his words, “you don’t want them to be better than anybody but you want them to be different or special.” He also felt that people are in charge of their own destinies but are resistant to change. People must take responsibility for their own behavior but without consequences, they do not change.

Robinson was also adamant in saying that “not every kid can be saved,” relative to teaching life skills, and some will not be interested or ready to learn. For this reason, he focuses his attention on the youth who want to learn. For example, if a camper does not put in a full effort during the camp he does not spend extra time motivating him or her. Robinson also conveyed that the best coaches “invest in kids,” lead with their boot tracks (model appropriate skills and actions), are trusted, and individualize their coaching, while at the same time, create general formulas for behavior change. Coaches also need to keep the teaching of psychological

skills simple, in what he refers to as “giving them (the campers) the answers to the test.” Athletes learn by doing as actions speak louder than words, according to Robinson. He supported his argument by saying that the Army found that resilience lectures do not work. Finally, he felt that change is a long-term process and extends beyond the camp experience. He stated that his role in the camp was to constantly “drive in the skills” using rote-repetition, with an intended outcome that the life skills “become a part of their whole identity.”

While discussing his views on teaching, Robinson repeatedly demonstrated a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), making statements such as, “there is always a better way to do something and as a coach you must constantly search for it.” He also indicated that the camp has been his laboratory for learning how to change young people’s behavior where he could control what was taught, the environment (something very important for behavior change), and test different ways to improve the system and his coaching, something he does to this day.

Finally, Robinson conveyed a number of his wide-ranging beliefs and guiding principles about learning. He stated that everything is a skill and young people learn through a process that involves choice (“kids are in charge of their own destiny”), having mentors, learning by doing, through repetition and by experiencing the consequences for their actions. Robinson also recognized that youth can be “hard learners” in that they may be resistant, something he identified in himself as a youth. He also felt that youth must learn to listen, but even when they listen they can remember no more than seven things. Youth fail to learn when things are easy. In Robinson’s words “they don’t learn anything when it’s easy.” For this reason he believes that some stress is essential as youth learn. Lastly, Robinson feels that there are fundamental skills that all youth must learn (See J7 below) and after these are learned “they are only limited by their imagination.” He also stated that “the more you learn, the more you want to learn.”

**Core Psychological Skills to Develop in Youth Athletes.** Robison expressed a number of clear beliefs about the fundamentals of psychological development in young people.

Specifically, he has identified seven fundamental psychological skills that he feels are essential for young people to develop. Dubbed as the J7 by his wife, Sue Rubens, these include: (1) hard work, (2) dedication, (3) discipline, (4) sacrifice, (5) accountability, (6) responsibility, and (7) service. Interestingly, when he started the intensive camps, the focus was exclusively on hard work but over the years he identified the additional skills of the J7 that he felt young people needed to develop to be successful both on the wrestling mat and in life.

### **Coaching Actions and Behaviors**

Figure 1 also contains a summary of the coaching actions and behaviors Robison uses to implement his coaching philosophy. This begins with the implementation of his “J7” teaching system that he discussed in interviews and was further supported by observations, support staff interviews and camp materials. In addition, a camp culture is created that helps facilitate athlete behavior change occur. Finally, Robison implements intentional strategies for teaching the mental skills he wants camp participants to develop.

**The “J7” and behavioral change system.** Coach Robison has a system for teaching the “J7” and facilitating psychological development (Pierce et al., 2016), that he is committed to and confident in. One camp coach stated, “he knows he can change people’s lives through the camp”. This model is summarized here to highlight the clear and explicit links between his philosophical assumptions, guiding beliefs and coaching actions (See Figure 1 column 4). To create behavior change, the model stated that youth: (1) need to understand that all behavior has *consequences*; (2) must take *responsibility* for his or her behavior; (3) need to make *choice to change* their behavior; (4) must *produce the change* in their behavior; (5) need to continue this new behavior

to create a new *habit*; and (6) experiencing habitual change that will lead to positive behavioral *consequences*. For example, at the beginning of the wrestling camp, campers were informed of the requirement to maintain cleanliness in their communal bathrooms and that there would be consequences if the rules were not followed. After a complaint from the cleaning staff about the bathroom conditions on the fourth day, the campers were punished with a fitness session at 5:30am the following day. After enforcing the consequential punishment, Robinson verbally challenged the campers to take responsibility for the cleanliness of the bathroom and emphasized that each individual must make a choice to keep the bathroom clean. He and the camp staff were observed continually monitoring and discussing the cleanliness of the bathroom, and explicitly stated the need to develop the habit of cleanliness for youth at the camp and for when they returned home. Through many teachable moments at the camp, Robinson would repeat the key words of consequence, responsibility, choice, and habit to attempt to produce change in the young participants. Robinson stated that this was a necessary behavior to “drill in the messages” to the campers.

**Camp climate creation.** Robinson also noted on numerous occasions that his end goal is not to teach specific skills per se, but rather to create an immersive, controlled, and monitored environment where the “J7” skills can be fostered simultaneously as a mindset. This system was based on his belief that young people learn by doing, that it was important to learn under stress, and that there are always consequences for one’s behavior. As can be depicted in column 5 of Figure 1 teachable moments were created through challenges Robinson designed and the camps intense daily physical training regiment.

**Intentional psychological skills teaching strategies.** Robinson further noted that young people learn best by doing if they are primed with talks and if teachable moments can be

recognized. These young wrestlers were not just thrown into challenging situations. They received intentional daily mental skills training (See column 6 of Figure 1). For example, observations showed that Robinson led relaxation and visualization sessions each day of camp so that young athlete could learn to better control their mind during the camp, had campers discuss and identify future sporting and life events to use the imagery, and campers were provided with a “story of the day” about a prisoner of war who used imagery to stay positive and improve his golf game. These observations aligned with Coach Robinson’s belief that behaviors change occurs when young athletes can match words with behaviors and experiences. Our embedded investigators noted those teachable moments were often intentionally created by the intense nature of the camp and the many challenges that are laid into the system at appropriate times. It was evident that many campers wanted to quit and return home in the first three days because of the shock of the physical and psychological challenge. Robinson was clearly prepared for this response and did not try to persuade campers to stay and continue the camp. Rather, he acknowledged the stress and emphasized they could choose how they were perceiving and framing the experience, and if they wanted to stay. He stated they could quit and go home, or “conceive, believe, and achieve” and take a positive approach to persevere through the challenge.

Additional evidence of Robinson viewing psychological development of young athletes more as a mindset versus an isolated activity came during the intense physical training sessions. For example, he would constantly reference the mental skills the athletes had learned, imploring the young athletes to use them. It was also interesting to note that during camp interviews, Robinson would often automatically start teaching the interviewer life skills (e.g., when the investigators asked him a question about how a session went he would first answer with “you tell me, you were there... were you not paying attention?”). Coach Robinson was observed as always

being in “coach-mode.” His continual challenge to his athletes, coaches and even researchers, highlights his embedded desire and perceived role to help individuals grow and learn.

**Robinson and his coaching staff as a change agents.** While not depicted in Figure 1, the importance of Coach Robinson and his staff as a change agents must be recognized. Whereas the same system is used in each intensive camp, when exactly components are “laid in” depends on Robinson’s reading of the particular context and where the young athletes are in the process. Because the camp consists of a system of interconnected parts the timing of when things occur is paramount as reflected in the follow quote.

Given them certain talks on certain days – redefining what ‘hurt’ means, reframing thoughts to take action, and a gradual improvement focus...Match talks to what is going on in their heads...Lay it in a certain way. The foundation first, once you have the foundation add to it...It doesn’t do you any good to tell them to be tough the first day they are scared to death.

Observations of, and discussions with Robinson, made it clear to the investigative team he believes to best teach these skills it is essential the young people be held to strict standards, be given a clear choice to decide what they want to do, and that ultimately they are responsible for their behavior. For this reason it is important for the staff to understand how to make each camper feel special, while at the same time maintaining high standards for effort and performance. Robinson regularly discussed the importance of a caring and trained staff, and held staff meetings during the camp to reinforce this notion. In particular, he sought a staff who can establish credibility and earn the campers trust, recognize the need to intentionally teach mental skills, keep mental skills lessons relatable and simple, uphold camp standards, provide contingent rewards and punishments, and give relatable examples and quotes that make key

lessons and mental strategies easy to remember. Robinson also feels that hard work is essential for success and constantly talked to the wrestlers about “improving 1% every day.”

Finally, while Robinson and his staff employed a systematic and intentional system in his camps that we believe is transferable to other coaching contexts, the importance of Robinson himself must be recognized. He attends every camp and is highly involved. Robinson is a charismatic figure who models the behaviors that he is trying to foster, conveys powerful stories of his own successes and failures in life and the lessons learned from those experiences, and provides colorful examples and metaphors to help the wrestlers remember key lessons. Robinson clearly has considerable credibility with the campers because of his status as a highly successful college coach, former elite athlete, and Special Forces officer. At times he appears to be a scary figure (e.g., old Marine drill sergeant) while at the same time displaying his own vulnerabilities (e.g., how he had an unsuccessful first marriage) and showing empathy and care (e.g., he tells the wrestlers he will push them because he loves them and wants them to develop as wrestlers and people). While we did not measure Robinson’s emotional intelligence, we were struck by his ability to understand young athletes, read them, and know when to integrate the components of his system in at the appropriate times.

### **The Link between Coaching Philosophy and Coaching Practice**

Robinson’s intentionality in developing psychological skills for performance enhancement and life skills development (Pierce et al., 2016), and his ability to provide a rationale for his coaching actions was repeatedly noted by all four investigators involved in this study. In fact, our research team never met a coach who could provide such clear rationales for his coaching actions.



There were strong links between Robinson's coaching philosophy and his coaching actions. For instance, there were numerous examples in the camp where Robinson adhered to his high standards. First, he was programmed to live his philosophy and the messages he shared. One summer, Robinson underwent extensive knee surgery that included complications. While he was instructed to rest, Robinson insisted on attending a camp, on crutches, to show the campers the need to persist through adversity. Through his coaching of youth athletes, the links were clearly evident. Interviews revealed Robinson's assumptions that society and the school system does hold young people to high standards and allow them to fail, and his guiding believes that standards must be clearly laid out and must be maintained. Observations revealed that Robinson, explicitly stated that wrestlers who gave maximum effort and discipline (e.g., adhered to camp rules like wearing a clean t-shirt to every session, being on time) were rewarded while those who failed in these efforts were penalized. He stated that he was "giving them the answers to the test" in that the formula to success at the camp was clear. Subsequently, regardless of the circumstances (e.g., injury, illness), wrestlers would not be awarded the coveted "I did it" t-shirt (something that is highly desired by all campers) unless they showed the required effort and discipline and scored the required number of points to earn it.

Robinson was strong in his belief that youth were in charge of their own destinies. This was clearly conveyed to the campers on repeated occasions with Robinson and his staff constantly emphasizing that the young wrestlers have choices. For example, they had the choice to quit or not to quit when highly fatigued during hard training. Researchers observed discussions where campers would discuss quitting a session or even leaving the camp with Robinson. He responded by reinforcing that life was full of difficult choices, and leaving or

staying was their own choice. He would remind them that leaving would have consequences where they would miss valuable learning and personal growth opportunities.

Finally, as a key tenet of his philosophy, Robinson firmly believed the young people “learn by doing” and learn through challenging experiences. Subsequently, he conveyed this belief by sharing anecdotes of this experiential learning during the camp. He discussed experiences of overcoming adversity through loss at the Olympic level and learning discipline and hard work through the challenges of Army Ranger school. The camp design then systematically increased the stress and challenging wrestling tasks and camp schedule for young athletes to overcome, while at the same time, Robinson would remind them to use the mental skills they had learned to cope with these challenges. The camp structure and Robinson’s actions reinforced the guiding principles in his coaching philosophy.

### **Discussion**

This in-depth case study reinforces the importance of having coaches establish well thought coaching philosophies, something that has been stressed in the coaching education literature (Jenkins, 2010; Martens, 2012) and has been associated with coaching success (Collins et al., 2009; Camire et al., 2012). Moreover, the narrative approach prompted the identification of Robinson’s core values and assumptions about society, his purpose, teaching and learning, and showed the clear links between his autobiographical experiences, his coaching philosophy, and his coaching practices. Establishing this wider perspective beyond sport might be interesting for coaching educators to explore when helping less experienced coaches establish their philosophies.

Not only did Robinson have a clear coaching philosophy but the philosophical principles identified were linked to his coaching practices. He was very intentional in his coaching being

able to convey a clear rationale for the vast majority of his actions. This is similar to what Gould and his colleagues (2006, 2007) reported with award winning high school football coaches who were found to link their philosophical beliefs with their coaching actions. Robinson's approach differed, however, in that he not only developed links between philosophical beliefs and coaching actions, but developed an entire system for developing mental skills in young athletes. Developing a system to implement one's coaching philosophy was also reported by Gavazzi (2014) in his study of Ohio State football coach Urban Meyers and reported in Meyer's (2015) *Above the line* book. In fact, Meyer (2015) discusses how important it is for a good leader/coach to set clear standards, be straightforward and demand accountability with one's athletes. He also emphasizes how athletes need to live their life "above the line" meaning that they must be purposeful and intentional in what they do and avoid being resistant and impulsive. These concepts are very similar to Robinsons and suggest that there may be some factors common in coaching excellence.

What was particularly interesting about Robinson's system was that it was rigid enough to be replicated across different camps while it was flexible enough to be individualized. This individualized approach to coaching within a system is consistent to what has been found in other elite coaches (Kimiecik & Gould, 1987). Our study of Robinson also supports many of the recent findings of Mallett and Coulter (2016) resulting from their in depth case study of the personality of a successful Olympic coach. Specifically, like the Olympic coach they studied, Robinson had a clear vision of what he was trying to produce and core values that framed his coaching actions. He also demonstrated a similar thirst for knowledge and motivation to continuously learn. Robinson demonstrated an obsessive passion for his craft, as well as high achievement motivation and power strivings associated with this agency to influence change in

athletes he coaches. Lastly, it was interesting that like the Olympic coach who was the focus of Mallett and Coulter's (2016) study, Robinson seems to have had a parallel redemption theme of pursuing what it takes to achieve excellence as a coach based on his 4<sup>th</sup> place Olympic finish as an athlete.

Consistent with the previous literature (Gould et al., 2007), Robinson viewed the development of psychological skills in young athletes more as a mindset (a 24-7 vocation) than an isolated activity. Pointedly, he believed that the J7 were skills he could simultaneously develop for sport and for life. This certainly suggests the best coaches do not view life and psychological skills development as separate activities from their other coaching duties. All those duties are all integrated. This finding has implications for coaching education in that the presentation of psychological skills coaching strategies may not be best taught as divorced from general coaching. They should be integrated.

While only a secondary focus of this study, Robinson's career pathway was consistent with the five career milestone stages (diversified early sport participation, competitive sport participation, highly competitive sport participation and introduction to coaching, part-time early coaching, and high performance head coaching) that Erickson and colleagues (2007) identified as characterizing elite sport coaches. We advanced this literature by providing in depth information on how Robinson developed his coaching philosophy and corresponding system for developing athletes' psychological skills through participation in intensive wrestling camps. A variety of situations and individuals were also found to influence him beginning in his childhood and carrying through today. This supports Careless and Douglas (2011) call to examine the development of one's coaching philosophy and actions via critical life incidents. Robinson described himself as a hard learner as he often learned from his mistakes.

The coaching research literature suggests that critical incidences often trigger reflective practice (Nelson & Cushion, 2006). Numerous critical incidences were cited by Robinson that shaped him as an individual and coach. These included sitting out of two years of high school football because he did not study, quitting college wrestling, Army Ranger school and his 4<sup>th</sup> place finish at the Olympics. An interesting question that has not been raised in the literature is why some coaches grow from such experiences while others may not. Are there individual differences in one's ability to reflect? How does the ability to reflect evolve? What factors can facilitate reflective coaching? For example, Robinson reports that he struggled with his 4<sup>th</sup> place finish at the 1972 Olympics for almost 20 years until he participated in a psychology based seminar that helped him shift from an ego oriented outcome focus to one where he focused more on the process that not only helped him as an individual but as a coach. This bodes well for formal coach education and reinforces the notion that efforts must be made to link formal coach education with reflection on critical incidences (Knowles, Borrie, & Telfer, 2005; Nelson & Cushion, 2006; Mallett, Trudel, Lyle, & Rynne, 2009).

One reason Robinson grew so much was his ability to reflect on practice, a finding consistent with current coaching education thinking forwarded by Gilbert and Trudel (2001). Consistent with the work of Schon (1987), our investigative team saw evidence of reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and retrospective reflection-on-action. Robinson's approach to developing his J7 system by using the camp as a mini-experimental setting, where he could test new ideas, while holding the setting, workload and instruction constant also provides an excellent example of Gilbert and Trudel's (2001) experiential learning model, especially the issues setting, strategy generation, experimentation and evaluation components. More specifically, Robinson provides an excellent example of what Trudel, Gilbert and Rodrigue

(2016) have labeled a super competent coach who constantly adapts knowledge and skills by employing a mindset where he or she associates ideas from different fields, ask questions that challenge current practices, engage in careful observation, and experiment with new practices. It is also consistent with Weinberg and Gould's (2015) recommendations on how practitioners should take a scientific approach to their coaching.

Finally, Robinson's views and his coaching system for developing young people through wrestling suggests that positive youth development does not always need to be positive. This supports research by Larson and Brown (2007) who found that young people learn important lessons from hot emotional issues and seemingly negative experiences. This is also consistent with emerging research on the origins of mental toughness (Bell, Hardy & Stuart, 2013; Collins & Mac Namara, 2012) and reports of highly successful coaches placing importance on the helping players take personal responsibility for their actions and the importance of remaining optimistic in the face of adversity (Voight & Carroll, 2006; Yukelson & Rose, 2014). What is so interesting about Robinson's stress inoculation approach<sup>3</sup> is how he orchestrates adversity while at the same time provides youth with the psychological skills to assist them in dealing with it. Future researchers should consider how coaches can best balance support versus challenge in working to facilitate positive youth development in young people as getting the balance wrong could result in stress, burnout and a lack of motivation.

### **Future Directions**

This study suggests that when observing and studying coaches it is important to take an in-depth approach. For example, if someone were to observe one practice at an intensive camp they might conclude that Robinson is a militaristic and controlling coach. While he certainly appears to be a tough "no nonsense" coach and is in the sense of having high expectations for

young people and holding them accountable for their behavior, our investigation revealed another side to him. A side that was characterized by a very caring individual who is genuinely concerned about the young athletes he works with and works tirelessly to help them develop. Future research should continue to use multiple method approaches (e.g., interviews and observations) to understand coaching philosophies and coaching behaviors, and utilize narratives and life stories approaches of coaches (McAdams, 2008; Sparkes & Smith, 2014) to gain a holistic picture of what effective and ineffective coaches do, and why they do what they do.

While the study of Robinson is very revealing, some limitations are warranted. First, we were not able to separate out effects of the J7 system Robinson developed versus the J7 system as implemented by Robinson since others have not implemented the program without him being involved. He is a charismatic figure who commands considerable respect because of his credentials. We also think he has exceptional emotional intelligence. Would less skilled coaches, coaches with lower emotional intelligence, or coaches of lesser notoriety be able to implement the system as effectively? Additionally, we were not able to identify how Robinson changed his approach over the many years he has run the camps. Second, Robinson is the first to admit that this approach works only for motivated adolescent athletes who want to improve and get better. It would not work well for individuals who are not motivated. Similarly, he indicates that it is not appropriate for youth who have not yet reached high school. He feels a certain level of and motivation maturity are needed for his program to be successful. In his opinion, programs for younger youth should be all about fun and enhancing their passion for the sport. Third, we were not able to study the effects of youth who dropped out of the program so potential negative effects of this type of intervention remain to be studied.

Lastly, while Robinson is an outstanding coach and individual he has his flaws. His steadfast adherence to his standards might make it difficult for him to compromise with others and his out of the box, get it done thinking might cause conflicts with administrators. It is also important to note at the time of this publication, Robinson is embroiled in a controversy surrounding his position as a university head coach. Specifically, some of his wrestlers were reported to be using and/or planning to sell prescription drugs for recreational use. Based on information reported in the media, upon learning about the plan Robinson attempted to handle the situation internally by promising the wrestlers amnesty if they came forward, turned any pills in and wrote essays taking responsibility for their actions and outlining how they failed the university. Questions have arisen, however, of when and how much he informed his administration and if he should have gotten the police involved at the onset of the situation. No charges were brought forward by the police, but Robinson was been placed on administrative leave by the university. That being said, this controversy was not related to his J Robinson Intensive Wrestling Camps, which are a totally independent business form the university. As investigators we also felt that while we do not have information to judge what was and was not appropriate relative to institution reporting and legal responsibilities, Robinson's efforts to get the offended wrestlers to come forward, take responsibility for and learn from their actions are totally consistent with his coaching philosophy. This current controversy with Robinson certainly points to the importance of helping coaches understand how legal/institutional responsibilities and duties might, at times, interact and even conflict with one's personal coaching philosophy and ethical guidelines.

Despite this controversy we feel there is much to learn from studying this outstanding coach and others in the coaching profession who coach more than techniques and strategies.



These outstanding teachers and mentors should be sought out and their philosophies and supportive actions analyzed for more lessons on leadership and teaching psychological skills for performances of all kinds and more importantly for life skills to those who are most in need of them, the youth of today.

### Footnotes

1. J Robinson Intensive wrestling is a private business that runs different types of wrestling camps for high school aged youth in the U.S. A number of technique, competition and intensive camps are conducted every summer and range from 5 to 28 days in length. The intensive camp experience were the focus of this investigation.
2. Through the University Institutional Review Board process, Robinson gave written permission and consent to use his name and the name of the camp in the presentation of study findings.
3. Stress Inoculation Training is a cognitive behavioral stress management technique developed by Meichenbaum (2007) that involves helping individuals understand their stressors, practice positive coping skills, and apply the newly developed skills to more progressively stressful situations.

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*Appendix*

**Robinson Interview Guides**

**Pre-camp Interview**

**J Robinson Intensive Camp Director Interview Questions**

1. How did the idea of conducting an intensive wrestling camp come about?
2. Tell us about the camp. What are your goals and objectives for the participants? What is it that you hope they take from the experience?
3. What do you do in the camp to accomplish your goals and objectives? Which of these strategies are most effective?

Goal 1 \_\_\_\_\_ Strategies

Goal 2 \_\_\_\_\_ Strategies

Goal 3 \_\_\_\_\_ Strategies

Goal 4 \_\_\_\_\_ Strategies

4. You advertise that the camp focuses on developing 6 mental characteristics in the wrestlers? How do you define each of these? Is any one of these objectives more important than the others or easier to develop?

Self-Discipline:

Intensity:

Ability to Deal with Challenges:

Ability to Make Sacrifices to Achieve Goals:

Dedication:

Wrestling Success:

5. What specific strategies do you employ to develop each of these specific objectives?

Self-Discipline:

Intensity:

Ability to Deal with Challenges:

Ability to Make Sacrifices to Achieve Goals:

Dedication:

6. Wrestling Success:
7. What methods does you staff employ to teach mental skills?
  - Model them?
  - Speak about them regularly?
  - Reinforce them during sessions?
  - Present/persuade?
8. What information does you coaching staff get about the camp?
9. Do you train your coaching staff in any way?
10. In your experience, what type of athlete gets the “most” form your camp? The “least?”
11. Based on your experience, what characterizes the “most” and “least” effective camp instructors?
12. If you had to grade your success from 0 to 100% what grade would you give your success in achieving your camp goals?

13. How has the camp changed over the years? What have you stopped doing? What did you expand on? Why?
14. How has your coaching in the camps changed over the years?
15. Is there anything else we should know about the camp and your approach?

### **During Camp Interview**

Note: No interview guides were used for during camp interviews.

### **Camp Exit Interview**

1. Overall, how would you say this camp has gone?
  - Compared to other camps?
  - How would you say this group compared to the typical group of camp participants?
  - Any unique/interesting events?
    - o Dropout rates,
    - o Attitudes of kids
    - o Quality of wrestling
    - o Changes in kids in relation to J7 Note: Maybe walk through each of the J 7 specifically
2. Is there anything you would have done differently?
  - In your personal work/interactions with the kids?
  - In your role as camp director?
3. How has your role in the camps changed over time?  
(He only talks to kids after wrestling sessions, not directly involved in coaching)
  - Why?
4. What changes do you foresee/do you have planned for the camp in the future?
5. If you had an endless supply of money and resources, what would you do to make this camp more effective in it's goals?

### **Post Camp Life History Interview**

#### **Part 1: How J Developed as a Coach**

1. From your previous interviews and camp observations we have learned that you have a coaching/youth development philosophy that is focused on the J7 and stresses understanding such ideas as the consequences of one's behavior, taking responsibility,

making choices and choosing to change one's behavior. In this interview we want to understand the influence of life events on the development of your coaching and personal philosophy? In other words, what events in your general and sporting life helped shape your coaching and J 7 system?

2. Here is a timeline that starts with your birth and leads us to today. First, *I would like you to identify key events or episodes that you feel were critical in shaping your development as a person and as a coach (especially as it relates to the development of your J7 program)*. For right now we will just have you identify the key events. When we are all done I will ask you to talk about each of them.

A. Draw out timeline/life history and identify key events

- Possible Probes: Did any of the following have an influence.
  - a. Religion
  - b. Ranger School
  - c. Vietnam
    - i. What are his 4 rules from Vietnam?
      1. Know who you work for – you are only as good as those who control you
      - 2.
      - 3.
      - 4.
  - d. Parents
    - i. Mom: secretary that lived until 93
    - ii. Dad: passed away (check Day 2 – debrief)
  - e. Olympics (1972)
    - i. “took 20 years to realize importance/personal purpose”
  - f. Leadership class in Las Vegas
  - g. Real Estate Job
  - h. Iowa coaching job
  - i. Financial history (how can we ask this?)

B. The second part of the exercise will have you discuss why you view that as a key event. Lets begin with....

- Probe: Can you think of, and describe personal examples of going through this process
- 3. You compared yourself to a kid who now makes \$2 million, and you “change the world”
  - a. Although you talk a lot about success as and individuality, how did you personally gain the perspective that success is “changing the world” and being a “planter” and helping others
- 4. Does your coaching philosophies/style differ when working with the Division I wrestlers at Minnesota and youth wrestlers at the J Rob camps
  - a. Why do they differ?
- 5. How would you describe your personality?
- 6. How would your wife describe your personality?
- 7. How would you describe your coaching style?
  - at the J Rob camps
  - with your collegiate team

### **Part 2: Camp Intervention Follow-up**

1. How do your 14 day and 28 day camps differ?
  - a. How does the approach and philosophy change?
  - b. Which approach do you think is best? Why?
2. You discuss the need to “get kids out of their comfort zone”, provide them with more challenges and make them more individualistic
  - How has youth sport and the sporting structure changed over the 34 years, and influenced your ability to reach these goals?
  - Giving responsibility to kids for them to gain responsibility
3. How has the role of parents in the J Rob wrestling camps changed from your perspective?
  - a. How has this influenced your role as camp director and organizer
  - b. How has this influenced the kids in the camp – how have they changed?
4. How will the J 7 coaching system function without you?

5. What has been in the J7 that is now gone?
6. How do you balance fatigue with overtraining prevention?
7. Role of the shirt:
  - a. What is the role of the t-shirt? – relate to IM and EM, Task vs. Ego
  - b. What would the camp be like without the t-shirt

### **Staff Interview Guide**

#### **Coach Interview Guide**

1. Describe your role as a coach in this wrestling camp.
2. What are the goals of the wrestling camp?
  - How do you know that these are the goals?
3. How do you coach to those goals?
  - What is done at the camp to achieve these goals?
  - What is your role as a coach in achieving these goals?
  - Describe specific strategies/techniques
4. What do the athletes at this camp need to do to help the camp achieve its goals? Why?
  - Describe specific examples
5. How do you, as a coach, influence the development of skills in athletes?
  - Physical/wrestling skills?
  - Psychological skills?
6. What do athletes at this camp need to do to develop their psychological skills? Why?
  - What psychological skills are important? Why?
  - Describe specific examples
  - How do athletes use these psychological skills? In wrestling? In life?

#### **Questions about Coach Robinson**

7. How long have you known J and in what capacity?

8. How would you describe J as a person, and as a coach?

- Describe his personal philosophy
- What is the most important thing J focuses on in the camp?

9. Why has J been able to keep this camp running for 34 years?

- What is 'it' about J that makes the camp successful?

10. Based on your experiences what percentage of the wrestlers attending this camp become mentally tougher? Note: read the definition of mental toughness to them.

11. Any other thoughts about J and the impact he has on the kids in the camp?