

Understanding Coach Performance: The Impact of Passion
By Donna Harris

Let us accept the definition of passion as “a strong inclination toward an activity that people like, that they find important, and in which they invest time and energy.” It can then be agreed that passion is an intrinsic aspect of coaching; the word appears over and over in almost every context and situation, but what is its reality in practice? In a word, complexity, not least because passion is both negative and positive, with the former aspect often outweighing the latter. For the wellbeing of coaches, both female and male, it is essential that both aspects be better understood. Author Donna Harris presents a compelling case for the creation of programs “focused on protecting coaches from the negative impacts of passion and harnessing its positive elements [to] aid in maximizing and extending coach performance.” Her assessment, including its particular implications for women coaches, merits consideration at all levels of our sport system. – Sheila Robertson, Journal editor

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“The truth is, I do not share well. I want you all to myself. And you, my precious acolytes, want me, too – even at the expense of others. You follow me to lonely practice rooms, faraway stages, late hours inside smoky recording studios, your weary fingers banging piano keys, your tired lips clamped around a mouthpiece, playing on, forsaking those who love you and who you should love back. They will lure you. I will lure you more. It is the price I exact. And the one you pay.” (Albom, 2015) (p. 260, The Magic Strings of Frankie Presto)

As a coach and as a woman, what are the elements in your life that pull on you? The elements in which you invest time and energy? The elements in which you invest yourself? Are they your athletes, your sport, your personal life, your partner, your children? Where does the pull originate? Why is it there? Just one pull is unlikely, and the pulls are not necessarily congruent.

Probably one or more of those pulls is the result of passion. Passionate activities are those which are important to individuals. People enjoy activities they are passionate about and, consequently, they invest time and energy in the activities. People who are passionate about an activity value and experience an emotional connection to it. If you are a coach, it is likely you are passionate about athletes, coaching, and sport.

I am a Level 4 Athletics coach, a wife, a mom, and executive director of a provincial sport organization. I walked away from national team coaching opportunities and, after that experience and a decade of working at a national sport organization (NSO) in coach development, I decided to engage in graduate research to better understand expert coaches, their performance, and the impact of the coaching job on coach performance and coaches’ personal lives.

My study involved interviews with seven male and three female expert Olympic/Paralympic coaches and their partners, six of whom were men and four were women.

Understanding Passion

Drawing on Vallerand and colleagues, my graduate work was rooted in the Dual Model of Passion. This model asserts that passion can be positive (harmonious) or negative (obsessive).

When passion is harmonious, the activity is in balance with one’s life and the passionate individual can engage and disengage with the activity without negative consequence. Harmoniously passionate individuals can adapt when

they are prevented from engaging in the activity about which they are passionate. The opposite is true for those who are obsessively passionate. Such individuals experience friction between the activity and their lives. Obsessive passion can overtake the individual, leading her or him to continue to engage in the activity even when doing so is no longer healthy or productive. Further, obsessively passionate individuals may have trouble disengaging from the activity, resulting in challenges with recovery and/or friction in their personal life. Finally, the passionate activity likely occupies a disproportionate part of the obsessively passionate person's life, resulting in an imbalance.

In this article, I draw on the results of my exploration of how coaches define passion, the perceived consequences of passion, and the necessity of passion in an expert role. I conclude with an overview of why an understanding of passion is important for female coaches and the sport system overall.

I began my study by asking each coach and partner to define passion and describe what passion meant to them. The responses tended to align with the obsessive as opposed to the harmonious elements of passion. Coaches referred to passion being linked to loving an activity, to being willing to be "all-in" with it, so much so that it could be uncontrollable at times:

"You know, I think, something that is incredibly ... it's a main value, but it's also an uncontrolled value, one that never ... I feel like it's an out-of-control love for something. Does that make any sense?"

In addition to involving a love for the passionate activity and the investment of time and self, coaches and partners also suggested that passion is a necessary ingredient for success in high performance sport:

"I think it's a form of motivation that's required to do some abnormal things, at times, like high performance sports require. You need to be abnormal in terms of your outlook on life and your characteristics and your habits. I don't know if that's right on for what you're looking for or an answer you're looking for."

All the coaches in the study acknowledged a passion for coaching or coaching elements. One identified a straight up love for coaching:

"I would say absolutely I believe my passion is coaching ... When you're really, really doing something at a high, high level, it's in you. When it becomes a passion, it's part of you."

Others referred to a commitment to athletes and being "all in" to their role as a coach and the need to be "all-in" to be effective:

"I guess at the end of the day, if I really wanted more balance, I would have it. I don't know; I've never really been a half-asser ... I definitely, when I'm doing something, I just do it all-in."

In addition to identifying as passionate, coaches also referenced an obsessive or almost addictive element to coaching. The draw to coaching was strong and managing that pull was not something coaches can necessarily control:

"My challenge is balancing that passion and I guess maybe controlling it and not letting it control me. Being able to enjoy it without letting it get out of control."

The lack of control or the draw increases over time, to the point where the coach is "all in" without realizing it:

"It just became more and more, and now it's like everything."

Some coaches suggested that being motivated through and by passion is necessary and a key component of expert coaching. When balanced with the perspective of what is really important in one's life, the "all in" behavior driven by passion may be acceptable:

"I still invest all my time, basically, and almost all of my energy into getting those results and providing the best program possible ... My actions say that it's super important, the most important thing ever, but I do think if you know in the back of your mind that it's not the end of the world ... I mean there's a passion for sure. It's like the first thing I'm thinking about. It's the first thing that, like I'll literally wake up in the middle of the night because I've got

all these ideas sometimes ... [But], I think I have a different view than most ... I am obsessed, but I've also walked away. I know that life goes on and I have other skills and abilities. I am not afraid to have another life and I have other interests."

Coaching at the expert level requires an investment by coaches in both the athlete being trained and in themselves. The coach investment comprises not only a commitment of time and expertise, but also emotional engagement with the process. The emotional engagement with the athlete's performance and their progress is amazing, but can also be draining and challenging for the coach:

"You put so much of yourself into something, then it's difficult to separate your performances from who you are. I see quite often with young athletes when they have, even if it's a bad workout or certainly a bad week, they really take it to heart. They see themselves as their performance. To take athletes out of that head space is a big challenge ... I think, as a coach, when athletes don't perform or they are not, if they have an injury or something, you feel like you've let them down. You take it personally. I think that's the downside of something that is so ... You get emotionally involved in it. It can be amazing, because you're emotionally involved in someone's journey. It's also very difficult when things are not going well to keep perspective and not see yourself in what's happening, because sports, ranking, and outcomes are not all of who a person is."

Uncontrolled passionate behavior was reported to have negative impacts on coach performance:

"I think sometimes passion hijacks your emotional system. You act out of control in situations where you probably want to be in a little bit more control ... An example of when I see it sometimes being negative is, sometimes when you're a leader of a program and you're too passionate about your approach or about the outcome because you are emotionally into it, you often make decisions quite quickly and you make them, often, with your heart and not so much with your head ... Sometimes, you make those ... It's not a high performance decision. It's not best for the program. It's sometimes best for that situation and it's not best long-term. I see that's where passionate can sometimes be detrimental."

Such passionate behaviour was also reported as having negative health impacts. There were instances where personal lives were left in shambles:

"I know coaches that are far more obsessed than I am. Really, they know it to a fault that is disturbed and destroyed, in some cases, their personal lives."

In other cases, the coach left coaching or was made aware of their behaviour in time to remedy it and minimize the impact on personal life:

"... sometimes I was so unaware of how deep I was into my other world, my job world, that the screen was so foggy in front of my eyes that I thought things were fine until I came back, until I let the job go, until I realized, man, this is what I've been missing personally. What have I been missing with my family. What have I not been seeing. Tons of things."

Effective coach management

The results of my study appeared to demonstrate that expert coaches are passionate about being coaches. They are willing to go the extra mile and refer to being "all-in" as both necessary and the way they operate themselves as coaches. They appeared to experience passion in an obsessive as opposed to a harmonious way. Passion seems to be a necessary ingredient of coaching at the expert level. However, given that obsessive passion has been shown to result in negative outcomes and that coaches reported some negative impacts because of their passion or commitment to coaching, it also appeared that effective coach management requires the sport system to protect coaches from themselves to support performance and mitigate the negative impacts of passion. At this point, it is appropriate to offer some insight into what this means for female coaches specifically and the sport system overall.

None of the literature I reviewed examined differences in experiences with passion for women or men although passion appears to have the potential to significantly affect both genders in life and in performance. As a female coach, wife, and mother, I wonder if women experience more than one passion that could originate from very different places. Coaching and wanting to be present with athletes could be rooted in a personal passion. Being

passionate about being present with our children is rooted in a very different experience. The incongruence between these two may be more significant for women than men although coach/fathers I know struggle with it, too. but it seems more pronounced in coaches who are moms. At the end of the day, passion does not seem confined to only one gender, but is important for both and occurs across all sport contexts, and not only at the high performance level.

Some suggestions for managing passion

As noted in the opening paragraph, many elements in your life may pull on you in your role as a female coach, partner, friend, and perhaps mom. You are likely passionate about more than one part of your life. Upon reflection, this is certainly the case for me, and while I am grateful, passion is not always easy. Understanding that passion can be a seductive and strong, even over-powering pull can aid in managing it. Armed with the knowledge that passion is likely present in your life and that it can be obsessive may provide insight into how you operate, what drives you, what helps you be your best, and what hinders you. Understanding that the nature of your drive (for coaching particularly) may be rooted in your love for the sport and your emotional tie to it could aid in helping you take a step back, evaluate your approach, and determine if your passion is harmonious or obsessive. If the former, good for you. If the latter, give yourself permission to make changes to reduce the friction between your passion and the rest of your life.

The expert coach role demands extraordinary, if not abnormal behaviour from expert coaches. The demands are not likely to be met unless one is passionate about the sport or the athletes. The risk for many is that in situations where passion is expressed obsessively as opposed to harmoniously, the impact may be negative on performance as well as personal life. Planned recovery, permission to recover, or periods of less intensity may aid in combating fatigue and other negative health impacts associated with obsessive passion, thus positively contributing to coach performance.

Consider periodization of coaching schedules in a way that is similar to the way athletes are periodized, with specific periods of recovery and simple monitoring throughout the year. Providing planned periods of rest when coaches have permission to unplug may aid in negating the negative outcomes associated with obsessive passion.

Our current sport system seems unaware of obsessive passion and fails to manage expert coaches holistically. Acknowledging that coaches tend to be obsessively passionate may change the way they are managed. Educating the system is the first step in influencing positive change. Given their tendency to be “all-in”, expert coaches generally appear to require support and protection from themselves. It may be helpful to educate coaches, partners, and NSOs about the demands of the expert coaching job, the Dual Model of Passion, and the negative impacts obsessive passion can have on sustained performance. It may be as simple as making sport leaders aware of the passion construct and its potential impact on coach performance or as involved as creating protocols for the management of coaches in an expert role, such as periodization. While not specific to passion, a 2016 study by Mallett and Lara-Bercial indicated that the expert coach role can have a negative impact on the health of the individual and that coaches should be educated regarding the risks of the profession. Creating programs focused on protecting coaches from the negative impacts of passion and harnessing its the positive elements may aid in maximizing and extending coach performance.

In conclusion, expert coaches appear to be obsessively passionate about their role as an expert coach; however, passion also appears to be a necessary ingredient for expert coach success. Managing expert coaches, for successful and sustained performance, would seem to be necessary so that success can be achieved through controlled passion as opposed to performance fueled by obsessively passionate behaviours alone. To create sustainable coaching performance, it would be prudent to develop coaching environments that protect coaches from the negative side-effects of obsessive passion through effective planning for coach performance rooted in an understanding of passion.

About the author

Donna Harris has 16 years' experience in coach development and sport administration. She spent 10 years at Athletics Canada leading the sport's National Coaching Certification Program and Long-term Athlete Development as well working on coach recruitment and retention strategies. She is pursuing a master's degree in kinesiology at the University of Manitoba. Her thesis will focus on the role of passion in the performance and life of expert coaches and their families. Donna is a Level 4 Athletics coach and is currently the executive director of Athletics Manitoba.

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References available upon request