Does Any Good Come From a Coach that Yells? Reflective Experiences from Former Athletes

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Abstract

Yelling in society is a common occurrence. Parents yell at their children, bosses yell at their employees and coaches yell at their athletes. Yet, in many cases the yelling coach exhibits unkind, loud in nature, and very personal statements. The purpose of this study was to better understand former athlete’s perspectives regarding their thoughts and experiences of their coaches yelling at them. For this study yelling will imply saying loud, unkind, personal comments towards the athlete. For this study 124 former athletes were surveyed regarding their experiences with a yelling coach. Generally, it was found that the former athletes did not like or appreciate their coaches yelling at them. In many cases the coaches lost credibility with the former athletes. The implications of this study were that coaches should try a self-controlled, calm approach with their athletes.
Introduction

For those that have participated in a sport, there is a good chance that the coach
has yelled during games and in practices at them. A couple of examples of a coach
yelling would be giving instructions, such as placing a player for a strategic reason,
giving encouragement, saying something like, “That was a great block.” Instructing a
player to run a certain play. For example, “Run the number one inbounds play.” These
types of examples of a coach yelling are common during a game or in practice. Yet,
there is another side of a coach yelling that does take place. The other type of yelling
coach’s use is unkind, loud, derogatory, and personal statements. Of these two types of a
coach yelling, the later has been found to be ineffective with athletes. Martin, Rocca,
Cayanus and Weber (2009) have stated, to date, researchers have not identified a
relationship of context where verbal aggression is related to any positive outcomes or
consequences (pg. 230).

When reviewing the literature dealing with coaches yelling, the phrase verbal
aggression or verbal abuse is commonly used. Alexandra, Stefanous, and Vassilis (2015)
have stated that when a coach is verbally aggressive their ‘attacks’ are expressed through
various forms such as character attacks, competence attacks, physical appearance attacks,
teasing, ridicule, threats, swearing and profanity. Along these lines Mazer, Barnes,
Grevious, and Boger (2013) found that when a coach is verbally aggressive it hurts a
person’s self-concept, the person is embarrassed, feel inadequate and in some cases
depressed. Also, when coaches yell it negatively affects the climate in the gymnasium or
playing field. And finally, athletes consider verbally aggressive coaches as less credible.

With these negative results of a coach that yells at their athletes, studies have found other
negative consequences. Alexandra, Stefanous and Vissilis (2015) examined how coaches’ verbal aggressiveness, as perceived by the teen basketball players relating to their intrinsic-extrinsic motivation. For this study 180 Greek male and female teen basketball players were surveyed in regards to their coaches verbal aggressiveness. It was found that verbally aggressive basketball coaches negatively affected the player’s intrinsic motivation. Because of this finding the researchers felt that the basketball players self-determined types of motivation would also be negatively affected. Thus also affecting the player’s levels of performance and their lifelong involvement. Another study looked at coaches that aggressively yelled while coaching elite child athletes (Gervis & Dunn, 2004). One slight difference with this study was a coach’s verbal aggressiveness towards athletes was couched as emotional abuse. Twelve elite child athletes were interviewed regarding their experiences with their coaches. Shouting was the main behavior the coaches exhibited while coaching. Examples of emotional abuse the elite child athletes expressed were, “when she shouts it is very personal. I don’t like it and I can’t train properly, it puts me off because it scares me when this happens.” Another athlete stated, “I think being humiliated is so horrible and the pain of that I think I’ll always remember.” One other athlete stated how much he disliked the emotional abuse, yet he stated that no one seems to question these coach’s behavior, these behaviors are accepted as part of the sport and experience.

Besides the academic research that has been conducted, there are articles in popular periodicals that address coaches yelling and the negative aspects that come from it. For example, Wickersham (2010) stated that yelling can be an emotional release; yet it can exact a physical toll, like high blood pressure to a lack of energy. Arrington (1992)
said, “We all know that yelling at family, friends, and co-workers is not effective communication and yet its use persists in coaching.” The author continued in stating that yelling is less effective among females and youth of both genders, than among teenage males. Studies dealing with coaches that yell have referenced, elite child athletes, teenage basketball players and professional athletes. Coaches yelling has also been portrayed in popular culture and motion pictures. Kerr, Stirling, and Bandealy (2016) examined film portrayals of coach/athlete interactions in sport movies, with a focus on emotional abuse within the coach/athlete relationship. After viewing 19 films, the researchers concluded that emotionally abusive coaching practices are frequently portrayed in sport films. Some of the specific findings from the viewing of these movies were that bystanders were present and observed a coach being emotionally abusive without intervening. Also, yelling would take place with negative comments laced in the yelling at the athlete. The researchers summarized that these examples are considered as normal or that it is common in the coach/athlete interactions.

To further the research of coaches yelling and its effects on athletes, investigating past athlete’s experiences with coaches that yell may be beneficial for coaching educators and future coaches. Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand better individual’s perspectives regarding their thoughts and experiences of their coaches yelling at them. For this study when the word yelled is used, it is referencing a coach that would use unkind, loud, personal and derogatory comments that were abusive and not appropriate.

Methods

Participants
Participants for this study were 124 undergraduate students at a private university in the intermountain west. The sample consisted of 71 males and 53 females. Participants ages ranged from 18 to 36 years.

**Instrumentation**

Through a review of literature, an instrument could not be identified specific to coaches yelling. Therefore, for this study, an 11-question survey instrument was developed (see Table 1). The survey consisted of one yes/no question, three yes/no with open-ended follow-up questions, six open-ended questions and one likert scale question. To establish content validity, we had college-aged students, not involved in this study, review the survey questions for clarity and understanding. For reliability, the instrument was further pilot-tested on college-aged students who did not participate in the subsequent study.

**Procedures**

Convenience sampling was employed to collect response data for this study. The researchers contacted 10 physical activity class instructors at the university and explained the study and instrumentation. After the instructors agreed to have their class participate in the study, researchers attended each physical activity class and systematically administered and collected the survey. Before survey administration, researchers explained the survey, asking for volunteers that had a coach that yelled at them to participate before volunteers signed informed consent forms. Students were assured their voluntary decision to participate or not participate in the study would not affect their grade in class or class standing. Completion of survey explanation, administration and document return took approximately 15 minutes.
Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) 24.0 program. Percentages were used to reflect the participant’s responses for each item being analyzed. The other method of data analysis was referencing qualitative analysis, the researchers read and reread the data until common themes became evident for each survey question (Mueller & Skamp, 2003)

Results

Descriptive statistics were used to better understand how college-aged students felt when their athletic coach yelled at them.

Quantitative Analysis

Question 1 asked the participants that when their coach yelled at them, did it improve their performance. It was reported that 56% of the males felt that their performance improved. Yet, 60% of the females felt it did not improve their performance. Question 3 states, “Did your coach yell at all of your teammates, or did he/she yell just at you?” Both male (66%) and female (51%) participants reported that their coach yelled at everyone on the team. For question 4, which states, “When the coach yelled, did it affect the coach’s credibility in your eyes?” For this survey question 54% of the males felt it did not affect their credibility. While 59% of the females, it also affected the coach’s credibility in their eyes. Question 5 asked the participants if their coach yelled at them in practices, games or both (practices & games). For both the males (63%) and females (59%), their coaches yelled at them in both practices and games. For question 8 it states, “When your coach yelled at you, was there any profanity accompanying the yelling?” A majority of both males (58%) and females (72%) reported
that when the coach yelled there was no profanity. And question 10 asked the
participants if profanity was used while the coach yelled did it affect your performance.

Here again both males (70%) and females (85%) felt that their performance did not
improve when their coach profaned and yelled.

**Qualitative Analysis**

Additional data results comprised of short-answer response from the participants.
The thematic analysis and findings reported below comprise eight question. The
following outlines the qualitative responses from the participants for this study.

Participants were asked (Question 1) when their coach yelled at them, if it improved the
performance. A similar question (Question 10) asked the participants if yelling with
profanity improved their performance. For question 1 one student stated, “I tried harder”,
and “I think he was trying to pump me up.” Yet, other students stated, “it made me
stubborn and I wanted to do the opposite”, and “my performance definitely did not
improve.” For question 10 such statements as “it freaked me out”, “killed my
confidence”, and “ruined my focus during the game.” Question 2 asked the participants
how they felt when the coach yelled at them. One participant said, “affected my
confidence and made me apprehensive.” Another participant said, “I felt less and felt like
a constant disappointment.” Also, for many participant’s responses such words were
used to describe how the coach made them feel. For example, the felt “angry”, “I wanted
to cry”, “frustrated”, and “stressed”. The participants were asked (Question 4) when the
coach yelled, did it affect the coach’s credibility in their eyes. One participant stated, “I
wouldn’t trust her with anything.” Another participant stated, “He sounded
unprofessional and less knowledgeable in the sport.” And finally, one participant said, “I couldn’t believe it that he couldn’t control his temper. It was embarrassing.”

Participants were asked (Question 6) how the participant’s parents felt about the coach yelling at their child. A few of the participants stated, “My parents yell harder than the coach”, “they were OK with it”, and “Good for me to get a tough skin.” Yet, many of the participants felt differently. For example, the participants stated, “They (parents) did not think it was appropriate”, “did not approve”, “My dad was so mad, he blew up at him (coach)”, and “My dad was so upset, he looked for ways to get a new coach.” For question 7 the participants were asked how the coach’s yelling affected the climate during practice, games and in the locker room. Participant statements were, “It put a damper on things”, “Made a pretty toxic environment”, “No unity. No team building happened. There was nothing constructive or helpful from coach”, and “The team made fun of the coach all the time.” Question 9 asked the participants how they felt when the coach’s profanity was directed at them. Such statements were, “I laughed. I thought he was pathetic”, “It made me lose respect for him”, and “I felt upset. Those words are usually strong and demeaning.” And finally, for question 11 participants were asked to recall a bad experience with their coach. Many of the participant’s statements are fairly graphic. Thus, a few less graphic statements are, “He yelled at the whole team at halftime and told us we were a bunch of ‘blank’ idiots”, “While he was yelling, he pushed me with two hands on my shoulders and said ‘come on’. All the other players were terrified”, and “he called us ‘little girls’.”

Discussion
The purpose of this study was to understand better individual’s perspectives regarding their thoughts and experiences of their coaches yelling at them. Results indicate that the participants generally did not like or feel being yelled at was good or appropriate. For question 1 males and females differed on when a coach yelled at them did their performance improve. The male participants (56%) felt that it did not improve the performance. Whereas the females felt (60%) when the coach yelled it improved their performance. However, Arrington (1992) don’t concur with the findings in this study. Arrington found that females did not play better when their coach yelled at them. More specifically, they felt less effective. Participant responses to this question were, “He was helping me see my errors”, “No, it made me want to punch him”, and “As I got older the more she yelled the more I was defiant.” Question 2 looked at how the athlete felt when they were yelled at. Participants responses for this survey question were summed up with one word responses. For example, “Angry”, “mad”, “fearful”, and “disappointed.” In the literature, Gervis and Dunn (2004) studied the emotional abuse elite child athletes were exposed to. These elite child athletes “felt stupid,” “worthless,” “lacking confidence,” “depressed,” “fearful,” and “hurt.” These are not the kind of emotions any athlete should feel as they participate in their sport. Question 4 on the survey dealt with a coach’s credibility that yelled. For the males in this study, 59% felt it affected the credibility. Whereas, for the females, 54% felt it did not affect the coach’s credibility. Once again, participants statement to this survey question shed light on how they felt. One participant stated, “My coach was also a leader in my community. That did not help his standing.” One participant stated, “I’ve been to many wrestling tournaments, and my teammates were always noticing the coach’s that yelled and were
thankful they (the other coach’s) weren’t ours.” Mazer, Barnes, Grevious, and Boger (2013) studied verbally aggressive coach’s and the effects it had on athlete’s motivation. The findings were that athletes motivation was negatively affected. The athletes wanted a coach that exhibited self-control and was calm in practices and games. A side finding from this study was that when a coach was verbally aggressive towards the athlete they perceived their coach less credibly. Thus, having a negative effect on the athletes motivations.

The sixth survey question asked the participants how their parents felt when the coach was yelling at them. Such responses for this survey question were “my dad lost respect for the coach,” “My parents did not enjoy sitting in the stands hearing the coach yell at me during the game”, and “My parents couldn’t believe how personal the coach made his comments.” Kerr, Stirling and Bandealy (2016) found that parents did not like it when the coach yelled at their child. Yet, the parents felt that the culture was that coaches yelled at the players, their child. Thus, the parents were socialized that yelling coaches was the norm. And the final point of discussion dealt with how the coach’s yelling affected the climate during practice, games and the locker room. Participant comments were “It was a real downer for the team”, “Made thing tense in the locker room”, and “There was nothing constructive or helpful.” Parker et. al. (2012) felt the type of climate the coach provides can influence the experience and the way the athlete views the sport experience.

**Implications**

After analyzing the data and the participant’s responses, a coach that yells at the athletes are not going to yield the results they want. Some coaches must think that if they
use unkind words or statements that are personal, the athlete will perform better. The
results of this study just add to the literature that coach’s that yell is going to improve the
athlete’s performance, that parent’s do not appreciate hearing their child being singled
out and embarrassed, and that their yelling is not making the athletes experience
enjoyable. Parker et al. (2012) found athletes from the Generation Z wanted coaches to
be “nice”, to “stay calm”, and “yelling does not make the situation better.” These types
of suggestions from Generation Z athletes have given, may sound unrealistic. Yet, the
athletes have stated they would “work harder”, “have more respect” for their coaches
when they stay calm and controlled their emotions. Jeff Hartings, a former offensive
lineman for the Pittsburgh Steelers, appropriately stated, “You have to coach like you
have 53 sons in the locker room. Would you scream and yell at your son all day
(Kennedy, 2004)? It is hoped that implications from this study will provide coaches with
something to think about when it comes to yelling at their athletes.
References


Table 1 Coaches Yelling Survey

Gender: Male ____ Female ____

Age: 18-25 ____ 26-30 ____ 31-35 ____ 36 and older ____

The following survey questions will ask you regarding your experiences with coaches that yelled at you during you time on athletic teams. For the purpose of this study, yelling is defined as directing unkind, loud, personal comments to the individual. Some questions will ask you to circle your answer and other questions will ask you to write a brief explanation. Thank you for your participation with this survey.

1. When your coach yelled at you, did it improve you performance? Please explain your answer.
   YES          NO

2. How did it make you feel when your coach yelled at you?

3. Did your coach yell at all of your teammates, or did he/she yell at you?

4. When the coach yelled, did it affect the coach’s credibility in your eyes? Please explain your answer.
   YES          NO

5. Would the coach yell at you in practices, games or both?
   Practices   Games   Both

6. How did your parents feel about your coach yelling at you? Please explain your answer.
7. How did the coaches yelling affect the climate during practice, games and locker room?

8. When your coach yelled at you, was there any profanity accompanying the yelling?
   Yes          No

9. How did you feel when you heard your coach using profanity that was directed to you? Please explain your response.

10. When profanity was used during the yelling episode, did your performance improve? Please explain your answer.
    Yes          No

11. From your recollections of coaches yelling at you, what was the worst example of your coach yelling at you (what they said, how they said it, words used when yelling at you). Please explain your answer.

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