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A Qualitative Exploration of Successful High School Baseball Coaches Silence During Practice

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Abstract

For athletic coaches, there are many methods to coach their athletes. One method that may not be as common or even thought of as coaching, is silence. Silence is basically, when the coach does not speak, but is thinking of specific team, player, and competitor items. The purpose of this study was to interview consistently successful high school baseball coaches with an emphasis on their silence as a coaching behavior. Five successful high school baseball coaches in the southeastern region of the United States were interviewed. Generally, it was found that these baseball coaches were strategizing, thinking of baseball related items while they were silent during practice. The results from this study are a valuable addition to the literature.

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Introduction

The following scenario could take place at a high school baseball practice. Two parents are watching their sons during a two-hour practice session. During the practice, the parents observe a myriad of drills and other related baseball activities that their sons and their teammates are participating in while their coach observes. As the practice continues, one of the parent's comments that the head coach does not say much to the players during batting practice, taking ground balls and other drills during practice. The other parent agrees and states that the coach mainly observes with his arms folded and does not say much at all. As the parents' conversation continues to center around the head baseball coach's limited verbal interaction with his baseball players, they are both of the opinion that this coach should be regularly talking and making his presence felt in the practice. These types of conversations have probably taken place on a number of occasions with all sports.

Many people, including parents, feel that successful coaches have to provide constant instruction, feedback or other interactions in order to be successful (McGaha, 2000). Yet, a coach's silence does not mean he/she is not coaching, in fact, it may indicate just the opposite. Many times during these periods of silence, a coach is thinking about their next move, how to help their athletes, or a multitude of other issues. In fact, in the literature, silence is a sign of expertise. Tan (1997) identified six elements of expertise. They are: 1) Extensive knowledge base and domain specificity, 2) Hierarchical organization or knowledge, 3) Acute perceptual capacities, 4) Problem representation and solving, 5) Automaticity of behavior and 6) Self-monitoring skills. Extensive knowledge base and domain knowledge are skills developed over many years of experience. The knowledge deals within a particular field and the experts highly skilled in the application of the knowledge. Hierarchical organization of knowledge allows

47 experts to store and organize vast amounts of knowledge that they accumulate throughout their
48 experience and practice in long-term memory as structured patterns. Thus, experts can sort,
49 identify and analyze information to make decisions. Regarding acute perceptual capacities,
50 experts are able to recognize patterns during a performance more readily than non-experts. The
51 problem representation and solving, experts rely more on underlying principles when analyzing
52 and representing problems. When observing experts, a type of unconscious behavior or
53 automaticity becomes apparent regarding their mental and physical skills related to their area of
54 expertise. Finally, concerning self-monitoring skills, experts can accurately identify causes of
55 their failure, and then take corrective actions much more readily than non-experts. These
56 characteristics of expertise align nicely with Bloom's (1986) schemata theory, which states that
57 schemata is developed over time with practice. Knowledge is represented and organized by
58 internal schema in long term memory and stored as correct performance standards against which
59 to compare present and future performance. Schema has been defined as knowledge from
60 experience, and when incoming information is recognized, the information in memory is then
61 accessed and informs the diagnostic process (Chi, Glasser, & Farr, 1988).

62 The literature regarding expertise in coaching has identified *instruction* and *silence* as the
63 two most common behavioral categories observed among coaches (McGaha, 2000). Lacy and
64 Darst (1984) defined *silence* as a period of time when the coach is not talking, and the behavioral
65 category "other" as any behavior exhibited by a coach that is not specifically described by the
66 observation instrument. The literature has investigated a number of coaching behaviors and for
67 many of the studies, silence has been a repeated result. For example, Smith and Cushion (2006)
68 studied the coaching behaviors of professional youth soccer coaches during games. For this
69 study one of the top coaching behaviors identified was silence. One coach stated:

70 “I want to let the players play unencumbered by the pressure of my voice. So, I want to
71 let them go through the process of making decisions and choices during the course of the
72 game unfettered by me telling them what to do and when to do it. So, I’m specifically
73 looking at the key moments in possession, and out of possession and transition.”

74 The researchers concluded that silence was used as a learning tool. Researchers expressed too
75 much intervention would deny the players not only opportunities to learn but also the opportunity
76 to demonstrate what has already been learned. During moments of silence, the coaches in this
77 study were involved in a number of cognitive processes. They were, observing and analyzing
78 the play of their athletes, letting the play unfold, allowing their players to learn for themselves,
79 and checking learning of players decision making.

80 Another study dealing with silence, once again observed youth soccer coaches coaching
81 behaviors (Cushion & Jones, 2001). The purpose of this study was to compare eight English
82 male youth soccer coaches between two levels of competition (Nationwide & Premier Leagues).
83 The soccer coaches were observed during practice. The results revealed that silence was the
84 third largest behavior exhibited by the coaches. Here again, it was concluded that coaches in this
85 study didn’t constantly have to talk during practice because they wanted the players to play and
86 not feel that tension of the coach’s remarks. The coaches felt that much learning can take place
87 among the athletes without the coach commenting on the players play during practice.

88 One last study to examine silence in coaching, studied youth soccer coaches with
89 different levels of coaching qualifications (Stonebridge & Cushion, 2018). For this study, 10
90 male youth soccer coaches between the age of 24 to 55 were observed. The results from this
91 study found that silence was the second most frequently observed behavior among the youth
92 soccer coaches. The researchers further observed that coaches that have higher qualifications

93 had longer periods of silence when observing their athletes during practice, compared to those
94 coaches that had less qualifications. Once again, coaches made statements regarding their
95 silence. For example, one coach stated, “When I’m silent, I’m watching their actions, whether
96 they’ve got the grips with and doing things that I want to see.” A second coach with lower
97 qualifications stated:

98 “I feel if I’m coaching a session and I sit back and observe for even two minutes...I
99 personally, feel the session’s getting away from me... I feel like I’ve lost control of the
100 session. So, silence for me as a coach, I’m saying it’s not right or wrong, but for me it’s
101 uncomfortable.”

102 For all of these studies, the coaches involved all coached youth soccer. The results from these
103 studies are valuable in the fact that silence for a coach is an important part of coaching. With the
104 number of studies focusing on soccer coaches, this presents an opportunity to study coaches in
105 other sports. Thus, the purpose of this study was to interview consistently successful high school
106 baseball coaches with an emphasis on their silence as a coaching behavior.

107 **Methods**

108 **Participants**

109 Participants for this study were five male high school head baseball coaches from the
110 southern region of the United States. These baseball coaches’ coaching experience was from
111 four to 10 years as head coach. The five coaches in this study were considered successful, with
112 an average of winning 73% of the games they coached. The university institutional review board
113 (IRB) approved the study. The five baseball coaches also gave their consent to participate in the
114 study.

115 **Procedures**

116 Upon gaining IRB approval the lead researcher contacted the baseball coaches to
117 interview them. Over a five-day period, the lead researcher interviewed the baseball coaches
118 regarding their silence during baseball practice. Each interview took approximately 45 minutes
119 in length. All interviews were audio recorded. The interviews took place in the coaches' office.

120 **Semi structured Interviews**

121 For this study semi structured interviews were used. Semi structured interviews do not
122 involve the use of a structured set of questions that are asked in the same manner to each
123 participant. Open-ended questions were asked to the coaches.

124 **Data Analysis**

125 For the interview questions, the baseball coaches responses were correlated for each
126 interview question and reviewed to generate preliminary coding categories, with framework
127 analysis methodology for participant responses, as outlined by Check and Schutt (2011).
128 Framework analysis incorporated the stages of 1) familiarization, 2) thematic, 3) identification,
129 and 4) charting and interpretation (Rabiee, 2004).

130 **Results**

131 The following are the themes that were extracted from the interviews with the baseball
132 coaches: 1) Thoughts during times of silence, 2) Fatigues affect during periods of silence, 3)
133 Strategizing during silence, and 4) Silence being effective and instructional.

134 **Thoughts during times of silence**

135 This theme may appear broad in scope, yet many of the coaches expressed specifically
136 what they were thinking during times of silence. For example, one coach said, "After I've made
137 a comment, I'm looking to see how the player will react, or what they will do." Another coach
138 stated:

139 “I was focusing in on a particular aspect and especially in the early part with skilled
140 players trying to think of certain comments that might make it easier for them to
141 understand what they’re doing. I’m sure a lot of these occasions that is what I was trying
142 to do.”

143 A third coach stated:

144 “I feel like a good coach, many times, is trying to gather as much information as he can to
145 make a good comment, to make qualified statements, as to not hurt whatever they’re
146 working on unintentionally. I think that silence probably plays a very important role in
147 what kind of statements I make.”

148 Finally, another coach stated, “As I analyze my players I go through a mental checklist. I go
149 through hitting, pitching or whatever skill it might be.”

150 **Fatigue’s affect during periods of silence**

151 The results from this theme covered how fatigue affected what the coaches thought about
152 during practice. The researchers noticed the coaches repeatedly used such words or phrases, as
153 “wandering”, “daydreaming”, and “thinking of non-baseball things.” One coach stated:

154 “I’m sure that there are times in freshman practice for example, that my mind wanders
155 more than at the varsity level practice. But the higher-level practice I would say, I don’t
156 tend to think of other things that are not baseball related. I think the situation dictates
157 when that can happen and when it can’t.”

158 Another coach stated:

159 “Because of fatigue there’s going to be sometimes that I’m going to be thinking, “This

160 has been a crappy practice”, “This has been a waste of a day”, and “I should have just
161 sent them home.” Because I am tired, my thoughts may tend to be or dwell on the
162 negative.”

163 One last coach stated:

164 “No, I really don’t. We’ve got 22 to 23 kids and we’ve got two coaches, and there’s just
165 always something going on, and when we are through with practice, I’m usually more
166 mentally drained than physically, just from all that’s going on. I can’t afford to
167 daydream.”

168 **Strategizing during silence**

169 The theme of strategizing during periods of silence was common among the coaches.

170 The first coach stated:

171 “Yes, I am thinking, ‘What can I do to get that kid’s confidence up?’ It may be that we
172 go hit off the tee for 30 minutes. I think you’re looking, you’re always thinking ‘How
173 can I get the most from my kids?’ I know what the kids expect from me and they know
174 what I expect from them and that’s to get it done on the playing field.”

175 A second coach stated:

176 “This was right before an intersquad scrimmage game, and I remember thinking about
177 that, trying to plan ahead. I know even while we were taking B.P. (batting practice), I
178 remember still considering who was going to try to go with this guy, watching these guys
179 hit, what lineup are we going to use. So, I think I was kind of looking ahead, thinking
180 ahead to the scrimmage game.”

181 A third coach described how he strategized individually with one of the players. He stated:

182 “If I see a kid doing something and he’s in the cage, and he has three or four swings left,

183 rather than instruct him right then, I'll just let him finish his cuts, and then get him out
184 behind the cage and try to tell him- I guess I was being silent during the actual skill, then
185 try to get him back there after that to where he can think about that and mentally rehearse
186 that while the other two guys in front of him are hitting, then when he goes up there, he's
187 hopefully got a clear head and can work through that, and not interrupt on his time in the
188 cage.”

189 **Silence being effective and instructional**

190 The last theme to be discussed by the coaches was silence being effective and
191 instructional. When the baseball coaches were asked if silence could be effective and
192 instructional at a certain time of practice, all of the coaches said ‘yes.’ For example, one coach
193 said:

194 “I think it is. I think it’s essential. If you have two kids that are messing around and if
195 they know you’re watching them – I don’t have to tell them anything – if they aren’t
196 doing what they are supposed to do, they know the coach is fixing to get on them, then
197 that’s a period of silence and they can correct that themselves, which is accountability. I
198 think that it’s a very valuable tool.”

199 Another coach discussed that silence can be good instruction by saying,

200 “I think kids, adults, all people, all beings, all the time, are capable of picking up
201 information from many different instructional techniques and I think silence is one of
202 those. I know that when I’m quiet and they see my wheels turning that they also have to
203 think about what they just did. If I have to think about it, obviously something is not
204 right. If they’re reviewing what just happened in their minds, they’re also getting an
205 educational benefit out of the silence. It may be silence pondering is not the same look as

206 silence and giving somebody a dirty look. There is a lot silence also. I know many
207 people that I can read their mind by their facial expression that they have on and I'm
208 quick to use facial expressions in my coaching. They can see pleasing facial expressions,
209 they can see terrifying facial expressions, and I think they know the difference.”

210 One last coach stated his thoughts this way:

211 “I think to a certain degree it is effective. To let a kid, play during a game, to be silent
212 there, or during a drill to be silent like you talked about, or just being silent, but giving a
213 look or whatever to a kid, that he knows you didn't approve of what he did or how he
214 handled himself in a certain situation. I think that sometimes that's good. Sometimes
215 silence can be a good enforcer method of feedback.”

216 **Discussion**

217 The purpose of this study was to interview consistently successful high school baseball
218 coaches with an emphasis on their silence as a coaching behavior. It was generally concluded
219 from all of the baseball coaches that silence during practice can serve as an effective coaching
220 behavior. From the interview data there were four themes that emerged, they were: 1) Thoughts
221 during times of silence, 2) Fatigues affect during periods of silence, 3) Strategizing during
222 silence, and 4) Silence being effective and instructional.

223 The theme of the coaches' thoughts during times of silence revealed that they were
224 thinking of baseball related items and what was happening in the moment. For this study, one of
225 the coaches described a conversation he had with himself, when he recounted by stating, “If I
226 move John (pseudonym) from shortstop to 2nd base this should allow me to put Frank
227 (pseudonym) at shortstop, thus giving us a stronger bat in our lineup. Yet, how can I utilize Joe
228 (pseudonym) when I sit him?” This coach was thinking about his personnel and how to make his

229 team more competitive, and it demonstrates what the coach was thinking about during his time of
230 silence. This example from this study is what Cushion and Smith (2001) have labelled
231 cognitively processing important factors that have the possibility of affecting the outcome of a
232 game. From Smith and Cushion's (2006) study of youth soccer coaches, one of the coaches
233 wanted to be in the moment during practice, and that as he analyzed his players performance
234 during practice, he felt he could think of game situations that he could impart to his athletes that
235 could benefit them later in a game.

236 From the theme of fatigue affecting the coaches' silence, the coaches used words or
237 phrases such as "my thoughts were wandering", "daydreaming," and "thinking of non-baseball
238 things." These responses hint that when the coach was tired during periods of silence that they
239 would find themselves thinking of non-related baseball thoughts. One coach stated,

240 "Because of fatigue there's going to be sometimes that I'm going to be thinking, 'this has
241 been a crappy practice,' 'This has been a waste of a day,' and 'I should have just sent
242 them home.' Because I am tired, my thoughts may tend to be or dwell on the negative."

243 Another coach had a different perspective about fatigues effect on a baseball coaches silence
244 when he said, "I'm usually more mentally drained than physically, just from all that's going on.
245 I can't afford to daydream." One key factor from these baseball coaches' fatigue could be that
246 these baseball coaches were classroom teachers. They had taught a full day of classes so then
247 going to baseball practice would make for a very long day for these coaches.

248 A third theme discovered from this study was the fact that the coaches were strategizing
249 during their periods of silence. Smith and Cushion (2006) observed soccer coaches and noted
250 from their observations that because of the nature of soccer the soccer coaches would silently
251 observe their players game-like situations for some time. Following this silent observation, the

252 coach would call a time-out, gather the players around and discuss with them what he had just
253 seen. The coach would then strategize how his players could implement certain situations during
254 game play. From this current baseball study, one of the coaches discussed watching his team
255 take batting practice and considering who he was going to play against a certain opposing
256 pitcher. The coach stated, “I think I was kind of looking ahead” which is clearly an example of
257 strategizing during silence. The final theme from this study was the coaches’ belief that silence
258 was an effective and instructional behavior for their players. Stonebridge and Cushion (2018)
259 studied youth soccer coaches with different levels of training and their coaching behaviors. The
260 soccer coaches were asked, what was the purpose of their silence during practice. One coach
261 stated, “To observe. To make sure when you do go in, you coach something that’s real as
262 opposed to...it just being based on what you want to do.” A second coach stated, “... to let them
263 make their decisions so I’m not telling or trying not to tell them the answers.” Both of these
264 coaches felt that when they were silent during practice it gave them an opportunity to give
265 valuable instruction and/or feedback and that it gave the athletes a chance to learn as they were
266 practicing. From this study, the baseball coaches used silence as a time for their players to think
267 for themselves and make the necessary adjustments. One coach stated, “If the player has not
268 made the necessary adjustments during the time, I am silent, then I will pull the player aside and
269 talk him through what he needs to do.”

270 **Conclusions**

271 The findings from this study can be beneficial for baseball coaches and coaches in other
272 sports. To the untrained eye, a coach’s silence may appear to be wasted time when a coach is
273 giving no instruction. However, from this study, it was found that during these periods of silence
274 that these baseball coaches were focusing on how to improve their players, how to better prepare

275 the team in game-like situations, and thus better preparing the team for competition. These
276 baseball coaches believed that team practice provided them the time that they needed to think
277 through a multitude of game situations and strategies that their players would soon face, thus
278 allowing the coaches to use these periods of silence to prepare their players. The researchers feel
279 that these findings from this study will help strengthen the coaching literature in the area of
280 silence. The researchers feel that these findings from this study will help strengthen the coaching
281 literature in the area of silence, hopefully helping future parents that find themselves in the
282 opening scenario to understand that a coach's silence is an instructional behavior that will help
283 get the team ready to compete (Claxton, 1988).

284 **Study Limitations**

285 The researchers noted limitations to this study. The baseball coaches from this study
286 were from the same geographic region of the United States, thus limiting the generalizing of the
287 findings. Another limitation to this study was that the baseball coaches studied were all coaching
288 at the high school level. It would also be interesting to study college coaches at the NJCAA,
289 NAIA, and NCAA levels.

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321 **Table 1**
 322 Interview Themes Regarding High School Baseball Coaches Using Silence

324 Interview Themes	325 Comments
327 Thoughts During Time of 328 Silence	329 “I am focusing in on particular aspects... 330 trying to think of certain comments that 331 might make it easier...”
334 Fatigues Affect During 335 Periods of Silence	332 “Trying to gather as much information as he 333 can...to make qualified statements...”
334 Fatigues Affect During 335 Periods of Silence	336 “I’m sure that there are times in freshman 337 practice... my mind wanders”
340 Strategizing During Silence	338 “This has been a crappy practice” and “This 339 has been a waste of a day”
340 Strategizing During Silence	341 “How can I get the most from my kids”
347 Silence Being Effective and 348 Instructional	342 “While we were taking BP, I remember still 343 considering who was going ... go with this 344 guy”
347 Silence Being Effective and 348 Instructional	346 “If they aren’t doing what they are supposed 347 to do, they know the coach is fixing to get 348 on them”
351 “I know that when I’m quiet and they see 352 my wheels turning that they also have to 353 think about what they just did”	
