

**17 - THE EXCELLENCE OF THE SPORT COACH. A CASE STUDY.**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The search for transcendence has always followed man, since it is strongly related with his nature. It has been one of the most important philosophical themes ever, philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Heidegger or Kant have reflected upon this matter thoroughly.

Sport is an activity searching for transcendence, just like a quest, man is constantly trying to overcome his limits. (Garcia & Lemos, 2005). According to Bento (2004:225), "the essence of the practice only becomes real as one climbs the steps towards the end of difficulties, finally reaching the so called excellence".

During the last years, the interest in studying the excellent coach has increased (Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2003; Potrac, Jones & Armour, 2002). However, there are still several questions surrounding the theme.

Janssen & Dale (2002) and Orlick (2008) talk about some interesting topics, even though they deserve further research, for example, why do some coaches actually manage to obtain enormous success with their athletes and teams? How do they manage to gain the player's trust, loyalty and respect? How do they transmit self-esteem, motivation and aggressiveness so that they are able to overcome the pressure of high competition? How do they inspire athletes' pleasure in performing their jobs?

Although many of these coaches are the centre of public interest and of the media itself, we still don't know much about the top coaches' behavior and practices.

This way, it becomes urgent to further investigate this issue, so that it becomes possible to gather more data concerning the coach's interpretation of his own professional experience, his daily routine, the principles, which guide his actions, and the meaning of his attitudes and behaviors (Jones, 2007; Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2003).

Within this research, it is mostly interesting to put in doubt the coaches' excellence, the question seems to be: how can one characterize an excellent coach? Alternatively, what are the reasons that explain excellence in these characters?

The aim of this study was mainly to identify the values, the references and the leading concerns of a world class coach, as well as to be aware of his own representations about excellence and to examine the consequences, specially as far as youngster's education is concerned, always considering his life story.

**EMPIRICAL TASK****PARTICIPANT IN THE STUDY**

The object of our study is a Brazilian volleyball coach, Prof. Percy Oncken; he is considered one of the finest within his class.

Prof. Percy Oncken was born in 1960, in Igaracú, a city in the north of Paraná, Brazil. As a young man he was a volleyball player, he was part of the juvenile and adult selection of the state of Paraná. In 1981, he finished his degree in Physical Education in the University of Londrina, where he still works as a professor.

In 1980, he started working as a volleyball coach. He trained several clubs and he won some titles with younger athletes. In 1988, he was already the coach of the selection of Paraná. In 1991, he was invited to the technical team of Brazil, and in 1993 he is the main coach of the national juvenile team.

Among several titles as a main coach, these are good examples: i) as main technician of the Infante/Juvenile Male Selection of Brazil (under 17 years old) he was a world champion in 1993, 1995, 2001 e 2003; he also won the South American Championship in 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002 e 2004; ii) as main technician of the Juvenile Male Selection of Brazil (under 19 years old) he won the World Championship in 2007 and the South American Championship in 2006.

**PROCEDURES**

The used investigation technique was the "Life Stories", as they stress the individual's experiences as well as their connections with all the changes that took place along their own lives (Tierney, 2000). Attending to their features, we are able to gather information related to the sportive and personal life of world class coaches and to understand more thoroughly their social and cultural influences as well as the context of the place they work, compete and live (Sands, 2002).

Gathering information to build this particular Life Story took place during a training period of the Juvenile Brazilian Male Selection in Portugal in May of 2007.

The instruments used in this Life Story were the interviews and the non-participating observation:

i) Interviews – the technique of the semi directed interview was the basis to the gathering of information within Life Stories (Poirier, Clapier-Valladon & Raybout, 1995). Since we were centered in a single individual, a single Life Story, several dialogues took place, the aims were to deepen all the information and all the approaches of unknown themes (Poirier, Clapier-Valladon & Raybout, 1995).

The interview script was made according to the methodological requirements of well-known authors (Bogdan & Birklen, 1994; Quivy & Campenhoudt, 1998; Ruquoy, 2005). Before applying this model to the subject of this study, it was sanctioned by a group of Professors well used to deal with this kind of work instrument. The interviews were authorized and recorded and then they were transcribed.

b) The non participating observation – without involving in any way in the object of this study the observer watched practices, games, conferences as well as meals and all the pleasurable moments with the team. The result was an assemblage of information that is called field notes (Heinemann, 2003; Quivy & Campenhoudt, 1998; Thomas & Nelson, 1996). These notes are descriptions of all the interventions and behaviors, as well as personal interactions and organization processes Percy Oncken was involved in.

In this research, the transcription of interviews and the field notes are the corpus of the analysis.

The technique used for data treatment was the "Contents Analysis" (Bardin, 1977; Creswell, 1994; Vala, 1986). We considered the two functions within the Contents Analysis, the confirmatory and the heuristic (Bardin, 1977). This way and based on the revision of literature, we categorized part of the contents first and then, after a further and more profound study of the corpus, we categorized the remaining.

The data analysis was discussed with other investigators with the purpose of promoting an option confrontation, therefore developing a way to give this methodological path a good credibility (Bardin, 1977; Creswell, 1994).

### UNDERSTANDING THE SPORTIVE SUCCESS THROUGH LIFE STORIES

Next, we will present some ideas and thoughts, which are inherent to Oncken's attitudes and behaviors. These inner insights aroused as the final categories of this study

#### GREAT CONCERNS

The interviewed coach expressed the restlessness and solicitude, which have accompanied him throughout his career. It becomes very clear the passion for his job. Therefore, *"the first thing a coach should do is to love what he is doing. People should love the things they like, so they won't live sadly"*.

The taste and passion for one's professional activity are the main factors as far as promoting excellence is concerned (Janssen & Dale, 2002; Orlick, 2008). Also Patricio (2005) states that *"what is worth to be done is even more valuable if it is done well" and that only becomes possible when we actually like the things we do*.

Prof. Percy Oncken also showed another concern that has to do with the kind of relationships he has with his athletes. These relationships *"were always very good but demanding, sometimes they love me, sometimes they hate me. This is all normal in a kind of process you look for excellence"*.

Within these relationships with the athletes, there are fundamental aspects, which become essential to obtain the so wanted success. One of them has to do with respect and he explains: *"one thing I take seriously during all practices is the respect for people. We can't give respect we conquer it"*.

Janssen & Dale (2002) also state that the relationship coach – athlete should be guided with credibility and respect, since this is a vital condition for success.

Determination is also well expressed in his ability to take firm decisions. He does not give up in the presence of difficulties and he does not hesitate in his goals. This means, *"the will to overcome problems... if I didn't have it this wouldn't be possible ... with 20/25 years of career maybe I would have given up at some point, to work in a more profitable area. I think determination is definitely the word of my life"*.

Orlick (2008:11) also shares this position when he claims that: *"we all possess incredible strength when we draw on the full power of our focus. Excellence flows naturally when you develop confidence in your focus and know that your focus will take you where you want to go"*.

Throughout time and in several fields there have been remarkable personalities, who have always won because they refused to give up, facing all the challenges and problems along their way (Pereira, 2001).

#### AMBITIONS AND PROJECTS FOR THE FUTURE

In a period of big social changes, the ability to look ahead and to idealize is fundamental to build the future. During our interviews a thought aroused, for our coach it becomes fundamental to do a good job everyday. *"I need to work in the present to think about the future. If I work in a wrong way now the future will never be the way I imagined it"*. Although he won many titles, but these are "never enough", nobody will hire you only for your past".

Orlick (2008:13) also reminds us "the heart of human excellence often begins to beat when you discover a pursuit that absorbs you, frees you, challenges you, or gives you a sense of meaning, joy, or passion. When you find something within a pursuit, or within yourself, that you are truly committed to developing, everything else can grow".

#### CONSTRAINTS AND DIFFICULTIES

Throughout their paths, coaches face periods of enormous difficulties; some of them give origin to profound crisis. Percy Oncken's reaction to these adversities is in a positive and meaningful sense. This way, *"I even think crisis are quite necessary during the training process, so that we have to think things over. That happened to me lots of times, I had a crisis in every selection a coached, but I always thought it was welcome, since it made me change some aspects towards better solutions ..."*

This kind of attitude is mentioned by Bento (2004) when he calls it pedagogical uneasiness and pedagogical intervention, the taste in accomplishing something, the stimulation of wanting to achieve something and the celebration of the enthusiasm against difficulties and the prizes for the positive situations.

The great constraint, according to our guest has to do with the big constant involvement with the job itself, sometimes affecting the family.

*"That was effectively the most difficult part of my job, since people get worn out and they are not present, that was the main cause of my bad wedding. When I started working with the Brazilian selection I had to catch the opportunity, so I sacrificed other things, like my wife and my children..."*

#### MEANINGFUL MOMENTS

A successful coach has always remarkable moments along his career, this way for Prof. Percy Oncken among these moments are certainly the ones connected with the real success obtained during his professional activity. *"My first success was when I won the 1st state title, it was when it all started, in 1984...1985. When I was called to the national selection, that was also an important moment and of course, when I won the first world title, as a coach in 1993. Each of these moments was obviously very pleasant for me"*.

The elements just shown allow us to conclude the highest moments were deeply connected with the richest professional experiences. We also understand this man had a desire for professional accomplishment within this activity and since very early times he established future perspectives and long-term objectives.

The truth is there are always moments of unhappiness and suffering; the most relevant is the players' release from the national selection. Our coach says, *"... these episodes happen every year in the selection. When we have to dismiss them, it means they will not play in the World Championship and this means I am going to be the person responsible for that failure in their lives, for destroying their dream. I feel terrible when it happens"*.

### PERCEPTIONS ABOUT EXCELLENCE

One of the most pertinent aspects of our study is to understand Prof. Percy Oncken's perception and reflection about his own performance, its meaning and his mission in society.

We also thought it was important to hear about the way excellence is "built" and managed. The answers are in the sense of always searching for the constant quality: "quality practices are always in my mind so that we can be big and conquer titles like we did in the past." *He also states, "I admit titles also give you extra responsibility ... people expect you to win all the time or at least that we keep a certain type of style and results." This means, "You need to establish daily goals for your players, they need to have purposes ... and I must keep their trust and self esteem, so that they won't lose their faith in the job".*

Orlick says (2008:273) "the challenge of every coach is to bring out the best in each of his or her athletes". Only a creative, innovative and enterprising spirit, open to new ideas and available to continue learning (Janssen & Dale, 2002), that imposes challenges to himself, that believes in his mission and in his team (Orlick, 2008), makes it possible to look for new answers to the innumerable questions, which walk side by side with the coach during his daily routine.

Another aspect to observe is the top coach's role in society and particularly in sport. Clearly, Prof. Percy's answers point out to the complete formation of the athlete. He tells us *"the coach of the Brazilian selection has to find out new talents... But then we have to educate and form players within the greatness of being a volleyball player, not only a team player"*.

In this sense, the coach's action is conclusive, since "obviously talent itself is not enough, to be born good doesn't mean you become a great player..." Prof. Percy Oncken's intervention sometimes reaches the most basic aspects of living in a society. For example, *"sometimes it happens that the young boys we receive in the Brazilian selection don't have the abilities required to live with other boys, even in the way they behave during the meals ..."*

As far as the athletes' whole formation is concerned, our guest gives special attention to the values, as he understands that as a coach he should be a part of *"transmitting and transforming values... This means changing the bad aspects in good people's personality... also showing citizens good paths to follow, so that they also become helpful members of society. This is why values are so important, because without them we cannot be perfect citizens... this becomes the only way an athlete can reach excellence in the game"*.

Janssen & Dale (2002) claim the idea that coaches seeking for success must show a true interest in the athletes' global formation, for their extra sportive life and for their future. They also must be available to help them with their problems and to develop loyal friendships. Sport should be grounded in an ethical of the human person (Garcia & Lemos, 2005). Due to the theoretical presuppositions sport is based on, it has always been seen as an experience field transmitting and socializing values and humanitarian principles (Bento, 1998).

This concern for the whole formation of the athlete is related to the ancient concept of paideia. In ancient Greece, the education and the formation represented the human being as a complete whole, justifying the community and the human individuality themselves (Jaeger, 1989; Monteiro, 2007).

These principles were well demonstrated by our guest along the interview and the whole research.

On the other hand, we are aware the main theme of ancient Greek education was the concept of aretê (Jaeger, 1989), it is possible to check that Prof. Percy Oncken expresses concerns and attitudes which show that intention of discipline, surpass and perfection towards the individual and collective wellness.

### CONCLUSIONS

The main goal of this research was to identify the values, the references and the concerns, which guide the world-class coach's activity, as well as his own representations of excellence.

Our chosen coach showed us a wide range of concerns he has lived with his entire career, never hiding the passion for his job, the dedication and respect for his athletes and a great determination, which allows him to walk through a path of obstacles.

As far as ambitions and future projects are concerned, he talked about his will of developing a good job every passing day. The way he deals with constraints and difficulties reveals a constructive attitude and the awareness they are part of the improvement process. The most jeopardizing event was to have deprived his family of his company, due to his intense activity within sport.

Throughout his life the most important moments are obviously, connect with titles and big sportive successes. On the other hand, the events that hurt him the most are related with dismissing athletes from the national selection.

His understanding about his mission in society is organised in two references. The first has to do with the fact one needs to seek quality all the time, using a permanent, demanding and innovative spirit in order to obtain further and better sportive results. The second deals with the athletes' formation, paying special attention to the transmission of values

The methodological approach used in this study was the life stories, which are remarkably subjective, qualitative and particular. This singular approach placed a world top coach as the centre of investigation, since we are sure the singularity of his life may give us data towards a bigger knowledge about the phenomenon of excellence in sport.

### GRATITUDES

We would like to thank Prof. Percy Oncken for accepting so generously our intrusion in his place of work and for sharing with us his Life Story.

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#### **THE EXCELLENCE OF THE SPORT COACH. A CASE STUDY.**

##### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this study was to identify the values and the references that guide Professor Percy Oncken, a Brazilian volleyball coach and winner of various world-wide championships, in his work. The research technique used was "life stories". The data was collected by carrying out in-depth interviews and non-participative observation. Among the concerns that have followed his life-long career, we can highlight his great passion for his profession, respect for athletes and determination when facing difficulties. In terms of ambitions, we can point out the will to do his best every day and to one day train senior athletes. He regards difficulties that arise as being indispensable to a process of perfection. Having deprived his family of his attention is what has distressed him the most. The most important moments of his career were when he achieved good results and the ones that generate more suffering are those when he dismisses players from the national team. In terms of his social intervention, he is concerned with permanently carrying out his work with great quality and fully developing athletes.

**KEYWORDS:** excellence, coach, life stories

#### **A EXCELÊNCIA DO TREINADOR DESPORTIVO. UM ESTUDO DE CASO.**

##### **RESUMO**

Esta pesquisa teve como objectivo identificar os valores e as referências que orientam a actividade de Prof. Percy Oncken, técnico brasileiro de Voleibol, vencedor de vários campeonatos mundiais. A técnica de investigação utilizada foi a das "Histórias de Vida". A recolha de dados decorreu de entrevistas em profundidade e da observação não participante. Entre as inquietações que o têm acompanhado ao longo da sua carreira, salientam-se uma grande paixão pela profissão, respeito pelos atletas e determinação perante os obstáculos. Em termos de ambições, salientou a vontade de desenvolver todos os dias um bom trabalho. Encara as dificuldades como algo indispensável num processo de aperfeiçoamento. O ter privado a família de atenção foi o constrangimento que mais o afectou. Os momentos mais importantes da sua carreira ocorreram quando alcançou grandes êxitos e os que geram mais sofrimento acontecem quando dispensa jogadores da selecção. Em termos da sua intervenção social, a sua preocupação vai no sentido de uma actuação permanente de grande qualidade e a formação integral dos atletas.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** excelência, treinador, histórias de vida