

An Investigation of the Relationship of Coach's Use of Humor and Subsequent Player Evaluation

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This study examined the effects of coaches' use of humor on player evaluations. A questionnaire was administered to 97 high school wrestlers. Subjects were asked to indicate their perceptions of their coaches' use of humor, coaching abilities, and the degree to which they liked their coach. Respondents indicated their coaches had a sense of humor ($M = 1.50$), that they liked their coach ($M = 1.52$), and had appropriate abilities for coaching wrestling. Further analysis indicated weak relationships between the athletes' perception of coaches' use of humor and coaching ability ($r = .131$) and between the coaches' use of humor and the degree to which athletes liked the coaches ($r = .217$). A moderate relationship ($r = .561$) existed between athletes liking the coach and perceived coaching ability. This study suggests use of humor by wrestling coaches does not improve athlete perceptions of coaching ability or liking of the

coach. However, there was a statistically significant relationship between athletes' liking of the coach and perceived coaching ability.

Humor has long played an important role in interpersonal and group communication. Research studies in educational and business settings have demonstrated that the use of humor by leaders can improve the communication process (Vinton, 1989; Parish, 1984, Bryant, Comsky, Crane & Zillman, 1989). These findings indicate the use of humor aids with information retention and application while minimizing feelings of anxiety and unassuredness. This growing body of research suggests it is beneficial for leaders to utilize and encourage humor in the workplace (Avolio, Howell & Sosik, 1999).

Leaders who infuse humor into their managerial style are frequently perceived as more effective by employees (Bass, 1995; Shamir, 1995; Malone, 1980). Research suggests leaders who utilize humor often have a greater ability to effect change in the workplace (Conkell, Imwold & Ratliffe, 1999; Hogan, Curphy & Hogan, 1994). This could be attributed to the fact that humor in the workplace often creates an environment which promotes the development of trust in the leader/worker relationship (Weaver & Cotrell, 1987). The willingness of employees to trust leaders is often an important determinant of whether followers will adhere to the directives of the leader (Chelladurai, 1999). In addition to increasing trust, the use of humor by leaders has been associated with other organizationally relevant outcomes. For example, the use of humor in the workplace has been associated with group cohesion (Katz, 1996), employee morale (Gruner, 1997), conflict resolution (Smith,

Harrington & Neck, 2000), creativity in decision-making and problem solving (Chatterjee, 2000), productivity (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995), and employee commitment (Ziv & Gadish, 1990). While there is support for the use of humor by leaders in business and educational settings, there remains a dearth of information on the effectiveness of humor within an athletic context.

Research regarding the use of humor in athletic settings is minimal and the results of these studies are limited. Because coaches normally assume leadership roles in sport there is the potential for humor to have the same benefits in an athletic context that have been observed in business settings. Burke, Peterson, and Nix (1995) investigated the relationship between a coach's use of humor and an athlete's evaluation of coaching effectiveness. Results indicated humor played a role in an athlete's perception of their coach's ability and "liking" of their coaches. The item measuring "liking" of the coach was intended to solicit the athlete's feelings about the coach as a person. This evaluation was based upon factors other than perceived coaching ability. However due to the exploratory nature of this study there is a need to further examine of the use of humor by coaches in an athletic setting.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine participant's evaluation of their coach in relationship to his/her use of humor. The questions used to guide the study were as follows:

1. What is the relationship between a coach's use of humor and perceived coaching ability?
2. What is the relationship between a coach's use of humor and how well they are liked by participants?
3. What is the relationship between participants liking of the coach and perceived coaching ability?

4. Do participants perceptions of their coach's use of humor, coaching ability or likeability vary based on age or years of experience?

Methodology

Nine high schools wrestling programs were randomly selected from all schools that fielded wrestling programs ($N = 59$) in a southern state. A cover letter explaining the purpose of the research and a copy of the survey instrument was distributed to each school. Participants in this study were male high school wrestlers ($n=97$) ranging in age from 15-19 ($M = 15.5$) with an average of 1.9 years of experience in amateur wrestling.

The study utilized a modified version of the Coaches Evaluation Questionnaire (Rushall & Wiznak, 1985). The original questionnaire contained 36 items and had reported reliability of .80. Three survey items were used as primary indicators of the players' perception of their coach's sense of humor, ability and how well players liked their coach. The questionnaire utilized a five-point Likert scale with response options ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Results

Table I shows the mean and standard deviations of Item 1 "I feel my coach has a sense of humor;" Item 2 "I like my coach"; and Item 3 "Overall, I feel my coach is a good wrestling coach" for all participants by experience and by age group.

Table 1
Mean and Standard Deviations for All Wrestlers By Age and Experience

Item	All Players (N=97)		13-15 Yrs Old (N=48)		16-19 Yrs Old (N=49)		Experience (>1Yr) (N=48)		Inexperience (≤1Yrs) (N=49)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1	1.505	0.761	1.563	0.788	1.449	0.730	1.542	0.841	1.469	0.673
2	1.526	0.879	1.667	0.943	1.388	0.664	1.479	0.612	1.571	0.990
3	1.330	0.647	1.354	0.559	1.306	0.645	1.354	0.595	1.360	0.613

Note: 1=Strongly Agree

2=Agree

3=Neutral

4=Disagree

5=Strongly Disagree

Results indicated respondents thought their coaches had a sense of humor ($M= 1.50$), that they liked their coach ($M= 1.52$) and felt their coach was a good wrestling coach ($M= 1.33$)

Table 2 gives the correlation matrix for each of the three items. A weak relationship ($r = .131$) was found between the players' perception of their coach's sense of humor and coaching ability. In addition, a weak relationship ($r = .217$) existed between the coach's sense of humor and the liking of the coach by the players. Finally, a moderate relationship ($r = .561$) was demonstrated between the players liking the coach and the perceived coaching ability.

Table 2
Pearson Product Moment Correlation
Among Variables (N=97)

Variables	1	2	3
1. I feel my coach has a sense of humor		.217*	.131
2. I like my coach			.561*
3. Overall, I feel my coach is a good wrestling coach			

*($p<.05$)

In order to determine variation based on age of the participants the sample was divided into two age categories 13-15 ($n = 48$), 16-19 ($n=49$) and a Pearson Product Moment Correlation was performed to determine if younger wrestlers had different perceptions than older wrestlers. Results indicated a weak relationship for both groups ($r=.168$; $r=.272$) between the coach's sense of humor and

liking the coach. A weak relationship ($r=.115$; $r=.141$) between the coach's sense of humor and perceived coaching ability was also detected for each age group. However, both groups showed a moderate to strong correlation between liking the coach and their perception of the coach's ability. There was a stronger relationship within the older group ($r=.730$) compared to the younger group ($r = .422$).

In addition to separating the sample based on age, participants were also divided into experience categories; 0-1 years ($n=49$), 2 or more years ($n=48$) and Pearson Product Moment Correlations were again computed. Both groups showed moderate relationships ($r = .519$, $r = .678$) between liking the coach and perceived coaching ability. These correlations were found to be statistically significant ($P<.05$). When examining the correlations between the coach's sense of humor and perceived coaching ability, results indicated a weak relationship for both groups ($r = .146$; $r = .116$). In addition, both groups demonstrated a weak relationship ($r = .241$, $r = .224$) between the sense of humor and liking the coaches

Discussion

Results of the present study suggest that use of humor by wrestling coaches does not improve athlete perceptions of coaching ability or liking of the coach. The results showed a weak relationship between a coach's use of humor and the other variables. It was found that humor was not a factor in participant's analysis of their coach's ability despite age and /or level of experience. Burke, et al (1995) also noted that female volleyball participants showed a weak-moderate correlation between the coach's sense of humor and liking the coach. The current study demonstrated a weak

relationship between the coach's sense of humor and liking the coach (in all categories). It appears that wrestlers (males) do not see humor as an important coaching tool while the volleyball player (females) did. This study found that younger wrestlers do not differ from older wrestlers in the relationship between the coach's use of humor and liking the coach or believing in their coach's ability. In contrast, young female volleyball players indicated a stronger relationship between coach's sense of humor and liking the coach. Therefore, results of the present study indicate humor does not seem to influence a wrestler's level of satisfaction with his coach.

It is possible that High School wrestlers do not expect humor from their coach. The use of humor may not have a positive effect on learning within the sport of wrestling. Also, humor may not have an effect of improving individual player performance. It is possible that participating coach's sense of humor was not interesting or funny. The wrestlers may not perceive that the coach's use of humor makes them laugh or work hard. This seems to confirm research conducted by Terry and Wood (1975) that examined the effects of humor on performance. Results of this study revealed the nonhumor group performed better than the humor group in an instruction/examination setting. The present study concluded that high school wrestlers do not perceive the use of humor by their coach as an important factor in learning wrestling.

In the previous study, volleyball players appeared to value the use of humor. However in the present study the use of humor did not appear to be important to wrestlers. This could be attributed to differences within the sports as volleyball is seen as a team sport whereas wrestling is most often viewed as an individual sport. This would point to the

needed socialization within the team setting that may not exist in individual sports. As humor has been shown to help with this socialization process it may be more useful in the team setting. This does not however indicate that humor is not effective in an individual setting but it may meet a larger need in the team setting. A contributing factor for these differences could also be in the nature of the two sports. Wrestling tends to be a more aggressive sport with violent overtones. Accordingly, wrestlers may not perceive humor as appropriate form of communication in this environment.

The differences found between the two studies also indicate variation between male and female perceptions regarding coaches' use of humor. This difference could be attributed to different needs by gender or the socialization process.

Finally, a strong correlation between liking their coach and perceived ability of their coach was found by all groups. Results indicate that wrestlers value coaching ability more than their coach's use of humor. This study demonstrated a moderately high correlation between wrestlers liking their coaches and perceived coaching ability. Older, experienced participants had a high evaluation of their coach's perceived performance and indicated they liked their coaches. Younger, inexperienced wrestlers showed a moderately high correlation between liking their coaches and perceived ability of their coach. This supports the previous findings of Burke, Peterson and Nix (1995) which indicated that humor was a significant variable in coaching. The participants in that study (female Volleyball participants) exhibited a strong relationship between liking the coach and perceived ability of the coach.

Additional differences could be attributed to the general leadership style typically used by the wrestling coach. If the

coach is an autocratic type leader, the use of humor may seem out of place and inconsistent to the participant. One of the primary desires individual's have of leaders is consistency in behavior (Chelladurai, 1999). The use of humor by coaches could be regarded by wrestlers to be "out of character" and therefore ineffective.

The type of humor used by coaches could also be a factor in wrestlers' perceptions. Often athletic practices are laced with sarcastic and hurtful attempts at humor that have been shown to be an ineffective means of communication (Anshel, 1994). It would seem feasible that some coaches may in turn model this same style of sarcastic humor in communication with their athletes. Research suggests that this type of humor often has a negative effect on individual and group performance (Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999).

Implications

The findings of this and previous studies could have important implications for today's coaches and administrators. It is possible that the use of humor in the athletic setting could help establish an environment that could minimize attrition of younger athletes. Participant attrition in sport is an established concern among athletic coaches and administrators. The attrition of participants from sport programs occurs for a variety of reasons. The two major reasons for student attrition can be directly addressed through the use of humor by coaches. A survey of 10,000 school age students identified the primary reason for quitting a sport was lack of fun, followed by boredom in practice as the major causes for leaving a sport (Ewing, 1990). Previous research indicates the use of humor could have a positive impact on the reduction of these problems

(Katz, 1996; Gruner, 1997; Ziv & Gadish, 1990). Through the appropriate use of humor coaches could create an environment that would promote participant enjoyment and minimize participant boredom in practice. The benefits of increased retention numbers could include the expansion of athletic contest offerings (through Junior varsity and/or "B-team" games), the addition of new programs and the justification for hiring additional coaches and staff members.

Furthermore, results of this study, as well as previous research, indicate that humor can be utilized as a form of communication in the athletic setting. The current study supports the general findings of the previous study that demonstrates humor can have a positive effect on the athlete's perception of the coach's abilities (Burke, et al.1995). Coaches wishing to effectively use humor with their athletes should consider gender, sport, and individual or team setting. It would be prudent for the coach to carefully examine their use of humor in order to increase the potential for a positive effect. Future studies should be conducted examining gender differences, team versus individual sport settings and coach's actual use of humor.

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**Coaches Evaluation Questionnaire
(Rushall & Wiznak, 1985).
Modified Burke, Peterson and Nix (1995)**

Please answer the following questions as they relate to your most recent wrestling coach by using the following scale:

*1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3= neutral,
4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree*

1. I feel my coach is dedicated to the sport of wrestling.
2. I feel my coach is dedicated.
3. I feel my coach communicates with me.
4. My coach uses abusive and foul language.
5. I feel my coach dresses appropriately, setting a good example for me to follow.
6. I feel my coach is a source of motivation.
7. I feel my coach's decisions are well thought out.
8. I feel my coach is strict
9. I feel me coach gives attention to me.
10. I feel my coach gives encouragement to me after a loss.
11. I feel my coach's physical appearance sets a good example for me.
12. I feel my coach has a sense of humor.
13. I feel that I can trust my coach.
14. I like my coach.
15. I respect my coach.
16. My coach is interested in me as a person.
17. At team meetings, the coach gives me a chance to make my opinions known.
18. I feel my coach sets a positive example during competitions.

19. I feel my coach's conduct toward me during a match is sportsmanlike.
20. I feel my coach's conduct towards officials during a match is sportsmanlike.
21. I feel my coach encourages social activities for the team.
22. I feel my coach is interested in my schoolwork.
23. My coach provides practices that are well organized.
24. I feel my coach is in command during practice.
25. I feel my coach is concerned about my health and safety during practice.
26. I feel my coach makes the best use of the time available for practice.
27. My coach interacts with me at practice
28. I feel my coach's instructions are easily understood.
29. I feel my coach knows how to teach difficult skills.
30. I feel my coach knows when to use discipline and when not to.
31. After a match, my coach indicates the good parts of the match but also points out the areas that could be improved upon.
32. My coach considers me to be an important wrestler on the team.
33. Overall, I feel my coach is a good wrestling coach.
34. I was truthful and took my time in answering these questions.