SHOW NOTES

Praise is Not Feedback

Praise is Not Feedback

Episode 7 | Season 3 | *Coaching Research To Results Podcast*

EPISODE AT A GLANCE

Paper	A Systematic Review of Coach Augmented Verbal Feedback During Practice and Competition in Team Sports
Author	Corbett, R., Partington, M., Ryan, L., & Cope, E.
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Episode Length	Under 12 minutes
Tags	feedback, verbal feedback, coach behaviour, athlete learning, team sports, systematic observation, augmented feedback

THE THREE STICKY IDEAS

These are the labels to remember from this episode. They are designed to stick with you long after the research fades.

Praise is Not Feedback

Across 31 studies of real coaching sessions, praise and general encouragement were the coaching behaviours observed most often, appearing in 19 of the 31 studies. Yet meta-analytic evidence shows praise has minimal to no measurable impact on athlete learning, meaning the most common thing coaches say may be doing the least for their athletes' development.

The Information Gap

Even when coaches went beyond simple praise, most feedback remained general rather than specific, and high-information feedback (the kind that tells an athlete what they did, how to understand it, and what to try next) appeared rarely across the studies. Research shows the information content of feedback is the main driver of its effectiveness, meaning coaches may be talking often without giving athletes much they can actually use.

Winning Unlocks the Good Stuff

Two studies found that higher-quality feedback (descriptive, positive, and process-focused) appeared more often during winning moments than during losing ones. This raises the

possibility that coaches deliver their best feedback exactly when athletes need it least and revert to lower-quality feedback when the pressure and the learning stakes are highest.

TWO ACTIONS FOR TOMORROW

Take one or more of these actions into your next coaching session.

To run the information strip experiment in your next session

After your next session, mentally replay the feedback you gave to one athlete or in one drill, stripping out every instance of praise without content, and notice how much real information remains. This gives you an honest baseline for how much of your feedback is actually usable information versus encouragement.

A simple technique you can practise before your next session even begins

Before your next session, choose one technical or tactical point and prepare one complete sentence that tells an athlete what to do and why, rather than relying on feedback in the moment. Preparing this in advance makes it more likely you'll deliver high-information feedback even under the pressure of a live session.

RESEARCH REFERENCE

Primary Source: Corbett, R., Partington, M., Ryan, L., & Cope, E. (2024). A systematic review of coach augmented verbal feedback during practice and competition in team sports. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, *19*(2), 864–881. https://doi.org/10.1177/17479541231218665

Counterpoint Sources: Badami, R., Vaez Mousavi, M., Wulf, G., et al. (2012). Feedback about more accurate versus less accurate trials: differential effects on self-confidence and activation. Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport, 83(2), 196-203.

LINKS AND RESOURCES

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Share this episode with one coach this week, since that's how research actually travels.

FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

The following is the complete script for this episode of *Coaching Research To Results.*

Cold Open

You give feedback all the time. After every rep, every drill, every game, words are coming out of your mouth. "Well done." "Good work." "Keep going, keep going!" You are firing feedback constantly. You might even pride yourself on it. You are present, you are vocal, you are engaged. Your athletes know you are watching.

Here is the thing. Researchers have now sat on the sidelines of thirty-one real coaching sessions across football, basketball, volleyball, rugby, and more, and they have counted every word. And what they found about what coaches say, and what that does for athlete learning, might make you want to sit down and take a minute before this episode is over.

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Intro and Show ID

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The Paper

The paper is called "A Systematic Review of Coach Augmented Verbal Feedback During Practice and Competition in Team Sports", published in the International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching in 2024. The lead author is Ross Corbett from Loughborough University and Atlantic Technological University in Galway, and co-authors are Mark Partington, Lisa Ryan, and Ed Cope.

What they did was gather 31 studies, all of which used direct observation of real coaches giving real feedback in real practice sessions and competitions, across developmental and elite team sports. They were prompted by a very specific gap: most research on coach behaviour is done in recreational settings, but if feedback matters most anywhere, it is where athletes are actually developing and performing. So, they went looking for the evidence in those contexts specifically.

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Big Idea #1

The big idea could be called "Praise is Not Feedback"

Across all 31 studies, the single most commonly observed coaching behaviour was praise and general encouragement. It appeared in 19 of the 31 studies. Coaches said, "well done," "good job," "great effort," and versions of those phrases more than almost anything else.

Now, here is where the research lands a punch: meta-analyses by Hattie and Timperley, and Wisniewski and colleagues, consistently show that praise and punishment, as a feedback category, have minimal to no impact on athlete learning. It feels like feedback. It sounds like feedback. But by the measure of whether athletes actually learn something from it, praise barely registers.

Praise feels like the most natural thing a coach can do. Which is exactly why it fills the session and leaves the learning behind.

Think about your last session. How much of what you said to athletes contained real information about what they did and they could do differently? And how much was encouragement that felt good in the moment but didn't effectually teach them anything?

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Ideas #2 and #3

Call this one "The Information Gap"

When coaches were observed giving feedback that went beyond pure praise, it was still mostly general rather than specific. In one study, general encouragement made up 35% of all coach behaviours. In another, it was 14%. Across the data, the use of high-information feedback, the kind that tells an athlete specifically what they did, how to understand the process, and what to try next, was rare.

This matters because Wisniewski and colleagues found that the information content of feedback is the main driver of its effectiveness. Simple forms of praise and punishment have low effects. High-information feedback has very large effects. Coaches were, in the language of the researchers, using a lot of colour but not much detail.

Here is a useful question to ask yourself after a session: if I took out every "well done" and every "good job," comment, how much information would be left? That remainder is your actual feedback. How rich is it?

The sticky label here is "Winning Unlocks the Good Stuff"

Two studies observed feedback quality in relation to performance outcomes within the same session or game. In Australian rules football, Mason and colleagues found that feedback more commonly associated with learning and performance, including descriptive rather than prescriptive feedback, positive rather than negative, and process-focused rather than task-focused, appeared more often during winning quarters. In boxing, Halperin and colleagues found the same pattern: better-quality feedback came during winning bouts.

This is a really uncomfortable finding. It suggests that coaches may be producing their best feedback precisely when athletes need it least, and reverting to lower-quality, more controlling feedback when the pressure is on and the learning stakes are highest. It raises a question worth sitting with: does stress change how you talk to your athletes, and if so, in what direction?

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The Counterpoint

Now let's complicate the picture a little, since there's another layer worth considering here.

The paper is clear that praise in general has minimal effect on learning. But there is an important nuance buried in the evidence. Specific feedback based on positive performance, which is not the same as general praise, has been found to enhance athletes' perceived competence and may positively impact future performance. Badami and colleagues (2012) found that feedback about more accurate versus less accurate trials had differential effects on self-confidence.

So, the issue is not that positive feedback is harmful. The issue is that vague, non-specific positive feedback is essentially neutral in its learning impact. The word "great" tells an athlete nothing they can use. The phrase "that was great: your weight was over the ball and you made

the decision early" gives an athlete something to hold onto and repeat. Specificity is the difference between an empty feedback calorie and actual nutrition.

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The Anecdote

I once worked with a coach, we'll call him Mark, who was absolutely convinced he was feedback-rich. He was positive, he was vocal, he was always talking, and by all accounts, his athletes loved him. If you'd asked him to describe his own coaching, he'd have told you he gave his athletes constant feedback: encouraging, energetic, present the whole session. So we put that to the test. I asked him to watch back a ten-minute clip of a drill he'd just run and count only the moments where he gave an athlete *something specific to do differently*. Not simply encouragement or energy…an actual instruction they could act on. The number he came up with was two. Two moments in ten minutes. Everything else was "good," "keep going," "yep, nice."

You could see it land on his face as he watched the clip back. He hadn't been lazy or careless; he'd been busy the entire session, working hard, sounding like a coach who was deeply engaged. But *busy and informative* are not the same thing. He had been generous with his voice and stingy with his content, and until he counted it for himself, he had no way of knowing that.

That's the learning I keep coming back to with coaches: volume of talk is not the same as volume of information. You can fill every silence in a session and still leave an athlete with almost nothing to change.

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Two Actions

Action one is to run the Information Strip experiment in your next session, tomorrow, or this week.

The experiment could be called the Information Strip. After your next practice, pick one athlete or one drill, and play back in your head every piece of feedback you gave in that window. Strip out everything that was praise without content: "well done," "good," "nice," "yes," any version of those. What remains? How much of what you said contained information an athlete could use to do something differently next time?

You don't need a camera for this (but you can for sure use one if you want the best data!). You just need honest recall. The goal isn't to make you feel bad; it's to give you a baseline. Most coaches, when they do this for the first time, are surprised by how little specific information remains. Focus on this, and your perspective shifts for good. From this point on, before the praise leaves your mouth, start asking: can I attach something real to this?

You might do this for one drill in your next session and build from there. This works across all sports and all levels. The principle is the same wherever you coach.

Action two is a simple technique you can practise before your next session even begins.

It's the One Sentence Rule. Before your session, choose one technical or tactical thing you are likely to give feedback on. Now write, or say aloud to yourself, one complete sentence that tells an athlete what to do and why. Not just what, but why.

For example: not "get lower" but "get lower because it shortens your reaction time when the ball changes direction." Not "release earlier" but "release earlier to give your teammates more time to position before the ball arrives."

The research in this paper shows that high-information feedback, the kind that connects what to the process behind it, has very large effects on learning. The One Sentence Rule is a preparation habit: it forces you to know your feedback before you give it. And most coaches, under pressure, revert to their level of preparation. You will find that when you have it ready, you say it clearly and confidently. Then your athletes will act on it.

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Close and Invite

So here is what we know from today. Coaches in developmental and elite sports give a lot of feedback. More than that, coaches give a lot of praise. And the research tells us clearly: praise feels right, but it does not teach athletes very much.

The three ideas to carry out of this episode: praise is not feedback; the information content of what you say is what actually drives learning; and your best feedback may be showing up at the wrong time, when you are winning, rather than when the pressure is highest and athletes need it most.

The most common thing coaches say, it turns out, is also the least useful thing coaches say. What you fill the silence with matters more than the fact that you fill it.

The sharpest thing to take with you today is this: before your next session, ask not "do I give feedback?" but "does my feedback contain information?" Because volume without content is noise, and your athletes deserve better.

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