

The Parallels Between Sports Coaching and Graduate Teaching: Coach Boettke as Exemplar

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Abstract

This paper explores the parallels between being a successful sports coach and graduate mentor. It takes the form of a case study of Prof. Peter J. Boettke, utilizing experiential evidence drawn from the author's own graduate studies. In 2009 Prof. Boettke was awarded the George Mason University Faculty Member of the Year prize and was also inducted into the Fairfax Stars basketball team Hall of Fame. The paper outlines a number of examples of a successful pedagogical philosophy that is common to both domains.

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You say you have taught them and they don't seem to follow,
but you haven't taught until they have learned.

–Coach John Wooden

I. Introduction

There is a large and well-developed science of pedagogy (e.g., Christensen, Garvin, and Sweet, 1992), and whilst the technique of mentorship is only a subset of this, there is a scientific literature that aims to understand and diffuse good practice (see Daloz, 1999; Zachary, 2000). Similarly, the ideas that underpin sports coaching methods are a colossal industry, with most successful practitioners releasing autobiographical works that are often bestsellers, not to mention unofficial or unauthorized biographical accounts. It is a reasonable assumption that there is potential for pedagogical techniques to transcend not only disciplines, but also professions. It is therefore surprising that very few studies actually make an attempt

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to do this. This might stem from the relative scarcity of appropriate individual classes. Although it is common at the high school level to combine classroom teaching with sports coaching, it is rare to pursue either margin to an elite level (as an exception see Swen and Gallimore, 2005). Even if these cases do exist, there is also little reason to expect them to be studied. Aside from a possible bias against studying pedagogy (especially in subjects other than the humanities), much of the empirical evidence would only exist at a fragmented and informal level.

In 2009 Prof. Peter J. Boettke was awarded the George Mason University (GMU) Faculty Member of the Year prize and was also inducted into the Fairfax Stars basketball team Hall of Fame. As a renowned basketball coach *and* a graduate mentor, he is an appropriate case to study the extent to which the same basic philosophy might apply to both domains. As I was a graduate student at GMU from 2003 to 2007 and had the privilege of Pete serving as chair of my dissertation committee, I feel well placed to make an effort to contribute to this under-studied topic.

Peter Boettke might give the impression of being a jock's scholar. He's passionate and blunt, with a penchant for sporting analogies. But this belies the degree to which his academic achievements (especially as a mentor) and his sporting prowess are philosophically intertwined. This paper attempts to explore the tangency that drives his professional accomplishments.

When I commenced graduate studies at GMU, it took time to adjust to Pete's personality. Like many "self-taught" Austrian School economists, my academic interests had previously relied upon brief conversations with professors with only a partial awareness of the likes of Mises and Hayek. Such encounters were often quite formal, and tended to occur within office hours. Coupled with a natural shyness, this led to a culture shock on arrival at Mason. One of the first activities was an invitation from Pete for beer and pizza with other new recruits (an event I missed on account of a pitiful inability to navigate the CUE bus system!). Several hours, and numerous orbits of greater Fairfax later, I returned, grappling with the episode. Casually talking about Austrian economics over lunch with one of the world's *greatest living* Austrian economists struck me as absurd as wearing pajamas to the House of Commons.

But one of Pete's strengths is how he demystifies economics. He lives and breathes it, and encourages that in his students. Whether

while sharing beers in a pub off Tottenham Court Road or over coffee and donuts in New Orleans, it's the way in which conversation switches so seamlessly between the AEA and the NBA that brings things down to earth. However, I am not trivializing his thinking. Indeed, Pete has articulated well the difference between enthusiastically talking about economics versus the actual act of conducting scholarly enquiry (Boettke, 2008):

HS basketball is enjoyable to watch for a fan of the game, but there is a huge difference in the athleticism and skill exhibited in a HS game and a high level college or NBA game. It is a huge mistake to confuse the two as interested parents of the boys often do! Same with the discussion of real economics in the JPE, the AER or in books with Princeton, Cambridge and Chicago, and the lay economic conversation that goes on at blogs, internet discussion lists, ideological magazines and public policy think-tanks.¹

What I take from this is a distinction between training and a real match situation, let alone the gulf in class when playing at different levels. Whilst Pete encourages engagement with the layperson, he appreciates that economists need to act on different margins and to different audiences. There's no point impressing the coach during practice if you can't perform on game day. And there's a whole world of difference between engaging with friends and with the best in the field. And let's be clear, Pete wants to train his players and students to play on the big stage.

This article proceeds as follows. Section II discusses "the coaching mindset" and shows how attitudes toward sports teams can be applied to graduate mentorship. Section III outlines some coaching parallels in more detail, drawing attention to specific aspects of Peter Boettke's philosophy. Section IV concludes.

II. The Coaching Mindset

Although Pete was a tennis instructor before graduate school, his true passion is basketball. He first became a high school coach in the late 1970s and simultaneously pursued basketball and economics at

¹ Several quotes for this article are taken from "Coordination Problem," the web log to which Peter Boettke is a regular contributor.

Grove City College. As a spectator he holds a season ticket for GMU, and as a coach he's held several positions within the youth basketball pyramid (including the elite AAU). He has received numerous accolades for his achievements, notably in 2009 when he was inducted into the Fairfax Stars Hall of Fame. Indeed, he says (Boettke, 2007c):

Much of what I have learned in life, I learned in the context of being around coaches trying to get young men to compete effectively.

First: a confession. Basketball isn't my game, and I've never witnessed Pete on the hardwood. What follows draws most on my own coaching knowledge and a conjecture about the comparison. As an undergraduate I completed my UEFA 'B' Coaching badge in Liverpool, England, and became heavily involved with a commercial soccer school and a voluntary team. Whilst studying at Mason I was a coach for Vienna Youth Soccer, managing a girls under 10s team.

On the sports field there tend to be three main coaching styles. First is "command," the old school classic; for example, shouting, "Here's what I want you to do." Second is "question and answer." This involves asking specific questions to a small group and responding to their suggestions (for example, asking "What is the best way to proceed in this scenario?" and then utilizing the players' feedback in the strategy). Third is "guided discovery," where the coach asks for a demonstration, and then closely works on the skills to show how it is done. Of course, good coaches mix all styles depending on the circumstances – the former is utilized in poor conditions (e.g., cold weather) or if there's a specific instruction that he needs to get across. The latter is more likely if there's a good rapport and plenty of time.

It is possible to draw a rough parallel between the above styles and the environment of PhD study. Command is more similar to a lecture format, where instruction is imparted in a hierarchical manner. Question and answer is perhaps more akin to a seminar, where participants are required to actively engage in queries about best tactics. Guided discovery is more intimate, and suggestive of one-to-one mentoring that involves gentle nudges in a certain direction.

Pete utilizes all of these. His lectures are a trove of insightful commentary. The Graduate Student Paper Workshops that he's instrumental in running generate an amazing atmosphere for developing articles.² And I'm sure I'm not the only student who has forged an entire research agenda based on casual conversations with Pete in his office (Aligica and Evans, 2009; Evans, 2009, 2010). Indeed, he's very intellectually generous, and he coauthors with grad students to provide first-hand exposure to his working style and habits.³

Attention to other coaches pervades Pete's philosophy. In a blog post (Boettke, 2009) he retold the story of how basketball Coach Mike Krzyzewski gave his Duke team an important lesson during shock defeat: "Coach K called a time-out in the final seconds and asked his players to listen to the Clemson crowd and burn it into their memories. This was the sound of defeat, a humiliating defeat." He then quoted John Wooden, "Failure is never fatal, but failure to change may be," and drew a link to one of his own mentors, Kenneth Boulding:

Mr. Boulding told us both once that if economists really wanted to learn we would study the waste baskets of our peers not what gets published in the journals.... We learn much more from our failures than we learn from our successes if we open ourselves on the lesson to be learned (Boettke, 2009).

I have reams of notes from graduate workshops where Pete would utilize wisdom from sports coaches. Fortunately, his blogging means that many of them are now online and publicly available. One of his favorite quotes is from the legendary UCLA Coach John Wooden, who famously said, "You haven't taught until they have learned." The key lesson from Coach Wooden is that the principles he employed as a high school English teacher mirrored the ones on the basketball court. One of Pete's favorite books on education outlines 11

² These are organized through the Mercatus Center at George Mason University

³ Aside from the phenomenal output he's coauthored with Christopher J. Coyne and/or Peter T. Leeson (according to his Spring 2010 vitae, this amounts to 28 peer-reviewed journal articles), Pete has also coauthored with the likes of Susan Anderson, Dan D'Amico, Bridget Butkevich, Dan Smith, Ed Stringham, and Bob Subrick (a further 10 papers).

common characteristics of good teachers (Boettke, 2007a) derived from Coach Wooden (see Nater and Gallimore, 2005):

1. Make learning engaging
2. Have passion for the subject
3. Know your subject knowledge
4. Be organized
5. Be intense
6. Recognize and acknowledge even minor progress in students
7. Treat everyone with respect
8. Treat everyone fairly
9. Believe that every student is a natural learner
10. Enjoy being with students
11. Place priority on individual learning

I can't think of a better professional code to live by.

III. The Coaching Parallels

There are obvious similarities between coaching kids to improve their basketball skills and teaching students to become better scholars – both are about realizing potential through the exchange of ideas and by setting a good example. An underlying similarity that I would draw particular attention to is the balance between individual development and the building of a successful team. On the sports field there is a perennial battle between allowing players to demonstrate their individual flair and creativity and retaining a team ethic and adhering to predefined tactics. Similarly, Pete has helped to build at GMU an entire graduate program that students fit into, and feel part of, without compromising their own unique talents. He himself (Boettke, 2007b) has best articulated this balance:

The master teacher creates an environment in which inquisitive and creative individuals can express themselves without losing sight of the common cause of the enterprise (team, class, firm). It is, I contend, about CREATIVITY WITHIN DISCIPLINE.

As a student of Pete's, I'll point out what I consider to be several of his key principles for graduate education and briefly speculate on how these are examples of good sports coaching.

Play to your strengths

A mistake many teams make is attempting to mimic their opponents. Whilst this can be a successful strategy defensively (for example as a means to nullify particular dangerous opponents), it is shortsighted to define yourself based on others. Pete is all about helping students to find their unique strengths (be it Austrian economics, public choice, or experimental economics) and developing them on those margins. The GMU program is not Harvard lite – it’s a distinct blend of disciplines that innovates on its own grounds.

You can make up for a lack of natural ability with a high work rate

Pete often retells James Buchanan’s efforts to instill a strong work ethic amongst his students, “Keep your ass in the chair. If you work 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., you will outwork all the other academics around you.” Not everyone is a genius, but working harder can compensate for this. Pete’s students are hustlers – we don’t let them rest. His focus on conditioning means that we’re always working.

Punch above your weight

Pete provides resources for students to attend conferences from an early phase. He encourages them to understand the debate at the top table and to become part of it. Whether it’s competing on the job market against higher ranked opponents, submitting to top journals, or presenting at decent conferences, the message is to play on as big a stage as possible. It is only by being exposed to the very best that you up your game and know what skills you need to develop. He’s seen students learning at Harvard, Chicago, NYU, and the LSE who didn’t seem out of place.

Enjoy playing the game

There’s no point in training hard if you don’t enjoy the game. Pete often says “love Mises to pieces,” by which he means never lose sight of why you entered the discipline in the first place. There are norms and standards amongst mainstream economists, and he encourages students to be able to converse in that language, but he always stresses the need to keep the raw enthusiasm.

Pass and move

Another of James Buchanan's quotes is, "All work is work in progress. Don't get it right get it written." It's tempting to sit back after a good piece of work and reflect on it, by which time the game has already advanced. Don't rest on success; move on to the next play. Once one thing is done, advance.

It's a team game

Pete is laissez-faire about the research topics his students pursue. Although he provides a lot of encouragement (and his encyclopedic knowledge means that his advice is always worth following), I've never seen him intervene in a student's topic. Partly this might be because he sees a holistic picture of the GMU Economics Department and understands that success on several margins increases the prestige of the entire program. He never attempts to "poach" students, nor does he dissuade people with only a casual interest in his own research areas. The focus is on allowing students to pursue diverse projects that fit with their natural proclivities.

Focus on youth development

Pete is a talent spotter (he knew Peter Leeson and Christopher Coyne long before they applied for graduate school) and invests heavily throughout the development of his students. As soon as you start at GMU, Pete puts resources in place to elevate you into the profession and pass onto bigger and better things. He ensures that graduate students have the resources they need to pursue their careers.

Fulfill your potential

Pete credits his father for saying that "the greatest sin in life is wasted talent" (Boettke, 2010), and he does feel there's an obligation for students to go on and accomplish professional fulfillment. I know Pete would recognize that this can be achieved across various margins, but the seriousness with which he views economics as a discipline to study carries over into the importance of doing well. It is clear that he views a PhD (and the culmination of his direct involvement of your career) as merely the first rung on the ladder.

It's probably more suitable for Pete's basketball team to comment on the applicability of the above to his coaching, but there

is plenty of evidence. According to the website of his team (Fairfax Stars, 2010):

His emphasis is on tenacious team defense, unselfish team offense, and superior fundamentals. Practices will focus on skill development, enhanced knowledge of the game, and improved physical conditioning (strength, agility and speed).

These points of emphasis are all referred to above – qualities such as tenacity, unselfishness, and strong fundamentals. Similarly, in his own words, Pete has said (Fairfax Stars Brochure, 2010):

We used the AAU season to help the boys improve as HS basketball players – skill development and improved athleticism – to learn to play the right way – we played as a team, we moved the ball and this enabled us to compete against elite competition throughout the US.

which highlights high work rate, turnover of the ball, and the quality of the opposition. In basketball, in economics.

III. Conclusion

If the sign of a good coach is the quality of his players, it can be said that you judge a teacher by his students. According to Richard Wagner (Pete's predecessor as director of the graduate program at GMU), "He takes pride in the achievements of his former students" (quoted in Rich, 2009). Pete also likes the following quote, which Mike Krzyzewski said about John Wooden "What I remember about meeting him as a young coach is the way he acted as if you were just as important, if not more important, than he was" (Feinstein, 2006). Pete bestows this compliment on Israel Kirzner and James Buchanan (Boettke, 2006), and he too has certainly exhibited this aptitude with us. He quite rightly knows that his students are a manifestation of his own professional accomplishments.

In some ways Pete's message to his students is to "achieve what I couldn't" – his aims are to place his students so that they have careers that rival and even surpass his own impact on the profession. Similarly, he writes, "My love of basketball far exceeded my ability to play the game" (Pete's Sports Page, 2010). This is the sign of a quality coach but mostly of Pete's incredible (and egregious) humility. Of

course he is an excellent coach, but I must underline the point that he is a *player-coach*. The chief reason why it's such a privilege to be mentored by Pete is because he is a first rate scholar. His research inspires, and his infectious enthusiasm is what drives his students forward. It's not just about listening to what he says, but watching what he does.

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