

2015

## Coach to Coach

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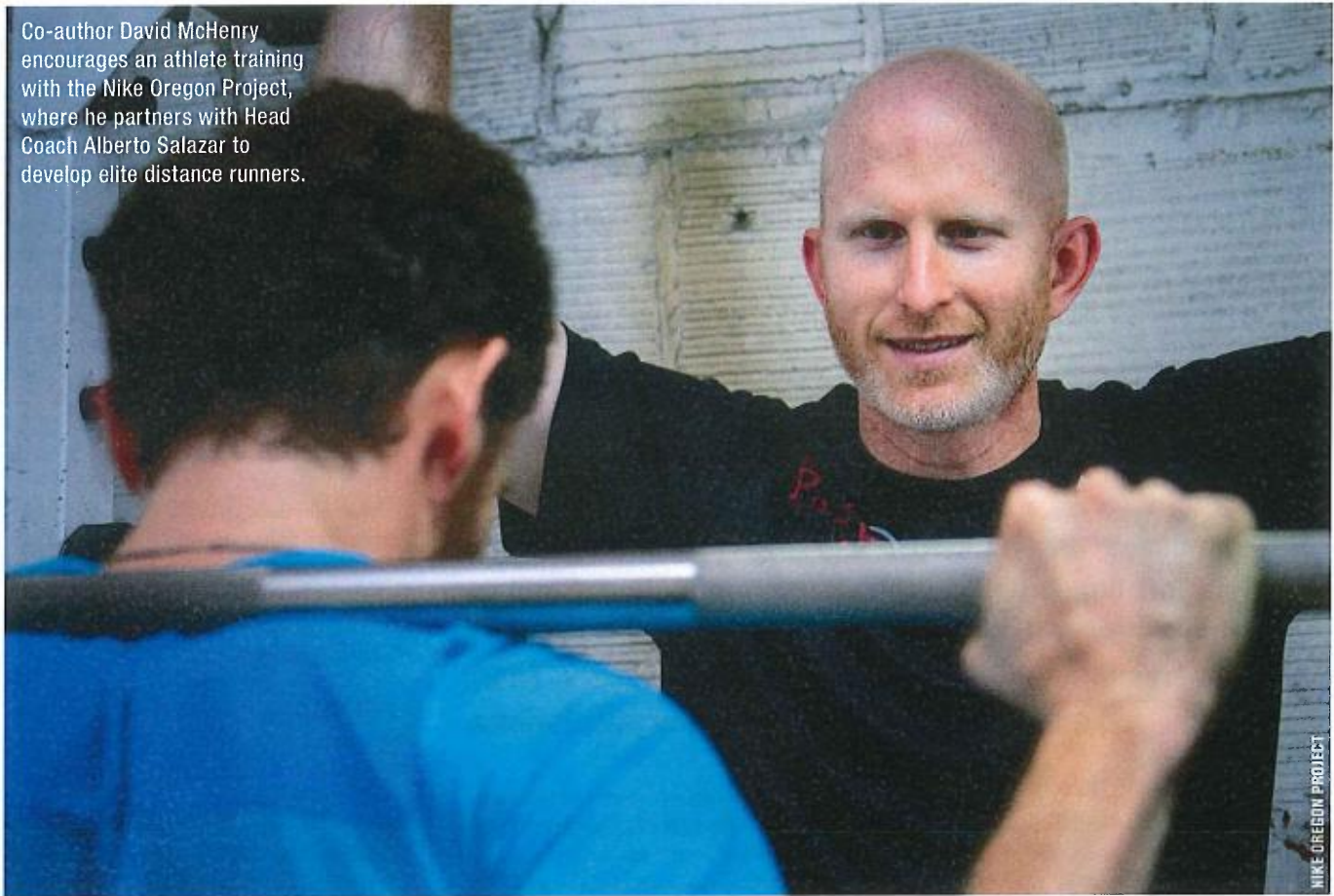
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### Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Favero, Terence G. and McHenry, David, "Coach to Coach" (2015). *Biology Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 34.  
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Co-author David McHenry encourages an athlete training with the Nike Oregon Project, where he partners with Head Coach Alberto Salazar to develop elite distance runners.



# COACH TO COACH

**The relationship between a strength coach and a sport coach can be tenuous, especially when one is new to the team. The solution is to build trust, communicate well, and never stop collaborating.**

**BY DR. TERRY FAVERO AND DR. DAVID MCHENRY**

**T**he championship is won, and the head coach stands at the podium, accepting the trophy and thanking a list of people who have had a significant effect on the team's success. That list usually includes assistant coaches, administrators, and other program personnel. Increasingly, however, the team's strength and conditioning coach is among those recognized.

For those who work in a weightroom every day, a sport coach thanking the strength coach is a no-brainer. It's obvious that a well-developed strength and conditioning program can turn a

good team into a great one. Therefore, the relationship should be straightforward. As the expert on strength and conditioning, the sport coach should give you free rein to develop the athletes off the field.

This is rare, however, especially when either coach is new to the program. Sport coaches are often reluctant to turn over control of the strength and conditioning plan to someone new or unfamiliar.

Getting from an introductory handshake to acknowledgement on the podium takes a lot of work outside the weightroom. And much of this effort is

centered on one task: developing a relationship with the sport coach. If you can't make that happen, your expertise will never be put to full use.

There's more than one way to build these relationships. Terry began working with the University of Portland women's soccer team more than 20 years ago after a few players asked him to organize their summer training regimen. Since he was a full-time faculty member with no soccer-playing experience, the reaction from the team's head coach was somewhat skeptical. But by showing he was dedicated to learning about the sport and could produce re-

sults, Terry laid the groundwork for a positive working relationship.

In David's case, he had already been a physical therapist with the Nike Oregon Project for a number of years when legendary distance running coach Alberto Salazar asked him to take on the joint role of Lead Physical Therapist and Head Strength and Conditioning Coach in 2011. Because David was already familiar with the existing training program, he decided to continue it instead of incorporating radical changes immediately. As his relationship with Coach Salazar grew over time, David became more comfortable making incremental adaptations, and Coach Salazar was more confident in David's ability.

**You can never have a positive working relationship with a sport coach without good communication. Start by getting to know their communication style and patterns by observing how they interact with their players. Then, you can mirror this in your own conversations.**

#### GAINING TRUST

Developing a positive relationship with a sport coach requires several steps, but the overriding element is trust. Most head coaches want to control all parts of their program, and they need to have faith in you and your ideas before giving up any control.

To start, it's important to let the sport coach take the lead. Establish that they are the expert on everything related to the team, and you want to follow their direction. Next, begin a discussion about why the squad trains the way it does. Ask the sport coach to name two or three essential strength training components that best serve the needs of the athletes. Then, make a list together of the sport-specific movements that can be effectively developed through strength and conditioning.

As you learn about the team's train-

ing tendencies, make sure to also discuss its deficiencies. The head coach will likely have specific insights into areas where the team can and should improve. Ask follow-up questions based on their thoughts, but refrain from offering solutions right off the bat. Having an understanding of the coach's perspective and likes or dislikes will be beneficial when it comes to designing an effective training program.

If you are working with a sport for the first time, show the head coach that you are invested in their team and willing to leave no stone unturned when it comes to developing the best program for them. When Terry started working with the Portland women's soccer

team, he interviewed the coaches and athletes to collect their thoughts on previous summer workout programs. He also extensively researched the physical demands of soccer, different types of sport-specific training, injury prevention strategies for soccer, and the physiological characteristics of top soccer players.

An important, but often overlooked, way of showing coaches that you are eager to learn about the sport is taking the time to observe the team in action. Take note of the rhythm of practice sessions both on a day-to-day and week-to-week basis. Terry attended at least one Portland soccer practice each week when he first partnered with the team. When observing, ask yourself the following questions:

- What does a typical warm-up look like?

- How long are the sessions?
- How long do activities last before water and/or coaching breaks?
- When do the hard daily and weekly training loads occur? When are the easy days?
- What is a typical practice like on the day before a competition?

By answering these questions, you will learn valuable information that you can apply when designing an effective strength program. It is vital that your plan is complimentary and ancillary to the sport-specific training. Not knowing the weekly workload and training intensity of the athletes will hinder your ability to adequately match their strength work to their sport work.

You can also gather a lot of useful information from attending competitions and watching game film. Terry found it helpful to join the soccer team for all home games, including the pre- and postgame discussions.

#### OPEN COMMUNICATION

You can never have a positive working relationship with a sport coach without good communication. Start by getting to know their communication style and patterns. You can do this by observing how they interact with their players. Understanding the methods of communication between athletes and coaches will help you mirror this in your own conversations to create continuity and consistency. Ask yourself:

- How does the coach communicate with the players?
- What kind of verbal and nonverbal communication does the coach use?
- How often and in what manner do the athletes communicate with the coach?

It is also essential to have a communication plan to guide and focus one-on-one interactions between you and the sport coach. Because the two of you are busy and may have only a few opportunities to sit down face-to-face, planning for these meetings is crucial.

Know what you want to accomplish going into each session. It might be a practical concern, such as scheduling times for team training, or it may be a theoretical discussion, such as coming up with strategies to enhance injury prevention. Either way, identify the questions you need to have answered. Creating and sharing an agenda beforehand is always helpful. This way, everyone is aware of the topics that will be

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discussed and can plan accordingly.

When talking with coaches, avoid jargon they might not understand. Provide answers to questions only if you are sure you are correct. Otherwise, offer to find the answer and get back to the coach.

Of course, communication is not a one-way street. Besides presenting your message clearly, make sure you are being a good listener, clarifying the coach's concerns, and offering feedback as needed.

When listening to a sport coach, beware of any subtext or words that could be misinterpreted. For example, if a head coach wants athletes to be "tougher," don't assume that means ramping it up in the weightroom. This could leave the players sore and tired for practice, which could cause friction between you and the sport coach. If you are unsure of their message, paraphrase what you think they mean to clear up any misunderstandings.

#### TAKE IT SLOW

You're educated about the sport, you've gained the coach's trust, and the two

of you are communicating well. Everything appears to be chugging along smoothly. So now is the time to implement your training program, right? Not so fast. When working with a coach for the first time, it's better to take things slowly.

For the first year of working with

the main issues were quad dominance with weak hamstrings, poor core stability (leaving athletes at greater risk for noncontact injuries), and a lack of a cardiovascular base to recover from demanding conditioning. Those three elements became the focus of Terry's initial summer training program. By

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a new coach, decide together on two or three training outcomes to focus on and build your strength and conditioning plan around them. By making a few changes at a time, you can slowly progress each year and keep from overloading the coach and players.

At Portland, Terry and the soccer coach decided to address the players' deficiencies first. Using carefully designed tests and workouts, Terry found

improving those key weaknesses, he was able to make the athletes faster and more agile while keeping them fresher during the season.

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needs, even if it deviates from your original scheme. The overarching goal is to come up with a program that you can both embrace. As you continue to work with the team and show your expertise, you'll likely get more autonomy to implement the activities you think are the most important.

After the head coach has approved your plan, it can help to get additional feedback from some of the team's other stakeholders, such as assistant coaches, athletic trainers, nutritionists, and support staff. Other good sources are strength and conditioning colleagues from other institutions. Ask them to

look over your plan for any missing pieces.

#### BUMPS ALONG THE WAY

Even if you follow all the steps outlined here, working with a head coach is a delicate process, so you'll likely have to overcome some challenges from time to time. You should expect that a miscue will happen somewhere along the way. Taking the time to understand the reasons behind any difficulties you face early on will help you avoid similar mistakes down the line that could undermine the effectiveness of your program.

## ATHLETES ON BOARD

When a strength and conditioning coach is new to a team, not only do they have to build a relationship with the head coach, but with the athletes as well. Just as you have to gain the coach's trust before implementing your training plan, you have to get athlete buy-in before you can see results.

Start by getting to know the athletes' histories. This way, you can gain an understanding of the attitudes and experiences of the players you will be working with. Find out each athlete's previous exposure to strength and conditioning work and any challenges they had to overcome.

Next, it's helpful to perform movement screens on the players. This will help identify weaknesses, inflexibilities, or limitations that might be adversely affecting their training and performance. Movement screens can also paint a composite picture of the team.

Occasionally, you might encounter athletes who resist strength training. We have faced this in both soccer and distance running, as athletes in these sports worry strength work will make their legs feel heavy or affect their stride.

Even when the athletes' concerns are baseless, you need to respect their perspective because any reluctance will ultimately detract from their athletic development. We believe it is important to meet the athlete where they are and build their trust. By starting with a few key exercises that show immediate results, even the most hesitant athlete will eventually recognize the benefit of strength work.

If you are working with athletes who have never been in a weight training program, give some thought to picking an appropriate environment. With players who have never seen the inside of a weightroom, consider performing some exercises on their "home turf" by utilizing their facility to make them feel more comfortable. For example, you might meet a distance runner at the track for a mini strength session using resistance bands.

Be willing to modify your program to meet each athlete's individual needs until they can see and feel the benefits of your program. Building their trust is the key to getting them to buy in. Only after you have developed a program that is meaningful, yet manageable, will you be able to have the greatest impact on your athletes' performance.

Regardless of why and when a misstep occurs, resolving the situation quickly and with integrity will help you get back on track. If an unexpected hurdle arises, try to avoid being defensive. Admit any errors you are responsible for, apologize if necessary, and don't take it personally.

You also must be willing to modify your plan if you discover a gap in training or encounter a problem. Don't consider modifications as a sign of failure, but rather as an indication of your flexibility and willingness to listen, accept suggestions, and respond positively.

Terry experienced this firsthand at Portland. He originally planned his training sessions around the principle of the "minimally effective dose" that achieves the optimal outcome. As a result, these sessions looked like moderate workouts. The sport coach wanted the training sessions to have a more intense feel to reflect the nature of soccer.

To balance his training philosophy with the coach's desire to include more intense work, Terry added "finishers" at the end of team workouts. These short, challenging activities don't add significantly to the players' training load but require them to be focused and disciplined.

It's not always easy, but developing a positive relationship when working with a new coach can lead to phenomenal success—even at the highest levels of competition. Shortly after David took over as the strength coach for the Oregon Project, the leadership team decided to create new strategic plans for the athletes headed to the 2012 Olympic Games. Because of David's relationship with Coach Salazar and the other coaches, he was able to successfully complete comprehensive evaluations and create new training regimens for the athletes six months before the Games. The reward for such effort? Oregon Project athletes returned from London with two top-five finishes, two gold medals, and one silver.

When working with a new coach, starting off on the right foot is essential to building a solid working relationship and early success. Gaining the coach's trust, communicating well, progressing slowly, and adapting to all challenges will help any strength and conditioning coach design an effective training plan to help the athletes achieve their goals. ■