



## Coaching Practices and Experiences of Youth Goalball Coaches

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### To cite this article/ Atf için:

Esatbeyoğlu, F. (2024). Coaching practices and experiences of youth goalball coaches. *Bozok International Journal of Sport Sciences*, 5(3), 171-181.

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the training and education experiences of goalball coaches who train young athletes with vision impairment (VI). Using Coaching Model as a theoretical framework, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four male and six female coaches (mean age  $36,30 \pm 6,18$  years) with a  $4,7 \pm 2,6$  years of youth goalball. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and were subjected to a thematic analysis procedure in which raw meaning units were developed into relevant themes. Two themes were constructed based on the participants' responses: lack of sport-specific coaching manuals and guides and information pertaining to the coaches' backgrounds. The findings emphasize the need to consider new formal coach development programmes. Coaching youth with VI is challenging especially when there is no disability sport specific coaching literature. Yet, coaches reported their experiences as being tremendously positive.

**Keywords:** Youth with vision impairment, Goalball coaching, Coach education, Coach perspective, Coach experience

## Genç Golbol Sporcu Antrenörlerinin Antrenörlük Uygulamaları ve Deneyimleri

### Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı, görme engelli genç sporcu antrenörlerinin antrenörlük uygulamaları ve deneyimlerine ilişkin fikir edinmektir. Antrenörlük Modeli'ni teorik bir çerçeve olarak kullanarak,  $4,7 \pm 2,6$  yıl golbol antrenörlük geçmişi olan dört erkek ve altı kadın antrenörle (ortalama yaş  $36,30 \pm 6,18$  yıl) yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapıldı. Görüşmeler kelimesi kelimesine yazıya döküldü ve ham anlam birimlerinin ilgili temalara dönüştürüldüğü tematik analiz prosedürüne tabi tutuldu. Katılımcıların yanıtlarına dayanarak iki tema oluşturuldu: Spora özgü antrenörlük kılavuzlarının eksikliği ve antrenörlerin geçmişlerine ilişkin bilgiler. Bulgular, golbol antrenör geliştirme programlarının dikkate alınması gerektiğini vurgulamaktadır. Görme engelli gençlere antrenörlük yapmak, özellikle engelli sporuna özgü antrenörlük literatürü yetersiz kaldığında zor olmaktadır. Yine de antrenörler, deneyimlerinin son derece olumlu olduğunu bildirdiler.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Görme engelli gençler, Golbol antrenörlüğü, Antrenörlük eğitimi, Antrenör bakış açısı, Antrenör deneyimi

## INTRODUCTION

The motto of the Paralympic, “spirit in motion”, points out that athletes with impairment from diverse abilities inspire and excite the world with their performances by pushing themselves to the limit. To reach sporting excellence, athletes with impairment train for continuous improvement regardless of their health conditions. To accomplish this, coaches play significant role in guiding improvements in athlete’s performances (Ritchie & Allen, 2015). It is accepted that coaches are generally the most significant agents and take an influential lead in the development of successful athletes (Camiré et al., 2011). However, literature on coaching athletes with impairment is still scarce compared to coaching for non-disabled athletes (McMaster et al., 2012; Wareham et al., 2017, 2018). Although the research on disability sport coaching is limited, this area has still caught attention of the international scholars interested in better understanding the coaching practices of athletes with impairment (Alexander et al., 2024; Alexander et al., 2020; Cote et al., 1995; Cronin et al., 2018; Dehghansai et al., 2020; Dehghansai et al., 2021; Douglas et al., 2016; Falcao et al., 2015; Nicholls et al., 2022; Ritchie & Allen, 2015; Townsend et al., 2015; Wareham et al., 2017). Also, it is reported that coaching knowledge in disability sports is challenging, coach education possibilities are rare, and written materials are limited (Bentzen et al., 2020; Cregan et al., 2007; Douglas et al., 2018; Duarte & Culver, 2014; McMaster et al., 2012; Wareham et al., 2017, 2018). What is more, for coaches, it is imperative to arrange accessible built environments such as training facilities and transportation, increase the knowledge of non-disabled sport professionals in disability sports, and most significantly, increase the knowledge of impairment types in order to organize training plans according to athlete with impairment’s psychophysiologic needs. Nevertheless, the literature has acknowledged the value of sport coaching in developing the skills of elite athletes with impairment (Wareham et al., 2019).

It is highlighted in the literature that an efficient coach of an athlete with impairment requires a good understanding of para-sport (e.g., para-sport classes and, eligible impairments defined by the International Paralympic Committee IPC) in para-sports) concentrating on what can be done in training in order to advance the para-sport performance of athletes with impairment (Bentzen et al., 2020; Culver & Werthner, 2018; Nima Dehghansai, Ross A Pinder, & Joseph Baker, 2021). It can be said that as the number of para-athletes increases, skilled and multifaceted para-sport personnel, such as coaches, are needed to improve the performances of athletes with impairment. This arguably would aid in the development of the science and practice of coaching athletes with impairment from early ages and various skill stages and this may even lead to advancements in coaching knowledge in youth athletes with impairment whom are the future para-athletes of para-sports (Bentzen et al., 2020). Positive development in youth athletes is the essential for sport advancement, therefore guiding youth athletes in maintaining a positive mindset throughout their sport career, compensating and balancing between professional sport career is imperative (Holt & Neely, 2011). Undeniably, coaches have primary influence on youth athletes’ personal, social and performance development, skill acquisition, motivation and wellbeing (Erickson & Côté, 2016; Hauser et al., 2024; Shull et al., 2024). Based on the previous research, it can be said that it is significant to consider the impairment type (e.g., cerebral palsy, spinal cord injury, amputation, visual impairment [VI],

the onset of the impairment (congenital and/or acquired impairment), sex, para-sport and classification and their interaction with the sporting experience affect the para-athlete development (Dehghansai et al., 2021; Houlihan & Chapman, 2017; Patatas et al., 2021).

Despite the amount of research into elite youth sport, literature is scarce which focuses on elite youth disability sport (Houlihan & Chapman, 2017) especially focusing on youth para-sport coaches (Lepage et al., 2020). What is more, there is a knowledge gap in the literature exploring how coaches understand the motor performance requirements and multifaceted development in youth athletes with physical, hearing, intellectual and VI. Indeed, Lepage and colleagues (2020) found that due to the lack of coaching resources, para-coaches predominantly had to learn through their own experiences with trial and error and formal and non-formal ways of learning, especially in their early careers. The development of para-athletes is complex and it is imperative to investigate coaching experiences of youth athletes with impairment to further our limited knowledge. This study solely focuses on coaches who train youth athletes with VI, their coaching, learning and achievement experiences. Therefore, the goal of this study was to gain insight into the training and education experiences of goalball coaches who train young athletes with VI.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

This study was limited to coaches with youth with a VI and to one para-sport, goalball. Recruitment of the participants was conducted through a cluster sampling method (Cresswell, 2014) and a total of 20 participants with a mix of male and female coaches were randomly identified by the technical delegate of goalball commission of the relevant sporting body of goalball. This method allowed the researcher to identify the study participants who could provide insight into their coaching experiences with youth goalball players and rich data in this understudied area. After the identification of potential participants, 10 coaches opted not to participate, and therefore six female and four male goalball coaches (mean age  $36,30 \pm 6,18$  years) with a  $4,7 \pm 2,6$  years of youth goalball coaching experience were interviewed.

### **Design**

This study used Coaching Model of Cote et al. (1995) as a theoretical framework, which has been applied to disability sport in previous research (Cregan et al., 2007). It is a framework for exploring associations between the knowledge on how and why coaches accomplish as they do. It is influenced by three external aspects: 1) coach's personal traits, 2) athlete's traits and, 3) contextual aspects such as training facilities, significant others (parents, siblings and close agents), finance and other significant sport personals.

The lead interviewer was a men's national goalball coach in Tokyo 2020 Paralympics. He also holds a master's degree in adapted physical activity and academic position at the university teaching courses such as adapted physical activity and education and Paralympic sports to undergraduate students. These experiences supported him with immersing in this culture and understanding this environment (Lepage et al., 2020). Demographics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of the participants

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education level</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>C.Q.</b>	<b>R/N</b>	<b>Years of C.</b>
<b>P1</b>	<b>F</b>	38	Undergraduate	Medical assistant	Level 1	R. Coach	5
<b>P2</b>	<b>F</b>	33	High school	Civil servant	Level 1	R. Coach	1
<b>P3</b>	<b>F</b>	25	High school	Purchasing assistant	Level 1	R. Coach	4
<b>P4</b>	<b>F</b>	43	Undergraduate	Tourism sector	Level 1	R. Coach	4
<b>P5</b>	<b>F</b>	28	Undergraduate	Coach	Level 3	N.Coach	5
<b>P6</b>	<b>F</b>	41	Undergraduate	Coach	Level 2	N.Coach	7
<b>P7</b>	<b>M</b>	38	Associate degree	Health technician	Level 1	R. Coach	2
<b>P8</b>	<b>M</b>	44	Undergraduate	PE teacher	Level 2	N.Coach	7
<b>P9</b>	<b>M</b>	35	High school	Civil servant	Level 1	R. Coach	2
<b>P10</b>	<b>M</b>	38	Undergraduate	PE teacher	Level 3	N.Coach	10

*Note.* F=Female, M=Male, PE=Physical education, C=Coaching, Q=Qualification, R=Regional, N=National

### **Data Collection**

The questions posed to the participants had been piloted with representative participants of youth goalball coaches from varying coaching levels. Then, the questions were adapted following this piloting to be more understandable. Feedback was also sought from the technical delegate of goalball commission, who is an expert in goalball and former goalball coach. Due to the geographical necessity, one-to-one online semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted at a mutually convenient time between the researcher and participant. Each interview lasted 30 min to one hour, as suggested by DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006).

The use of semi-structured interviews complies with epistemological constructivism and ontological reality as the unique relations between the researcher and each participant lent itself to the co-building of knowledge (Lepage et al., 2020; Poucher et al., 2020). Interviews started with introductory questions related to demographics (e.g., gender (f/m/x), coaching level (I, II, III, IV, V), age (years) and coaching background. Following this, participants were asked various primary questions related to their career experiences (e.g., what was the cause for you to start coaching youth athletes with VI?), their knowledge (e.g., what are the key components of coaching youth athletes with VI?) and their perspectives (e.g., what are the coaching challenges and if you face any then, what are your solving strategies?) in youth goalball coaching. Finally, a concluding follow-up question was asked to participants that allowed them the chance to add additional information and address any issues that have not previously been discussed relevant to the participants (Cregan et al., 2007).

The participants who agreed to participate were contacted by e-mail and were sent the consent form. Prior to interviews, they were informed about the study rationale, reason to use the data, confidentially, interview topics to be discussed, recording and transcribing the

interviews in order to support the trust and bond building between interviewee and interviewer.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and were subjected to a thematic analysis procedure. Thematic analysis provides accessible and systemic procedures for generating codes and themes from qualitative data and it detects patterns within and across data in relation to participants' lived experience, opinions and perceptions, and behaviour and practices (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The researcher applied six phases of thematic analysis as outlined by (Clarke & Braun, 2017): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, generating themes, reviewing generated themes, defining & naming themes and, writing the report.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Validity and reliability are two important factors that every researcher must consider when designing a study, analysing the findings, and questioning the quality of the research (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Morse, 2015). For validity, necessary modifications and additions were made to the questions in the semi-structured form in consultation with three experts. Two of them were sports science researchers working in qualitative research. The other expert was a retired youth goalball coach trained the goalball players for over two decades. The reliability of the analysis was increased by following the suggestions proposed by (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Morse, 2015; Clarke & Braun, 2017) and the analysis of the interview process and its findings was analysed independently by peer researcher besides the lead researcher.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the training and education experiences of goalball coaches who train young athletes with vision impairment VI. The findings emerged from the data revealed two key themes (coaching history and coaching experience).

#### ***Coaching History and Coaching Experience***

Coaching history and related factors covered aspects of the coaching characteristics of coaches, their experiences in youth goalball, and the pathway characterizing how they got involved in goalball. The participants in this study were clustered in three groups. The first group of coaches had no previous coaching experiences in either disability sports or in non-disabled sports (three of the 10 coaches started their career as goalball coaches) and they starting coaching directly with goalball by coincidence. As one coach narrated, *'I was introduced to goalball in 2010 when I was appointed as a physical education teacher to school for the blind. I was not aware of this goalball world before my career started as a physical education teacher. Ball with a bell? Blind can throw? Mask? These terms were not on the table for me.'* Similarly, one coach told, *'I was introduced to goalball 7 years ago in a special school for the disabled. I have a special educator certificate...'*

The second group of coaches had non-disabled sport coaching experiences prior to their engagement in goalball and they had diverse non-disabled coaching careers (three of the 10 coaches had non-disabled sport coaching careers in track and field, handball and basketball).

This group of coaches had no previous experience in disability sports, but took on the coaching role due to the encouragement and proposal of a disabled sport club director. One of the coaches training elite female handball team explained, *'There was a para-judo tournament in the indoor court where I was training handball players. While I was watching the tournament, I came across to the goalball players in there. It was a strange feeling as I had never saw people with blind doing sports. In there, a colleague of mine introduced me to a disabled sport club director who was desperate and in need of coaching in goalball. My initial goal was to help voluntarily but by the time passed, I fall in this wonderful sport and now I'm the head coach of youth goalball team.'* This clearly shows that coaches in non-disabled sports can make transitions to disabled sports with confidence in execution the role effectively.

The third group of coaches fell into the group who had solely coaching background in sports for athletes with vision impairment and later made transition to goalball (four of the ten 10 coaches had coaching experiences in B1 football (soccer), judo, powerlifting, chess and B2/B3 futsal). In this instance, having disability was one of the contributing factors to transition from one disabled sport to the other. As one coach explained, *'...I coached B2/B3 futsal, I mean partially sighted futsal. By the way, I would like to emphasize that, I'm also a person with vision impairment, I'm B3. I love blind sports; it does not matter whether it is goalball or B1 football (soccer).'* This finding supports the findings of Cregan et al. (2007) that some of the coaches in the current study were individuals with disability. On the other hand, some of the coaches in this group (who had solely coaching background in sports for athletes with VI) started their goalball career by coincidence, and the opportunity was presented to them naturally. One coached reported this experience as, *'One of my friends was a goalball referee as well as a goalball coach in one of the sport clubs for athletes with vision impairment. During one of the national tournaments, he was appointed as a goalball referee so he hadn't had a chance for coaching... team. Time was running and he had to find a goalball coach for.... team. My friend asked me whether I could coach. Can you image? Me? No knowledge in goalball at all. This is how I got started...'*, and another coach expressed this as, *'I was participating to several development seminars in disability area. This made me realise whether these individuals could actually participate to sports. Later on, I found the opportunity of watching the training and matches of athletes with vision impairments. During this time, there was a goalball match in the weekend and the head coach approached me and masked me to be an escort (guide) for the blind athlete. There he asked me if I like to start to coach or not. I immediately accepted this offer. Since then, I'm coaching.'*

This group of coaches also took structured and official paths in acquiring experiences in goalball coaching organized by the relevant sport organization which was founded solely for VI sports. There are five level coaching certifications ranges from 1 representing lowest qualification (assistant coach) to 5 representing highest qualification (technical director) in the country where these goalball coaches reside. Six goalball coaches had level one, two goalball coaches had level two and two goalball coaches had level three goalball coaching certificates, respectively. These are the official learning opportunities accessed by coaches in order to acquire, develop and increase their knowledge specific to youth goalball as explained by the coaches. Unfortunately, some of the coaches expressed their concerns regarding the structure

of the official learning steps and how the content of the certification program ‘colloquially’ blank and did not cover any aspects of youth goalball training. One coach expressed his concerns as, ‘...well, they teach (personally I think that the tutors are not that well in knowledge) courses such as sport specific training theory, sport game rules, psychomotor development in individuals with visual impairment, perceptual learning in individuals with visual impairment, technical and tactical aspects of goalball, etc. They (the sporting federation) gather you in a seminar room and they bombard you with all different courses for a week. Nearly 8 hours in a day with a very tight schedule. Only a couple of hours served me the purpose. Did I get any information related to the youth goalball and teaching aspects in the youth? No... there must be courses solely focusing on the youth with visual impairment’.

What is more, the coaches also mentioned shared thoughts regards to unstructured and unofficial learning mechanism and opportunities to develop their knowledge specific to coaching and training in youth goalball players. Learning sources commonly mentioned by the coaches were not led by a formal coach or instructor. They were mostly available sources on the internet and recorded previous-match videos as well as trial-and-error on the court, other goalball sport personals (e.g., peer goalball coaches, goalball referees, experienced goalball athletes) and, watching the trainings of experienced national goalball coaches on the court. First, using internet, recorded videos and trial-and-error appeared as significant learning sources to develop their coaching knowledge in youth goalball. This was expressed by one coach as, ‘...goalball is very popular in VI community in Turkey but manual for coaches is not published, this is a big challenge. There are no published goalball training drills for you to read, digest and apply them to youth goalball athletes. Mostly try-and-error. I also watch goalball videos of other countries via internet.’ Another coach told a similar experience as ‘I watch the recorded previous matches a lot. In addition, empathy is significant so on and off the court, how VI person strolls, wanders around or take a walk, I experienced these myself and from these experiences, I tried to improve myself. Once, watching the training of a goal keeper (in soccer) aided me in diving save skill in goalball and I applied this to my young athletes. There is no published data available to train your young athletes. I watched so many videos on and on and tried to improve my knowledge in youth goalball. And unfortunately, and sadly, mostly try-and-error...’ Coaches also mentioned to have peer goalball coaches, goalball referees and experienced goalball athletes as their learning sources in the early days of their careers to develop their coaching knowledge and exchange training plans, learning drills, or even the disabilities as explained by one coach: ‘...I speak very often with the other goalball coaches...I also ask to the ophthalmologist about the causes of visual impairment and its impact on the fitness...precautions etc...’ Additionally, one coach said: ‘...I ask to my fellow coaches, referees and athletes. I even paid and financed myself and flew to other countries to watch the international matches and speak with other international coaches.’ Supporting this, another coach told: ‘There is only video on the internet. No written materials. Speaking with the most experienced coaches, watching their training sessions, watching soccer goal keeper training videos are my main tools.’ Establishing a relationship and bond between the coach and the athlete also contributed to their coaching career in youth goalball, explained by one coach: ‘Coaching youth is very difficult. I do peer tutoring. I mean, experienced athletes help the younger athletes. I give responsibilities to experienced athletes

and they pass their knowledge and skills in goalball to new novice athletes. I learn from the experienced athletes, too. They contribute me a lot.'

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings emphasize the need to consider new formal coach development programmes containing long-term athlete development (e.g., the development of general, fundamental motor and technical-tactical skills according to physical maturation and emotional growth) as well as broader and structured coaching courses containing education sessions from special educators who specialized in individuals with VI. In brief, coaching youth with VI is challenging especially when there is no disability sport specific coaching literature. Yet, coaches reported their experiences as being tremendously positive.

## **Ethical Statement**

According to local legislation, ethical approval was not required. Participants gave their informed consent online to participate in this study.

## **Funding**

Author declare that there is no funding related to this article.

## **Acknowledgements**

The author thanks to goalball coaches who participated to this study voluntarily. The author presented this study orally (virtually) at the II. International Congress of Exercise and Sport Sciences (ICESS-2024), 5-7 December 2024, Samsun, Türkiye (Book of abstract page 680).

## **Conflict of Interest**

There is no potential conflict of interest reported by the author.

## **Data Availability Statement**

The data are available from the author with a reasonable request.

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