

Community sports coaching: policies and practice, edited by Ben Ives, Paul Potrac, Laura Gale, and Lee Nelson, Abingdon, Routledge, 2022, 270 pp., £110.41 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-367-43175-4/£33.99 (paperback) ISBN 978-0-367-74678-0

The four-person editorial team for this text has been publishing together, and regularly producing outputs, over the last six years, in the specialised area of community sports coaching (which prioritises health and societal improvements over the promotion of athletic performance). Two of them have two decades of experience of researching and writing about sports coaching, and are among the major players in the field; the other two have a decade of such experience, and may be regarded as rising stars. All of them also have some experience of coaching practically. This powerful blend of established wisdom from “leading researchers”, alongside youthful energy and new insights from “emerging talents”, is replicated across the extensive range of listed highly credible international contributors to the book, which additionally encompasses the voices of community sports coaching practitioners themselves. This healthy interaction and integration augurs well for the further development of scholarship and understanding in the sports coaching domain, both within and beyond the confines of this volume.

Despite a wide remit of shifting societal change agendas imposed on a community sport coaching workforce that is often ill trained, transient, and poorly (if at all) paid, there is “no existing academic textbook that considers the everyday challenges and opportunities that are inherent to this form of work” (p.1). While the editorial team have previously produced numerous journal articles and chapters about community sports coaching over several years (e.g., Gale et al., 2019; Ives et al., 2016, 2021), and we must appropriately recognise the prior contribution to knowledge of the relatively recent shorter book *Sports coaching in the community: Developing knowledge and insight* (Gale & Ives, 2019), “*Community Sports Coaching*” fills an important gap, and brings together a uniquely comprehensive exploration of policy and practice, that features both impressive breadth and depth of consideration. In short, it is an invaluable compendium of essential information about community sport coaching.

“*Community Sports Coaching*” is structured into three sections: (1) the political, organisational, and administrative landscape of community sport coaching, (2) enacting sport and physical activity interventions for diverse groups, and (3) negotiating social relationships in community sport coaching work. The editors point out that while these sections are distinct, they are also interrelated, and this is mirrored in the frequent and accomplished signposting between and to different chapters, which is very helpful for the reader in drawing together common threads within the broad tapestry of the information presented. There is a laudable stated aspiration that this work will prove to be a useful resource that caters for multiple audience needs - policy makers, educators, students, and practitioners. However, at times, as somebody who was once a community sports coach practitioner in a variety of roles earlier in my career, I wondered how

accessible some of the content might be for such practically oriented people, and the extent to which it might effectively hold their attention in places. The forensic detail and extent of consideration is extremely impressive, but sometimes the subject matter becomes quite dense and could prove to be difficult to digest for some readers (e.g., on politics and policy). The cost could also potentially be prohibitive for an often poorly remunerated practitioner audience.

Nevertheless, there are a number of ways in which the book successfully attempts to stimulate deeper thought and reflection about the subject area, and to help the reader to establish their own links between theory and practice. Well-conceived (and often scenario based) critical questions based on what the content could mean for practice are presented at the end of each chapter. In the second section, all chapters towards the conclusion incorporate rich insights arising from practitioners' own experiences of enacting their community sport coaching work with the diverse target groups discussed, to bring the theory and policy intentions to illustrated life. In the third section the voices of community sports coaches are interwoven more fully throughout each chapter, with vignettes punctuating and complimenting the consideration of theory (and there were additionally some excellent reflective questions integrated too in the chapter on political skill).

Indeed, the third section was my favourite part of the book – I really enjoyed it a great deal and was captivated by the content (although in the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary domain of sports coaching it is possible that some readers might find this section to be somewhat sociology dominated). It felt as though the authors were communicating directly to front-line community sports coaches here, and were focused intently on the needs of that particular audience, and thus it seemed generally more accessible, and featured the best facilitated synthesis of theory and practice. In this section practitioners were actively encouraged to grapple with challenging theoretical ideas and concepts (such as impression management) that might prove useful for them in framing and informing their practice. Hence, community sports coach Callum Morgan explains, “Being introduced to Goffman’s ideas, and seeing them applied in coaching research, has made me think entirely differently about how I ‘perform’ as a community sport coach” (p. 214). Detailed contextual examples of how such ideas may be employed in real world application are provided, such as in relation to strategically presenting ourselves to others - “It’s hard to have an impact if others do not think you are credible, knowledgeable, organised, and caring” (p. 214). The perceived superiority of this section may be a function of the fact that each chapter herein is authored by all four of the editorial team together, alongside a different practitioner co-author in each instance.

One aspect that I especially valued about this publication was the refreshing variety of writing styles and approaches that different authors brought to different chapters. For example, I enjoyed

the storytelling style that Jay Coakley (a world leading scholar in sport) employed in the chapter on “Neoliberalism and Coaching in the US”, which resulted in an excellent explication of the rise of neoliberalism and its influence on community sport policy and practice, that moreover drew productively upon his own accumulated experiences and opinions. As a further illustration, the vignettes presented in the chapter on “The Training, Education, and Continuing Professional Development of Community Sports Coaches” effectively captured the complexity and problematic nature of this specific practice related aspect by articulating “voices from the field”. I also found that the chapters on “Community Sport Coaches as Policy Actors” and “Teaching Yoga to Incarcerated Populations” to be exceedingly well structured (although the book is certainly logically structured throughout) in portraying in an accessible and palatable way a changing multidimensional landscape, and international developments in a highly specialised area of practice, respectively.

Overall, this text is a much-needed addition to the sports coaching literature canon, and is a superb resource centred on many important elements of community sports coaching. The content features gravitas, granular detail, and rich insights, and skilfully blends the empirical and the experiential. A critical lens is focused upon the relatively neglected area of community sports coaching. We are presented with an evidence-based guidebook that will inform educators, students, policy makers, and practitioners who are responsible for an expanding range of social policy objectives, in relation to the increasingly reimagined purpose and practice of community sports coaching.

Throughout one obtains the recurring sense of a redefining of the *raison d'être* of community sports coaching, to encompass more non directly sport related objectives. These put-upon unsung everyday heroes operate in complex settings requiring sophisticated skills, and a range of underpinning qualities, yet are frequently employed on a casual basis, and work unsocial hours. This book covers the associated policies they enact, related coach education issues impacting them, the needs of the diverse population groups they work with, and the socio-political challenges and opportunities associated with their roles.

The second section addresses issues specifically related to enacting interventions for diverse groups, featuring chapters on ethnicity, LGBTQ, girls and women, children and young people, social class, older adults, disability sport, and incarcerated populations. However, although it is undoubtedly touched upon at various junctures in the general consideration of the work of community sport coaching, I wondered if a specialised chapter on social class might have added further value, given the extensive community sport coaching initiatives situated in deprived areas, focused on social inclusion for instance, and the Matthew Effect of recent historical and political developments causing even greater disadvantage and lack of access to sport and physical

education for lower socio-economic groups (Sanderson & Brown, 2020), who ironically in the past have been the fertile breeding ground for generations of sports participants and coaches.

Two words that crop up repeatedly within the content are navigate and landscape. This reflects that community sports coaching is an ever-altering field of demanding and shifting policy priorities, that is problematic and complex for practitioners to deal with. One illustration of such complexity is the concept of intersectionality whereby athletes from diverse population groups must be recognised as having multiple possible social identities, and thereby being subject to different interacting potential mechanisms of privilege or oppression that we need to become sensitised to as practitioners promoting inclusion through and within sport and physical activity (e.g., Rankin-Wright & Hylton, 2020). Community sports coaches are essentially challenged to plot a course through unfamiliar territory without a detailed guiding map, in which both the terrain and the traveller are continually being reconceived and reshaped. While at the same time they must deal artfully with numerous stakeholders, partner organisations, and related disciplines. Interestingly, in the chapter on “Community Sports Coaches as Policy Actors” the central role that they can play in effectively bringing different bodies together in policy delivery as “boundary spanners” was highlighted (Jeanes et al., 2019), which caused me to speculate whether Landscapes of Practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2014) might be a useful theoretical framework to employ in the future exploration of community sports coaches, given that it encapsulates professional learning as individuals traverse multiple sites and roles, and the potentially powerful learning experiences associated with boundary encounters (Vinson, Huckle & Cale, 2021).

Reading this book evoked a sense of verisimilitude in that it resonated with my own diverse experiences long ago as a community sports coach (e.g., as a specialist sports youth worker in East London, as a sports development officer promoting youth participation in rural areas, as an over 50's fitness leader in a further education college, and as an aerobics instructor in community halls), and evoked fond memories of what was my favourite ever form of employment. Virtually everything I did in these roles was about making a positive difference in the lives of others through sport and physical activity, and it was only the unsocial hours, low pay, and lack of job security that forced me to seek alternative occupations once I had entered a long-term romantic relationship and needed greater stability in my life. While “*Community Sports Coaching*” clearly outlines the not inconsiderable challenges facing practitioners in this setting, it also balances this out by celebrating the affordances and rewards that are possible from invested care, passion, and effort in meaningful and purposeful work.

This book is a significant grand opus on a thus far neglected area. It employs robust guiding theoretical frameworks and practical examples to critically explore and to expand our

understandings. One impressive aspect of this text was the adept alternation between a broad and narrow focus, providing the reader with a facilitated interconnection between the large- and small-scale pictures of policy and practice in action, including an international perspective. Unfortunately, I personally found the front cover image to be somewhat uninspiring. While I absolutely appreciate that it is a very difficult matter to select a picture which is fully representative of the multifaceted complexity of this subject area, the one presented of an empty multipurpose sports playing court captures neither coaching practice nor policy enactment adequately for me, and does not therefore do justice to the highly engaging content within the book.

As community sports coaches are inexorably drawn away from their traditional roles and increasingly held to account for an expanding range of broader responsibilities, they undoubtedly become important agents of change in terms of translating policy into reality, but remain ill-defined as workers. We still know relatively little about this workforce, and as vocational boundaries are blurred further what we expect from community sports coaches becomes even more unclear and ambiguous. At times in reading this work one is left to ponder the extent to which they may even be regarded as coaches in some circumstances. In places I also wondered if we might be filling in the gaps in our current knowledge with assumptions to some extent – for instance, have we really yet established the current state of diversification in the community sport coaching workforce?

This text reveals the largely unseen, unappreciated, and underestimated work of community sport coach practitioners at the coal face of policy delivery that is both diverse and difficult, but at the same time crucially important. Previous research and writing has tended to focus mostly on coaching in elite and performance coaching settings, but as the following quote from practitioner Martyn Cooke illustrates, community sports coaches have their own claims to expertise that should be recognised and appreciated.

There is often a misconception that community sports coaches are not as competent or knowledgeable as their counterparts who work at an elite level. However, I wholeheartedly disagree. Being able to plan, deliver, and manage a community session with 30 children of varied abilities and interests requires just as much skill and competence (arguably more) when compared to a session delivered in an elite setting. Community sport coaching is so diverse that you need to be able to react to varied challenges (p.262).

There is a great chapter on “Care in Community Sports Coaching” in this book, by Colum Cronin and James Bush, detailing the duty of care and ethic of care rightly due from coaches in the service

of participants. However, this text as a whole will also hopefully serve as an informative wakeup call to us all about the problematic nature of the work (and working conditions) of community sport coaches, who deserve our greater understanding and support, in enacting their significant roles as potential agents of behaviour change. If we do not care for the carers, then who will care for the cared?

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