

Phil Jackson: Zen and the Counterculture Coach

Introduction

As a coach educator I sometimes set my students the task of choosing their favourite coach, and critically considering the reasons for their selections. Phil Jackson is without doubt my own favourite sports coach. In this article I hope to encapsulate the essence of his coaching philosophy and practices, and some of the personal qualities that I believe set him apart from other coaches. But first, a brief résumé of his coaching achievements in the context of American professional basketball seems in order.

In 2004, when Jackson parted company with the LA Lakers seemingly to retire, he had the best career match winning percentage of any NBA coach (72% out of over a thousand games), the most ever playoff wins and the best playoff win percentage, and had been coaching at elite level for 14 years. In that period he had won the NBA championship 9 times with two different teams, in three periods of three consecutive years (Chicago Bulls 1991-93, and 1996-98 and the Lakers 2000-03). Just imagine an equivalent achievement in the context of association football (it has never been done; although Herbert Chapman came close, winning the Division 1 title as manager of Huddersfield in 1924-26, and Arsenal in 1933-35).

Jackson has since returned to the helm of the Lakers, is in the process of rebuilding the team, and no doubt his career record may become somewhat diminished. But what is most impressive about Jackson's achievements for me, is not just what he has achieved as a coach to date, but also how and why he has done it. His coaching standards are very high in several ways. Dr Jerry Buss, the LA Lakers owner said of him "*I never knew of a coach who set such high goals for himself*" (Jackson & Arkush, 2004, p.261).

Counterculture Coach

Phil Jackson's unusual influences and unique coaching style differentiates him from other professional basketball coaches specifically, and I would argue most sports coaches generally. Here we have perhaps the antithesis of the authoritarian, shouting control freak, which is unfortunately still the dominant elite coaching stereotype. In the pressure cooker environment of the NBA, and a US social context that tends to over glorify winning and individual achievement, Jackson successfully resists win at all costs influences, takes a moral and spiritual stance, and proves that there is another way to facilitate sporting greatness. I am conscious that Jackson himself has indicated that his counterculture coach image is a little overblown. However, I feel his highly unorthodox coaching style, and his formative influences from the new age movement of the 1960s perhaps justify the label.

It is said that coaches are both the manifestation and product of their experiences. Thus, the way that coaches coach is largely reflective of the way that they are. Jackson brings personal influences from areas such as his strict Christian upbringing, and his interest in Zen Buddhist philosophy, and native

American Indian culture, into his coaching; resulting in interventions using unlikely methodologies such as meditation and yoga in regards to preparation for athletic performance, and a strong spiritual dimension to his approach. For example, Jackson is keen to stress to his players that they should honour and respect their opponents, since they help you to achieve your best as an athlete. This relates to the warrior culture of the Lakota Sioux tribe, and also links to the Latin origin of the term competition – *con petire*, meaning to search together (that is for excellence in self-fulfilment).

In a parallel with Sven-Göran Eriksson's track record as England football manager, Jackson's statistics in regards to friendly fixtures are extremely ordinary compared to his excellent competitive winning percentage. This indicates a willingness to experiment during such matches, and the ability to keep winning in perspective, when considered against development. Coaches with bigger egos might find such a balanced and long term approach to short term losses unpalatable.

Jackson attempts to make a strong personal connection to his players, and makes use of apocryphal stories, by giving his players books as personal presents, setting a theme for the season, and by utilising feature film clips to motivate and to illustrate coaching points. Additionally he is careful to offer his players their proper respect in regards to open communication, and an empathetic and compassionate attitude, whilst simultaneously maintaining overall control and direction. He also seems to believe strongly in the nurturing and cultivation of a community based approach to teamwork. This again is unusual for basketball, where talented individuals tend to dominate games from an early age. Remarkably, these methods seem to have had considerable and consistent success at the highest level.

Teamwork Requires Selflessness

In regards to team versus individual needs, Jackson's approach seems to emphasise the attainment of team growth, at the expense of individual dominance. Talented (and highly marketable!) players within basketball have been known to abuse their positions of power, and effectively destabilise the balance of teams. Conversely, Jackson would argue that encouraging a greater sense of oneness, or a collective consciousness, within a team enhances their chances of making the necessary sacrifices in training, and of winning a championship. An illustration of how this is emphasised in practice is the importance that Jackson places on the pre-assist pass in game evaluations. That is, the pass before the pass that leads to a scoring basket – which is often the one that starts to pull the defensive unit out of position.

Jackson's great strength seems to be his ability to take a group of talented but disparate individuals, and to meld them into a high achieving team. Both the Bulls and the Lakers were perennial underachievers pre-Jackson, and have not won championships subsequently without him – which testifies to the value he adds in the coaching role. He seems to have managed to help some incredibly talented individuals, with renowned egotistical tendencies, to subjugate themselves to the team ethic, and thence to achieve more than

they ever could on their own. For example, Michael Jordan, Dennis Rodman, Shaquille O'Neal, and Kobe Bryant.

The following quote from Sir Alex Ferguson, from Bolchover and Brady's *The 90 Minute Manager* provides a useful summary of the rationale for this approach "*Selfishness, factionalism, clique-ishness are all death to a football team...talent without unity of purpose is a hopelessly devalued currency*" (Bolchover & Brady, 2002, p. 207). Jackson himself has coined the phrase "*Selflessness is the soul of teamwork*" (Jackson & Delehanty, 1995, p.6).

The Triangle Offence

Jackson's tactical modus operandi is the Triangle Offence. He describes it himself as *five man tai chi*, whilst Michael Jordan called it a *community oriented offence*. Both of these statements allude to the equal opportunity nature of this attacking system. The Triangle requires discipline and sacrifice from players, rather than the expression of their individual talent alone. This offensive system does not rely on just one playmaker, but rather necessitates a team rhythm that responds to the opposing team's energy, and plays into it when opportunities arise.

In a way this is more like a philosophy in action. It operates under a clearly defined framework of guiding principles, which emphasise unselfishness, working in harmony, and how each player can be important within the system. It is beyond the realms of this article to describe the intricacies of the Triangle Offence in detail, but in essence it is a team strategy that reinforces the message that no player is more important than the team, and only by engaging with teamwork can players achieve true greatness. As that other great basketball coach, John Wooden, once said "*It's amazing how much can be accomplished if no one cares who gets the credit*" (Walton, 1992, p. 59).

Ownership and Investment

Jackson uses what might be described as a holistic empowered development approach with players. For example, he will sometimes deliberately not call timeouts when the team is playing badly; but will instead leave the team to come up with their own solution, so that they can resolve similar difficulties encountered in games in the future. This problem solving emphasis also extends to timeouts which are taken, where Jackson often leaves the team alone for the first 45 seconds, to allow some cognitive space for them to diagnose problems and come up with ideas themselves. A major benefit of this method is that it reduces the chances of coach dependency, and transfers more independence and responsibility to the athletes, who are invariably in a better position than the coach to recognise potential solutions to game related problems anyway.

Athletes are also able to suggest their own contributions to the coaching process. This shared ownership of problems, and shared responsibility for solutions, is another aspect of cultivating collective consciousness, and encourages greater motivation and investment of effort. Players have

expressed that they feel part of something bigger than themselves in such an environment. In Jackson's own words "*For me that's what sports is all about...bringing people together in a common spirit ultimately transcends wins and losses*" (Jackson & Rosen, 2002, p.265).

Winning in Perspective

Whilst Jackson emphasises how much he enjoys winning, he is quick to point out that winning for him is ephemeral, in that the feeling quickly passes. Success is viewed thus as a fleeting moment; a here and now temporary phenomenon.

Other coaches have noted this experience, such as former Italian national football coach, Giovanni Trapattoni, who stated "*Success is ephemeral for me. As soon as it's done, it's over, and I think about the next challenge. It's like a hole inside you which is never filled. Ever*" (Bolchover & Brady, 2002, p. 72). However, for Jackson this does not necessarily result in the relentless pursuit of further glory, in order to get one more brief buzz from a transient victory. Instead he immerses himself in the present of the coaching process, gaining fulfilment from being fully engaged and focused in the moment.

This is a humbling perspective, which encourages us to maintain a balanced sense of reality. Too often in sport, winning obscures faults, while losing exaggerates them. Thus, the importance of winning itself perhaps ought to be critically considered and somewhat downplayed, and possibly considered as a by-product of getting the coaching and athletic performance processes right, rather than the be-all and end-all in itself.

Relating to Buddhist philosophy, Jackson has also described winning as the secondary effect of right thinking (being fully in the moment), and right action (playing every game to your fullest ability). Thus winning may be considered as an epiphenomenon – like the flow experience in sport, it can only ever arise as a by product of other things. This is why the surest way to not get into flow, is to strive to grasp and experience it. Hence for Jackson winning is merely a consequence of hard preparatory work, skill development, and the cultivation of self-belief and team spirit.

For Jackson, an over emphasis on winning can be potentially debilitating, in that the fear of losing may be more destructive than losing itself, given the chances of negative psychological effects upon players, who may become over anxious, and play safe in order to try to avoid failure rather than aggressively pursue victory. There are connections here with the coaching philosophies of both tennis coach Brad Gilbert and Sven-Göran Eriksson, who stress that athletes must have the courage to dare to win in sport, in order to achieve their fullest potential

Use of Psychology

Like many of the great coaches, Phil Jackson seems to have an intuitive grasp of the importance of psychology within the sporting domain. As

indicated by the title of Lazenby's (2000) biography of Jackson – *Mindgames*. For instance, Jackson has described how he utilised a psychologist who had worked with teenagers in urban schools to help deal with issues of narcissism with certain egotistical star basketball players. Similarly, psychological support was employed to help Dennis Rodman deal with anger management issues. Furthermore, he recommended that Shaq consult a hypnotist in regards to his well documented free throw inconsistencies, and also attempted coaching interventions based upon visualisation, self-talk, and positive mental attitude.

Many coaches are familiar with the famous psychological coaching guideline *control the controllables*, and this is indeed apparent in many of Jackson's coaching practices; but he also employs *correct the correctables*, accepting that there is only a certain amount that coaches can achieve in some situations, and that some problems may be largely insurmountable. For example, like Arsene Wenger, Jackson asserts that most coaching should be done prior to competitive matches. As a further instance, Shaq's preference for saving energy for games was accommodated by allowing him to not warm up before matches. Refreshingly, Jackson also espouses that coaches are not infallible, and should freely admit their mistakes.

Other instances of psychological influences in his coaching include the preservation of rant shock value. Jackson recommends that a coach never really loses control, but that you can feign it on a limited number of occasions as a deliberate coaching tool. Similarly, as a figurehead for the Positive Coaching Alliance, Jackson recommends that critical feedback is used economically, and should be directed at the performance rather than the person. He believes strongly that too many young players lose confidence in themselves, which is never fully recaptured, and that a positive coaching approach can help to combat this trend. Similarly, he employs exit interviews with players at the end of the season to offer honest feedback on their performance.

One of Jackson's most effective coaching qualities in regards to strategy is that of spoiling, which has strong links to the psychological concept of self-efficacy. Spoiling is causing doubt in your opponents, taking them away from their natural game and their preferred methods – in other words disrupting the opposition's energy and confidence. This is why Jackson believes that it is crucial to identify the soul of an opposing team, or the key to the way that they play, in order to effectively disturb them. Similarly, for his own team he emphasises that it is imperative to find any small thing you can to hold on to and believe in, in order to ward off doubt in the team or the self. There are parallels here again with Brad Gilbert's philosophies, as expressed in *Winning Ugly*, where he advises how tennis players can go about overcoming more talented opponents.

Open Focus

Maintaining an open focus is again a core aspect of Buddhist philosophy. Hence Jackson attempts to maintain a coaching attitude of not trying to be judgemental, but only to clear the mind – to listen, observe and notice. This is

the principle of non-judgemental awareness, which sits well with the established research finding that many elite coaches spend much of their time in silent observation, and is a potentially powerful means by which coaches might productively reduce the pervasive influence of their own prior assumptions and adherence to stereotypes.

Another interesting aspect of Jackson's coaching philosophy is his ability to embrace change and accept impermanence as reality. In *The Last Season* (Jackson & Arkush, 2004) he highlights a mantra which he keeps on his desk - *Unceasing change turns the wheel of life, and so reality is shown in all its many forms*. There are two important implications arising here. Firstly, an acceptance of change means less attachment to the situation as it stands. That is, such an attitude, allows the coach to be more responsive to new ideas or notions, to recognise early when the team is about to enter a period of transition, or a player is coming to the end of their career, or to abandon old coaching practices in the light of new findings. Secondly, if one accepts impermanence, and as highlighted earlier that the coach can only *control the controllables*, then one is well equipped with a necessary quality of mind to cope well with the complexity and unpredictability that is inherent in the coaching process.

Hence Jackson seems to exhibit a balanced approach in his coaching – between for example individual talent and teamwork, or winning and development. Furthermore, the perfectionism associated with Zen influences leads him to attend to critical coaching details, such as the use of video analysis at half time to inform tactical adjustments, post match workouts for bench players to maintain equivalent match fitness, and the gradual cultivation of players' ability to concentrate on game footage over an extended period of time.

Problems, Dilemmas and Paradoxes

Paradoxically, the selflessness coach only seems to win championships with teams that include outstanding superstar individuals. It is important to recognise that although teamwork is undoubtedly a cornerstone of Jackson's approach, every great team needs its mixture of soldiers and artists as the great English football coach Dave Sexton indicated many years ago. Nonetheless, given that Jackson has had to persuade gifted megastars to undertake less dominant team orientated roles in order for teams to achieve greatness, this remains a fascinating point. One may speculate that the transformed roles of these individuals, and the devolved responsibility to other players, in some way galvanised the whole team to higher levels of performance. In a recent interview (Robertson, 2004) Jackson states "*It doesn't matter how good individual players are – they can't compete with a team that is awake and aware and trusts each other*". In the context of football this reminds one of the remarkable over-achievements of Mourinho's Porto in the Champions League in 2004, and Reihagel's Greece in Euro 2004. Nonetheless, Jackson also says in the same interview "...*you're better off with maybe two very, very talented and perhaps selfish people on the team than*

five or six or seven". Clearly, striking a critical dynamic balance within the team is the essential issue.

Did the players merely tolerate Jackson's methods such as meditation, or were they genuinely engaged with and by them? For example, in regards to Sir Clive Woodward's many coaching innovations in the lead up to England winning the rugby World Cup, some players have subsequently indicated that they engaged with aspects which were useful for them, and just went along with the ride for the rest. I suppose one must examine critically the effectiveness of the whole package, and as illustrated earlier Jackson does seem to have added value to performance overall, regardless perhaps of whether players actually agreed with all of his methods, or indeed continued with them after his departure. A nice quote from Shaq regards Jackson's work as a coach is "*I like playing for PJ because he has great communication with the players. He's prepared for every situation, he's fair, and he means what he says*" (Jackson & Rosen, 2002, p. 229). Does it even matter if Jackson's methods are unorthodox or not fully accepted if he achieves such positive outcomes?

Jackson's downfall with the Lakers arose partly because of an individual star who was unwilling to give himself over to a teamwork strategy. The selflessness coach was ironically brought down in the end to some extent by the selfishness of one star player. However, he has now returned to the same team, and is working with that same individual – reaching the play-offs in the first season back, with a side very much in a period of transition.

His 2004 departure from the Lakers was a relatively dignified one, and his attitude seemed to epitomise the message of embracing change. Jackson announced his intention to retire, and to do, amongst other things, some yoga and maybe some mentoring. However, his subsequent return to coaching is not such a shock as it might be given his clearly expressed joy of coaching. For Jackson the fulfilment, engagement, and sheer intensity of the experience are powerful attractors, and he is one of very few coaches I have encountered who reports that he has actually experienced flow in the coaching role. Indeed for him coaching itself seems to be a spiritual experience.

So, how does this example help us in regards to coach education? Should we for instance immediately add Zen Buddhism and native American Indian culture to the curriculum? As always with coaching, copying the development of others is not wise, and we should find our own path, as well as recognise our own developmental influences and cultivate our own values in action. However, Jackson illustrates excellently that there is always another way, and that coaches should remain open minded and ever learning from a variety of potential sources. Finally, I believe that there is much to fruitfully reflect upon in regards to coaching practice, principles and philosophies in Jackson's story.

In Conclusion

I hope you have found this brief examination of Phil Jackson's coaching philosophy and practices interesting and informative. It was based upon my own reading of Jackson's trilogy of coaching books, subsequent analysis, further research, and personal perceptions. I strongly recommend Jackson's three books detailed below, should any coaches wish to read further and increase their knowledge about this exceptional and inspiring coach.

References

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