

The multi-tasking coach: managing the risks of wearing several hats

By the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada



In national sport organizations (NSOs), where resources are scarce and where expertise is highly concentrated among a relatively small number of individuals, members often wear several hats at once (coach, official, board member, etc.), leading to the potential of finding themselves in situations of conflict of interest. In a small community with a large interdependence and interaction of individuals like the Canadian sport system, it is a reality that calls for the utmost prudence and care.

In a recent issue of *Coaches Plan*, Rachel Corbett from the Centre for Sport and Law addressed this situation from an organizational perspective. "The sport community is small in Canada and it is not uncommon for sport leaders to hold more than one leadership position in Canadian sport. In fact, it is the norm."¹ While that article discusses conflict of interest as a governance issue, specifically at the board level, the present article looks at it from an individual perspective and particularly that of coaches.

Broadly defined, conflict of interest occurs when private interests clash with public duties and is closely linked with having responsibilities that could be incompatible with personal wishes or needs. For example, it is quite common to have the national team coach also act as personal coach to one or several high performance athletes in the same sport. Such a situation would likely put the coach in the uncomfortable position of having to make difficult decisions relating to team selection. For the national team coach, this means

having the responsibility to select the best athletes for the national team, which may be incompatible with his/her personal wishes or needs to see his/her own athlete make it to the national team. As a result, the impartiality of the coach can be undermined. Furthermore, the technical expertise of coaches is frequently called upon by NSOs to assist in preparing recommendations for carding. Coaches involved in carding committees may be placed in the situation of making or influencing decisions that will directly affect the athletes that they personally coach.

Those two examples alone illustrate that even the best coaches in Canada cannot avoid situations of conflict of interest. In fact, they are susceptible to finding themselves in those situations. So, what should you do if it happens to you?

In an article published in 2006, Julie Duranceau, who is now a mediator with the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada (SDRCC), wrote "Regardless, the absence of resources is never a valid excuse for partiality or bias on the part of the third party responsible for rendering a decision."² She reminds us to put ourselves in the position of those who have "much at stake," who should not only be given good reasons why they are not selected, but also be given the confidence that the decision and process followed to reach it are valid and without bias.

The *Coaching Code of Ethics Principles and Ethical Standards* of Coaches of Canada dedicates an entire section to 'Integrity in Relationships,' and, specifically, three paragraphs on conflict of interest:

- 3.9 "Do not exploit any relationship established as a coach to further personal, political or business interests at the expense of the best interests of their athletes or other participants."
- 3.10 "Be clear about and avoid abusing relationships [...] and avoid other situations that might present a conflict of interest or reduce the ability to be objective and unbiased in the determination of what might be in the best interests of athletes."
- 3.11 "Declare conflicts of interest when they arise and seek to manage them in a manner that respects the best interests of all those involved."

These statements offer clear guidance to coaches with regards to conflict of interest. Julie Duranceau's article² proposes three options to deal with conflict of interest, and they are illustrated here in the context of coaching:

- 1) Refuse to act as the decision-maker: as a coach, if you play several roles that may cause athletes to perceive that you are in a conflict of interest in making a decision, it may be appropriate to delegate the final decision to someone more neutral, or, at the very least, involve others in the decision-making process so that you are not the sole and final decision-maker. As a national team coach, for example, you can involve your assistant coaches or the high performance director of your NSO in selection decisions. Their involvement could create the level of comfort that athletes need to have in the decision-making process.

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- 2) Disclose the conflict of interest: if you know that a relationship exists that may make other people perceive a conflict of interest, make it known prior to engaging in the decision-making process. This will allow the people affected by the decision to determine whether they are still confident in your ability to be impartial and neutral.
- 3) Recuse yourself: this can happen if you have accepted a decision-making responsibility before knowing who will be involved. If you find out later on that you are unable to be impartial, it may be appropriate to simply step away and let someone else deal with the issues at hand; this can happen either at the request of someone or at your own discretion.

As if defining conflict of interest was not complex enough, we now have to add to it the concept of ‘perceived conflict of interest’ as opposed to ‘real conflict of interest.’ A ‘perceived’ conflict of interest occurs when a third party (looking from the outside) might reasonably believe that the person rendering a decision can be affected by competing interests. It does not matter whether the conflict of interest exists or not. The fact that there is an appearance of conflict of interest is sufficient to stir trouble. Whether the conflict of interest is real or perceived, it can equally generate a dispute of similar scope and impact.

For example, imagine a situation where an athlete, trying out for the national team, finds out that the last spot goes to an athlete with similar

performance records who happens to be personally coached by you. It is not hard to see that the athlete who did not make the team could very well perceive an injustice caused by a possible bias on your part in selecting your own athlete. Your decision may very well be the correct one, or at least be defensible before an arbitrator, but the situation will have given rise to a dispute anyway. And the damage caused by that dispute is as serious as the damage that a real conflict of interest could have caused.

Unfortunately, a fair number of cases heard at the SDRCC emanated from situations where perceived conflict of interest played an important role, if not the central role, in the dispute. However, there are strategies that can be implemented to reduce the occurrence of real or perceived conflict of interest. They include:

Transparent processes: people affected by decisions made must know and understand how those decisions were taken, who made those decisions, and based on what reasons. This also includes communicating the decisions in a timely manner to the individuals affected by them.


Clearly defined roles and responsibilities: ensuring that the people making decisions within the organizational structure are those with the appropriate authority to do so. This also entails having alternative arrangements in the event that the decision-maker(s) must withdraw from the process due to a conflict of interest.

Well-written and coherent policies: set out clear expectations for the athletes by communicating criteria and processes for team selection, carding,

and other areas of contention with adequate notice. Athletes who know how they will be evaluated can have more confidence in the fairness of the decision.

Collaborative decision-making: decisions requiring complex analysis are best taken by more than one decision-maker. Involving others in key decisions is likely to reduce the perception that the decision is unreasonable or tainted with bias.

Above all, it is important to understand that, most of the time, it is not you as an individual who is responsible for putting yourself in a situation of conflict of interest. The conflict of interest is often created by a series of events and circumstances that can arise as a result of the system in which you work. The key is in recognizing that it is happening and in taking the appropriate measures to deal with it in order to avoid the unnecessary fallout.

Since everyone in the sport system has a responsibility to create a positive and fair environment for all Canadian athletes, the importance of prevention cannot be overstated. A fair and dispute-free Canadian sport system is certainly an ideal that the SDRCC will continue to pursue through sustained partnerships and collaboration with Coaches of Canada and other relevant stakeholders. 

ENDNOTES

- 1 Corbett, Rachel (2009). *Conflict of Interest: The Sport Organization's 'Achilles Heel.'* Coaches PLAN, spring 2009, Volume 16 Number 1.
- 2 Duranceau, Julie (2006). *The Right to be Heard by a Neutral and Impartial Third Party.* In the Neutral Zone, August 2006.