Coaching has become an increasingly central part of contemporary society: there are coaches that will help you find a job, make the optimal career choices, be a successful singer, a great lover, a good husband of wife – the list goes on and on. There is, thus, a growing profession of coaches with very different education and skills. We strongly suspect that this, like so much else in society, is a temporary flare, albeit widespread, a fad that is fed by the complex interplay of incompetence, too much money, and vaguely defined needs. But coaching is so much more than hype, and when new universal solutions to life and life-puzzle problems take over, sport coaches, at least, will still be in high demand. It’s fair to say that the modern use of coaches and coaching began in the world of sports, about 100–150 years ago. But even in sports it’s hard to say with certainty what a coach is and does, partly because of different uses of language in combination with differences in sports culture between countries and continents. Wikipedia’s definition, however, covers various aspects of the sports coaching profession: “In sports, a coach is an individual involved in the direction, instruction and training of the operations of a sports team or of individual sports people.” Swedish Wikipedia adds that the sports coach “might also support people in terms of career or personal development”. The Swedish National Encyclopedia is more concise; a sports coach is a “trainer and adviser with an active leadership role, mainly in team sports”. An instructor and trainer, therefore, but also a supportive mentor and – perhaps – a friend.

The place of coaching in academic research is in dispute. There’s room for educators and psychologists – for example, the university education Coaching and Sport Management at Linnaeus University is situated in the Department of Education, Psychology and Sports Science – for obvious reasons, as it might seem, since the subject competence in both disciplines will be very useful for tasks such as learning, management, personal support. The attentive reader of this forum won’t have failed to note that also sports sociology – through Lars Tore Ronglan – claims research expertise in coaching, for example in terms of social interaction at the group level. In terms of research, the view of this journal is unequivocal – the more cooks, the more interesting and nutritious the broth. Thus, we welcome new and fresh perspectives on the subject of sports in generally and on coaching in particular. Against this background, we are proud to announce new Norwegian research in the area of coaches and coaching, Frode Moen’s and Camilla Fikse’s study of which competencies, and where appropriate, what competence development, that elite coaches consider necessary to carry out their duties. Twenty-eight coaches expressed their thoughts on this in a methodologically structured qualitative study involving advanced focus group discussions, the intervention of the top elite coaches, the researchers’ interpretations and structural analysis, and the feedback of this to the test group. The result was, in summary, six overall competency categories, each with a repertoire of knowledge, skills, abilities and/or attitudes. Skills in communication and leadership were considered to be most important.
Introduction

Today’s elite coaches face great challenges as they struggle to continuously develop their athletes in accordance with the well-known Olympic motto, *citius, altius, fortius*. Elite sport develops continuously and the struggle to maximize athletes performances challenges coaches’ knowledge, skills and abilities. The helping relationship which is established between the coach and the athlete therefore aims to improve athletes’ skills in a wide range of tasks. In sport, specific physical, technical, tactical and psychological skills are important for the athletes (Bompa, 1999; Martens, 1987). Hence, coaches need to perform in different domains to be effective in their roles, e.g., they have to be instructors, motivators, strategists, organizers and character builders (Gould, 1987). Interestingly, research indicates that the coach is an important factor in order to develop successful athletes (Blom, Watson II, & Spadaro, 2010; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Thus, in order to face the challenges and continually develop successful athletes, coaches must develop their capabilities as coaches and build their own competence continuously. Research shows that even experienced coaches who perceive themselves to be competent acknowledge that they have training needs (Santos, Mesquita, Graca & Rosado, 2010). This suggests that elite coaches in sport are interested in and understand the need to increase their knowledge and competence to be successful, and self-conceptualization of their coach capabilities and resources seems to be important to meet the demands of their roles. Important elite coach competencies must therefore be described and defined based on specific coach demands. The two main questions to be investigated in this study are, therefore, What are elite coaches’ perceptions of needed coach competencies in elite sport, and what are their training needs?

Theoretical background

In order to develop capabilities and build competence as elite coaches, consciousness about their own capabilities as coaches towards task demands is essential. To begin with, the acknowledgement of training needs claim awareness about task demands. The four stages of learning theory confirms the importance of awareness as it describes the learning process as progressing from unconscious incompetence (unaware of a deficiency), to conscious incompetence (aware of a deficiency), to conscious competence (need to focus to develop a skill), and finally to the stage unconscious competence (skill happens automatically) (Howell, 1982). Flor that reason, awareness is a key to achieve growth and development (Moen, 2009; Whitmore, 2002). Increased awareness of the task demands of elite coaches gives coaches the opportunity to discover both possible strengths and deficiencies regarding their own competence, and to move from unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetency. Then they can begin the process of developing their own competence as elite coaches. Coaches’ focus on training needs are supposed to make them consciously competent and finally unconsciously competent. Competence is here defined as “the total knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes which are enabling [one] to perform particular tasks and functions according to defined goals” (Lai, 2004, p. 48). Thus, competence is in this study defined as the coach’s ability to apply a repertoire in his or her role as a coach (Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2004).

* Latin for Faster, Higher, Stronger.
Needed competencies for elite coaches have claimed attention among several researches in the field of sport coaching (Abraham, Collins & Martindale, 2006; Demers, Woodburn & Savard, 2006; Durand-Bush, Thompson & Salmela, 2006; Jones et al., 2004; Kirschner, VanVilsteren, Hummel & Wigman, 1997; Westera, 2001). Researchers claim that training, competition and managing are the three major domains where coaches need to be effective in their roles (Côté & Salmela, 1996; Côté, Salmela, Baria & Russel, 1993; Côté & Sedgwick, 2003; Demers et al., 2006; Duffy, 2008). Thus, important task demands for elite coaches are concerned with these three major domains: the physical, technical, tactical and psychological preparations related to training and competitions, as well as the constant claim for dynamic social interactions with both athletes, their parents, assistant coaches and team personnel (managing). Coaches’ main tasks therefore include the ability to organize, implement and evaluate plans for the long and short term, to conduct and support players during practices and competitions, and to co-ordinate and managing human resources. As a conclusion, coaches ability to communicate effectively in different situations is an important competency that is needed (Duffy, 2008; Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2002; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Salmela, 1996).

Communication
Communication skills are the basis of all helping relationships, and successful communication happens when there is accordance between the message sent and its perception by the receiver (Ivey & Ivey, 2006; Røkenes & Hanssen, 2002, Weinberg & Gould, 2007). Coaches abilities to communicate form the basis for their interaction with both athletes and other team members (Duffy, 2008; Jones et al., 2002; Salmela, 1996). As discussed, coaches need to be effective in different domains such as training, competitions and social interactions with their athletes and their team. Thus, it is reason to believe that coaches need to adapt a balance between assertive and accommodative communicative styles in these different situations. They need to listen deeply in order to understand the athlete’s situation during coach–athlete conversations, and in other situations such as competitions that require clear instructions, they need to do that as well. These different situations have different underlying intentions for communication and they require quite different communication skills (Ivey & Ivey, 2006). Coaches need to adjust their communication to the different situations in training, competitions and managing. Research confirms this as findings show that coaches enter roles that are situationally necessary and adjust their behaviour and communication in accordance with situational demands (Jones et al., 2004). Coaches in elite sport seem to have a need for flexible communication skills in order to maximize the potential for learning in training, competitions and managing.

Self-efficacy
There is a significant amount of research aimed at exploring the effect of psychological variables on people’s ability to express their competency in action (Grant & Greene, 2004). Self-efficacy has been found to be one of the most important factors (and often the single most important factor) contributing to successful performances in almost every area of life, such as leadership (Anderson, Krajewski, Goffin & Jackson, 2008; Anderson, 2000), musical performance (Craske & Craig, 1984), relationships (Thomas, 1999) and sports (Feltz, Short & Sullivan, 2008; Wurtele, 1986). Self-efficacy has proved to be an important vari-
able in order to predict peoples competence. Coaching efficacy is therefore an important variable in order to understand and develop coaches’ competencies.

**Coaching efficacy**

Bandura (1997) postulated that if someone has the requisite skills and motivation, then self-efficacy is a major determinant of an individual’s actual performance. Additionally, self-efficacy is found to affect an individual’s choice of activity, effort expended and persistence at the task. For coaches in sport then, “coaching efficacy” is the strength of coaches’ beliefs that they can successfully carry out the duties expected from them in their work with their athletes (Feltz, Chase, Moritz, & Sullivan, 1999). Coaching efficacy is the aspect of self which refers to how certain (or how confident) coaches are that they can successfully perform requisite tasks in specific situations, given their unique and specific capabilities. Efficacy beliefs are typically assessed prior to engaging in a particular task or activity. As a result, efficacy beliefs have been conceptualized as a forethought process because of its proactive impact on performance as shown in Figure 1 below (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006). In order to build coaches’ coaching efficacy and develop their competence, valid analyses of the situation and particular tasks that are needed to be fulfilled, compared to an assessment of own personal competence, are important.

![Figure 1](image)

*Figure 1*  

**The cognitive process prior to performance**

Coaches need to analyse task demands and judge themselves with regards to how well they think they can plan and execute the necessary actions to successfully accomplish the specific tasks they are faced with (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1989). The cognitive aspect of self is therefore prominent, significant and influential in terms of performance, outcome and success. During the cognitive process coaches are assumed to interpret different sources of information in order to determine their coaching efficacy. Of the four principal sources (experiences of mastery, verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, and physiological arousal), Bandura (1997) believed that the most essential and dependable source of self-efficacy is mastery experiences. Authentic experiences of successful performance have the greatest influence on efficacy beliefs (Pajares, 1997). Experiences of mastery (or success) are essential to the growth of coaches’ coaching efficacy and competence. Importantly, valid analyses of task demands and their assessment of own competence as coaches, will result
in important training needs in order to build and develop new competencies. The study of elite coaches’ perceptions of needed competence and their assessment of their own training needs, allows an understanding of which areas coaches believe they are competent in and those in which they perceive themselves to be in need of more training. This will provide valuable information to improve coach education and in turn improve the abilities among coaches in sport. As discussed in this subsection, coaches need to be familiar with the demands and requirements expected from them to develop strong beliefs in their capabilities as elite coaches and expand their competencies. The purpose of this study is therefore to investigate what practicing coaches in elite sport perceive are important competencies and what they believe are their training needs. Thus, this study aim to describe their analysis of needed coach competencies in elite sport and their assessment of own training needs. The problem to be addressed is, as stated above: What are elite coaches’ perceptions of needed coach competencies in elite sport, and what are their training needs?

Method

Qualitative design
In order to investigate coaches’ perceptions of needed coach competencies in elite sport, a qualitative approach was chosen. A phenomenological study “describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998 p.51). Phenomenological analysis seeks to “grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people” (Patton, 2002 p. 482). The phenomenological approach lies within the qualitative tradition and the researcher relies on the phenomenological dialog where he or she must do the interpretations and analyses (Tislevoll, 2010). The aim in this study was to disclose coaches’ discourse by stimulating deep reflections related to the current inquiry.

Research participants and data collection
The data was collected in august 2010 from twenty-eight coaches who participated at an up-grading course arranged by the Norwegian Olympic Committee together with the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). The program was aimed at elite coaches who are working with national elite teams in Norway. The coaches who participated in the course were from different sports such as cross country skiing, biathlon, ski jumping, Nordic combined, ice hockey, alpine skiing, swimming, rowing, athletics, bicycling, wrestling, dancing, figure skating, orienteering and handball. Their average age was 35.5 years (the youngest 23 and the oldest 53), and their formal educational background varied from master degree to no formal education after high-school. Out of the twenty eight coaches, five were women. Twenty-four out were coaches in individual sports and four in team sports. Their experience as coaches at elite level varied from 12 months to 25 years.

The coaches were gathered for a three-day upgrading course and the course was the first out of three parts which were focusing on the coach, the team culture and the reputation of the team (parts 1, 2 and 3). The coach was the main focus in this first part of the course. The plan for these three days was to analyse and discuss needed competencies for elite
coaches and agree upon a final standard. At the end, the coaches were supposed to assess
their own training needs as coaches towards the final standard. The process of gathering,
analyzing and interpreting data was completed through five steps: 1) Focus group discus-
sions, 2) Analyzing the data, 3) Lectures from experienced elite coaches, 4) Presentation
of needed coach competencies, and 5) Assessment of individual training needs. These steps
will shortly be discussed below.

1. Focus group discussions. The coaches were introduced to the problem and divided
randomly into triad groups to begin with (Tislevoll, 2010). Triad groups were chosen to
avoid that individuals would not be heard, which could be a challenge in larger groups.
They were asked to consider and discuss all-important competencies that are needed to
fulfil their roles as elite coaches in sport. One group member was taking notes on his or
her personal computer during this process which lasted for about an hour. Then, pairs of
groups were merged (each now consisting of 6 coaches), and they discussed their findings
with each other in order to agree upon which competencies are needed. One group member
was chosen to take notes and prepare a PowerPoint presentation of the most important find-
ings from his or her group. The groups adjusted or developed their findings for about one
hour. This approach is in accordance with the use of focus groups, which is in increasing
use in research within health education subjects (Tsu, 1980; Bender & Macauley, 1989).
The method aims to reveal the research participants thoughts and experiences based on the
participant’s similar background and/or special knowledge. These group dynamics provid-
ed participants with opportunities to contribute, deepen and make their perspectives clear.
The groups were supported by the researchers in this process. The researchers’ task was to
encourage discussion among the participants, observe the group dynamic and sum up the
content occasionally to help to center the discussion on the essential topics in the dialog
(Krueger, 1998). Madriz (2000) argues for the use of focus groups in studies which are in-
vestigating attitudes, experiences and questions related to how knowledge is produced and
used in a cultural context.

After the group discussions, the merged groups presented their findings in plenary. This
process was lead by the researchers, who encouraged discussions related to the findings
among the coaches, to further deepen the coaches’ perspectives in order to achieve a deep
and common understanding of the findings. The researchers took notes from this process
which lasted for about one and a half hour. All documented notes on personal computer
programmes such as Word or PowerPoint, or handwritten in the groups, were gathered for
further analysis.

2. Analyzing the data. The researchers’ interpretations of the coaches’ thoughts, experi-
ences and meanings based on their participation, observations, questionings, descriptions,
and the coaches’ presentations, constitute the data in this study. Although the coaches
possess expert knowledge about competencies in coaching, the researchers were the most
essential instrument and responsible for the final interpretation of the data (Patton, 2002).
The process went back and forth through the group discussions and the group presenta-
tions, and then the first preliminary interpretations of patterns of meaning into categories of
competencies were identified. Each category was sorted from a perceptive of shared similar
skills, attitudes or efforts. The category represents coach repertoires that share similarities
within the category. This qualitative research method is called content analysis; data is sys-
tematically examined by identifying and grouping themes, and coding, classifying and de-
veloping categories (Patton, 2002). One of the researchers has a PhD within coaching and 15 years of experience with elite coaching in sport and have elite experience as an athlete in individual sports. The other has many years’ team sport experience, both as an executive and as team coach in handball, and is finishing her PhD within counseling and leadership.

3. Lectures from experienced elite coaches. On day two, and running parallel with the researcher’s preliminary interpretations and analyses of the data, the coaches who participated at the course were introduced to four experienced coaches who all had succeeded as coaches in international competitions such as world championships (1st places), Champions League (quarter finals), Olympic winter games (1st places), European championships (1st places) and/or world cup competitions (1st places). They all had experience from international elite sports for at least ten years. The experienced elite coaches were from alpine skiing, football, cross country skiing and bicycling, and they gave lectures about important competencies needed for elite coaches in sport, based on their own experiences and their individual coaching philosophy. The lectures lasted for about seven hours altogether during one day. The coaches were given the opportunity to reflect upon their own findings and broaden their own perspectives based on these lectures, so that their analysis and discussions were based on a broader, more valid and reliable information about the focused issue. As initially stated, valid analysis of task demands are important in order become aware of possible deficits and to grow and develop competence (self-efficacy theory).

4. Presentation of needed coach competencies. On the third day, the researcher’s preliminary analysis and interpretations of the data were presented, giving the categories of important coach competencies, with the coach repertoires representing each category, to the coaches. The categories were discussed in detail, with the coaches being asked if they were reasonable based on the group’s work. Next, the coach repertoires representing each category where discussed in detail in order to achieve a common understanding and to further analyse the data towards a final result. This latter process is a form of validation feedback of content and meaning related to the interpretation of the categories and the coach repertoires, from the coaches to the researcher. Qualitative interpretations begin with elucidating of meaning. “Providing preliminary feedback provides an opportunity to reaffirm with intended users the final focus of the analysis and nurture their interest in the findings (Patton, 2002 p. 506).” This process lasted for about four hours. The coaches’ contributions during this process were mainly elaborative. The preliminary analysis and interpretations of the data were generally accepted and confirmed. The reliability of the categorizing increased because the coaches were given the opportunity to see and contribute to the categories and the coach repertoires in the process. Patton (2002) says that when you ask for interviewees’ understanding of a statement, the answer determines the validity of the researchers’ interpretations. The researchers then made their interpretations and final analysis of the data and the final result of needed coach competencies for elite coaches was compiled.

5. Assessment of individual training needs. After the three days course the coaches were asked to assess their own competence compared to the final result of needed coach competencies. In this process they were asked to involve their athletes as well. Based on their own and their athletes assessments, the coaches were asked to give priority to three competencies which they needed to improve. The final result was sent by email to the researchers within three weeks after the end of the course.
Results

The researchers interpretation and analysis of data resulted in six categories of competencies with accompanying coach repertoires as shown in Table 1 below: 1) Communication, 2) Leadership, 3) Pedagogy, 4) Sport specific, 5) Team building, and 6) “X- factor.” The reported training needs from the coaches are also shown in Table 1. Each coach gave a priority to the three most important training needs, and the sum of reported training needs sorted for each coach repertoire is shown together with the total sum for each competence category. The per centage of reported training needs within each category are also shown in Table 1.

Table 1  Competencies needed for elite coaches and their reported training needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competencies</th>
<th>Coach repertoire: An elite coach in sport must...</th>
<th>Training needs</th>
<th>Sum</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>...be able to communicate in a clear and evident manner.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>...be able to communicate constructive and goal oriented feedback.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to listen to the athlete and arrange for mutual interaction.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to stimulate the athlete to deep reflections through powerful questions.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to share the athlete’s perspective (empathy).</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to ensure common understanding about goals, strategy and consequences.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>45,2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>... be able to establish functional teams which together have complementary skills.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to prioritize the most important tasks from the least important.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to delegate tasks to others in the team when it is needed.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to make decisions fast.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17,9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to be future-oriented and visionary.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to be clear with regard to goals, strategies and consequences.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17,9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
<td>... be able to simplify complex things.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to see both details and the complete picture.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to prepare training to achieve learning.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to work systematic and structured.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to be focused on the most important tasks for the athletes over time.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to have a positive asset search in his or her approach.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to ensure optimal quality in action.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10,7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport specific</td>
<td>... be able to develop a clear and evident philosophy for training.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to understand the sport specific demands at an international level.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... have experience from performance at an international level.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... have knowledge about the best athletes in the world and their training.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to analyse the athlete’s performance both technically, physically, tactically and mentally.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to split up the performance in smaller parts and practice specific on that.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team building</td>
<td>... be able to involve both athletes and other team members.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to handle the media to benefit the team.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to be a role model for the team’s value base and attitudes.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to arrange for mastery experiences within the team.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to have the athlete in main focus in everything.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to understand the total situation for the athlete.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X- Factor</td>
<td>... be able to appear with a natural authority through his or her actions.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be honest and trustful in every occasions.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be self-aware in the role and know about strengths and weaknesses.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be a positive energy in the team, always!</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be offensive and enthusiastic in his or her approach.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>... be able to challenge others and him- or herself, both athletes and other team members.</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Communication**

The coaches discussed several competencies, which were within the category Communication that are important in order to be successful as a coach. The need to balance their communication between assertive and accommodative styles seems to be of great importance. The coaches agreed that:

During a time-out in handball for instance, the players need instructions and considered decisions from the coach. The time-limit and the stress during a match increases the need for clear and direct instructions from the coach. On the other hand, during an appraisal conversation with the athlete, it is of great importance to approach the athlete with respect and understanding.

Thus, the communication techniques need to be quite different in these different situations. In the first, the coach must be able to communicate in a clear and evident manner. The communication must be constructive both verbally and non-verbally (body language), and feedback must be goal-oriented. In the second situation, the coach must be able to listen to the athlete and arrange for mutual interaction in order to meet the athlete with respect and understanding. Also, mutuality is important to achieve a common understanding about goals, strategies and consequences, according to the coaches. The coaches were also clear that an elite coach must stimulate the athlete to deep reflections and build the athlete’s self-awareness related to the case in focus. This is achieved with the help of powerful questions. Also, the coach needs to be able to share the athlete’s perspective to achieve a deep understanding of it; the coach’s empathetic skills are also essential. Importantly, as the coaches discussed, there’s a big difference between being able to understand the athlete’s perspective and to taking their place and sharing their perspectives. If that happens, the coach will be in danger of losing his potential to make changes with the athlete. Of all the prioritized training needs chosen by the coaches, 45.2 per cent were within this category.

**Leadership**

The coaches were pretty clear that leadership is a matter of necessity for elite coaches. The coaches agreed that:

You cannot be an elite coach and not be a leader. It is no use to have the best experts in the team and the best athletes if they are all going in different directions and/or wrong directions. An elite coach must be a leader and influence the direction.

Thus, an elite coach needs to have the ability to be future-oriented and visionary; goals, strategies and consequences must be clear so that the team makes progress towards agreed upon standards. To achieve this, the coach must be able to establish functional teams which together have complementary skills. The coaches agreed that:

Everyone in the team must have the opportunity to do what he or she knows best.

Further, the coach must be able to cooperate and work together with others, for example external experts, sponsors, media, and so on. Also, a coach normally has numerous tasks to fulfill, and coaches need to prioritize the most important tasks from the least important in their work. As a consequence, they must also be able to delegate tasks to others in the team when that is needed. This requires that the coach must be able to make quick decisions, and
sometimes also decisions which are unpopular. Of all the prioritized training needs chosen by the coaches, 17.9 per cent were within this category.

**Pedagogy**
An elite coach needs to build a bridge between the knowledge and expertise he or she is in possession of (the experts in the team other than him- or herself as well), so that the athletes can profit from it. The coaches agreed that:

> Our knowledge as coaches and experts needs to be understood and helpful among the athletes, if we cannot make that happen, our knowledge will be of no use for the athletes.

It was of great importance that the coaches had the ability to achieve common understanding about goals, strategy and consequences between themselves and their athletes. Coaches must be capable of studying the athlete and the team down to tiny details. However, they must also be able to make complex things simple and understand the complete complex picture. An elite coach must be systematic in his or her approach in such a way that each practice is prepared and deliberate towards needed sport specific standards. Also, the most important tasks must be focused over time according to the coaches. The coaches’ ability to ensure optimal quality in and during action is also of great importance. The coaches agreed that:

> There is no room for a gap between knowing how to do a skill and the actual execution of that skill in action.

Of all the prioritized training needs chosen by the coaches, 10.7 per cent were within this category.

**Sport specific**
Being able to understand the sport and the sport specific task demands at the highest level of performance is also a matter of necessity for an elite coach according to the coaches. The coaches agreed that:

> You cannot become an elite coach if you don’t have the experience and knowledge from the highest level of performance in your sport, either as an athlete or as a coach.

If coaches do not have this experience they have to get it, starting, for example, with assistant coaching at this level. The importance of knowledge about the best athletes in the world and their training was also emphasized by the coaches. If a coach doesn’t have such knowledge, he or she must pay a visit to these athletes and their teams in order to gain such knowledge. The coaches agreed that:

> To look up the best athletes in the world to learn how they are training and competing is really important in order to gain understanding of what’s necessary. It is the best athletes in the world who develop the sport.

A coach must have a clear and evident philosophy for training and competitions, based on knowledge about sport specific demands at the highest level and of basic theory in sport, according to the elite coaches. The coaches also discussed the importance of being able to
analyse performance in different areas (technically, physically, tactically and mentally), of being able to split athletes’ performances into smaller parts, and of practicing specifically on smaller parts of the performance (e.g. basic exercises aimed at improving both general and sport specific demands). Of all the prioritized training needs chosen by the coaches, 17.9 per cent were within this category.

Team building
The coaches’ ability to build strong teams was also emphasized. The coaches agreed that:

Individual sport is also a team sport, except from start to finish in the race. If you give something to the team, you often get multiplied responses from the team in return.

The athletes and team members must be involved in the work within the team, so that each member is given the opportunity to contribute with his or her knowledge favorably to the team. A coach must also arrange for practices and competitions that over a period of time results in mastery experiences. The coaches agreed that: “It is important that each member in the team experiences that important tasks are achieved over time. Thus, experiences of mastery are important and the coach must remember this in his planning and execution of practices and competitions.” Importantly, coaches are there to help the athletes, and the athletes must be in main focus for coaches through all their actions. The coaches agreed that:

Will this be profitable for the athletes? In what way will my athletes benefit from this?

The coaches also emphasized the importance of understanding the athletes’ total situation (e.g. education, family situation, leisure needs). Thus, the athlete’s total situation must be taken care of. Lastly, an elite coach must also be a role model regarding the rules of the team, and be clear and evident in and during his or her actions according to the coaches. Of all the prioritized training needs chosen by the coaches, 1.2 per cent were within this category.

X-factor
The five first categories were quite obvious, based on the knowledge, skills, abilities and/or attitudes the coaches discussed. The sixth category which the coaches discussed was more associated with the elite coach’s personal qualities, or the character. The coaches agreed that:

There is something special with the best elite coaches, something undefined. They just seem to have the X-factor. An elite coach must always be a positive energy within the team, and he or she must be proactive and enthusiastic in his or her approach.

Thus, when results and performances are not good, the coach is supposed to be the person who changes the climate in the team from depressed to excitement. The coaches also discussed the importance of appearing to have natural authority through his or her actions. Authority isn’t something elite coaches have; it’s something they have to earn through their actions, according to the coaches in this study. Another important capability is the ability to be self-aware about one’s own strengths and weaknesses, and to act determined yet controlled in the role as an elite coach. Also, in order to grow and develop, changes are neces-
sary. To achieve this, a coach must challenge both him- or herself, and the athletes and the team members when it is necessary, according to the coaches in the study. Of all the prioritized training needs chosen by the coaches, 7.1 per cent were within this category.

Discussion and conclusions

The results from the qualitative data analyses show that elite coaches face great challenges as they struggle with multiple task demands and that the need for different competencies challenges coaches’ knowledge, skills and abilities. The results further show that the elite coaches gave their highest priorities to training needs that are within the communication category, and that competence within communication, leadership and the sport specific domain accounted for 81 per cent of the total training needs reported by the coaches.

Competence within communication seems to be an absolute necessity for elite coaches in sport. Interestingly, this is the category of training needs that coaches gave the highest priority (45.2 per cent). Within the communication category, influencing skills (“communicate in a clear and evident manner” and “communicate constructive and goal oriented feedback”) and attending skills (“to share the athlete’s perspective [empathy]” and “to ensure common understanding about goals, strategy and consequences”) had the highest priority. This result gives reason to believe that coaches must struggle to balance their communication in different situations, and that they in reality need to fulfil multiple roles dependent upon the situation. Coaches therefore need to be self-aware about how and when to use their different communication skills. Their communication is suppose to vary from being instructive, to stimulate common understanding and/or deeper reflections. These different underlying intentions for communication require different communication skills: clear and evident communication towards specific goals (instructive), attention skills such as empathy and listening (common understanding), and open and powerful questioning skills (deeper reflections). Thus, these results indicate that elite coaches are expected to be flexible in their communication. Many areas of coaches’ work, such as dealing with the athletes’ personal concerns during personal conversations, are not part of the structure of coaches’ training programs. Research found that this area emerged as crucial tasks of expert gymnastic coaches in their work to develop elite gymnasts (Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria & Russel, 1995).

Leadership capabilities are another important category of competencies that coaches must have. Goal setting skills are necessary to point out a clear and visionary direction. The coach is responsible for the strategy and the execution of necessary actions in order to keep the team and the athletes in accordance with the strategy. To achieve this, the coach must be clear in his or her communication and actions so that goals, strategies and consequences are supported. Thus, the coach must have the ability to act and communicate with determination towards athletes as well as team members. Interestingly, the ability to involve others and establish mutuality within the team is another important leadership competency according to the coaches. Mutuality happens when athletes and team members perceive that they are equal in the relationships that are created (Moen, 2009). Thus, the coach and the team members are supposed to understand each other’s perspectives and promote
each other’s independence while working and learning together. To achieve this, attending skills within the communication category are essential. The coaches are supposed to invite team members into relationships where they are respected, listened to, confirmed and understood. The coaches’ abilities to ask powerful questions and be active listeners are therefore needed to establish relationships based on mutuality. The results give reason to believe that leadership is the ability to possess a paradoxical mixture of showing humility in one situation and acting determined in the other. The different communication techniques are the essential tools they need to achieve this. Research also recommends that coach education programmes assist coaches to develop effective relationships with their athletes (Jowett & Cockerhill, 2003). The leadership category was given 17.9 per cent of the priorities by the coaches. Interestingly, both the communication and the leadership category contain repertoires that are contradictory, which confirms the explanation that the coach need to enter quite different roles in elite sport. These different roles require completely different competencies from the coach.

Sport specific competence was also a matter of necessity for elite coaches. The understanding of sport specific task demands are essential to help athletes to develop skills and abilities to meet these demands in action. Coaches emphasize the importance of both formal academic and experiential competence, and it is clear that their sport specific competence must be at a really high level. It is not enough to know how (academic), coaches need to know how to do as well (experiential knowledge). This is in accordance with the development in research on coaching education that expanded their interest from what coaches need to know, to what they need to be able to do with what they know (Cushion, Armour & Jones, 2003; Demers et al., 2006). This is interesting according to the importance of the communication competence category discussed above: coach educational programs focusing on communication must satisfy the need coaches have to know how to do. Thus, coaches need to practice on communication during coach educational programmes.

As discussed, consciousness and awareness is a key to develop expertise competence, and the coaches perceived importance of sport specific competence confirm this. The coaches gave 17.9 per cent of their training needs priorities within this category. Out of all the reported training needs, 81 per cent were given to one of these three first categories of competencies: communication, leadership and/or sport specific competence. This should be an indication to the content in coach education programmes.

Competence in pedagogy is also important in order to be successful as an elite coach. The approach towards the athlete in the learning process is essential if it is supposed to be successful. It is supposed to be a search for positive assets, not mainly a search for mistakes and defects. The skills within pedagogy are also supposed to bridge the potential gap between the expertise among the coaches and their staff (athletes’ helpers) and the athletes. Thus, their expertise must benefit the athletes. Pedagogy becomes the link between the coaches’ and their staff’s competence, and the actions which are carried out by themselves and their athletes. Pedagogy seems to be what brings out the full potential in the relationship.

Competence in team building shares important similarities with leadership, and the coaches argued that establishing functional teams that are beneficial for the athletes is an important leadership competence. The centre of attention in team sports is the athletes. Thus, the athletes must be in main focus for all activities and work within the team.
The last category of competencies which coaches perceived as necessary was defined as the “X-factor”. Obviously, according to this category, the coach’s trait of character is important to be an elite coach. The skills and abilities which define this category is much about how the coaches is supposed to appear within the team, and as a consequence, the appearance will influence both athletes and other team members. Elite coaches need to create an atmosphere where athletes and team members want to give their absolute best, and their appearance within the team seem to be important in order to achieve this.

**Strengths and limitations**

The credibility of the data in this study is good. The participants were given the opportunity to give response to the researchers interpretations and analysis of the data towards their original data several times (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Both researchers also have education in interviewing and counseling, and they focused on using techniques that ensured rich descriptions and had the ability to understand the coaches’ perspectives. This should increase the trustworthiness of these findings.

The coaches in this study varied in professional experience and formal academic education. Therefore, their perceptions of needed competencies varied according to their individual characteristics. On the other hand, the focus groups stimulated the coaches to discuss the current issue from several perspectives, including their owns. Thus, the final result is based on a broad investigation, seen from experienced and well educated elite coaches’ point of view, as well as from less experienced and educated elite coaches point of view.

However, the data collection process could have been better documented, for example by recording the focus groups discussions. The lectures from experienced coaches on day two were intentionally brought into the program in order to broaden the coaches perspectives, so that they drew their conclusions based on broader, more valid and reliable information about the focused issue, in order to more effectively build their own competencies. However, this could have influenced the coaches so that they made their perceptions in accordance with the lectures held by the experienced coaches and not trusted their own thoughts and meanings.

**Conclusion**

A broad range of competencies is required for coaches to perform effectively in their roles. The results of this study show that the coach must be flexible, and act with a paradoxical mixture of humility in some situation and determination in others. Communication techniques seem to be central tools for coaches to cope with these shifting situational demands. The situation and the coaches’ analysis of it determine which repertoire the coaches must use. Thus, in order to know what coach repertoire to use, situational analysis seems to be of great importance. Analysis of task demands are also important. When coaches become aware of the most important task demands in their roles and assess their own capabilities towards these demands, they also have a potential to discover important training needs. This is important in order to develop self-efficacy and build competencies as coaches. Also, a coach cannot change something of which he or she is unaware, awareness is a prerequisite for the discovery of training needs and the development of competence, as initially demonstrated. This study allows an understanding of what competencies coaches believe are important in elite sport, and those in which they acknowledge they need more training for.
This should provide valuable information to improve coach education and drive elite coach development.

References


