

# The Impact of Changing the Coach on Injuries in Professional Sport—Example from Practice

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**Abstract:** The role of coach is a significant factor for players, both mentally and physically, as the sport environment is an important social context stimulating players to develop social skills, work discipline and habits. In order to achieve a quality relationship between players and coach, it is essential to create mutual trust, which is the key factor of a well-functioning team. Changing the coach changes the whole psychophysical concept of the training process, training approach, and changes the team itself. The change of coach affects the psychophysical condition of the players not because the previous coach was better or worse, but because of the change itself. Due to the new conditions, players are often distracted, anxious, and lost focus during the training. Consequently, by trying to prove themselves again and in fear of a new coach, the player may lose concentration resulting in an irregular movement balance, and due to insufficient muscle strength to overcome the external force, new injuries or reoccurrence of old injuries are possible. The most common injuries are ruptures and strains of muscles and ligaments reinforcing the most heavily stressed joint while performing a certain movement. A positive factor of having a new coach is the great need to prove oneself, especially in players that were not recognized by the previous coach. Coach changes are often counterproductive because players get used to character, tactics, training methods, and teamwork organization. Due to the new coach's lack of knowledge about the psychophysical readiness and the ability of each individual player and his specific training methods, injuries are often inevitable.

**Key words:** Coach change, coach, injury, professional player.

## 1. Introduction

A change of coach affects the entire team and each player individually because the entire training concept, schedule and the first line-up of the competition team changes. There is a change in the approach to the training process, the use of different equipment, communication, organization and functioning of a team. Such a sudden change of coach may have several adverse impacts on the athletes because due to not knowing the tactics, character or method of work of a new coach or because of too much desire to prove themselves, the players lose focus on the pitch and are more exposed to injuries due to psychological unpreparedness in the new situation.

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## 2. Elaboration

### 2.1 Role of Coach

The coach is the achiever, motivator and key actor of a team. He is the most important link for recognizing the qualities and abilities of each player and compiling a quality team looking in the same direction and encouraging each other. The influence of coach is most important for athletes' developmental abilities because the social context of the team itself depends on the quality of the coach and mutual trust. He plays an important role in building a profile of a professional athlete because through encouragement, belief and optimism, he forms the athlete's personality and makes him self-confident, certain in oneself and in his abilities. As it is important for a coach to recognize the quality of a player, it is also essential to put together a winning team and set them to the positions best suited to their abilities [1].

## 2.2 *Why Injuries Occur—An Entirely Different Approach to Training Causes Injuries*

Football is a contact sport that requires leaps, rapid changes in position and body posture, contact moments which can result in severe injuries due to the force of impact. The Swedish professor Jan Ekstrand pointed out that by changing the head coach, there is a five percent increase in injuries in players, and by changing a conditioning coach the increase may be up to 40 percent because different coaches have different methods of work and the athlete's body has not adapted to the stress caused by the change of training of different intensity, duration, change of equipment, terrain and exercise program [2, 3]. Each coach has a different way of achieving increased muscle strength, speed, flexibility, endurance, explosivity, or conditioning level for a professional athlete, and for this reason, the muscles are not prepared to suddenly change the exercise mode, which results in injury [4].

Such sports injuries arise from one-off and clearly defined risk situations. They occur in frequent rapid changes in movement direction and landing and are the result of new situations and training that the athlete's body is not accustomed to and they grow proportionally with the total time spent on training. The severity of injuries ranges from mild, such as dislocation or strain to severe injuries such as partial or complete rupture of ligaments and muscles, fractures requiring a longer recovery period, which may affect the career of a professional athlete [5].

Prevention of sports injuries is a key factor in preventing injuries resulting from a change of coach, which each coach should be aware of and why preventive measures should be introduced at each training program change. Successful preventive measures are reflected in the use of equipment that reduces the risk of injury, appropriate conditioning training, good warm-up at the beginning of the training process, training programs aimed at reducing the frequency of injuries and the risk of injury, which are also aimed at preventing sports injuries. For this

purpose, training sessions should consist of proprioceptive stimuli, exercise of primary strength, equilibrium, movement balance, weight training, speed and agility development, learning of directional change and landing techniques. Continuous education of both coaches and athletes about injury mechanisms is also required, with insistence on the proper, desirable technique of performing exercises [6, 7]. In addition to improving motor skills (strength, jump, velocity, dynamic equilibrium, loss of muscular disbalance), such programs lead to improved biomechanical factors associated with reducing the risk of injury, thereby reducing the incidence of injuries [6].

## 2.3 *Physiotherapist's Log*

From 20 July until 29 July 2017, 28 senior players and professional staff composed of the head coach, conditioning coach, assistant coach and physiotherapist went to Slovenia for preparations where the players had to face a great challenge: to prove themselves to the new coach and to get into the first team.

The team did not know each other and each of them had their expectations and ambitions.

A group of young professional players was already familiar with the consequent aspects of professional training. The most common injuries among them were partial ruptures of adductors, hamstrings, front quadriceps, their overuse syndromes, and often the ligaments of the knees and the ankle joints were injured [3]. The players quickly gained confidence in the physiotherapist who became their person of trust, more as a friend, while the head coach represented authority. Players often came to ask the physiotherapist at the end of a hard day for advice or something to relax for better sleep. It was stressful to them and affected their physical health. They were scared because they did not know the character or the methods of the new coach's work, and it was noticeable there were more negative than positive results from the change of coach because of the fact that mutual trust was not yet developed. They did not know what to expect and what kind of

team the coach wanted to compose. Each player had at least one quality to contribute to the winning team, but the question was whether the head coach would recognize it. Players often came to the physiotherapist complaining of muscle pain and begged him to keep it from the coach for fear of discarding them as a possible opportunity. The head coach was also under pressure from the club management because he was appointed to ensure the club's entry into the first league, which requires a winning team that, in addition to the professional staff, needs also healthy, well-prepared players.

A 25-year-old footballer playing or struggling to enter the first team of a second league club is not considered a young athlete and his football career is very uncertain. In the second league football world there is a silent cruel rule: "Every player is replaceable, and it is more important to win a match than watch his health". By changing the coach, it is most important to build a quality relationship and mutual trust in the team, which is often impossible because the coach is changed after a few games are lost, and with him also the whole team. When the coach is changed, the players become deconcentrated in the training process and are more inclined to injury. Goran (22 years old) trained for many years in the first league club and was injured on the pitch and diagnosed with a partial rupture of the femoral biceps. His recovery was not supported by the club, so though injured he was forced to move to another football club. During his rehabilitation two coaches changed in the club, which had affected him to a large extent.

He was thinking of leaving Croatia and devoting himself to other things in life because he lost perspective and hoped he would be given a chance. Milan (24 years old) during his football career in young age injured the ankle, medial ligament of the knee, patella and had a rupture of quadriceps. As he often changed clubs to get a better chance, he also frequently changed the club physiotherapist. Because of insufficient time to build mutual trust, he did not have

the opportunity for quality rehabilitation.

This does not mean the problem is in physiotherapists, but the change of physiotherapist itself resulted in a permanently negative image of a physiotherapist as a health professional. Tarik (24 years old) from Bosnia and Herzegovina came to enrich his football career with new challenges and, due to the change of the environment, club, coach and other professional staff, he lost focus on the pitch and injured the lateral ligamentous complex of the ankle. The club management learnt it was quite a serious injury and the rehabilitation period would take some time, and for that reason they gave up on him. Due to the lack of time for rehabilitation because of an ambitious coach and club, football players with ankle injury often request artificial stabilization from the physiotherapist, but there are also those who are uninterested in taking care of their health. Thus, Karlo (19 years old) with an ankle injury obtained an exercise program from a physiotherapist that focused on strengthening passive and active stabilizing structures but he was not motivated to do the exercise and he was persistently looking for artificial stabilization even though he was aware it was not advisable to often apply a bandage. Some athletes find their daily training program overwhelming and leave the football arena on their own initiative for a few days to rest. With the arrival of a new coach, a certain number of footballers become demotivated because they do not gain confidence in the new coach and look for another club. Marijan (23 years old) was unable to go through a single day without a physiotherapist's help. Every day, before or after the training, he asked for a sports massage, Trigger point massage or simply a conversation. Each coach has his own training method, so the change of coach changes the training process. The first coach had longer training sessions and used the same pitch with natural grass. On the match day, he required the players to come 3 hours before the match for preparation, arrangement and therapy at the physiotherapist. The second coach had shorter training sessions with more dynamic exercises

and asked the players to arrive 1 hour earlier on the match day. He often changed the training ground, so players were more likely to get injured. He held training sessions on artificial and natural grass, which did not suit the players because they were more often injured [8]. Changing the training mode also changes the work of individual muscle groups so the change of coach changes the whole psychophysical concept of athletes.

### 3. Conclusions

Professional sport requires an athlete's readiness to adapt, to which the body often responds by injury due to the lack of preparedness for the new situation. The coach is an essential factor in the professional career of a player, but the athlete's reaction to predictable and unpredictable situations in the sports arena are of key importance.

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