



## Guru-ism and the decline of coaching

**Author:** Steve Myrland

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*'The medium is the message.'* (Marshall McLuhan)

Marshall McLuhan got it right, when commenting on our collective gullibility. We are often prepared to swallow almost anything if we trust the messenger.

The Madison Avenue folks have understood this for years, of course. (That is why they dress up actors in lab coats when they set out to sell us medications.) Coaches seem to be particularly vulnerable to 'huckster-ism'. The pursuit of ever-higher levels of human performance is fertile ground for those who choose to take advantage of the phenomenon Mr McLuhan spoke of when he noted that, if you can sell the messenger ... selling the message is a cinch.

It is a sad truth that **talking** about coaching is often more lucrative and ego-sustaining than **actually** coaching. So it is no surprise, in the age of computer-generated slide-shows and laser-beam pointers, that lots of folks have decided that standing in front of the room beats sitting in the crowd. After all, once you are up there, it is an easy sell. People want to trust their teachers. And they want to believe in what they buy.

In fact, our devotion to the message is usually proportional to the amount we had to shell out for it. An expensive three-day seminar, for example, can convince an entire room-full of supplicants to accept *en masse* ideas that might not be fully vetted. It is not important to verify that what our teachers say is true; it is important that we all paid for the information. (There is safety in numbers.) And then bad ideas gain prominence, like snowballs rolling downhill, growing larger and more formidable all the way.

And it is an ironic effect of learning from gurus that those parts of presentations that are most confusing to us tend to be the parts we question least. We more readily assume our own fallibility than that of the teacher we paid to hear. As a result, we have come to value 'weirdness' for its own sake. Who has not been seduced by at least one exercise, piece of training equipment, or grand theoretical pronouncement simply because it seemed so ... out there ... that it was bound to impress our athletes, clients or colleagues when we might have occasion to regurgitate it later?

The problem, here, is that when the gurus re-create themselves in the form of 'ideas and information for sale' — whether a text, or a course of study — they also tend to create lots of rigidity in the minds of consumers. Heaven forbid, for example, that our athletes' knees should ever wander beyond their toes when lunging or squatting; or that the multifidus muscle should choose to pull its oar before the transverse-abdominus (even though both things happen in sport — and in life — all the time).

What I find so unfortunate is not information with which I disagree getting into the coaching dialogue. It is that the promulgators of so much of this information have committed their ideas to the texts they use to bolster their 'cult-of-personality' status as 'cutting-edge' coaching gurus, making it that much harder to dispense with when it proves to be drivel. People are, after all, generally trusting of their teachers and assume that most of what they read in books is true.

It is a nice feeling, being regarded as the expert. And though we should state the limits of our knowledge and understanding, the temptation to 'take on airs' (as they used to say) is great, sometimes leading us to wrap ourselves in experiences we do not actually have. Example: a friend (and otherwise honest fitness instructor) boasts on radio commercials for his gym that he has been training top-level athletes for 30 years. He is 41, now. (You do the maths.)

Consider the coaching jargon. It is replete with terms and phrases that we hear or read and then simply cannot leave alone — any more than most of us can effectively define or use them with anything approaching exactitude. 'Functional training' and 'proprioceptively enriched' are examples of this kind of 'coach speak', in which meaning is relative to the speaker. We get much of this from our gurus, but we should remember that it is an easy thing to spice a presentation with high-sounding, multi-syllabic junk, reminding us of another of McLuhan's maxims: 'Mud sometimes gives the illusion of depth'.

I once heard a coach use the phrase: '... re-tonification of the central nervous system ...' in an informal discussion on sprint training. While I wrote furiously to preserve that line for later use, I asked the speaker to explain what he meant. My notebook (I can show it to you!) dutifully records the comedy-of-the-absurd experience. I wrote:

'Re-tonification of the central-nervous system' (Balance)

Terms and phrases barge into our consciousness and are then used and re-used, often imprecisely, until whatever meaning they may have originally held erodes and they are left as shrivelled and bankrupt as the word 'lite' on ice-cream containers and beer bottles. As McLuhan observed: 'When a thing is current, it creates currency'. That is, an idea becomes accepted simply because it is stated frequently. And given that we live in a time of instant credibility; of web sites and book publishing made easy-as-you-please, lots of misinformation gains a foothold as a result. Soon, we are all too cowed to point out that the emperor has no clothes. (Nobody likes to admit they may have bought a pig-in-a-poke.)

Let us remember: The essential preface to all presentations, pronouncements, texts, treatises, discourses and debates on the subject of human performance should be a bold-faced reminder that this is a work in progress. It is a journey, as one can easily deduce by examining the progression of Olympic records over the years. There is no end-point. And this truth suggests that coaching is also a journey — an investigative process in which, the more we do, the more we learn. So, when somebody on the training road says: 'I'm it! The be all end all! Listen to me and look no further because I have the answers!', well ...

Here are some thoughts and questions that may be useful in sorting the informational wheat from the chaff:

There are two kinds of teacher — the ones who really want you to know what they know; and the ones who really want you to be impressed by what they know. The biggest imposters tend to stand in the brightest spotlights, so be skeptical of resumés and introductions. You know:

' \_\_\_\_\_ has worked for \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_. He has written \_\_\_\_ articles for such publications as \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. He has presented at the \_\_\_\_\_ National Conference, and is the author of Why Everybody Should Do it My Way and Pay No Attention To Anyone Else. Over \_\_\_\_\_ people have been certified by his organisation in his training methods, and he is personally responsible for the athletic accomplishments of \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ and many others too numerous to name. And now, please welcome my good friend \_\_\_\_\_.'

Just skip all that. It is written and recited to make you feel better about spending all that money to attend.

What is this person selling? I sell stuff. Do I present because I want people to buy what I have to sell? (No.) Should people assume I present because I want people to buy what I have to sell? Absolutely. It is up to me to persuade them otherwise. Whenever you begin to suspect that you are present at a commercial masquerading as a presentation, run — don't walk — for the exit.

If someone is making a subject more difficult to comprehend than less so, it is a lead-pipe cinch that they either do not understand it themselves, or they have a reason for their obfuscation. How many coaches struggled to understand and employ the old Eastern European periodisation models? How many athletes suffered as a result?

Whenever you hear someone taking credit for the athletic achievements and/or prowess of somebody else, leave . Let the athlete offer credit to the coach if they feel it is justified. Some coaching gurus never see 'star' athletes until they are stars. (It is often a symbiotic relationship: the gurus only want to work with the stars; and the stars are often suckers for the gurus.) And when it comes to stars, you need to know who it was who brung-em to the dance more than who wants to dance with them, now.

Be a good student: find a good teacher

Learning and teaching are synergistic, and a student who does not test the teacher is about as useful as a teacher who does not test the student. It is too easy to accept without question most assertions when they come to us printed in books or amplified from the front of the banquet hall. Guru-ism may be an unfortunate and unavoidable part of popular culture, but we must not simply accept what the gurus offer us as though it comes down from the top of the mountain, etched on stone tablets.

I am drawn to coaches and teachers of considerable (and verifiable) experience who have learned from their mistakes, and who are happy to admit that they made some. I have found it beneficial to learn from the folks who were too busy coaching in their formative years to have written many books or devised whole business empires ( with certificates suitable for framing! ) from their personal (newly minted) coaching philosophies. I also like it when my teachers tell me about their teachers. And, happily, it has been my experience that, when you find one good teacher, you will find many more simply by hanging around and meeting the folks your teacher hangs around.

I am also persuaded that the best coaching mentors are those who foster independence rather than dependence. I simply do not want to believe that I cannot progress unless I have this piece of equipment, that textbook, or pay for (yet) another certification and the studying hours required to sustain it. I just want to get good information and have confidence, enough, to use it.

To that end, I suggest you do two things:

- When receiving information, determine where it comes from; find and verify its source(s). So much of what is called 'new' and 'cutting-edge' has been around for a long while (medicine balls and yoga, anyone?).
- When presenting information, inform your audience whence you came by it. 'I learned this from "So-and-So"'. He may have made it up, or learned it from somebody else. But I learned it from him.' I do not feel diminished by acknowledging my teachers. Rather, I feel fortunate to have learned from good people, and proud to identify them when sharing what they taught me. Those coaches too insecure to give credit or attribution to their sources do a disservice to the coaching profession and will, ultimately, invite questions concerning their professional integrity, the veracity of their information, and the provenance of the wisdom they claim (or imply) is their own.

Finally, while we may not be able to escape the coaching gurus, we can eschew dogma in favour of knowledge. Keep your critical-thought mechanism charged and calibrated.

*Steve Myrland is a conditioning, and performance coach for competitive athletes in the United States. Steve is the creator of several training products including the ABC (Agility, Balance and Coordination) LADDER and the SMART Hurdle System.*