

From One Coach to Another: A Story of Transformational Coaching in Disability Sport



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Canadian Disability Participation Project

Le projet canadien sur la participation sociale
des personnes en situation de handicap

PREFACE

OVERVIEW

This creative nonfiction (i.e., an evidence-informed short story) was created as a learning tool for disability sport coaches in entry level and developmental coaching domains. This tool is meant to demonstrate and provide information about coach behaviours that facilitate quality experiences for athletes with disabilities.

This tool can be supported by an accompanying question guide to stimulate reflection and dialogue on the situations and behaviours described in the story.

Available at: <https://bit.ly/30uXTNr>

An accompanying scientific paper for this tool is forthcoming: Allan V, Gainforth HL, Turnnidge J, Konoval T, Côté J, & Latimer-Cheung AE. (2021). Narrative as a learning tool for coaches of athletes with a disability: Using stories to translate research into practice

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What follows is a creative nonfiction that is meant to demonstrate and provide information about coach behaviours that facilitate quality experiences for athletes with disabilities. The story is divided into four chapters, each emphasizing a different dimension of transformational leadership¹:

Chapter 1: Individualized consideration

Coaches show genuine care and concern for each athlete's unique needs

Chapter 2: Intellectual stimulation

Coaches encourage critical thinking and creativity by engaging athletes in the learning process

Chapter 3: Idealized influence

Coaches gain their athletes' trust and respect by acting as positive role models

Chapter 4: Inspirational motivation

Coaches inspire athletes with a compelling vision of the future by fostering perceptions of meaning and team unity

¹ Turnnidge, J. & Côté, J. (2017). Transformational Coaching Workshop: Applying a person-centred approach to coach development programs. *International Sport Coaching Journal*, 4, 314-325.



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Chapter 1: Individualized Consideration

Logan stood uncertainly on the pool deck at a community centre about an hour's drive from his hometown. The air was warm and humid, infused with chlorine and the laughter of small children in brightly coloured life jackets. He couldn't help but smile as youthful lifeguards shepherded them towards eagerly waiting parents gathered around the change room doors. Across the pool, sunlight streamed in through tall windows and danced over the surface of the water. A combination of warmth, laughter, and sunlight invited him into the space, and still, Logan felt uncomfortable.

The unexpected sound of bodies slicing into the water at the far end of the pool startled Logan from his initial thoughts. He looked up to see two swimmers racing side-by-side in the centre lanes. A woman stood behind the starting blocks, stopwatch in hand. He quickly realized that she must be the coach he had come to meet. Before Logan could make his next move, the swimmers had completed the turn and exploded off the wall back in the direction of the coach.

Having swum competitively for most of his life, and now coaching at his local club, he was impressed by the speed and technique of the swimmers. He watched as they slid into the wall with outstretched arms, too close to call the first touch. The coach knelt down beside them at the edge of the pool deck. After a brief exchange, she stood, waiting as the swimmers pushed their way up and out of the pool. Although Logan was aware that he would be observing a swim practice for athletes with physical disabilities, he was initially surprised to notice that the first swimmer out of the water needed to grab a crutch for support. Admittedly, he wasn't really sure what to expect – but the skill of these swimmers gave him the immediate impression that he may need to reconsider his initial assumptions.

For a few minutes, the swimmers relaxed on the pool deck, chatting with one another and the coach before hopping back into the pool for a slow cool-down set. With her athletes occupied, the coach, Jamie, beckoned for Logan to join her at the deep end of the pool.

"You must be Logan!" exclaimed Jamie, extending her hand toward Logan. "I'm Jamie, head coach here at the Marlins Para-Swim Club."

Logan reached out to shake Jamie's hand. He was nervous, despite Jamie's warm welcome. "That's me," he replied. "Thanks again for having me at practice today. I heard about your program from one of the swimmers in my club and found your contact information on the Marlins website. I figured it would be worth it to send you a quick e-mail, you know, to learn more about it. It was extremely generous of you to invite me out to practice."

Jamie gave Logan a knowing look. "It's no problem. I often reach out to other coaches for help. It's a great way to learn! Because the disability sport community is small, opportunities for coaches to learn from one another are important – especially when you're

working with people who have unique needs and abilities” she explained. “You mentioned in your e-mail that you might have someone with a disability joining your team?”

Logan nodded. “Yeah, so, I’ve only ever coached able-bodied athletes, but I was recently approached by an athlete with cerebral palsy who is interested in joining my swim club. Her friends are on the team and she’s keen to participate, but I’m worried that I just don’t have the knowledge or skills to coach her well.”

“That’s understandable, but I think what you’ll realize today is that the knowledge and skills you already use still apply when

coaching athletes with disabilities,” Jamie stated reassuringly. “It’s all about tailoring to the individual, providing athletes with ownership over their own participation, leading by example, and assisting athletes as they work towards reaching their overall potential.”

Logan reflected for a moment on what Jamie had to say. He’d been coaching able-bodied swimmers for several years – perhaps he was better equipped to coach para-swimmers than he’d originally thought? He still didn’t feel all that confident. Before he could linger on it any longer, his train of thought was interrupted by an unfamiliar voice.



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"Jamie!" called the voice from across the pool deck.

"Sam!" Jamie replied enthusiastically, a smile spreading across her face.

Logan turned as a man in fitted swim shorts wheeled towards them from the accessible change room. A Team Canada backpack hung from the back of his chair.

"Welcome back!" Jamie continued, crouching down to meet Sam at eye level. "How was your first training camp with the national team?"

"It was tough, which was to be expected, but I feel much more confident now that I've had the chance to train with other top-level athletes in my class," Sam explained.

"That's great. I knew you had it in you!" remarked Jamie, then turned her attention back toward the change rooms.

Using her right arm, a young woman held open the door for a teenaged boy using a walker. The woman's left arm was missing from the elbow down. They walked across the pool deck side-by-side, deep in conversation. As they approached the group, Jamie greeted them warmly.

"Alex, I heard you got into all of the programs you applied to for university next year. Congratulations!" Jamie said to the boy. Turning to the girl, she added, "And Taylor, nice work on the fundraiser you organized last week. It was a really great event."

"Thanks Jamie," the pair replied in unison, a look of satisfaction and mild embarrassment apparent on their faces.

"Now that you're all here, there's someone I'd like you to meet," announced Jamie. "Logan coaches the swim team the next town over. He's interested in learning more about the world of para-swimming, so I've invited him to join us at practice today."

The athletes nodded affirmatively as Jamie spoke, and Logan smiled in return.

"Logan, meet Sam, Taylor, and Alex." Jamie nodded toward

each athlete in turn as she said their names. "Sam is training twice a day right now while he works toward the next Paralympic Games. Taylor and Alex join him for practice once a day after school. The two swimmers finishing up in the pool right now usually train with this group as well, but I brought them in early today to work on their starts. So, today it will just be these three."

There was a brief silence after Jamie finished talking. Logan thought for a moment, then addressed the group. "I really appreciate all of you for welcoming me into your practice today. If you have any ideas for me, I'm all ears," he offered.

Taylor smirked and glanced sideways at Alex and Sam. "We may be missing a few things, but I think we're all good for ears," she joked.

The athletes chuckled and Jamie smiled, content to see her athletes in good spirits.

Noticing the confusion on Logan's face, she winked and said, "She likes to make jokes. You'll get used to it."

Still smiling, Jamie focused her attention back on the athletes. "Alright, that's enough. It's time for practice" she scolded, her smile betraying her words. She surveyed the group. "I know that you've all had a busy couple of weeks. How are you feeling today? Sam, let's start with you."

Although he still felt somewhat out of place, Logan's nerves had begun to settle. Jamie and her athletes carried on like he was a natural extension of the group, accepting him into their space in the way that humour, nudges, and winks tend to do. Logan observed as Jamie addressed each athlete prior to practice. She listened attentively to each athlete's updates or concerns, taking a moment to ask questions and offer suggestions until both coach and athlete had agreed on a plan of action for the day's practice. For more experienced athletes like Sam, who claimed he was "drained" after training camp the previous week, Jamie took a more hands-off

approach. She gave him three options: complete the workout as planned, complete a shortened version of the workout, or swim easy lengths of the pool. The choice was up to him. For novice athletes like Alex, Jamie took a more active role in modifying the practice plan. Alex complained of muscle stiffness, so Jamie reminded him to complete his regular stretches and range of motion exercises before getting in the pool, then asked him to check back in with her as the workout progressed. When Jamie got to Taylor – who “felt great!” – she held up her hand for a high five. Taylor returned the gesture, but had more to say.

“I was thinking that maybe today I could work on my flip turn?” Taylor wondered. “I feel really good about my open turns, and the faster I can turn, the faster I can swim in my next race!”

“That sounds like a great idea,” Jamie answered. “I planned to work on turns with each of you after the warm up, and we can certainly make that happen.”

After addressing each of the athletes, Jamie asked them to drop off their flippers and kickboards at the end of their lanes before starting the warm-up. The coaches watched as Sam, Alex, and Taylor gathered their equipment. With a few minutes to think, Logan thought about his first ten minutes with the Marlins Para-Swim Club.

“You seem to have a really strong connection with your athletes,” he commented to Jamie.

“I make an effort to get to know them on a personal level,” she replied. “If I can show my athletes that I care about their lives outside of the pool, and recognize them for the things they accomplish not only as swimmers, but as people, then I can work towards building a sense of confidence and accountability that transcends their time as athletes.”

“And I suppose the more you know about each athlete, the easier it is to tailor their training and set them up for success,” remarked Logan.

“Exactly,” answered Jamie. “I like to work collaboratively with each athlete to develop practice plans and tailor training because they know themselves – physically *and* emotionally – better than anyone else. With their input, I can adapt training activities to meet the needs and goals of each athlete so that everyone feels included and challenged when they come to practice.”





Chapter 2: Intellectual Stimulation

"All set," called Sam, wheeling back towards Logan and Jamie with his teammates.

"Awesome. Let's get going on the warm-up. Sam, would you mind taking Alex and Taylor through the dryland exercises you learned while you were at training camp last week?" Jamie asked.

"No problem," he replied, then signalled for Alex and Taylor to follow him to an open area on the pool deck.

Jamie stood and continued her conversation with Logan. "I try to develop the people in my program into strong mentors, leaders, and teammates," she explained. "By providing them with opportunities for leadership, they're able to learn from one another, develop new skills, and establish stronger roles and relationships both within and beyond the club."

"I guess then you also get a break from coaching!" kidded Logan, but Jamie responded with a serious look.

"Quite the opposite!" she calmly countered, then explained, "When one of my swimmers takes the lead, I have more time to

observe and work one-on-one with the other athletes in the group. It's also a great opportunity for me to learn from the swimmers' experiences with other programs and coaches."

"That's interesting," Logan replied. "I never thought of it that way before. It actually sounds like a great way to make the most of your time during practice."

"Exactly," agreed Jamie.

After a brief pause, Logan asked, "So do you normally work one-on-one with your athletes? I noticed that you addressed each of them individually before practice, but you described them as a training group."

"Whether I'm working with able-bodied athletes or athletes with disabilities, I do my best to engage each athlete in their own training by asking for their thoughts and opinions," Jamie began, then added, "That one-on-one time becomes especially important when I'm working with swimmers who have a diverse range of abilities. When I include athletes in the process, they make important connections that facilitate learning, and like I said earlier, gives them ownership over their own participation."

Before Logan could respond, Jamie began walking towards the group of athletes warming up on the pool deck. As they spoke, she had kept her eyes on the swimmers, carefully observing their activities. Sam sat in his chair, verballing instructing Alex and Taylor on the technical points of a double leg glute bridge. Alex and Taylor were lying on their backs, attempting to follow along as Sam talked them through it. Alex was having trouble maintaining the bridge position with his hips raised. Logan recalled that Alex had complained of muscle stiffness earlier in the practice, which likely affected his ability to perform the exercises.

Jamie asked Alex to relax, then laid down on the ground beside him. She mimicked his position, then said, "What am I doing wrong with this exercise?"



Alex scanned Jamie and answered, "Your hips are too low."

"Right, so, based on what you learned from Sam, what can we do to make sure that my hips are in the right position?" asked Jamie.

"Umm...squeeze your butt?" Alex answered inquisitively.

"Yes! Squeeze the butt muscles!" Jamie exclaimed. "Can you show me what that would look like?"

Alex focused for a moment, then lifted his hips off the ground so that his body formed a nearly straight line from his shoulders to his knees.

"That's great Alex," praised Jamie. "Now, if you're having trouble getting in or out of that position, do you remember which stretches you can do to help relax those muscles?"

Alex nodded. Jamie gave him a 'thumbs up' and returned to a standing position.

"Feel free to jump in if you see anything the athletes need to work on," she said to Logan.

"I don't know," he replied uncertainly. "I'm still not really sure that I know enough about their disabilities to offer any important feedback"

"Don't think too hard," Jamie assured him. "You've got the know-how. It's no different than coaching any other athlete."



Chapter 3: Idealized Influence

After warming up on the pool deck, Jamie thanked Sam for his help and the swimmers transferred into the pool. Logan continued to shadow Jamie, observing and asking questions as the practice progressed. He helped out by keeping time for the athletes, and offered a few tips to help Taylor with her flip turn. Nearly an hour had gone by since Logan first arrived at the community center, but he'd barely noticed the time pass. When it came to the final set, Jamie motioned for Alex, Taylor, and Sam to gather around and listen. They looked up at her from the water, supporting themselves on the edge of the pool.

"Great work so far today everyone," she began. "For the last set, you will have your choice of stroke, and I want you to think about a couple of things. First, I want you to think about your training and competition goals – which strokes do they involve? Second, what are the techniques or strokes that you feel you need to improve on the most?" She gave the swimmers a moment to think. "Sound good?" she asked.

The swimmers nodded collectively, their heads bobbing up and down above the water.

"Alright, you'll start on the 60," Jamie instructed, and counted down until the first athlete pushed off from the wall.

Once all three swimmers had begun the set, Logan looked over at Jamie. "Is it important to let the athletes choose which stroke they want to work on? I sort of thought that was the coach's job," he questioned.

"Yes and no," Jamie responded. "I have a general plan for the training group, and I individualize it for each athlete. For example, Sam has shorter recovery times than the other two, and Alex swims a shorter distance. Although they might all be doing different things or swimming different distances, I try to tweak it so that they are all finishing each set at the same time, and in that way, doing the workout together. That said, I want to show them that I trust in their decisions by handing some of the decision-making power over to them. They also tend to enjoy training more when, at least some of the time, they get to pick the things they like."

Logan nodded in acknowledgement, and the two coaches fell silent as they observed the swimmers in the pool. Jamie offered words of encouragement as the set wore on, and occasionally prompted the swimmers with cues for technique. Halfway through the set, Taylor came to an abrupt stop at the end of the pool. Rather than complete the turn and push off for another length, she tore the goggles off her face and threw them angrily onto the pool deck. She clung to the edge of the pool, visibly upset and heaving to catch her breath.

"Would you mind keeping the time for Sam and Alex?" Jamie asked, turning to face Logan as she knelt down beside Taylor.

Jamie waited for Taylor to calm down. After a few minutes, Taylor raised her eyes enough to meet Jamie's gaze.

"Want to tell me what happened?" Jamie inquired, her voice soft.

Taylor took a deep breath, looked down and back up again,

then replied, “I never saw myself as an athlete, but ever since I joined the team, I’ve just been getting faster and faster. Every practice. Every race. My times get faster every time I get in the pool. But for the last few practices, I just can’t seem to keep it up. I’ve been slowing down in the workouts, and I don’t know how to stop it from happening. I want to be an athlete and I want to compete, but how can I do that if I can’t be fast?”

Jamie nodded empathetically. “I remember back when I used to compete, I used to push myself *so hard* – just like you are now. I

would swim best times in training on a regular basis, but I could never really make it happen in a race. And you know what happened? I got a cold – right before a big race – and my coach refused to let me train. I was *so angry*, but after a few days of rest, I was able to race...and guess what? I swam a best time. The problem all along was that I was pushing my body too hard and not giving myself enough time to rest.”

“But I only swim a few times a week,” Taylor mumbled. “Sam swims twice a day and he doesn’t have this problem.”



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"Ah, but the difference between the two of you is that he's been training for several years, and you've only been at it for a few months," Jamie explained. "Plateaus are a normal part of the process. You need to listen to your body, and trust that with proper training and rest, you'll eventually see the results you want."

Taylor gave Jamie a small smile and sighed. "Okay. Thanks, Jamie," she said.

"It's okay to be frustrated," offered Jamie. "Just remember that even though you're relatively new to the team, you're a role model for the younger swimmers. And as a general rule, we do our best to support our teammates and approach our training with positive attitude."

"Got it," Taylor replied.

"I know you do," said Jamie, standing to clap as Sam and Alex approached the wall to finish the set. When both swimmers had come to a full stop, Jamie addressed the group.

"Congratulations on making it through a tough workout!" she exclaimed, smiling widely at each one of them. "How did it feel?"

"Good," huffed Sam.

"Hard," panted Alex.

"It looked hard!" Logan asserted, having fulfilled his timing duties.

Jamie laughed, but before she could respond, Taylor surprised her.

"I'm sorry I got upset. I hope I didn't interrupt your workouts," she said, facing Sam and Alex while she supported herself on the edge of the pool with her full arm.

"Don't worry about it," Alex responded.

"Yeah, it happens to the best of us!" chipped in Sam.

Looking satisfied, Jamie thanked the athletes for being so kind and understanding with one another. Logan listened intently as the athletes thanked Jamie in return for allowing them to make

mistakes, sharing her own mistakes, and instilling the values that make the club feel like such a safe and inclusive space for learning. After Jamie instructed the swimmers to complete a few easy lengths, Logan looked over at her.

"I'd be hard-pressed to see the teens in my club offer an apology like that," said Logan.

Jamie smiled ruefully. "Sometimes all they need is a gentle reminder," she replied. "They know that it's okay to make mistakes, and that having respect for their teammates is a core value of the club. With a little nudge in the right direction, they know what to do."

A few more minutes passed. The coaches watched as the swimmers made their way up and down the length of the pool. Jamie looked pensive, then turned to face Logan one more time.

She said, "See, all you have to do is be yourself. Share your stories, model your values, treat people well – and you will set a great example for *any* athlete."



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Chapter 4: Inspirational Motivation

One by one, the swimmers finished cooling down. Jamie moved Sam's wheelchair closer to his lane when he asked for help with his transfer, and Logan followed suit by placing Alex's walker at the end of the ramp leading in and out of the pool. Back on the deck, the athletes towed off and gathered their things. Jamie busied herself putting away equipment, and Logan waited patiently nearby to thank her and the swimmers before it was time to leave. When Sam, Taylor, and Alex were ready to go, Jamie and Logan joined the group.

"Only one practice left before the first meet of the season," Jamie announced, sounding more excited than serious. "So, I have some homework for you..."

Jamie paused. The athletes looked at one another and then her.

"I want you to think back to the goals you set for yourself at the first practice of the year, and then think about everything you've done since then. You should have a pretty good idea of the times you'll be able to swim," Jamie instructed. "So, for your homework, I

want you to think about one aspect of your stroke or technique that you can improve on in order to make those times. Any questions?"

Alex raised his hand, and Jamie nodded in acknowledgement.

"How do we know if we're focusing on the right thing?" he asked.

Jamie smiled and answered, "I'll meet with each of you individually before next practice to discuss those goals and your race plans, but I'm confident that each of you have the ability to figure out one thing that will make your stroke better. Sound good?"

Sam, Taylor, and Alex nodded in agreement.

"Good," Jamie continued. "And one last thing. I expect each of you to support one another at the meet next weekend. That's my goal for the team – that when you're not racing, you're helping one another work towards reaching your individual goals."

"That can be arranged," replied Sam.

"Sounds good to me," echoed Alex and Taylor.

"Awesome. Again, great work today everyone. It was a tough practice, but I'm positive that you're all in great shape heading into the first meet," Jamie declared. "Let's bring it in."

Sam, Taylor, Alex, and Jamie put their hands together in the middle of the circle. Logan stood awkwardly on the fringe until Taylor gave him a nudge.

"You were part of the group today too," she said, and motioned towards his hand.

Logan added his hand to the top of the stack.

"Marlins on three," called Jamie. "One-two-three-"

"MARLINS!" came the collective response.

After saying their goodbyes, the athletes made their way towards the change rooms.

"Sam, call me in the morning to let me know if you're feeling recovered enough to practice again tomorrow!" Jamie called out

after them. "And Alex, keep me posted about school – I'm here if you need a sounding board. Have a great evening you three!"

Before taking his own leave, Logan thanked Jamie for allowing him to shadow her at practice. "Thanks again for everything today," he began. "I mean, everything I've learned today applies just as much to my able-bodied athletes as it will to my new para-swimmer."

"You're absolutely right," replied Jamie. "There are some obvious differences, but in the end, the process is the same. They're all athletes. And behind each athlete, there's a person."

Logan thought for a moment. "I think one of the biggest lessons I've learned today is that the athlete is a great resource," he stated. "I might know a lot about the sport, but she's an expert in her own disability. We can work together to adapt training and address her needs."

"Exactly. You can discuss goals and expectations with para-athletes the same way you would with any other athlete. When you believe in them, they're more likely to believe in themselves, and in turn they'll be more likely to experience success," Jamie affirmed.

Logan went on, "I also think it's important to make sure every athlete feels like a part of the team, regardless of their ability."

"Definitely," agreed Jamie.

"I felt nervous as an outsider coming in and working with your team today, but I felt more and more comfortable every time you and your athletes included me – whether it was a joke or a team cheer," Logan explained.

"I'm glad you felt that way," Jamie replied. "And just remember that you're welcome to get in touch anytime if you have questions or need help."

Logan looked Jamie in the eye, a grateful look on his face. "I'm sure I will take you up on that," he said. "But in the meantime, I'm excited to welcome a new athlete to the team!"



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