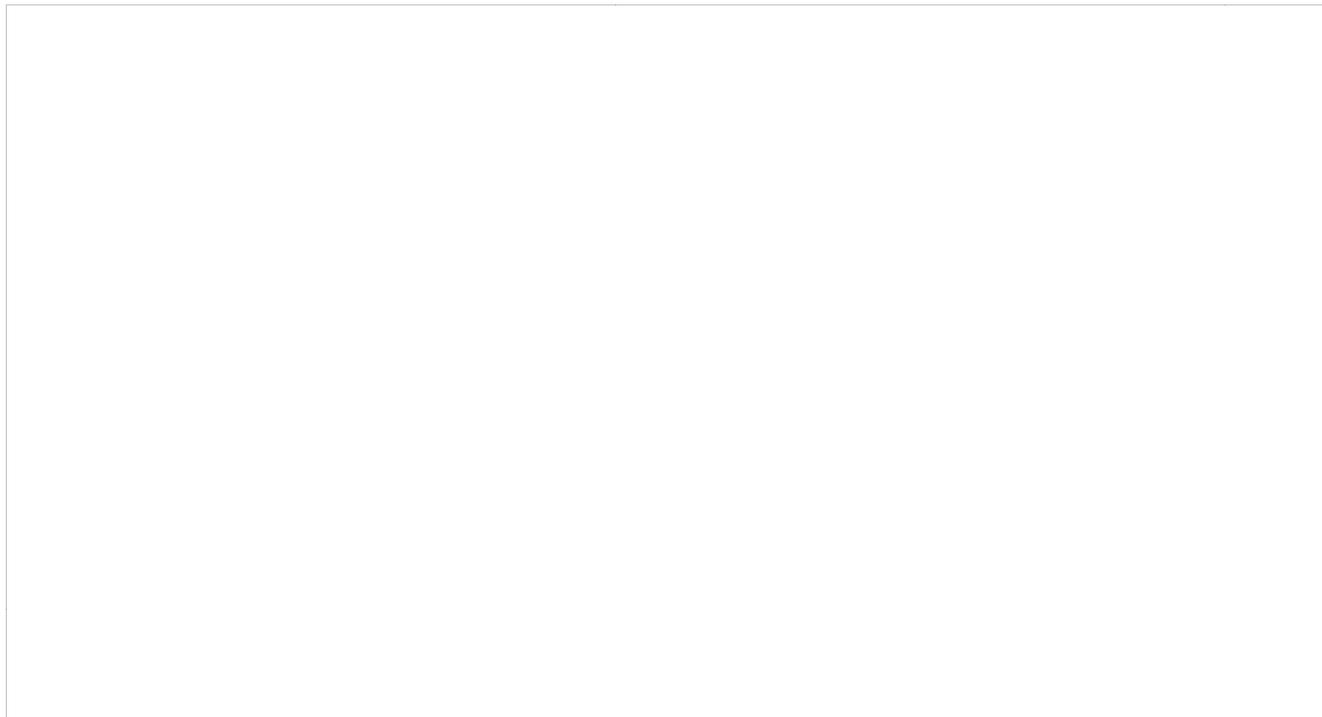


Tri-umphant transition: Making the step up from assistant coach to head coach at your club

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- Responsibility and accountability are essential components of being a head coach.
- Being practised in dealing with welfare issues is advisable as this will fall under your remit.
- Wondering if you will make a good leader is a daunting prospect as you won't really know until you've tried it.
- Vital attributes include being a good people person and a role model who leads by example, and having a passion for mentoring.
- A proactive approach is needed in introducing new development initiatives and formulating a clear vision and strategic plan are prerequisites of the job.
- Be prepared for a change in the relationship you have with club members and fellow coaches.

A revered sports coach and well-respected schoolteacher will share many of the same qualities.

They will be adept at transferring their knowledge and skills in a subject by using strategies and techniques acquired and adapted through their experience on the sports field or in the classroom. Their mission statements are almost identical: to nurture their protégés' social, emotional and sporting/academic development.

Those teachers with ambition who display sound [leadership skills](#) will aspire to be assistant or deputy heads and eventually head teachers. Like-minded sports coaches may harbour ambitions of helping to run their club or take over at the helm themselves one day.

As these prospective leaders climb the rungs of the career ladder, so they will continue to develop shared characteristics, interchangeable in the different environments.

Those who take the plunge from assistant to head, in whichever setting they ply their trade, will soon discover a prerequisite of their promotion will be significantly increased levels of responsibility and accountability.

Becoming a leader is a daunting prospect, and those making the step up can be plagued by self-doubt. But the rewards are enormous. If they weren't, and there was nothing to look forward to other than a crushing weight of expectation, then the education system and sports industry in this country would be in a bit of a pickle as there would be nobody willing to grasp the nettle.

Problem solver

ConnectCoaches Community Champion [Kate Clifford](#) is in the process of making the transition from assistant coach to head coach at Manchester Tri Club, the largest triathlon club in the North West, with more than 480 members and 18 coaches.

And she admits the word 'daunting' hits the nail on the head.

'Having that extra responsibility is scary,' says Kate. 'First and foremost, as an endurance sport, there are a lot of welfare issues that you have to be hot on. You have to be particularly aware of the dangers of overtraining and of the perils of [nutrition](#). Because triathlon attracts a lot of high-achieving personalities, there tend to be a lot of issues around that.'

'I hadn't really had to deal with things like monitoring athletes and telling them your concerns until I was in the head coach role.'

'You also have to start thinking longer term as well. What sort of sessions are we going to need in the next five years? How are we going to grow the club? Have we got the right balance of cyclists, runners and swimmers?'

Kate highlights one example of how being responsible for an athlete's well-being can place a huge emotional burden on the head coach.

'There was one member who was having headaches and heart palpitations in training sessions. My gut feeling was they shouldn't be training, even though they had signed a form to say they were fine to train. It was when Tony Jolly was head coach so he came to observe one of my sessions, and afterwards, we took them aside and told them that, as coaches, we felt it was neglectful to let them train until they had got to the bottom of the problem.'

'It was a really hard conversation to have, and the person in question didn't take it very well, but I maintain we did the right thing because, if they had had a cardiac arrest on the track, we would have felt it was partly our fault.'

Manchester Tri has a welfare officer, who Kate will consult if there are any causes for concern or if one of her coaches picks up on any warning signs.

'In the past, we have then dropped into a few sessions that person has been doing, or just tried to get to know them a bit more and see if we can work out what makes them tick. Then, if we think it's still an issue, it's about sitting down with them and having a chat and, if it's appropriate, asking them directly about it.'

'You need to find out all the information you can, get the support from the right people in the club, then decide whether to address it head-on or take a different approach. I guess it boils down to good communication but making sure you've got the facts to back it up.'

Gradual initiation

Of course, dealing with a variety of emotional issues or health concerns is only scratching the surface when it comes to the responsibilities of running a large sports club.

And for Kate, her apprehension about taking on her new role was exacerbated by the fact that the man handing over the baton, Tony Jolly, had been such an accomplished leader.

'Tony was a tough act to follow. Anything Tony said, you'd nod your head and think, "That's a good point." So that was something that scared me. I would think, "If people come up to me at the end of the session, am I going to have the same impact?'

'Tony was a thought leader. He did a lot of work for British Triathlon in terms of writing their coach education programme. He's a real theorist. I know I have people skills, the coaching skills and the background management skills.'

'My initial concern was, "Am I enough of a thought leader? Am I enough of an expert, and will people respect my knowledge?" Not knowing if people would want to follow me was daunting.'

Tony decided to step down in March and recommended Kate as his successor. The handover phase has sensibly been spread over several months, with Kate serving as acting head coach to allow her to settle into her new role while Tony takes more of a back seat over time.

'I think being a good head coach is having a bit of a presence. You have to do things your own way, and that is where I'm up to now,' she says.

'I'm passionate about being a role model. Don't get me wrong, I'm not the best triathlete, but it's about leading by example and living the right sort of lifestyle.'

Relationship advice

More parallels can be drawn between Kate's new-found number one status and the role of a head teacher.

Both leaders must have a clear vision, which is shared by the coaches and committee (teachers and governing body). A strategic plan must be devised, with objectives and methods for learning and development filtered down from the coaches to the athletes (teachers to pupils).

And by converting from an assistant, whose job it is to suggest ideas, to a leader, who is charged with making decisions, be prepared for your relationship with club members to change irrevocably.

As University of Maine Head Basketball Coach Bob Walsh neatly summarises in his blog ['Expecting to be a head coach'](#): 'It's not really a matter of you acting differently, it's simply that they all look at you differently. They are always reading you as a head coach – what kind of mood you are in, how you talk to them, what type of one you are setting.'

'It doesn't mean you can't get along with them, crack jokes and have a good time. But you have to be able to get serious when the time is right, and demand a lot out of them.'

'You can still have [great relationships with your players](#) when you become a head coach, but they will be on a different level than the ones you had as an assistant.'

Kate appreciates the back now stops with her but is mollified by the knowledge she has like-minded people under her, who share her coaching philosophies.

A people person who never shirks advice, Kate's strong teamwork ethic should stand her in good stead.

'I try to surround myself with people who are a bit more knowledgeable so I can challenge myself to keep up,' she says. 'I've got lots of peers who I coach with, and I respect what they say. I've spoken to a lot of people.'

'A couple of British Cycling coaches have mentored me. A lot of people on the way have been willing to give me their time, and I do ask questions, and I am eager to learn.'

'One of the things I hope I bring to the role is a personal side. It's the people in the club who are the most important thing.'

Which leads seamlessly into Kate's coaching philosophy, which is: 'Confidence and consistency are what you need to get results. Once you give people confidence, they get empowered, and then, it's a matter of piecing together consistent blocks of training. Understanding the athlete is key, and I definitely don't believe in a one-size-fits-all approach to coaching.'

'Everyone has got the potential to be the best athlete they can be, and it's our job as coaches to direct them in the right way, with the right mentality.'

Level 3: A quantum leap

Every club works to a different model, but Kate has been pleased to discover that the administration side of the job has become less onerous.

'When I was the assistant coach, there was a lot of administration work. The way the club works is the assistant sorts out the general invoicing, coaching cover, club kit. It's very much hands-on admin and not very strategic.'

'The head coach manages all the venues and the other coaches and all the high level training plans.'

'There's still a lot behind the scenes admin work as head coach, but for me, the big step is leadership and strategy.'

And Kate has been helped massively on this front by being accepted on to the British Triathlon Federation Level 3 course.

'It's a very hard course to get on so I feel lucky to have had the chance to do it,' she says.

'It's a big step up from Level 2. The first weekend was very much about what makes you different as a Level 3 coach and what your expectations are. It's all about seniority and mentoring. It's more on the high performance and elite side.'

Course members have had a talk from the [head of performance and nutrition at the English Institute of Sport \(EIS\)](#) and attended a workshop from an Institute of Swimming (IoS) physiologist, while the Brownlee brothers' physio, Alison Rose, came to talk to them on running technique. The course finishes in April.

Kate Clifford running



ON THE RUN: Kate gyrts her teeth as the finish line approaches

Multiply by three

Kate sees mentoring as one of her key duties as head coach.

That includes fostering good personal/developmental relationships with her own club coaches and athletes but also offering mentoring to other clubs that Manchester Tri has links with.

Being a sport that comprises three disciplines in swimming, cycling and running, that is a large club base.

'Other, smaller clubs come to see how we do things. I spend a lot of time talking to their coaches and trying to help them. It feels like it's a big role in trying to project good practice in triathlon to a wide variety of clubs and coaches,' says Kate.

With such a broad membership, it can be a challenging task to ensure the sessions meet everyone's needs.

'We're a big club with loads of different sorts of people. You just cannot have one size fits all. All our coaches are different too so it's about trying to offer a broad range of coaching styles so it covers every type of triathlete.'

Kate states proudly that the club has 'brilliant facilities'. Her pride is not misplaced. Feast your envious eyes on this list.

'We use three different swimming pools, the Aquatics Centre, Moss Side and Strefford. Our running track is at Longford Park Stadium, which is owned by Trafford Athletics Club, who we have a good relationship with, and then we do turbo sessions at Strefford Leisure Centre and also use Manchester Velodrome.

'So, with triathlon combining three sports, it is important we form strong partnerships with other local clubs.

'We have really good links with Trafford Metro Swimming Club, and we do lots of joint events with them, masters swimming and an annual gala. You realise people are rarely just a member of the triathlon club, they are also a member of a swimming, cycling or running club. So fostering good relationships with the area's other clubs is an important part of being a head coach.'

It hasn't taken Kate long to introduce new club schemes. She pinpointed an area for development after speaking to runners and cyclists who were weak swimmers and who found it hard to get lessons.

She set up a late Friday night session for beginners who could swim basic breaststroke but struggled with front crawl – and she is delighted with the results.

'The classes have made quite a big difference because there are a lot of people who would never have dared to go to a triathlon session without that coaching,' says Kate.

She coaches on a Monday, Wednesday and Friday night, while her head coach role will typically involve one or two days a week, including Sunday. Additionally, there are a lot of workshops outside of normal training times. The club itself holds two or three sessions every day.

There is regular interaction with members, then, and Kate is enjoying the opportunity to hone her leadership skills.

'When you hold sessions, people always want to ask you things so you kind of have to be in head coach mode all the time. If you're coaching with a new coach, you have to show them that you know what you are doing, you're not just putting on an "average Joe" session where they might think, "I can do that."'

Route into coaching

Swimming was always Kate's first love when she was growing up.

She competed at national level, but injuries thwarted any hopes of an international career.

Then at university, it was, she admits candidly, 'Just about drinking and eating kebabs.'

After getting a job in Manchester, she began looking for a masters swimming club and a route back into the sport. A friend recommended Manchester Tri Aquatics.

'James Hickman, who was to be a future Olympian, would swim in my lane, and I just loved it,' says Kate, who soon found that you couldn't be in a triathlon club without running and cycling as well.

'I used to spend more time injured than not injured, and now that I coach, I would question a lot of my training techniques,' she adds.

An enforced break followed when she had two children only 17 months apart, and shortly after making her comeback, she broke her arm, leaving her with nerve damage down her left arm.

'I was grappling with the fact I would never get back to the level I had been when someone said, "Have you thought about coaching?"; and it all snowballed from there.'

Now 36, Kate has some unfamiliar business. Having failed to reach the heights she dreamt of as a swimmer, she is aspiring to fulfil her potential as a coach.

And as triathletes might say of her transition phase (no pun intended) to head honcho, diving off the deep end has not put her off her stroke; since setting the wheels in motion, she's had her pedal to the metal; she's on the right track since she's been running the show.

Kate's top tips

1. Even if you are coaching groups, remember that all of your athletes are individuals and they work differently, think differently and learn differently. There is no one size fits all.
2. Be consistent, don't let fads erode your focus just because they are fashionable. Do try new things but make sure you have researched them and that they fit with your own philosophy.
3. Trust your gut instinct.
4. Be a role model. You might not have to be the best athlete yourself, but live by the principles you expect of your athletes (for example, a healthy lifestyle, be focused, be timely, be consistent, be professional, be bold).
5. Trust your athletes. Let them think for themselves.
6. Learn from other coaches and let them learn from you.

Are you about to step up to the role of head coach? Let us know your views by leaving a comment.

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