

# Pre-mortem and reflective practice make a deadly combination

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Nick Ruddock

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*HOME FROM HOME: Gymnastics coach Nick Ruddock relaxes in his favourite environment*

**Local club coaches can play at being Olympic coaches this summer by implementing a simple model that can be used whatever level of athlete you work with – and which ConnectedCoaches member Nick Ruddock used to great effect to guide Great Britain to a historic silver medal at the 2014 European Junior Gymnastics Championships.**

You'll be dying to give this tried and trusted coaching model a go, as practised and endorsed by leading gymnastics coach and educator [Nick Ruddock](#).

The coaching term under examination is pre-mortem managerial strategy – not to be confused with post-mortem – and how it can help you instil a winning edge in your athletes.

The technique, more commonly used in business but equally effective in sport, is when you look to the future, imagine a project has failed, then work backwards from that point to identify all the possible reasons why.

While effective on its own, it is an even stronger and more dependable coaching framework when used in conjunction with reflective practice – where you learn from information extracted from the past, and past competitions.

DIY hobbyists will be familiar with Milliput – two strands of modelling putty that, when you blend the two coloured polymer clays together, transform into something harder than MMA fighter Conor McGregor.

Well, that's the sort of result you can expect by fusing pre-mortem and reflective practice – a tight bond, stronger together than they are on their own.

And the best part is that this model is not the preserve of Olympic-level coaches; you will reap the benefits whatever standard of athlete you work with.

## **A whole new ball game**

ConnectedCoaches Content Champion Nick phones me minutes after getting off the line to Manchester City Football Club.

These are busy times for the former Great Britain national coach, whose [high performance](#) highlights include former personal and national coaching roles to international medal-winning teams and athletes.

He retains a consulting role with GB gymnastics, as well as six other international gymnastic federations, which include Germany, Finland and the European Union of Gymnastics.

His expertise in coaching delivery, strategic planning and gymnastics-specific methodology is in big demand from other international governing bodies of sport too – hence the call to the Etihad – who are keen to tap into his all-round expertise.

It's a bit of a coup, then, to get to pick Nick's brains over coaching strategy.

Having worked with athletes who have medalled at international events, I was keen to know what methods elite coaches might employ as part of their preparations, and how they might eke out some marginal improvement from their athletes in the all-important few months preceding the global extravaganza.

It turns out amateur coaches have the very same tools at their disposal. All they need in terms of buy-in is time and inclination.

Dissecting the anatomy of this particular coaching model is not perhaps the best turn of phrase, especially as I wrongly assumed the alliterative title of the article would be along the lines of 'Pre-mortem and post-mortem procedure'.

Nick, however, uses the term reflective practice as the other half of the combination – which evokes less gruesome connotations.

## **Prevention is better than cure**

So we have the past, present and future all working together – Dr Who meets Back to the Future, only far less baffling, and no need for a TARDIS or a DeLorean.

'Pre-mortem, first of all, is how coaches and their teams can get together and mitigate risk by identifying all the potential areas where the programme could fail,' explains Nick.

'Effectively, what you are then doing is working backwards – imagining that it has failed, deciding what you would blame it on, and what the main reasons are for why that athlete didn't reach performance expectations or any key performance indicators (KPIs) that had been set by the club, the coach or the athlete; then making sure that you have interventions in place to prevent them from occurring in the first place, or at least minimise the identified risks.'

- Begin by gathering all the coaches associated with a particular team or discipline together for a brainstorming session.
- Identify all the potential risks related to the activity of the athlete.
- Prioritise the likelihood of them actually occurring.
- Identify the solutions and intentions.
- Put in place a review process.

‘It’s not too dissimilar than if you were to go to the doctor’s feeling unwell,’ says Nick by way of analogy.

‘They diagnose you with an illness, they then treat it, follow it up and then maybe give you a repeat prescription.

‘The doctor would also suggest that eating healthily, exercising and making certain lifestyle choices would prevent you from having to go to the clinic in the first place. And I guess that is what we are trying to do here – identify what the lifestyle choices are, and the details that need to be taken care of, to make sure that you don’t end up in that situation to begin with.’

An equivalent example in business would be the launch of a new product, let’s say a mobile phone app.

Business chiefs will sit down months before the launch date and discuss worst case scenarios – nobody has downloaded it, the revenue stream is too low and we have failed to hit our targets. They will ask why this has happened, and put interventions in place to make sure those fears are never realised – such as implementation of publicity schemes, redirecting marketing money into the right places, bulk emails and press releases to relevant media.

The process ensures you are leaving no stone unturned, flagging up areas that could potentially cause a problem.

The model can be used across any sport.

In the case of an athlete, it may be a lifestyle problem you need to address outside of the sport that is having an impact on their training or performance; a sports psychology issue, identifying that there is no facility currently in place for athletes to access; or perhaps an issue with an athlete who struggles under pressure, having recognised the need for one-to-one help and advice so they become more comfortable in pressure-cooker situations.

### **No perfection without reflection**

Being wise after the event may not allow you to rewrite history, but it **will** help you prevent history from repeating itself.

Reflective practice helps you iron out any flaws in your pre-mortem strategy. Hitting problems from both sides – the future and the past, or the before and after – increases the chance of blitzing them out of existence.

‘The reflective part would happen after the competition, or even after each training session,’ begins Nick, as he examines part two of the process in more detail.

‘A lot of coaches are guilty of going from training session to training session, and it’s all in their mind how the athlete is progressing, but they need to sit down with the team and document it so they can get those interventions in earlier rather than later.

‘Ask yourselves what you can learn from the situation. If we were to do this competition again, what would we do differently? What were the stand-out lessons we learnt, and therefore what actions do we need to apply for future tournaments?’

‘There’s always something you can learn from an event. They might only improve preparations by a few percent, but collectively, they can make all the difference.’

Nick uses the phrase, ‘be opportunity rich and not strategically poor’. He says that some nations get into panic mode months before an Olympic Games because they have left some areas highlighted as a cause

for concern until the last minute.

While certain issues can be solved quickly, others, particularly technical headaches, need a lot more time to fine-tune or correct.

### **Progress no formality without formalising**

Playing devil's advocate, I suggest that a lot of coaches will already employ many of these principles in their coaching methods.

Nick does not disagree, but he does question the haphazard approach coaches often take to the implementation of post-mortem and reflective practice.

Like a house of cards, things can come crashing down if the exercise is badly executed.

'I have yet to come across many teams, certainly in gymnastics, who actually formalise this model,' he says.

'I think the formalising part is really important. It's about collectively using the power of the group, and using it as a non-threatening brainstorming opportunity as opposed to a, "I'm right and you're wrong" kind of thing.

'Thrashing out ideas and understanding which ones are a priority and then crossing the 'i's and dotting the 't's on them is only the starting point of a lengthy process. It's how you use that information for reflective practice later on that is important.

'Coaches should analyse the pre-mortem from months before to see if they really considered those points enough, or whether they failed to identify them as a risk. Was there something out of the blue that they didn't consider? That will then help inform future pre-mortems.

'It is the quality of the questions within the organisation that will make the real difference.'

An important point worth raising is that these brainstorming sessions are for the coaches.

Any interventions are then drip-fed back to the athletes.

There is no benefit to be gained in sitting in a room while your coaching team deliberate at length over the minutiae surrounding travel arrangements, then listen to them pinpoint 100 reasons why you might fail at the next tournament.

As Nick says: 'The job of the coach is to identify the risks the athlete might not even be aware of. Travel logistics or time zone changes, for example. If they are quite young or going to their first major international, they'll be thinking, and rightly so, solely about performance.'

### **Case study**

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Amy Tinkler

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*MAKING HISTORY: Amy Tinkler, left, and Catherine Lyons, pictured during their floor routine at the 2014 European Junior Championships*

Nick followed a similar framework in the build-up to the European Junior Championships in 2014 with the GB girls' team.

'The result was we won our first ever European team medal, and this process was a contributing factor.'

One of the big issues addressed in their team meetings was a concern over the likelihood that our athletes would step outside the floor area in their routines. Careful scrutiny of data analysis set off alarm bells, but it also served to highlight an opportunity for performance gain, and a plan was hatched.

'We knew through data analysis that the gymnasts we were looking to put on floor were 60% likely to step out of the boundary line. Doing that could have cost us a European medal so we sat everyone in a room, talked about it together, agreed that it was an issue – we had the stats to prove it so there was buy-in straight away – and decided in the last weeks of training to focus on landings with our gymnasts.'

'In the championships themselves, we didn't go off the floor once.'

With the Olympic Games under way, who knows how many teams in Rio will have adopted Nick's approach to help athletes fulfil their potential?

But the message to grass-roots coaches is clear: You can use it too.

'Top sports teams may well use this approach all the time, I really don't know. But this is going to appeal a lot to club coaches too,' says Nick.

'National governing bodies will have all sorts of different interventions already in place, and hopefully, this article will apply to a much wider audience than just those who are going to go the Olympic Games, serving as an educational piece for those coaches who are trying to get to that level.'

**Is this coaching model something you can use with your team? Please leave a comment below.**

### **Next steps**

If you found this article useful, you might also like [Blessed or stressed? Dealing with pressure in sport](#), where Nick shares his top tips on dealing with pressure.

You can also check out all of Nick's personal ConnectedCoaches blogs [here](#).

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