



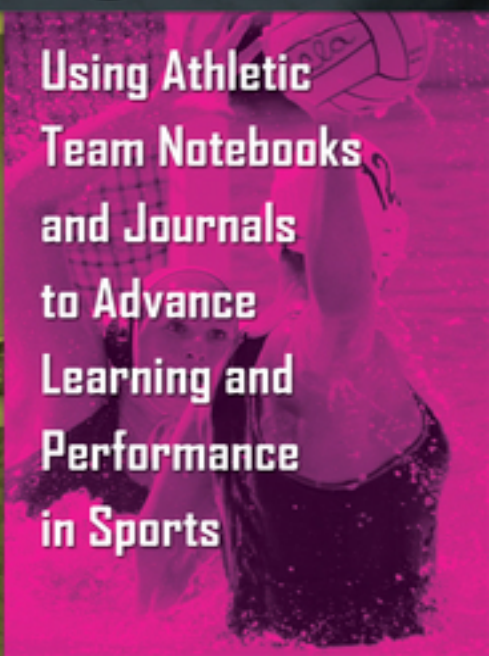
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Writing *on the* BUS



Using Athletic
Team Notebooks
and Journals
to Advance
Learning and
Performance
in Sports



Introduction

A dozen years into this new century and just about every athlete I know is writing.

Some keep blogs and others maintain Facebook sites—it's mind-boggling how many Twitter. Professional athletes work with sport psychologists, fine-tuning their mental approaches to training and games through talk, imagery, meditation, and writing. If you played basketball at Duke University for Coach Gail Goestenkors, 2006 U.S. Basketball National Coach of the Year, you kept a journal. If you played college soccer for Mike Keller at the University of Southern Maine or Amy Edwards at Gonzaga University, you kept a Team Notebook. Olympians and world-class athletes in all sports keep training logs and exchange reflective email with advisors, coaches, and training partners.

As you'll read later in the book, tennis champion Serena Williams pulled out her journal book for the press at Wimbledon in 2007, and for those baseball fans who followed the phenomenal Red Sox teams of the mid-2000s, they witnessed all-star pitcher Curt Schilling on the bench between innings . . . writing.

In England, 16-year-old soccer players who become apprentices to professional teams are *required* to keep a journal about training sessions, games, diet. . . . And if your goal is to make the U.S. Ski Team and are fortunate enough to land a spot at the renowned Burke Mountain Academy in Vermont . . . there's a good chance that writing will be a part of your training. What's this all about, you ask? It's about learning.

Ways Coaches Learn

In 1984, soccer was relatively new to Maine public schools. The season lasted 10 short weeks and most teams played their matches on American football fields—a space too small for *the beautiful game*. To build the capacity of the state's program for players and coaches alike, we organized trips to England, the motherland of our sport.

Rain plagued our 1984 England tour. At the first game on the outskirts of London, the pitch was a quagmire. Most of my players wore soccer shoes with short, stubby cleats—*molded soles*, we called them—while the British schoolboys screwed in foul-weather studs about three-quarters of an inch long. The Maine boys played athletically and with dogged determination—but inevitably, with those shoes, the British kids stood up and scored . . . and we did not. My players learned and so did their coach. For the next tour, I revised the players' equipment list.

While conducting a series of studies with various athletic teams, the genesis of this book, I asked coaches how they honed their skills. The answers were not surprising. We learn by reading books and articles, attending clinics, and watching videos. We email colleagues and talk on the phone. We learn from the John Woodens and the Pat Summits of the world and also by discussing our sports with athletes, officials, and fans. When interviewed by sports reporters, we are pushed to unpack, rethink, and diagnose our games.

Some of us learn by giving clinics to coaching colleagues; others continue to play our sport, officiate, and write articles. A few of us went to college to study coaching and most of us have been certified as coaches by our sports associations or through organizations like The National

Federation of State High School Associations. All of us learn by coaching games and thinking about our decisions, especially after a loss.

Ultimately, our work as coaches is about teaching and learning. Using a variety of instructional activities, we help our players move toward mastery. From analyzing game films to critiquing drills at the blocking sled, we devise multiple ways to teach our players. Those who study learning and teaching would agree: The meaning of our work as coaches is in the games we prepare our athletes to play. And those games, many of us know, provide quintessential life lessons.

Throughout our careers, we gather strands of knowledge and weave that learning into our coaching systems. We do this work to fortify our sports classrooms—the pools, fields, tracks, courses, rinks, half pipes, jumps, courts, and arenas where we guide our students toward outgrowing themselves. Our vocation centers on learning and teaching. Our goal: that elusive next level of play . . . and a winning record.

Ways Athletes Learn

Our athletes learn in a variety of ways, too. Some are skillful listeners and have the ability to translate our half-time talks into ESPN highlights. Other players don't hear a *single word we say* and return to the game as if they'd spent the halftime visiting their grandmothers and eating peanut butter fudge. For those athletes, we adapt our approach by sketching plays, writing lists, or asking questions one-on-one. Sometimes, we bench the kid—it just depends.

At the elite level of distance sports, athletes learn by monitoring their lactate levels and then fine-tuning their training. Within the high school ranks, coaches may require their athletes to referee or coach youth sports to develop a unique lens on the game, a view beyond the player's. To be sure, there are as many ways to learn as there are athletes as illustrated in Figure 1.

Although just about every athlete that I know writes, few athletic teams have an organized approach to include writing. When that's the case, an effective learning tool is neglected. In terms of communication, player development, and learning, writing has the potential to offer a powerful difference in the world of athletics.

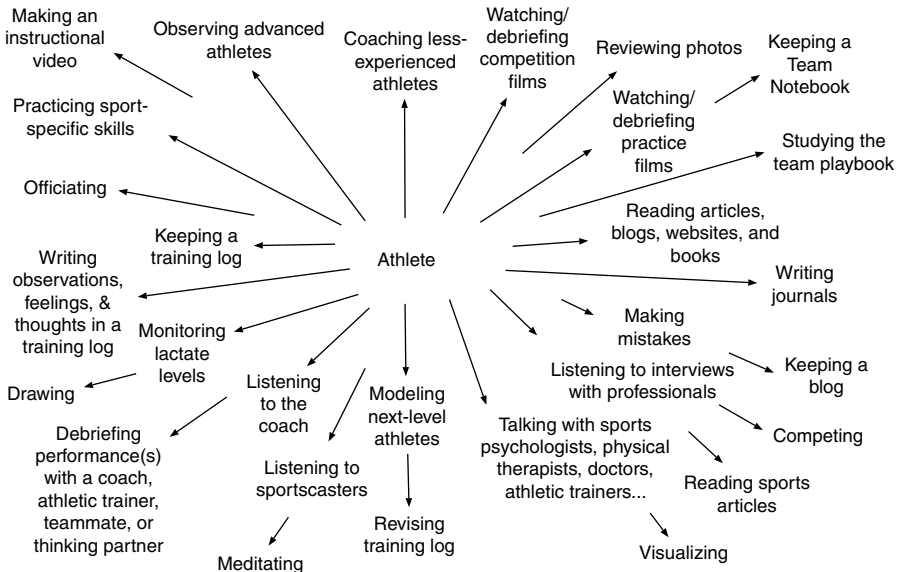


Figure 1 Some of the Ways Athletes Learn

Why Writing?

“Writing organizes and clarifies our thoughts. Writing is how we think our way into a subject and make it our own. Writing enables us to find out what we know—and what we don’t know—about whatever we’re trying to learn.”

—*Writing to Learn* by William Zinsser (1989, Harper & Row)

It’s not as if coaches don’t have enough to do. However, the plain fact is that having athletes take a few minutes to write in an Athletic Team Notebook or Journal enhances communication and amplifies learning. As learning tools, notebooks and journals serve as a place for athletes to analyze and reflect. They engage seniors and first-year students, all-stars and benchwarmers—in different ways. And that difference is the beauty of such a learning activity.

For coaches, reading an athlete’s writing adds a new dimension to our sports classrooms and to the learning that can make us more effective teachers of that sport. Indeed, effective coaching is the constant search for ways to enhance our athletes’ learning so that they may move to the next level of play. As a result of reading Team Notebooks, we

come to know our athletes and teams through a new lens: the written word. This additional way of knowing can help us further understand our athletes' strengths and challenges, and thereby assist us in creating more valuable training plans and practice sessions.

Of course, adding Team Notebooks to a program won't make up for unfit athletes, ill-designed training sessions, or tactical mistakes. But writing will complement an athletic program and add a new level of understanding for athletes and team staff members. The act of writing not only organizes and clarifies an athlete's thoughts, but for a team writing can also

- add variety to practice sessions,
- frontload pre- and post-game discussions,
- keep coaches and other team personnel informed in another way, and
- fill in knowledge gaps.

Ultimately, writing improves learning and that makes for more effective coaches, athletes, and teams.

But will writing help us win?

My Experiences as a Coach and Emerging Researcher

The mere mention of the word research used to make my brain seize up. As an apprentice coach in the classroom of David "Dusty" Drew at the University of Maine at Portland-Gorham (now the University of Southern Maine), I turned glassy-eyed when Coach Drew or any of my instructors made comments like "the research has shown us that" But once I stepped onto the playing fields and ski slopes as "the coach," my attitude changed as I faced scores of athletes who wanted, expected, and in some rare cases demanded that I guide them to that elusive next level.

My athletes' demands and the inevitable evolution of my sports of skiing and soccer ushered me to employ methods associated with action research, a kind of research in which "participants examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully" (Ferrance, 2000). An example occurred in the mid-1980s when the cross-country ski-racing world abruptly abandoned its classic skiing technique and turned to