

Strategies

A Journal for Physical and Sport Educators

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ustr20

Top Tips for Starting a Sports Coaching Business

Ian McClurg & Craig Parkes

To cite this article: Ian McClurg & Craig Parkes (2024) Top Tips for Starting a Sports Coaching Business, *Strategies*, 37:4, 32-35, DOI: [10.1080/08924562.2024.2350911](https://doi.org/10.1080/08924562.2024.2350911)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08924562.2024.2350911>



Published online: 22 Jul 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 9



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Top Tips for Starting a Sports Coaching Business

By Ian McClurg and Craig Parkes 

This Coach's Corner was developed out of conversations between two professional soccer coaches in North America who reflected on their coaching careers as part of an action research project. The primary purpose of action research carried out by coaches is to improve their own instructional practices within their professional setting. The recommendations in this column came from two coaching colleagues and professional friends engaging in “critical friendship” discussions. Baskerville and Goldblatt (2009) described a critical

friendship as a relationship between competent and reflective practitioners who can provide support and challenge in an area of shared understanding. This technique is frequently utilized in educational research. However, a detailed literature review suggests that it is scarcely used in sports coaching research. The information in this column primarily come from the perspective of the lead author's coaching business experience, while the second author took on the role of providing feedback as the critical friend.



I am always keen to point out that I am a coach who operates a training business, rather than a business owner who coaches. The distinction is an important one for me. In truth, I set up my own coaching business because I wanted full autonomy of the work that I do, meaning that working for coaching associations or grassroots soccer clubs was not compatible with my need for coaching freedom. This year, I will celebrate 25 years as an owner of a sports coaching business. It is a milestone that has prompted me to reflect on what advice I would give to a younger version of myself. Hopefully, this column will be of interest and value to aspiring coaches who are thinking of setting up their own sports coaching business.

Decide Your Why

When I first started coaching, my goal was to develop soccer players in Canada who would potentially be capable of playing professional soccer in Europe. I think it is important to start with your own personal goals and ambitions when you are deciding to take on the challenge of starting a small business. Starting a business is a big and often risky life decision. According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, around 20% of small businesses fail within the first year and, after 5 years, 48% have failed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

Before you think of starting a sports coaching business, ask yourself the following questions:

- Why do I want to start a sports coaching business?
- Is this the right time for me to start this business?
- What changes will I have to make in my life to be successful?
- Will others benefit from the services that I plan to offer?

Everything Starts With a Vision

In 2014, I released a book called *Play the 1v1 Way! Soccer Tips from an Emerging Talent Centre*. The introduction of the book was titled, “Everything Starts with a Vision.” In that opening section, I outlined “the problems” that were the challenges that I felt were holding young athletes back from playing at the highest levels. My vision was formulated based on my “solution” to these issues and I identified what I thought could be accomplished. Once you have decided that you are ready to set up your own coaching business, it is important to clarify your vision. What do you see as “the problem” and what do you believe you can do to provide “a solution”?

We are constantly told to write down our vision so it can act as a compass toward our ultimate destination. Your vision will be a description of what you ultimately desire to achieve in the future. My own vision was to be able to develop young players within Canada who could then go on to play soccer at the very highest levels of the game. This could include playing overseas for a professional club, playing for a professional club in North America, playing at a university/college on a soccer scholarship, or playing for our national or provincial teams. My belief is that

you must have a vision if you are going to succeed. There must be a reason for you to keep going when you face the inevitable challenges that you will face. Many small business owners, like me, have experienced debt, health issues, and negative impacts on relationships. What kept me going during those challenging moments was the internal drive to help soccer players reach high levels of performance. I did not play professional soccer myself due to injury, but I was determined to help other young players achieve this goal. I identified this as my purpose, and it remained a guiding light on which to focus when the challenging times arrived. Some of the questions that you can ask yourself as you develop your vision are:

- What does success in this venture look like?
- What does your average day look like?
- What activities will you have to complete?
- What support do you have around you?
- How does your vision inspire you?

Decide on What You Can Offer to Solve a Problem

Once you have defined your vision, it is time to decide what types of coaching services you plan to offer. As we are talking about a sports coaching business, I have always thought that your own personal coaching philosophy should be the driver for what coaching services you provide. Success for me as a coach was driven by a focus on improving players at the individual level. Therefore, my business offerings have been built around individual player development and not team performances. Your coaching philosophy should define what success looks like for you as a coach. Two questions to ask yourself are: (1) What are your core values when interacting with the athletes with whom you work? and (2) How will you accomplish performance improvements? Reviewing my own coaching philosophy helped me think about the types of services that I could provide. With sports, success is typically defined by performance improvements, so you can initially start by making a list of services that you should provide to help the young athletes that you are trying to help.

It is important to also become seen and trusted as a specialist within the area of coaching for which you have a passion. To do that, research and learn as much as you can. In soccer, I challenged myself and pursued the Union of European Football Associations coaching pathways. It was more expensive and challenging to travel back and forth to Europe and compete alongside coaches at top professional clubs in Europe or former players who had played at the World Cup. However, to be the best, you must show up and compete against the best. This formal licensing pathway enabled me to attract players to my program.

In addition, I also make regular study visits to top professional academy programs in England (Wolves), Spain (Espanyol and Seville), Portugal (FC Porto), and Italy (Chievo Verona) because I want to learn from the best player development systems in the world. My advice would be to become a lifelong learner within your chosen area of coaching and to continually challenge yourself.

In my 50s, I took myself completely out of my comfort zone and completed a master's degree in performance coaching from the University of Stirling in Scotland. It was difficult to juggle academic work alongside running a small business and coaching the players, but it allowed me to learn from other sports and become more of a critical thinker. Looking at research and factual data versus opinions for inspiration and direction gave me another competitive edge within the coaching fraternity.

The next step is to go through this “brainstorm list” of services and ask yourself the following questions:

- Will this service help my athletes improve (achieve greater success) or avoid failure?
- What value on a scale of 1 to 10 would my athletes place on having access to this service?
- What are the steps required to be able to offer this service?
- How many athletes could I potentially assist with this service based on time constraints?
- Are there any athletes willing to provide me with feedback on this service idea?
- Can I easily communicate the value of this service to potential clients?

Make Your Business Operations as Good as Your Coaching Skills

Last week, a friend in the industry paid me a compliment. He said that soccer academies have come and gone, but I am the one who has outlasted all my competitors. It got me thinking about why I have achieved longevity within such a fast-paced and changing industry when, every year, there are young and ambitious coaches starting their own businesses. I think a key factor is that I have spent a lot of time improving and refining my business skills in addition to my coaching skills. You can be the most talented coach in the world, but you cannot build a coaching business without the key commodity—the athletes themselves. This is where it is important to understand your audience. It is a little more complicated in youth sports, as you have two clients to service. First, the athletes themselves must enjoy working with you and benefit from your support. Second, you must understand and manage the expectations of parents who will pay for your services.

It is very important that you are relevant and concise with your marketing messages. When I first began my business, distributing flyers, newspaper articles and advertisements, and mailing correspondence (not email) were the standard marketing practices. Since then, I have had to master social media; utilize Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok advertisements; and distribute informative newsletters to regularly communicate to a database of around 1,000 active contacts.

My best pieces of advice on the business side of things would include the following:

- Generate video content to showcase your coaching and learn how to utilize Instagram and TikTok to target potential athletes, and Facebook for targeting potential parents.

- Invest in a web site and coaching platform like WIX to manage your web site, social media, bookings, and collection of fees. You can automate many of your business processes there for a low monthly fee.
- Invest in the best facilities and equipment to showcase your high standards.
- If possible, set up subscription programs where you offer discounted services if athletes sign up for 12-month terms. This will allow you to generate consistent income during the whole year and allow you to budget effectively and fully understand your monthly profit and loss figures.
- Remain innovative and constantly improve your offerings and your services. In youth sports or training, the “latest thing” can attract curiosity. Always stay one step ahead and be an innovator.
- Find the easiest way for athletes to participate in your services. This may involve location selection, training times, and other factors. Student athletes and parents are busy people, so make it as easy for them as possible.
- Understand why athletes play sport. Challenge them, but in equal measure support them and make sure they leave your facility having enjoyed the experience and learned something new that will help them as athletes and young adults.
- Stay in the niche that you have decided on. Athletes or parents may request several new or different services. Consider these requests carefully. Ask yourself the key questions: (1) Does this take me out my niche? and (2) What are the benefits and potential downsides of adding to or changing my services? Do not become all things to all people because you may become lost in translation.
- Be clear and concise in your messaging. I have read a few books by Donald Miller that have helped me to be clearer in my messaging. This includes messages on my web site, in social media posts, and conversations with athletes and parents. The two books I would recommend are: *Building a Story Brand* (Miller, 2017) and *How to Grow Your Small Business* (Miller, 2023).
- Be yourself and have fun. Your business should reflect your core values, your standards, and your personality. Do not try to mimic a competitor. Bring your own personality to the forefront of your business. Potential clients will want to know, like, and then trust you before they commit to working with you.

Map Out Your Future

One thing that I have always been big on is mapping out the future. I must understand what something looks like in one year, three years, or five years before I feel comfortable fully committing to it. As part of this exercise, you should also factor in your personal life. Understand how this will interact with your business. I do not think that I had a very good

understanding of this early on in my career. I was ambitious, hard-working, and thought about the business 24/7. Looking back, it led to burnout, had negative impacts on my personal life, and resulted in a lack of job satisfaction. At one point, my business became a chore that I was not enjoying, and I resolved this by asking myself the following questions:

- What areas of the business do I enjoy and excel in?
- What areas of the business do I not enjoy and can delegate or get contracted help to assist with?
- What do I have to accomplish on a daily basis to be happy and healthy? Invest in this time and make it nonnegotiable.
- What support network do I have when I feel overwhelmed or need another opinion?
- How many hours do I want to commit each week so that I can enjoy a balanced and enjoyable life? Working longer hours does not always lead to increased productivity, so delegate when you can and surround yourself with good, like-minded people.
- What is my exit strategy? Have an end goal in mind. Do I want to sell my business at a certain time or hire others to run the daily operations?
- What can I accomplish with my coaching that will make me proud after I have stopped coaching?


Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Craig Parkes  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5013-5219>

References

- Baskerville, D., & Goldblatt, H. (2009). Learning to be a critical friend: From professional indifference through challenge to unguarded conversations. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 39(2), 205–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057640902902260>
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023, October 25). *Business employment dynamics: Establishment and survival data*. <https://www.bls.gov/bdm/bdimage.htm#national>
- McClurg, I. (2014). *Play the 1v1 Way!: Soccer Tips from an Emerging Talent Centre*. Self-published.
- Miller, D. (2017). *Building a storybrand: Clarify your message so customers will listen*. HarperCollins Publishers.
- Miller, D. (2023). *How to grow your small business: A 6-step plan to help your business take off*. HarperCollins Publishers. 

Ian McClurg is the owner/operator of Ian McClurg Learn Perform Coaching in Ontario, Canada.

Craig Parkes (cparkes@southalabama.edu) is an assistant professor in the Department of Health, Kinesiology, and Sport at the University of South Alabama in Mobile, AL.

Submissions Welcome!

Readers are encouraged to send “Coach’s Corner” submissions to *Strategies* Editor at lstrecker@shapeamerica.org.

The purpose of the Coach’s Corner column is to feature short articles about one specific coaching lesson that readers can immediately implement with their team. Articles should contain a brief introduction, followed by quick-hitting information such as bullet points or lists. Submissions should not exceed 1,000–1,500 words (or roughly four typed, doublespaced pages).