

**Guru-ism And The Decline Of Coaching**  
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***“The medium is the message.”***  
***(Marshall McLuhan)***

Marshall McLuhan got it right, commenting on our collective gullibility. Truth is a relative commodity. For example: the woman next door suggests to you over the fence one day that we all ought to learn to live in peace. You nod, edge away and head back inside wondering how you managed to get saddled with such an oddball for a neighbor. But of course: If she has a *Nobel Prize* . . . you will be quoting her at every opportunity. “And did I mention we’re *neighbors?*” you will add with pride.

And consider the thought process of the individual lemming as the entire colony heads toward the cliff and ensuing oblivion: “I guess this must be okay . . . we’re *all* doing it . . .” Popularity can be a powerful medium, conferring legitimacy on some truly bad thoughts and ideas.

The lemming reference is apropos, here, because lemmings do *not*, in fact, commit suicide. The reason it is so thoroughly entrenched in our minds that they *do* is that another rodent (Mickey Mouse) dumped this myth on the culture in a 1958 Disney nature documentary entitled “WILD WILDERNESS.” We’ll let the title’s redundancy pass, for now, and focus instead on how we are prepared to swallow *almost anything*—if we trust the medium that delivers it *unto* us.

Sadly, this is the mind-set we often bring to coaching; constructing our philosophies, training sessions, and evaluation criteria based on a less-than-critical examination of the things we have read, heard, and seen. It isn’t important to verify that what our teachers say is true; just important that others around us believe what our teachers say is true. There is safety in numbers.

As a result, we find ourselves awash in training gurus and certification programs. We attend the seminars and presentations and we listen carefully, jotting down the salient points. If we are particularly bold, we may raise a hand and ask a question. Usually, the question is one of amplification. (“Could you explain that part, again?”) Rarely is it a question of essence. (“Where, on earth, did you get *that?*”)

And it is an ironic effect of learning from gurus that those parts of presentations that are *most* confusing to us tend to be the parts we question least. We more readily assume our own fallibility than that of the teacher we paid to hear. As a result, we have come to value “weirdness” for its own sake. Who has not been seduced by at least one exercise, piece of training equipment, or grand theoretical pronouncement simply because it seemed so . . . *out there* . . . that it was bound to impress our athletes, clients, or colleagues when we might have occasion to regurgitate it, later?

The problem, here, is that when the gurus re-create themselves in the form of “information for sale”—whether a text, or a course of study—they also tend to create lots of rigidity in the minds of consumers. Heaven forefend, for example, that our athletes’ knees should ever wander beyond their toes when lunging or squatting; or that the *multifidus* muscle might choose to pull *its* oar *before* the *transverse-abdominus* (even though both things happen in sport—and in life—all the time).

What I find so unfortunate is *not* information with which I disagree getting into the coaching dialogue. It’s that the promulgators of so much of this information have committed their ideas to the texts they use to bolster their “cult-of-personality” status as “cutting edge” coaching gurus, making it that much harder to dispense with when it proves to be drivel. People are generally trusting of their teachers, and assume that what they read in books is generally true.

***“If you meet the Buddha on the road . . . kill him.”***  
***(Zen Parable)***

I am hardly a Buddhist scholar; but the idea, here, is that the *real* Buddha probably doesn’t advertise. That is: the pilgrim you meet on the road will not set out to bring you *up* on the enlightenment scale if he or she is, in fact, enlightened. The proselytizing Buddha, therefore, is the false Buddha, and may be dispensed with.

It *is* a nice feeling, being regarded as the expert. And though we *should* state the limits of our knowledge and understanding, the temptation to “take on airs” (as they used to say) is great, sometimes leading us to wrap ourselves in experiences we don’t actually have. Example: A friend (and otherwise honest fitness instructor) boasts on radio

commercials for his gym that he has been training top-level athletes for thirty years. He is forty-one, now. (You do the math.)

We have a right to know how our teachers came by the wisdom they mean to impart; how long they have been on the coaching road; where that road has taken them; and who they have met along the way. Unfortunately, we rarely question message *or* messenger, and this leads, ineluctably, to the creation of so much confusion.

Consider the professional patois we employ. It is replete with terms and phrases that we simply cannot leave alone—any more than most of us can effectively define or use them with anything approaching exactitude:

- Functional
- Core-training
- Aerobic base
- Closed-chain
- Sport-specific
- Power
- Periodization
- Proprioception
- Progression
- Plyometric
- P-N-F
- Integration

These sorts of terms barge into our consciousness and are then used and re-used, often imprecisely, until whatever meaning they may have originally held erodes and they are left as shriveled and bankrupt as the word “LITE”

on ice-cream containers and beer bottles. As McLuhan observed: “When a thing is current, it creates *currency*.” That is: the *acceptance* of an idea simply because it is stated frequently. And given that we live in a time of instant credibility; of web-sites and book publishing made easy-as-you-please, lots of misinformation gains a foothold as a result. Soon . . . the emperor has no clothes. (*Nobody* likes to admit they may have bought a pig-in-a-poke.)

Let us remember: The essential preface to all presentations, pronouncements, texts, treatises, discourses and debates on the subject of human performance should be a bold-faced reminder that *this is a work-in-progress*. It is a *journey*, as one can easily deduce by examining the progression of Olympic records over the years. There *is* no end-point. And this truth suggests that *coaching* is also a journey—a heuristic process where the more we do, the more we learn. Each of us is the Buddha. So: when somebody on the training road says: “I’m *it!* The be-all-end-all! Listen-to-me-and-look-no-further-because-I-have-the-*answers!*” Well . . . Go for your gun.

Here are some thoughts and questions I find useful in sorting the informational wheat from the chaff. I try to keep these things in mind both, while my mouth is open (when I am in *front* of the group), and while it is closed (when I am in the back), too:

1) **The biggest imposters tend to stand in the brightest spotlights.**

2) **Forget the introduction.**

You know:

“\_\_\_\_\_ has worked for \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_. He has written \_\_\_\_\_ articles for such publications as \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_. He has presented—often—at the \_\_\_\_\_ National Conference, and is the author of **Why Everybody Should Do It My Way** and **Pay No Attention To Anyone Else**. Over \_\_\_\_\_ people have been certified by his organization in his training methods, and he is personally responsible for the athletic accomplishments of \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and many others too numerous to name. And now: Please welcome *my good friend* . . . \_\_\_\_\_”

Just forget all that. It is written and recited to make you feel better about spending all that money to attend.

3) **There are two kinds of teachers: The ones that really want you *know* what they know; and the ones that really want you to be *impressed* by what they know.** It’s an easy thing to spice a presentation with high-sounding, multi-

syllabic junk. So, remember one more of Mr. McLuhan's maxims: "Mud sometimes gives the illusion of depth."

- 4) **What is this person selling?** I sell stuff. Do I present because I want people to buy what I have to sell? (In truth: no.) Should people *assume* I present because I want people to buy what I have to sell? *Absolutely*. It is up to me to persuade them, otherwise. **Whenever you begin to suspect that you are present at a commercial masquerading as a presentation . . . run, don't walk, for the exit.**
  
- 5) **Who has this person trained, and when?** Some coaching gurus never see the stars until they *are* stars. (It is often a symbiotic relationship: The gurus only want to work with the stars; and the stars are often suckers for the gurus.) **When it comes to the stars . . . you need to know who it was who brung-em to the dance more than who wants to dance with them, now.**
  
- 6) **Whenever you hear somebody taking credit for the athletic achievements and / or prowess of somebody else . . . leave.** Let the athlete offer credit to the coach if he or she feels it is justified.
  
- 7) **If someone is making a subject more difficult to comprehend than less so, it is a lead-pipe cinch that they do not understand it, themselves; or they may have another reason for their obfuscation.** (How many coaches struggled to understand and employ the old Eastern European periodization models without ever considering that the word "periodization" was a euphemism for "drug cycle?" And how many athletes have suffered as a result of their well-intentioned coaches working *without* that bit of information?)

***"The only Zen you find on the tops of mountains is the Zen you bring up there."***

***(Robert Pirsig)***

Learning and teaching are synergistic, and a student who does not test the teacher is about as useful as a teacher who does not test the student. It is too easy to accept without question simple assertions when they come to us printed in books or amplified

from the front of the banquet hall. It is a sad truth that guru-ism is an unavoidable part of popular culture; but we must not simply accept what the gurus offer us as though it came down from the top of the mountain, etched on stone tablets.

I am drawn to coaches and teachers of considerable (and verifiable) experience who have learned from their mistakes; *and who are happy to admit that they made some*. I have found it beneficial to learn from the folks who were too busy coaching in their formative years to have written many books or devised whole business empires (*complete with certificates suitable for framing!*) from their personal (newly minted) coaching philosophies. I also like it when my teachers tell me about *their* teachers. And happily, it has been my experience that, when you find one good teacher, you will find many more simply by hanging around and meeting the folks your *teacher* hangs around.

I am also persuaded that the best coaching mentors are those who foster *independence* in athletes and fellow coaches, rather than dependence. I simply do not *want* to believe that I can't progress unless I have *this* piece of equipment; *that* textbook, or pay for (yet) another certification. I just want to learn good stuff, and be confident I can use it.

Finally, while we cannot escape the coaching gurus, we *can* eschew dogma in favor of knowledge. To that end, we are all well advised to try to do two things: 1) When *receiving* information, we should determine where it comes from; find and verify its source(s). So much of what is called "new" and "cutting-edge" has been around for a *long* while. (Medicine-balls and yoga, anyone?) And 2) When *presenting* information to others, we should inform our audience whence *we* came by it. "I learned this from Vern Gambetta," (for example). "*He* may have made it up, or learned it from somebody else, but *I* learned it from Vern." I do not feel diminished by acknowledging my teachers. I feel fortunate that I *have* learned from good people, and proud to identify them when sharing what they taught me. Those coaches too insecure to give credit or attribution to their sources do a disservice to the coaching profession and *will*, ultimately, invite questions concerning their professional integrity, and the provenance of the wisdom they claim (or imply) is their own.