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**coach**  
**force**21

**Position Statement**  
**“Professionalisation as a Process of  
Continuous Improvement for Sport  
Coaching in Europe”**

An output of Project CoachForce21



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## Project Partners



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# Position Statement<sup>1</sup>

## “Professionalisation as a Process of Continuous Improvement for Sport Coaching in Europe”

### Principal Statement:

In the context of the European Union Work Plan for Sport 2017-2021 and the Council of the European Union Conclusions of November 2017 (Estonian Presidency) and June 2020 (Croatian Presidency), the CoachForce21 partners:

- Acknowledge that sport coaching plays a significant and ever-evolving role for societies and individuals.
- Emphasise that organisations and individuals providing sport coaching services must at all times protect the interest of the public and participants, and abide by the principles of Safe and Ethical Sport.
- Demand that the rights of sport coaches to education, development, support, appropriate recognition, and safe and ethical practicing conditions must be protected.
- Propose that countries and national and international federations commit to a process of continuous coaching system improvement that powers a similar process of continuous individual coach improvement.
- Encourage national and international lead coaching organisations to develop appropriate professional standards that guide relevant quality assurance and licensing systems.
- Recognise that all of the above recommendations are context-dependent and must be interpreted and implemented locally.

### Extended Statement:

In the context of the European Union Work Plan for Sport 2017-2021 and the Council of the European Union Conclusions of November 2017 (Estonian Presidency) and June 2020 (Croatian Presidency), the CoachForce21 partners:

#### Acknowledge that:

- Sport coaches make a significant contribution to society by supporting millions of participants achieve their personal goals and by delivering broader community outcomes.
- Sport coaches constitute a significant workforce in the EU – albeit with a blended profile (volunteer, part time and full time) and clearly defined yet overlapping domains (participation and performance).
- Sport coaches must be supported to acquire the relevant knowledge, skills, and competences to fulfil the demands of their various roles.

<sup>1</sup> This position statement is intended to cover the period 2021 to 2030. However, it will be periodically reviewed and if necessary amended.



## Recognise that:

- Sport coaching is currently undergoing a period of substantial growth and development which carries increased levels of public and academic scrutiny.
- Substantial gains have been made in many EU countries to enhance the standing of coaching, including the creation of coaching laws, the regulation of the right to practice, and the improvement of coach education, development and employment pathways.
- Despite the above, there are areas where progress has been limited, including the development of national licensing schemes, optimal data collection, statistics and monitoring structures, functional and impactful representation bodies for coaches, paid employment opportunities, standards and training for the Coach Developer workforce, and continuous professional development (CPD) processes.
- Therefore, coaching cannot, at this moment, withstand a direct comparison to other long-standing professions.

## Propose that:

- Rather than a binary “Yes or No” option, the professionalisation of sport coaching is better understood as a long-term ambition and process of continuous improvement which aims to guarantee the quality of participant experiences and protect the rights of coaches and athletes.
- This process requires the coming together of a motivated and sufficiently resourced coalition of stakeholders, typically led by a National Lead Agency for Coaching, that can plan, implement and periodically review its progress, using an approach that considers all elements of the system and their unique roles and interactions.

## Urge Sport Coaches to:

- Play an active part in the decision-making process related to the improvement of sport coaching.
- Where appropriate and feasible, come together under the umbrella of single- or multi-sport coaches’ associations to enhance the voice of the coach, and its articulation to funders and decision-making bodies.
- Commit to a personal and individualised process of continuous development and lifelong learning according to their coaching role and practice domain.



## Encourage National Lead Agencies for Sport Coaching to:

- Adopt a systems perspective to the continuous improvement of sport coaching.
- Examine and understand what professionalisation means for sport coaching within their national historical and social milieu.
- Carefully consider the goals for sport coaching in their specific context including: good governance, recruitment, diversity, education, development, support, employment, recognition, regulation, representation, ethical practice, licensing, research, statistics and tracking.
- Design a long-term development plan with clear short and mid-term actions that create and maintain momentum.
- Recognise the central role of the coach in the social dialogue in sport and thus bring the Voice of the Coach to the fore of this process by stimulating consultation and representation at individual and organisational level.

The CoachForce21 Expert Group  
May 2021

# Position Statement

## “Professionalisation as a Process of Continuous Improvement for Sport Coaching in Europe”

### Background & Rationale Paper

## Introduction

The contribution sport coaches make to European society has received growing recognition amongst policy-makers over the last decade [1,2]. Sport coaching is no longer only associated with professional and Olympic sport, trophies and medals, and it is regularly proposed as an activity that contributes to the development of individuals, communities, and societies. Unfortunately, sport coaching has also been associated with negative outcomes such as institutionalised doping, abuse of athletes, and match-fixing. The level of scrutiny and expectations on coaches are higher than ever, and therefore, more and more countries and sport organisations are examining how coaches are currently recruited, educated, developed, supported, employed, represented, and recognised.

In the current landscape, the need to review the existing ICCE position statement on “Sport Coaching as a Profession” [3] written in 2011 is paramount. The 2021 position statement takes into account policy, practice, and research developments over the last decade to propose a way forward for sport coaching over the next 10 years.

## The 2011 Position Statement

In 2011, Duffy and colleagues conducted an analysis of the potential for sport coaching to become a profession. Sport coaching was found not to be fully aligned with recognised professional traits. For instance, it was found to be lacking in areas such as common purpose, knowledge base, representational organisation, ‘right to practice’ provision, and ethical practice.

In addition, the complexity of sport coaching as an occupational area was also highlighted. This is reflected in the multiplicity of status categories (i.e., pre-coach, volunteer coach, part-time paid coach and full-time paid coach) and coaching domains (i.e., children, youth participation, adult participation, emerging athlete, high performance athlete, etc.). Each of these statuses and domains was found to have their own characteristics and varying potential to meet the recognised traits of a profession. The authors thus advocated that coaching should be considered as a “blended professional area operating within the wider field of sport and physical activity” (p.93), and that the aim should be to create “a strong professional identity within a blended model” (p.113). This identity, the statement noted, could manifest in different ways across sports and countries.

Against this backdrop, the statement defined a series of indicative actions to guide the process of professionalisation going forward. These actions included clear purpose, knowledge, organisation, and ethics, and were intended as the basis for ongoing dialogue, research and development. The 2011 document recognised that these elements play out differently across national and sporting contexts and recommended that any application of these shared principles would require careful localised adaptation.

## Status of The European Coaching Workforce Today

Research-based estimates indicate that there are between 5 and 9 million active sport coaches in the European Union [4]. This represents between 1% and 2% of the total population. It is reasonable to expect similar statistics across most of the developed world, and increasingly, in developing countries. Sport coaches therefore constitute a significant workforce globally.

Recent research conducted in the EU [5] has revealed a contrasting picture in relation to the indicative actions proposed by the 2011 statement and the recognised traits of professions. A majority of countries now have:

- A legal definition of coaching and specific laws to regulate practice.
- Recognised coaching as a profession within their national professional register.
- An organisation or governmental department tasked with regulating and developing coaching.
- Formal occupational and ethical standards for coaches.
- Coaching qualifications aligned with and included within national qualifications frameworks.
- Involvement of higher education in the education of coaches as well as in the creation of an evidence-based knowledge base.

Progress, however, appears less apparent in relation to the existence of:

- National licensing schemes and quality assurance mechanisms to actively regulate and guarantee safe and ethical coaching practice.
- Optimal data collection structures and systems to monitor and track the status, education, progression, evolution and needs of the coaching workforce. A full picture of the total number of coaches, their demographic characteristics, qualification levels and employment status remains unavailable.
- Standards for the selection and training of the Coach Developer workforce.
- Regular and high-quality continuous professional development (CPD) processes and opportunities.
- Functional and impactful organisation and representation bodies for coaches (i.e., coaches' associations).
- Paid employment opportunities for the entire workforce.



## Professionalisation in 2021 and Beyond

Since the publication of the 2011 statement, the debate about the readiness of coaching to pursue professionalisation and the benefits of taking such approach have intensified. Whilst among policy makers there seems to be an emerging agreement that coaching requires some regulatory drivers to maximise the chance of wider individual and societal outcomes, academics have expressed a number of concerns.

Specifically, some authors have:

- Interpreted the overt regulation of coaching as an attempt to control coaches rather than to develop coaching [6,7].
- Suggested that the blended nature of the workforce makes it irreconcilable to aspire to professional status [8].
- Proposed that only professional coaches working in high performance sport should be subject to anything akin to professional regulation [9].

Despite the above concerns, our research and practical experiences of working with governments and national and international federations indicates that positive steps towards contextualised forms of professionalisation are still a valid aspiration for many of them. Importantly, however, a change of focus is proposed in the way professionalisation is generally understood and pursued.

We hereby propose that the focus is shifted from professionalisation as a single destination, towards professionalisation as a continuous long-term aspirational process of occupational improvement based on system development [10]. The basis for this shift arise from our on-going research showing that countries are at different stages along this journey, and that the key steps and processes are highly dependent on a range of contextual factors – culture, social structures, politics, and economics [11].

Moreover, case studies show that, even for countries and sports who have made significant progress in increasing the status of coaching as a profession, this has not been a quick process and that, in most cases, this has taken place over a decade of planned and coordinated small, successive steps, typically informed by a systems-view of sport coaching [12].

The notion of professionalisation has thus evolved to encompass not only the regulation of the right to practice and the remuneration status of sport coaches, but their recruitment, education, development, support, employment, and recognition. This broader understanding lends itself better to the understanding of the professionalisation of coaching as a continuous process of improvement of the overall coaching system. This, in turn, powers a similar process of continuous individual coach improvement which impacts directly and positively on the participants' experience.



Importantly, depending on contextual conditions, these developments may happen at a national level, or be limited to the efforts of specific federations or governing bodies of sport. Likewise, these processes may include short, mid and long-term steps and goals ranging from improvements to qualifications, to the enshrining of coaching as a profession in national laws. Continuous improvement of sport coaches and coaching is the premise and the outcome.

Despite the flexibility of this approach, the guiding aspiration remains that suitably qualified and developed coaches carry out their practice within a national regulatory framework of occupational and ethical standards and qualifications aimed at guaranteeing the quality and safety of coaching activities, the fulfilment of participant outcomes, and the promotion and protection of coaches' rights, rewards and recognition.

## Conclusions

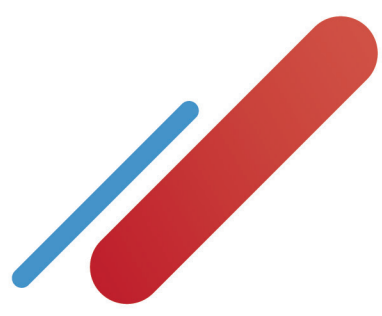
Sport coaches and sport coaching are a significant element of the fabric of modern societies. Improvements to education, development, and regulation of practice have been proposed as a mechanism to guarantee the quality and safety of the participant experience, and to protect coaches' rights. Advancing sport coaching as a profession, however, is a complex and challenging proposition which requires carefully contextualised solutions. Organisations and individuals interested in driving this process must engage and influence all relevant stakeholders – from government and institutions to the general public – to unlock more of society's capital and human resource. Preparing the ground and laying the necessary foundations is a pre-requisite to allow steady improvement over time.

The CoachForce21 Expert Group  
May 2021



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