

Running to Win # 8
Coaching Makes The Difference
By Dr. Greg Wiens

My first real coaching moment stands out in my memory as if it happened yesterday. The Athletic Director of the school district had come to watch the 400-meter dash. I was running in the first heat and after the run he briskly rushed over to me. I did rather well and expected him to congratulate me. Instead he asked where I learned to run? Then, without letting me say a word, he replied “A rubber chicken factory!” My coach said my head was flailing left and right like it was going to come off. Right then and there he taught me how to correct my form. He had me run up and down the track.

Up until that point, “coaching,” meant telling me how far and fast I had to run in practice or maybe laying out some strategy to win a race. But, for once someone was really watching me and trying to help my performance. He was trying to help me succeed at what I was doing. He didn’t hold anything back, and I am glad he didn’t. I very well would not be running today if he had not been so brutally honest with me.

Running is more complicated than most people think. Your form is unique and should always reflect your uniqueness. However, there are some principles of physics that can be applied to how you move your arms, the way your foot hits the ground, the length of your stride and the time your foot stays on the ground. With some coaching in these and other areas, you can run so much faster and farther with much less effort. And more importantly, it would be less stress on your body and cause less damage.

Every great runner has a coach, who videos, analyzes pictures and provides feedback on a runner’s stride, strike, speed and spread. It is almost impossible for someone to evaluate himself or herself. Every morning we all get up and look in a mirror to see our reflection. We need someone or something outside to give us an honest picture of ourselves.

Just as that Athletic Director improved my form and therefore performance drastically, a coach can change your ministry’s impact significantly. Arguably, one of the world’s greatest golfers, Tiger Woods has a coach (Hank Haney) who has radically changed his swing. Tiger trusted his coach even as he caused him to drop from top standings while he reworked his swing. But Tiger came back better than ever because he listened to his coach.

The same is true of Michael Jordan. He wasn’t one of the greatest basketball players in college, he became one of the greatest basketball players in the NBA because he worked hard and listened to Phil Jackson. He let Phil coach him into a much more well-rounded player. Every athlete has had coaches that improved their performance and so have most people who have excelled at anything in life. So why do we, Christian leaders, resist the idea of a coach?

When was the last time you asked for someone to honestly give you feedback on your life or ministry? For some reason, Christian leaders are paranoid of getting coached. They don’t want someone “suggesting” that they could be better. Or they are afraid of having someone see their faults. So they cover up their shortcomings rather than expose them to someone who can help. It may be painful, but it can be so productive!

I love looking at how Jesus coached the disciples for three years. He sent them out on assignments, he watched them perform, he asked them questions, he told them stories and he gave them

honest/brutal feedback (“you have little faith”, “get behind me Satan”). He enhanced their performance through focused coaching. Then they did it again.

I can't tell you how many times I have suggested coaching for pastors around the state and they are stunned I would even think of such a thing. Personally, I have had three mentors and three coaches over my 35 years of ministry. Each has done exactly as I mentioned above. They evaluated my life/ministry over a period of time and gave me honest feedback and ways to improve myself. I am a totally different man today because of their input in my life. Usually one coach doesn't cover all areas of your entire life. Generally, coaches are good for specific skills and seasons of life and ministry.

Each of us are unique. Like runners, we all run with a different form. We have different gifts, personalities, backgrounds, strengths, family of origin, issues and so forth. A good coach doesn't try to make you into someone you are not. Rather, a good coach will begin with your unique strengths and then enhance them by teaching you ways to maximize them and minimize your weaknesses. It isn't easy. It took the better part of that season trying to keep my head still when running. Even now when I get tired at the end of the race, my head starts to wobble.

The same is true for us in ministry. When we tire, it is easy to go back to the old habits of relating, preaching, leading and serving which the enemy knows lowers our effectiveness. Again, that is the time for a coach to hold up a mirror and then help us correct the behavior/attitude that is causing us to settle for less than God's best of us. Good coaches will be able to get you to do, what you don't want to do, to become what you want to become (Tom Landry).

A year ago, our Elders told me I needed to bring in a coach to look at the way our staff was working together. They had seen something in my life that I didn't see. I brought in Al Ells who spent several days with the team. We ended up totally reworking our key accountabilities as a team. I am pumped about our ministry today because we did that a year ago. I was drying up from the inside and didn't know it. They Elders saw it and pointed out the need to have my coach look at it. Al pierced my veil and saw the trouble underneath which few noticed on the outside.

The difference between a coach and a mentor, for me, is that a mentor helps guide me in issues of life such as my family, marriage or personal growth habits. A coach is more specifically focused on ministry skill sets, which need to be developed in my leadership and ministry. Obviously, there is a lot of overlap between the two, but the two general categories work for me. I have noticed how people refer to mentors, as personal coaches, which is fine.

Some runners really have bad form. It is difficult to watch as their form will likely cause injuries. It is sad because it doesn't have to be this way. How about you? Have you ever had anyone look at your life and/or ministry as a coach? Have you ever been totally honest with someone, not trying to look good, but rather trying to look like yourself to see how a coach can help you perform better with less effort and less stress? Jesus wants us to maximize our effectiveness for the Kingdom. Florida Church of God Ministries has a wonderful cadre of trained coaches who can help. All you have to do is ask.

And don't make fun of me if my head wobbles when I preach, I am still working on it!