

Preliminary Recommendations Report for ***GAA Coach Education Programme***

Submitted to the *GAA National Games Development Committee* by

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## **Introduction**

In April 2012, I was invited to visit as a *Fulbright Specialist* to the *Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)* with the intent to assist in the re-development and refinement of the *GAA Coach Education Programme*. Since arriving at *GAA Headquarters* on Monday, May 21, 2012 I have participated in various activities designed to help me develop an understanding of the entire process of the *GAA Coach Education Programme*. These six weeks have allowed me to gain a clear understanding of the process in which: (a) Tutor Trainers are prepared, (b) the content and process of the Tutor Training program, and (c) the structure, content, and procedures of the various levels of the current *GAA Coach Education Programme Awards*.

Furthermore, it has been my aim to understand not only the structure of the *GAA Coach Education Programme* but the context in which it is delivered. It is here where I was most challenged. A large amount of my time was devoted to comprehending and being respectful of the *GAA's* volunteer ethos. Concurrently, this meant learning about the motivation of its membership which strongly influences what can be included in a volunteer coach education programme and how it can be offered to those requesting and requiring it. Additional tasks undertaken that were related to my overall understanding of the *GAA Coach Education Programme* included discussions with third-level teacher education faculty at Dublin City University and becoming familiar with the *GAA's* efforts to engage teacher training colleges and primary schools across the island.

Engaging in these activities provided me with sufficient data sources that yielded information useful in conducting a critique and review of the current coaching education structures. Furthermore, those data, coupled with my background in this area enabled me to critique and review proposed changes in the way that the *GAA* conducts coach education and offer recommendations for consideration and, perhaps, implementation. This report provides the reader with a summary of data sources, general findings, and preliminary recommendations. While many people have contributed to my work while in Croke Park, the words and opinions expressed in this document are mine and I take full responsibility for any inaccuracies and/or errors.

## **Data Sources**

1. Multiple discussions with *GAA Games Development Personnel*.
2. Curricular Materials Used in Tutor Training and *GAA Coach Education* courses (e.g., logbooks, guides, *PowerPoint* slides).
3. Interviews with Provincial Games Managers (PGMs), Provincial Games Development Officers, Tutor Trainers, and Tutors.
4. National, Provincial, and County *GAA Websites*.
5. Contemporary research on coach and teacher education (references available upon request).
6. *Coaching Ireland* produced documents: (a) *Coaching Strategy for Ireland* and (b) *Coaching in Ireland – Systems Definition & Coordination* draft proposal.

## **Findings**

1. The *GAA* is comprised a group of individuals at the National and Provincial levels clearly concerned with and informed on the best practices and relevant content essential for quality coach education. The *Coach*<sup>10</sup> conceptual framework is a thorough and thoughtful characterization of coaching that has a depth and breadth rarely seen in other organizations. Furthermore, as the *GAA Games Development & Research* personnel have noted, *Coach*<sup>10</sup> has a measure “ecological validity” that is essential for a unique organization like the *GAA*.
2. The structural design of the current coach education program is inadequate to meet the needs of coaches with various expertise levels (e.g., beginner, competent, proficient; a.k.a. emerging, established, enlightened) and coaching interests (e.g., coaching different age levels of people). To be a more powerful influence, a slight restructuring of the programme delivery would be in order.
3. The current modes of program delivery are more “formal” in nature and do not include alternatives that are less formal (e.g., Online Modules & Mentoring Programs) and/or informal (Communities of Practice) in conjunction

with face-to-face delivery. Recent research in the area of Coach Education indicates that coaches can, and may prefer to, learn via multiple ways and to understand, acknowledge, and integrate those ways of learning is to increase the prospects of coaches developing their knowledge and skills.

4. A major strength of the current programme is the robust cohesiveness between the personnel at both the National and Provincial levels. This allows for a united drive toward quality coaching practice. *However, there appears to be a severe lack of fidelity to the established program at some local levels.* That is, the program is often delivered in a way that lacks faithfulness to the planned delivery structure and time frame. This is usually done to make coach education courses less of a burden on the volunteer's time but has drastic implications that are contrary to the intent of the *GAA Coach Education Programme* and renders the programme less effective, at best, and powerless, at worst.

For example, a current "Award 2" course consisting of 27 hours of content that is supposed to be delivered over the course of four weekends is many times crammed into two weekends. Even if the Tutor does an exceptional job in teaching the course, the probability of the coach internalizing and comprehending the content is minimized because of the lack of time available to apply, reflect, and then consult the Tutor and/or colleagues in the context of the coach education course.

5. The *intentional* continuing education of Tutor Trainers & Tutors is non-existent within the accredited GAA Coach Education Programme while the amount and quality of continuing education for Coaches is ungoverned. As it stands, the continuing education/development consists only of continued delivery of Tutor Training or Coach Education programmes. This is inadequate and appears to have been recognized by the Tutor Trainers and Tutors who have produced the *Tutor Support Programme* that outlines a key deliverables aimed at addressing this shortcoming.
6. The entire programme is bereft of a systematic assessment of its impact. When asked if something is working or not, I was never presented with data to support any assertions made. Such a system would allow the organization to obtain data for continuous improvement and to make an argument for the Programme's effectiveness. Without a system, declarations about what "works" and what "does not" are purely conjectural in nature.

### **Preliminary Recommendations**

1. Reorganize the *GAA Coach Education Programme* modules to accommodate coaches' expertise and desired level of coaching. I suggest that a "Core Curriculum" module be offered for three levels of coaching expertise and supplemented with specific modules related the age-level of person being coached/taught (See *Figure 1* for example of proposed structure).
2. Implement *less formal* and *informal* delivery methods of coach education (again, see *Figure 1*) in addition to the face-to-face coursework to suit coaches' practical and learning needs. These methods would include: (a) delivery of content through the Digital Online Education System (less formal method), (b) a structured mentoring program (less formal), (c) GAA-approved Workshops (less formal), and (d) the facilitation of coaching Communities of Practice (informal).
3. Increase the coach's "engagement" time with the *Programme* but structure it across a longer period of time. The intent of this is: (a) to allow for more reflection and application of content taught and learned in the *Programme*, and, (b) if well-organized, to dismiss the notion that enrolling and continuing one's coach education in the GAA is an imposition on one's personal life.
4. Provide *unambiguous* prescriptions regarding the length of time of a coaching education programme in regard to the entire course and in terms of particular delivery mechanisms. For example:

*“The face-to-face delivery of the Core Curriculum course content is designed to be delivered over \_\_\_ days and no longer than \_\_\_ hours per session.”*

This action should be taken to ensure delivery of a course as it was designed. It can also provide a measure (albeit limited) of quality control for the GAA. Whether these guidelines are followed is an issue that is out of the GAA’s Games Development & Research Department’s control. However, Tutor Trainers, Tutors, and Coaches should all be made *explicitly* aware that if the prescriptions are not followed, the course’s effectiveness is severely compromised.

5. Conduct a *needs analysis* that reveals what Tutor Trainers and Tutors require in their continuing education needs. Then, based on those needs, provide continuing education opportunities for Tutor Trainers and Tutors via formal and informal methods (coursework, workshops, mentoring program, & an on-line community of practice).
6. Consider a “point system” that allows these individuals to accumulate credits toward a special designation (i.e., “*Tutor, Class A*”). Or, possibly require Tutor Trainers and Tutors to maintain their qualification as such by accumulating a reasonable amount of continuing education “points” within a reasonable amount of time (e.g., 10 points over three years).
7. Institute an *independent* “*GAA Accreditation*” process for Workshops around the country that ensures a measure of quality control and enables coaches to earn Applied Lifelong Learning (ALL) credits that count toward their progress through the *Programme*. Consider a “points system” that allows coaches to renew a ‘certification’, or count toward their next level of course. Any Workshop attended that lacks *GAA Accreditation* will not count.
8. Devise a systematic manner of amassing and refining the Tutor corps so that it is comprised of only the highest quality and available group of Coach Educators. Perhaps begin to identify those Tutors who have not only been inactive, but appear to have their own agenda. Eventually, a culture of “Tutors are a select group” can be established.
9. Methodically collect and analyze data on the entire system, participants, outcomes, and pilot projects. This would go far in helping the GAA substantiate its claims and the process used in their *Coaching Education Programme*. Furthermore, the data will inform regularly conducted refinements in the entire program. This could be done “in-house” or externally by contracting with assessment experts.
10. Immediately begin video-recording the best practices used by “real” Tutor Trainers, Tutors, and Coaches to be used by these groups in courses and as a reference when not engaged in a course.
11. Investigate the possibility of aligning the Tutor Trainer and Tutor coursework with Ireland’s National Qualification system. The benefits could be two-fold: (a) such a relationship could be viewed as “value added” for those who may be interested in becoming a Tutor Trainer or Tutor, and (b) add a measure of quality control for these positions. Without high quality performance by those teaching the Tutors (Tutor Trainers) and those teaching the Coaches (Tutors) the conceptual framework, content, delivery structure and methods are rendered impotent.
12. Carefully deliberate the execution of any changes recommended in this document or otherwise. It appears that implementing such changes will be best received in small doses and in larger doses only after “pilot programmes” are delivered to smaller populations of Tutor Trainers, Tutors, and Coaches.  
Relatedly, since the effectiveness of the GAA Coach Education Programme is dependent on the Tutor Trainers and Tutors, it is strongly suggested that their training (in some cases, re-training) in the methods and

content be carefully administered. While I do not foresee major changes in the face-to-face delivery of course content, the meaningfulness of the less formal and informal methods of coach learning will be diminished if the Tutors (and hence, Tutor Trainers) are not able to make the links among all the modes of delivery.

### **Concluding Remarks**

It is my sincere hope that all those involved with *GAA Games Development* view this document as a supportive and useful guide as the Coach Education Programme moves forward within the *GAA*. I have done my very best to compile this report while considering the best practices of coach education while balancing it with the needs demanded by the unique nature of this organization. That said, I would like to caution the reader that if these recommendations are heeded that their implementation will be challenging, time consuming and labor intensive, therefore requiring a dedicated and informed group of individuals to execute. However, the effort will most certainly result in a coach education programme of which the *Association* can be proud.

I wish all those who look to continue this progressive movement all the best while remaining at your service when needed. It has been an honor to have been a small part of *GAA* through my work these past six weeks.

Figure 1. Example of Proposed Re-Structuring of GAA Coach Education Programme Structure

