

Sports coaches make these seven kinds of decisions

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The recent AFL Grand Final was a great spectacle. It was also a welcome distraction from the woeful performance of the Wallabies in the rugby union World Cup.

Coach Eddie Jones has been blamed for the disaster, with much criticism focused on his decision to drop many veteran players. Jones has been defending his decision by pointing to his longer-term strategy of building experience in a talented new squad with a view to greater success in the 2027 World Cup.

We can reasonably guess that Jones and his circle carefully considered their various options, and in some manner weighed up the likely advantages and problems associated with each approach.

"Decisions made in this way are often called "deliberative" or "analytical," though we prefer the more informal label pros and cons."

When people reflect on [decision-making](#), the pros and cons model dominates their thinking. However, [research on decision-making over many decades](#) and from diverse academic perspectives has found coaches and others frequently make decisions of many different types.

Our experience with sports coaches—for one of us, with the coaching team of the Hawthorn AFL club, during their three-premiership streak in the mid 2010s; for the other, with Netherlands Olympic coaches—suggests that relatively few coaching decisions are the pros and cons type. It also indicated that coaches generally aren't aware of the full range of types of decisions they make.

This matters because it is difficult to improve decisions if you don't properly appreciate how they get made.

[Our research](#) on this topic, published in *Strategies*, combined insights drawn from a selection of coaches with an extensive review of academic literature on decision-making, including the small amount already available in [sports science](#). We devised a classification of decision types that would be useful to coaches.

Our classification focuses on the nature of the thought processes involved, rather than the subject matter. We also limited our attention to the kinds of decisions people make naturally—given the cognitive machinery provided by evolution—rather than highly technical decision types that require specialized decision training and support.

We found that there are seven basic kinds of decisions sports coaches make, which we call snap, simulation, rule, analogy, metaphor, story, and pros and cons decisions.

We think these are the seven basic kinds of decisions that all people make. This shouldn't be surprising; sports coaches are people (at least for the moment), and do what comes naturally.

Snap decisions

On a spectrum from fast and intuitive, to slow and deliberative, snap decisions are at the other extreme from pros and cons decisions. They are made in the moment, with no conscious thinking through of what to do.

[One example](#) is when Tottenham Hotspur [coach](#) Jose Mourinho was addressing his team and saw they were not taking the situation seriously enough.

He repeatedly slammed his fist into his hand and used profanities. Mourinho didn't stop to weigh up the pros and cons of acting in these ways but acted immediately in order to get more out of his players.

The greatest advantage of snap decisions is that of all decision types, they demand the least time and effort which is crucial in high-tempo sports situations.

Although snap decisions can also be remarkably good—a theme of the well-known book by Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink*—they need to be grounded by extensive experience in the right kinds of situations. Otherwise, they can, as we all know, easily go awry.

Simulation decisions

Simulation decisions involve literally running through a scenario in your head of how events would unfold if you acted in a certain way in a particular situation. These are also known as recognition-primed decisions and are how coaches often select a training drill.

Robert Lansdorp—trainer of many tennis stars including Maria Sharapova, Pete Sampras, and Tracy Austin—thought of a drill where his 6-year-old student Simon needed to hit 10 consecutive balls in one corner of the court before they could move on to the next drill.

Lansdorp imagined Simon repeatedly missing before getting to 10, getting frustrated, and starting to focus better on his shots to escape the situation.

Simulation decisions are largely intuitive and while not as fast as snap decisions, they can often be made quickly, with little mental effort and no special training. However, if sports coaches do not have enough experience in relevant similar situations, simulation decisions will falter.

Rule decisions

Sometimes coaches make decisions by deliberately following an explicit rule that was formulated well in advance of the situation where a decision is required. These rules have a structure of: if these condition(s) arise, then take this action.

For example, before the Queen's stage of the 2020 Giro d'Italia, the Australian coach Luke Roberts thinks of a scenario where the main contender from another team, Tao Geoghegan Hart, attacks and his rider Wilco Kelderman, the highest-placed rider in the team, cannot follow but his teammate Jai Hindley can.

"If we're in a situation that one [of our riders] is not able to follow, we don't wait," Roberts said. During the race, Geoghegan Hart did ride away from Kelderman, so Roberts, using his rule, instructed Hindley to follow.

Rule decisions are essentially a way of pre-making decisions, which has several advantages including faster decision making reducing cognitive effort when making a decision and improving the defensibility of a decision. However, the coach needs to ensure that the situation is relevant for the rule.

Metaphor-based decisions

Seeing one thing "as" another is central to thinking. Popular metaphors for soccer teams include an army, a group of friends, a classroom and a family, making the sports coach respectively a general, friend, teacher or parent.

When he was coach of the Dutch national team in the nineties, Guus Hiddink was asked about the team's losing streak in penalty shootouts and whether the team should be practicing on this.

Hiddink told journalists there was no point in training on this facet of the game, because "Penalty shootouts are a lottery." As it's pointless to practice for a situation in which the team has no influence on the outcome, Hiddink decided not to practice for penalty shootouts.

Metaphor-based decisions have several benefits: they can focus attention

on the most relevant information for a decision and make communication more efficient and economical, they can evoke emotions and can be used to persuade listeners to get behind a decision, and can lead to creative insights.

However, people are rarely aware of the metaphors they are using, which can lead to unconsciously limiting options, as the Hiddink example shows.

Analogy-based decisions

In some decisions, a sports coach thinks about a similar situation—an analogy—and draws lessons from it for the current situation. Analogical decision-making involves explicit comparison with a particular, real previous situation and so is more specific and concrete than a metaphor.

Dawn Staley, the coach for the University of South Carolina basketball team, noticed her players took too long to process a loss. As she explains in the Netflix docuseries *The Playbook*, Staley drew an analogy with when she was a player and nearly stopped after she missed a decisive shot.

To prevent her players from falling into the same trap, and to contain their negative emotions after defeat, Staley implemented a 24-hour rule she had imposed on herself: players have 24 hours to bask in their victory or agonize over defeat, but then they must move on.

An analogy can quickly uncover the most important factors for a decision and does not have to be imagined (as in simulation decisions) or inferred (as in metaphor decisions). A coach can build a stock of analogies by reading case studies or discussions with colleagues that would take a lifetime of experience to encounter.

A common pitfall is that people often don't work hard enough to identify important differences between the analogy and the current situation.

Story-based decisions

In story-based, or narrative decision-making, the coach tells a story about how the current situation arose and how it will evolve, and how it would evolve if a proposed course of action is taken.

As the coach of the Japanese rugby team, coach Eddie Jones remembers in his autobiography sitting silently in the team bus on the way to the game against the mighty South African team.

When Jones asked himself what should he do now? He tells himself: "After four years of careful planning and brutal work, I have to let go. I have to trust our preparation and the character of the young men around me. I have cajoled and driven them, encouraged and even changed them. Right now, though, I can do little to control the test of courage they face."

Stories are a very good fit with sports because sports involve a cast of characters with their various, and often conflicting, roles and objectives.

A story can select important factors for a decision, saving the coach time in having to understand every aspect of the situation. However, as stories can be deceptively compelling, we can get "sucked in," neglecting important factors that do not fit or failing to consider alternative narratives.

Pros and cons decisions

Pros and cons decision-making is identifying a range of options and then

identifying and weighing up the factors counting for and against each option.

As the coach of speed skating star Ireen Wüst, Rutger Tijssen had to choose between two options: have Wüst focus on one distance (Tijssen's preference) or let her race two distances (the athlete's preference).

As part of a workshop in critical thinking for sports coaches, Tijssen drew up a detailed list of the pros and cons for each option, and after weighing up each option decided to make Wüst focus on the 1,500 meters, in which she later won a gold medal.

Canvassing the pros and cons of the options can help to think of the best option instead of the first option that is reasonable (as in simulation decisions), and actively looking for cons helps mitigate the confirmation bias.

In practice, however, often only a subset of options is entertained, options and arguments are raised haphazardly, and a search for compelling arguments can knock an option out of contention rather than canvassing and weighing up all relevant arguments.

The seven decision types we have covered are ones we all use from time to time.

Indeed, in some sense, we are all coaches sometimes, when we try to lift our own games or help others around us lift theirs. Appreciating the seven decision types, with their strengths and pitfalls, can help us all make better choices.

More information: Ger Post et al, Seven Kinds of Decisions Sports Coaches Make, *Strategies* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/08924562.2023.2238297](https://doi.org/10.1080/08924562.2023.2238297)

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