

Taking the Step into Volunteer Coaching

Stephen Millard

Stephen Millard has recently become a volunteer coach at a rapidly expanding club. Here, he reflects on the challenges he's faced so far.



Justen Hyde

It was something I'd been musing over since I began studying jiu jitsu – what would it be like to run my own club? At the end of the summer of 2003, I was given the opportunity by one of my instructors. He was looking for more time to train to get his next belt and, as his most senior student, I was the logical choice to take over the coaching of the York town club.

The Transition from Student to Coach

By taking over the instruction of an existing club, many of the problems I would have encountered with a new club were already dealt with. I had a ready-made base of students, a supply of mats on which to train and a venue that suited our needs. So, as I began to prepare to take over the club, my main worry was how the existing students would respond to me taking up the position and how it would look to prospective students.

At this point, I should explain that I was and am still a brown belt in jiu jitsu. This is just below the black belt that people generally associate with martial arts teachers. In the style of jiu jitsu that I practise, you have to run a club for at least a year before you are even eligible to try and get your black belt. On top of that, the club's previous instructor was one of the country's most senior second-degree black belts. Overall, it seemed as though the club was going to get a serious *downgrade* on their instructor.

Obviously other instructors must have encountered this issue before me, and I took solace in the fact that when I began learning jiu jitsu at university, my instructor was a brown belt as well. I had also completed all three of the coaching levels required by my association in order to run a club. An added consideration, however, was how people who were previously my training partners and friends would respond to my permanent change of role.

Before I finally took on the running of the club, I spoke to a number of the most senior students to find out their opinion of the situation. Thankfully, they were all really supportive and, with them backing me, I felt much more confident in taking on the challenge.

Since its inception, the club had run a single training session on Friday evenings for a mixed class of children and adults, with adults attending an extended session at the end. To my mind, Friday wasn't the best night to run a training session, as many adults would be busy socialising after a week at work. So, with the permission of my instructor, we decided to add an additional Monday evening session, which I would take for the first month and the Friday session as well thereafter.

Whilst I had taught many individual sessions in the past, both at this club and at the university club, the opportunity to plan and teach a month of sessions was invaluable to me. It gave me the opportunity to immerse myself slowly into everything that was required of me to coach and manage the club. The addition of the extra session has also had long-term benefits for the club. It has noticeably improved the rate at which the students pick up and retain the techniques they are taught, as well as providing an opportunity for people unable to attend on a Friday to train.

As I began teaching both club sessions, I began to find myself adopting a more confident instructor persona. I'm naturally quite a reserved person, so it always surprises me that I now seem to be able to adopt this role so easily just by changing into my jiu jitsu uniform.

The hardest problem I initially had to overcome was remembering people's names. Whilst I have always had a good memory, I've never been good with names. The club had at least 15 regular members, with perhaps the same again attending irregularly. But after the first month of taking registers and listening to people talking to one another, I managed to remember everyone's name. This was essential in what I wanted to do with the club.

The club had previously been just a place to come and learn jiu jitsu. People generally knew one another and everything ticked over nicely. I decided that the first step in the club's development was to create a good club spirit. This began with me just frequently referring to people by their first name when teaching the entire class. It helped me build a rapport with individual students, and it helped the other students learn everyone else's names. I also encouraged students to train with as many different people as they could each session.

Summary

Advice on the Transition to Volunteer Coach

Volunteer coaching is certainly a worthwhile endeavour, but for anyone making the transition I'd offer the following advice:

- Plan what you want to teach and then plan some contingencies, as things never seem to fit the plan exactly.
- Ensure that you develop an efficient committee to support you – don't try and do everything yourself.
- Make your lessons fun to teach as well as fun to participate in because enthusiasm is contagious.

I began organising trips to jiu jitsu courses and events that the club had previously tended not to attend. We also began organising social events for club members such as meals, trips and even a treasure hunt. Overall, this promoted more of a club mindset and this was bolstered even more when the junior members won the club trophy at the Junior Jitsu Foundation National Judo Competition.

This club spirit is evident in the way the training sessions now run. The atmosphere is open and friendly and everyone has lots of fun as they train. The more the students enjoy their training, the easier it seems for me to be able to coach them. When they are having fun, they are more attentive and responsive and it's always nicer to teach to a class of smiling faces than a class of people whose heart isn't in it 100%.

Extra-curricular Activity

The one thing I never quite grasped was how much effort I was going to have to put in outside the training hall. When I took over the club's coaching, I also took on all administration of the club. I knew that there would be a good deal of work to do: dealing with the national governing body, the regional committee, tracking club finances, advertising the club, and so on.

As my year progressed, the admin work continued to mount and become more complicated. I was trying to balance my lesson planning, teaching, training, club administration, social life and my full-time job. The best way I can describe it is like having two full-time jobs.

It was obvious by now that I needed some help in developing the club, and so we elected a committee of members to help run it. Whilst I still carry out the vast majority of the work involved, the committee helps in developing ideas and carrying out many of the independent tasks. Their assistance and the help of my partner I think have helped me retain my sanity over the past months. I would sincerely suggest that anyone who takes on the management of a club as well as the coaching gets at least a couple of people to help share the load of the mountain of admin work that inevitably appears.

Reflecting on the First Year

So a year has passed and I'm still a brown belt and still running my club in the middle of York. The club has now swelled to about twice its original size so, even though I feel my coaching is working well, I now find myself challenged with ensuring that the quality of coaching received by everyone does not suffer. I also still find myself battling against the paperwork, but I think I may be starting to win. It's been a fantastic year of discovery for me and, whilst it's been a lot of hard work, knowing that I've helped make so many of the club and student successes possible gives me a great sense of pride in what I've done in coaching the club. My main challenge this year will be finding the time to prepare myself for the opportunity to obtain a black belt without letting the running of the club or any other part of my life suffer.

Biography

Stephen Millard is a brown belt in the martial art of jiu jitsu, which he has been studying since 1993. He has taught at several clubs and at regional and national courses. For the past year, he has been a voluntary primary instructor for the York Town Jitsu Club. As well as coaching jiu jitsu, Stephen works full-time running an IT support team for a leading insurance company.



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