

“Hey coach, don’t sell yourself short.”

- Tom Cannella

Professional athletes need professional coaches no matter how physical or mental the sport can be.

Even spelling bee geniuses in the elementary ranks hire spelling and diction coaches.

Professional coaches are supportive of their athletes all the way from preparing and building a game plan, executing that plan during practice, and seeing how that plan plays out during competition and adjusting it for next time. A coach has the same professional role in every major sport such as baseball, football, golf, and even in a mid-major sport like bowling.

There is not a clear distinction in the sport of bowling as to what makes a coach, a professional. In other sports such as baseball or football, coaches who are members of professional teams are considered professional coaches. In golf, coaches of professional golfers are also seen as professional coaches. However, with bowling, knowledgeable people who coach profitable bowlers on the PBA tour are not seen as professional coaches in the public’s eye—they are seen as trusted guys “that know what their talking about.”

If Jordan Nassberg came up to you at the lanes and offered advice on bowling, you most likely wouldn’t give him the light of day. However, if Butch Harmon came up to a golf prospect and said, “Jump,” the golfer would ask, “How high?”

Part of the problem is name recognition but the largest part is that there is a clear difference in how we think of coaches in bowling and coaches in golf. Harmon has coached Tiger Woods to many tournament victories including several major championships, coached Phil Mickelson in 2007, and used to work with Nick Faldo. Nassberg has coached Michael Haugen Jr. to a victory at the H&R Block Tournament of Champions earlier this year and also coaches newly exempt PBA bowler, Andrew Cain. So is Nassberg a professional coach? Butch Harmon sure is.

Harmon tweaked Tiger’s swing mechanics or gave advice on club selection during practice before a tournament. Nassberg may tweak Haugen’s release, hand position, or give advice on ball selection during the practice sessions preceding a tournament. The parallel is clear, however, bowling fans don’t see it as Nassberg leading Haugen Jr. to a tour victory, but golf fans do credit Harmon for Tiger’s extraordinary success early in his career.

The problem with not having a clear distinction of who is and who isn’t a professional coach surfaces when the talk of financial compensation and reputation is brought to the table.

There are plenty of people in America who charge per hour to teach others the game of bowling—whether it be during a structured camp or after house leagues. These people may be certified coaches by organizations such as Dick Ritger’s Bowling Camp or USBC, but they are not necessarily professionals of coaching bowling. Nevertheless, they are being compensated for their time and expertise.

Then there is the traditional old-fashioned approach to learning bowling. Everyone who has bowled competitively knows “that guy” who is at the lanes 24/7, knows the strokes of every good bowler in the area, and is an expert at helping others pull off big profits at nights of pot bowling.

This guy is not a professional coach, but in many people’s minds, he has professional quality knowledge and they would trust him over anyone. He is not always compensated for his time or expertise, and yet everyone knows they can go to him for advice.

So where exactly is the line drawn in the sand for when a bowler should pay their coach, mentor, or advice-giver a percentage of their profits?

Obviously this is a question that should be answered case-by-case because any coach-bowler combination can agree on anything they want. I believe that at the very least, professional bowling coaches (people who coach professional bowlers) should be compensated by the bowler they coach, professional or amateur.

Receiving financial compensation for coaching at the professional bowling ranks is much different than charging for lessons during clinics or for giving tips on mechanics and lane-play after league on a Saturday afternoon.

When a professional bowler agrees to have a coach, they are entering a multi-faceted relationship. This relationship can range from discussing topics such as ball roll, drillings, and reaction over a few beers to completely restructuring a ball arsenal in between squads of a major championship.

The coach must know his bowler's personality on and off the lanes. Some bowlers are really receptive and easy to talk to off the lanes but self-destruct when things go array on the lanes. On the other hand, some bowlers are hard to get to know but very coachable on the lanes. Coaches must know what type of personality they are dealing with so that they know the most effective way to instruct their bowler.

This type of in-depth analysis that the coach must engage in order to ensure a healthy coach-bowler relationship is unique to coaching professionally. If you are giving lessons for \$20/hr. and never have to see that person again, you don't have to be concerned with whether or not they are absorbing what you are telling them—it's a one and done deal. However, with coaching professionally, it's about building your bowler's success gradually and steadily, learning new things about your bowler every week and making adjustments accordingly.

America's bowling industry is structured around building reputation and gaining knowledge. What we often forget is that professional bowling is also a professional sports industry. We would never entertain the idea that Harmon should coach Woods pro bono, but somehow as an industry we are apathetic towards the issue of paying coaches. Every bowling coach does it for the love of the game and for the relationships they develop, but no one should be selling themselves, their knowledge, time, or expertise for free.