RUNNING HEAD: COACHING ATHLETES WHO ARE DEAF

Effectiveness of American Sign Language in Coaching Athletes who are Deaf

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Abstract

A study was conducted to determine post-secondary coaches' perceptions of American Sign Language (ASL) and the level of involvement with ASL when coaching post-secondary athletes who are deaf and hard of hearing. Seventy-three hearing coaches of post-secondary athletes who were deaf and hard of hearing and twenty-two post-secondary athletes who were deaf with hearing coaches were asked to complete a survey. Based on the results from the surveys, it was determined that interpreters using American Sign Language was the most used and effective source of communication between hearing coaches and athletes who are deaf. However, the athletes who were deaf and who had coaches that took the time to try and communicate directly with them developed a positive relationship with their coach. Both coaches and athletes believed direct communication lessened the barrier and communication gap between athletes and coaches. Ultimately, the positive relationship between them enhanced and improved the athlete's attitude and performance. The recommendation emerging from this study would be for coaches to learn American Sign Language when coaching athletes who are deaf. (11 Figures)

Effectiveness of ASL in Coaching Athletes who are deaf

Athletes who are deaf have had a proud, but unassuming, history of competing in sports. In 1890, the New York Giants had three pitchers who were deaf on their team, including the legendary pitcher, Luther “Dummy” Taylor, who led the Giants to two pennants. In addition, there have been at least fourteen other major league ball players who were deaf. Contributions by athletes who were deaf have not been limited to the playing field. Outfielder, William E. Hoy, initiated the practice of using signs by umpires and coaches (Ritter, 1992). Football players from Gallaudet University, the only Liberal Arts College for the Deaf in the world, have been credited with creating the huddle to hide the discussion between players before each play (Strassler1976 & Gannon, 1981).

Along with the accomplishments there are specific challenges that face athletes who are deaf. The athletes who are deaf are typically surrounded by coaches and teammates who can hear on the field and in the locker room. Each has an exclusive means of communication, creating a thorny challenge for both the athletes and the coaches. Lack of compatible communication styles not only impacts success and failure on the field, but often leads to feelings of isolation and frustration by the athletes who are deaf. Wayne Coffey (2002), author of *Winning Sounds Like These*, recounts his own attempts and struggles to communicate with the players of a basketball team of whom all were deaf. He meticulously documented the gap and frustration between the athletes who could hear and those who were deaf. He found that the levels of dissatisfaction were frequently so great that the athletes who were deaf often retired before their eligibility expired.

While the world of sports can be a source of detachment, it can also provide avenues for socialization for the athletes who are deaf on and off the field. Deaf Sport, an

organization committed to supporting athletes who are deaf, aids in increasing and improving an athlete's overall psychological well being, self-esteem and integration into society (Stewart, 1991). Deaf Sport advocates that coaches guide and share information directly with the athletes who are deaf, specifically, they recommend the use of American Sign Language (ASL). ASL is the oldest and best-known form of communication for the deaf. It is a visual mode of communication that allows information to be gained by observing hand, body, and facial movements. This manual form of communication allows avenues of instruction that oral communication cannot provide athletes who are deaf.

The American Athletic Association of the Deaf (AAAD) supports Deaf Sports proposal to use ASL and noted that the Deaf world used sign language as a means of communicating with each other and as a valuable way to communicate with their hearing peers. They found that by utilizing this mode of communication athletes who were deaf did well in competition with their peers who were able to hear (Ammons, 1990).

Ralph Martens (1997), best known for his work in developing effective coaches, studied the nonverbal communication skills needed to be an effective coach when communicating with athletes who are able to hear. He suggests that body motion; including gestures and movements of the hands, head, feet, and the entire body, are effective communicators. His findings indirectly offer further support for ASL.

Aaron Moffett (2001) used research conducted by Martens to springboard his own research. Moffett, a special education professor involved with disabled sports at Michigan State University, focused his research on communication methods of hearing coaches and athletes who are deaf. In 2001, he studied ASL with 23 male and 16 female athletes who were deaf. The purpose of his research focused on effective and ineffective uses of ASL.

Moffett found that athletes who were deaf seldom paid attention to directions from a coach during actual playing time. Instead, effective coaches communicated important instructions during warm-up periods and timeouts. He recommended that coaches of athletes who are deaf articulate the players' roles before they take the field.

Moffett recognized the importance of finding ways to gain the athlete's attention before using ASL. He identified flickering lights on and off or waving ones hands as very effective means of gaining attention. In addition, consistent verbal and nonverbal messages enhanced the athletes' ability to properly interpret messages. Inconsistency with the delivery of the message lost the attention of the athlete, resulting in misunderstandings. He also found that using the different signs of the various regions or countries of the athletes who were deaf further reduced confusion and reinforced the athlete's individual importance. Moffett also suggested that coaches be aware of their environment, issues such as the glare from sun need to be considered when communicating with athletes who are deaf.

The purpose of this study was to determine post-secondary coaches' perceptions of the effectiveness and level of involvement with ASL when coaching post-secondary athletes who were deaf and hard of hearing and to determine their performance and attitude based on coaches who communicated with ASL.

Methodology

A database of emails was compiled from the National Collegiate Directories, a company that supplies email databases for all levels and sports of collegiate coaches. Two surveys were designed, one for hearing coaches of athletes who were deaf and one for athletes who were deaf with hearing coaches.

Initially, a pilot survey was conducted and modifications were made. The survey was then sent via email to coaches at all post-secondary schools in the United States. It was requested that only those coaches that worked with athletes who are deaf previously or currently complete the survey. Those coaches were then asked to forward a specifically-designed survey to any current athletes who were deaf on their team. A letter attached to the surveys assured coaches and athletes of confidentiality.

The first survey was sent to 551 coaches of all sports throughout the country, 73 hearing coaches of post-secondary athletes who were deaf responded to the survey. These coaches were coaching in all division levels, National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) divisions one though three, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) division one through three, and National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) division one through three. Twenty-two athletes who were deaf who were currently being coached by a hearing coach in a post-secondary setting returned the second survey.

Findings

Insert Figure 1 here

Coaches were asked if they believed direct communication between the athletes who were deaf and he or she affected the performance of the athlete. The majority of coaches (74%) believed that direct communication affected performance

Interestingly, almost half (36%) of those who believed that direct communication affected performance stated that athletes who had interpreters or some form of special treatment in place of direct communication had a lower involvement and performance rate.

Most attributed this decrease to perceived preferential treatment by the athletes who were deaf. These coaches stated that the athletes who had several interpreters or who had coaches that made it obvious that alternate communication was an inconvenience to them had players quit before their four-year eligibility or suffered a decrease in performance. Coaches believed these athletes felt neglected and unwanted. Therefore, these twenty-six coaches believed direct communication affected performance because it alleviated the stress and pressure the athletes felt when receiving preferred treatment.

Twenty-two coaches (30%) believed that direct communication required the involvement of the coach. These coaches felt that the job description of coach included being an effective communicator. Twelve of these coaches felt that direct communication provided a starting point for a positive relationship between themselves and their athlete. They believed that proper, respectable, and direct relationships with athletes enhanced their performance.

Sixteen of the coaches (22%) believed that direct communication did not affect performance. Seven of the sixteen coaches (44%) replied that the athletes who were deaf obtained the same information regardless of who delivered the message. They believed that if an athlete wanted to perform at a higher level they would simply work harder. These coaches found no correlation between working harder and communication. Six of the coaches (8%) believed that the athlete could learn from observing other players. They understood learning may be delayed using this method, but they believed performance would not suffer. The final three coaches (4%) believed they had no reason to learn ASL. They all felt interpreters were the answer and did not want to directly communicate with the athletes who are deaf athlete.

Insert Figure 2 here

Sixty-six of the seventy-three coaches (76%) believed that they were “Very Ineffective” or “Ineffective” communicators with their athletes who were deaf. Only seventeen of seventy-three coaches (23%) thought they were “Effective” or “Very Effective” communicators.

Insert Figure 3 here

Of the seventy-three coaches surveyed, fifty-four (74%) coaches believed a gap “Usually” or “Always” existed between themselves and the athletes who were deaf.

Insert Figure 4 here

When coaches were asked how they communicate with their athletes who are deaf, fifty coaches (68%) replied that they used interpreters. Sixteen coaches (22%) used ASL for communication, four coaches (5%) used blackboards or clipboards to write responses, two coaches (3%) used oral communication (lip reading) and the remaining one coach (1%) used cued speech (combination of lip reading and sign).

The coaches who replied that cued speech were his or her method of communication rated their use as “Effective.” The coaches who used oral (lip reading) or blackboard or clipboard all chose “Very Ineffective.” Of the twenty-two percent, who used ASL, 94% rated the use of sign as “Effective” or “Very Effective.” Eighty percent (80%) of the coaches believed that interpreters were “Very Effective” or “Effective.”

Insert Figure 5 here

A follow-up question was asked of coaches that chose interpreters or ASL as their means of communication with their athlete. Ninety-six percent (96%) of those responding believed that interpreters and ASL always had an effect on performance.

Insert Figure 6 here

Figure 6 indicates the number of athletes who were deaf in individual and team sports. Sports listed as team included: football, hockey, water polo, basketball, field hockey, lacrosse, soccer, volleyball, baseball, and softball. Individual sports included the following: track, swimming, diving, bowling, wrestling, golf, tennis, and badminton. Interestingly, twice as many athletes who were deaf participated in individual sports as team sports.

Insert Figure 7 here

Sixty-eight percent (68%) of athletes who were deaf believed it made a "Very Significant" difference in athlete performance when their coach directly communicated in ASL. No athletes believed that direct communication in ASL's impact on performance was "Very Insignificant."

Sixteen (73%) of the athletes who were deaf who had coaches who learned ASL based on the fact that they were coaching an athlete who was deaf. All sixteen did not know any sign language prior to working with the athletes who were deaf. The following are the responses of athletes who were deaf concerning attitude changes when their coach learned to sign:

- "My attitude changed because I never had a coach take the time to get to know me. It has built my relationship with my coach. I feel I have a direct connection to my coach that I never had with my other hearing coaches."
- "I believe attitudes change when anyone shows respect for you. By learning sign, my coach showed me that he respected me."
- "I felt more comfortable in practice. She never made me feel as if I was an outcast on this team because I was different. It is much easier to perform when the team and coach support you and you feel as though they will always be in your corner."
- "When I first came to college, I had a coach who could care less if my interpreter had shown up to translate for me that day. When he resigned, we were given an amazing coach who took the time to learn sign. She made sure I had acknowledged everything. I always felt that I was keeping up with the other athletes. I was much happier about playing a sport and excited to know I could go and talk with my coach at anytime one-on-one."

Insert Figure 8 here

Twenty-two athletes who were deaf responded as to how they communicated with their teammates and officials during game play. Six players (27%) had play signs, five players (23%) used pre-game discussion, and five players (23%) used partial signing.

Insert Figure 9 here

Half of the athletes who were deaf used play signals to communicate with officials during game play. The remaining responses were divided between pre-game discussion, game play, and other, referring to instinct.

Insert Figure 10 here

The twenty-two athletes who were deaf were then asked if their performance changed during their time at college or university based on their coach directly communicating in ASL. Twenty-one of the twenty-two athletes who were deaf believed that their performance was positively impacted. Ten athletes believed they went from a “C” or “Fair” performance to an “A” or “Excellent” status. Four athletes believed they moved from a “B” or “Good” performance to “A” or “Excellent” standing. Four athletes believed they moved from a “D” or “Poor” performance to a “B” or “Good” level. Three athletes went from a “C” or “Fair” to a “B” or “Good” mark. One athlete believed they began at “C” and remained.

Insert Figure 11 here

The final question asked of the athletes who were deaf were their perceptions of their performance changing due to the coach communicating directly in American Sign Language. Nineteen (86%) of the twenty-two athletes who were deaf chose “Very Significant” or “Significant” to describe the impact of signing on their performance.

Conclusion

Based on this study it was determined that interpreters using American Sign Language was the most used and effective source of communication between hearing coaches and athletes who were deaf. Coaches and athletes alike valued direct communication and believed it enhanced an athlete’s performance and built relationships.

Surprisingly, most coaches were very aware of the communication gap between hearing coaches and athletes who were deaf. The majority of coaches involved in this study believed communication was a significant problem when working with athletes who are deaf. These coaches believed they were ineffective communicators because they were not able to communicate directly with their athletes who were deaf athlete. Coaches that showed frustration with communication between themselves and their athletes who were deaf resulted in these players leaving their sport before their eligibility expired.

The athletes who were deaf and who had coaches that took the time to try and communicate directly with them developed a positive relationship with their coach. Both coaches and athletes believed direct communication lessened the barrier and communication

gap between athletes and coaches. Ultimately, the positive relationship between them enhanced and improved the athlete's attitude and performance.

Athletes who are deaf strongly gravitate toward individual sports. The small handful that were involved in team sports chose the more individualized team sports such as baseball, softball, and soccer for participation. It could be presumed that communication influenced the choice of sport for these athletes.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1: Coaches' perception of involvement in communicating directly with athletes who were deaf

Figure 2: Coaches' level of involvement in coaching athletes who were deaf

Figure 3: Coaches' perception of communication with athletes who were deaf

Figure 4: Coaches' different styles of communication with athletes who were deaf

Figure 5: Coaches' perceptions of interpreters or American Sign Language to effective performance

Figure 6: Participants who were deaf in team or individual sports

Figure 7: Perception of American Sign Language, direct communication, and performance of athletes who were deaf

Figure 8: Communication during game play between teammates

Figure 9: Communication during game play between athletes and officials

Figure 10: Perception of performance change from athletes who were deaf based on coaches whom signed directly to the athlete

Figure 11: Extent that coaches who communicate in American Sign Language impact the perceived increase in performance based on the viewpoint of the athletes who were deaf

FIGURE 1

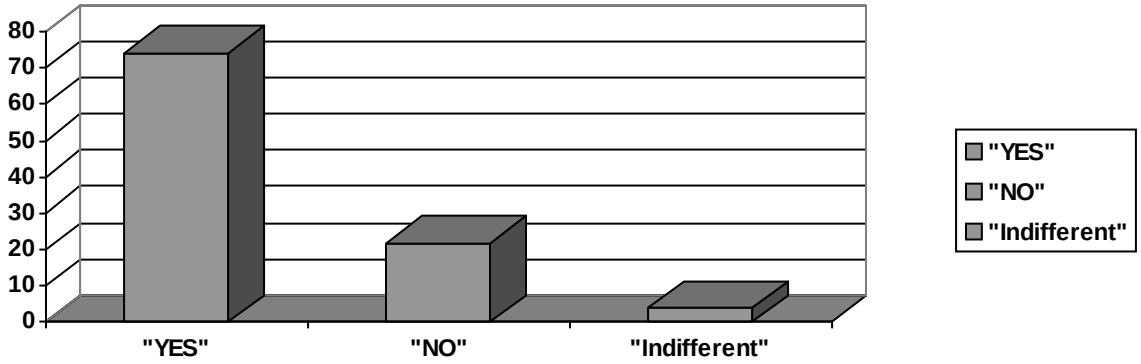


FIGURE 2

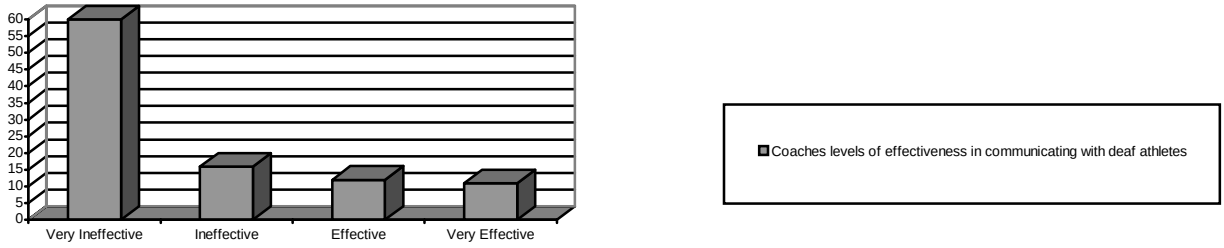

60
55
50
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
Very Ineffective
Ineffective
Effective
Very Effective
Coaches levels of effectiveness in communicating with deaf athletes

FIGURE 3

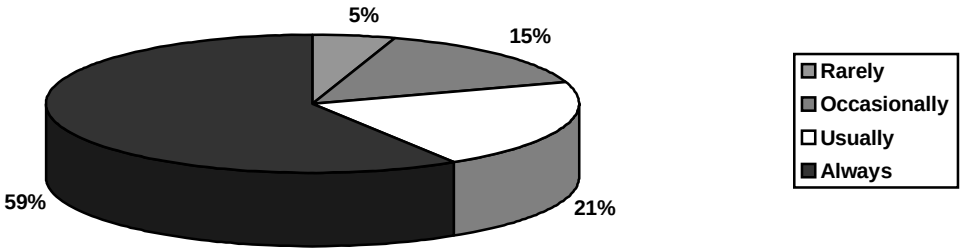


FIGURE 4

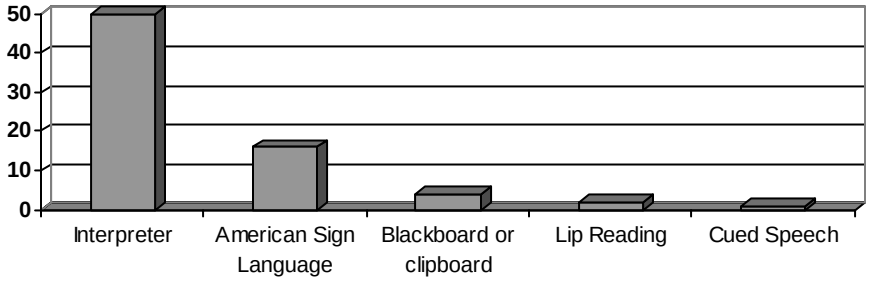

50
40
30
20
10
0
Interpreter
American Sign Language
Blackboard or clipboard
Lip Reading
Cued Speech

FIGURE 5

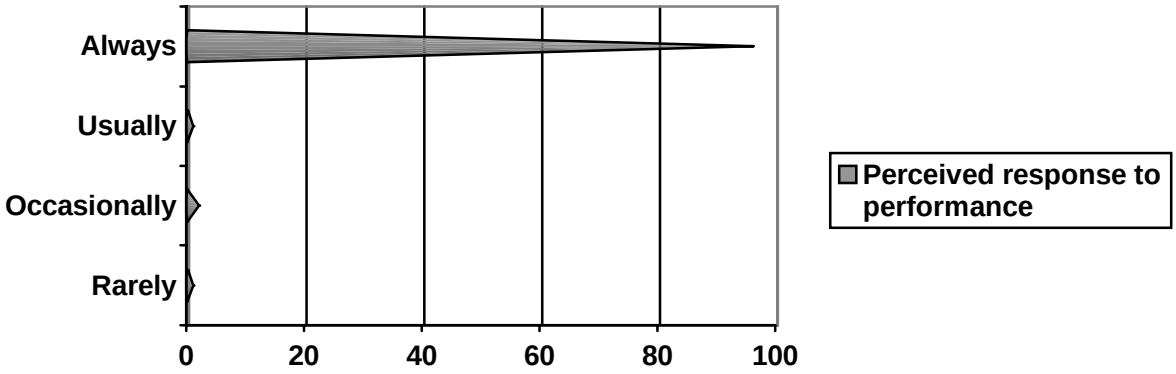

Always
Usually
Occasionally
Rarely
0
20
40
60
80
100
Perceived response to performance

FIGURE 6

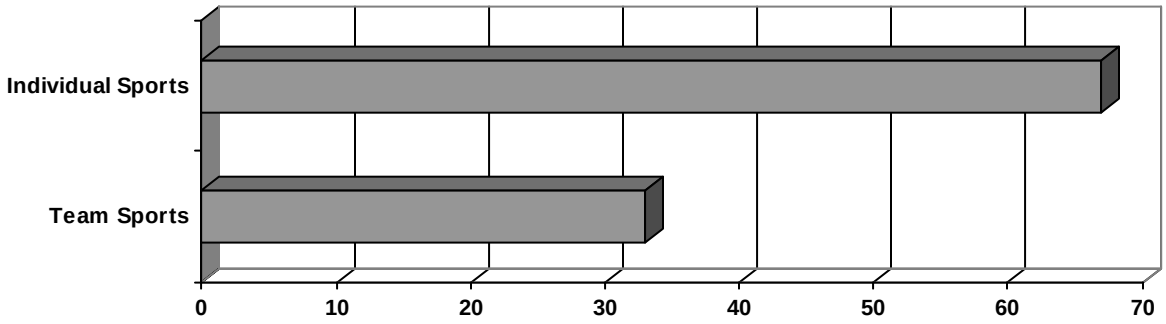


FIGURE 7

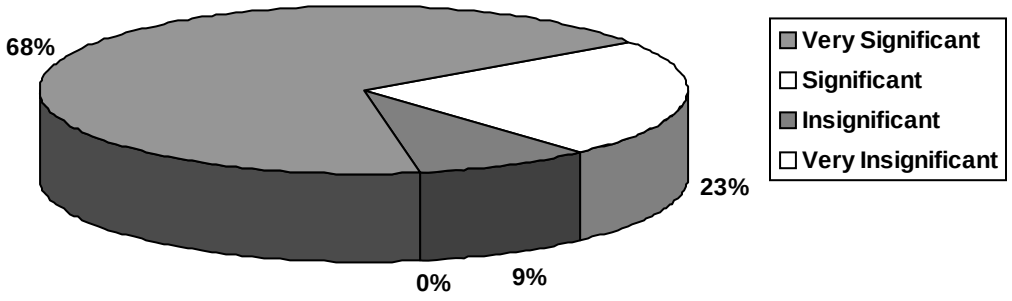

68%
23%
0%
9%
Very Significant
Significant
Insignificant
Very Insignificant

FIGURE 8

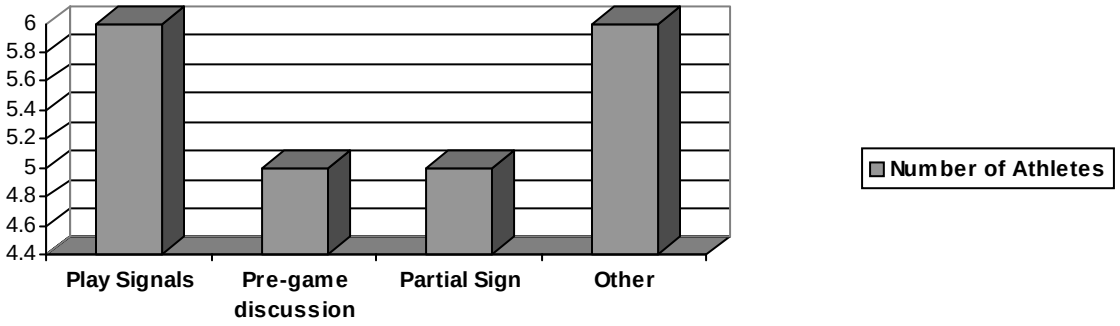

6
5.8
5.6
5.4
5.2
5
4.8
4.6
4.4
Play Signals
Pre-game discussion
Partial Sign
Other
Number of Athletes

FIGURE 9

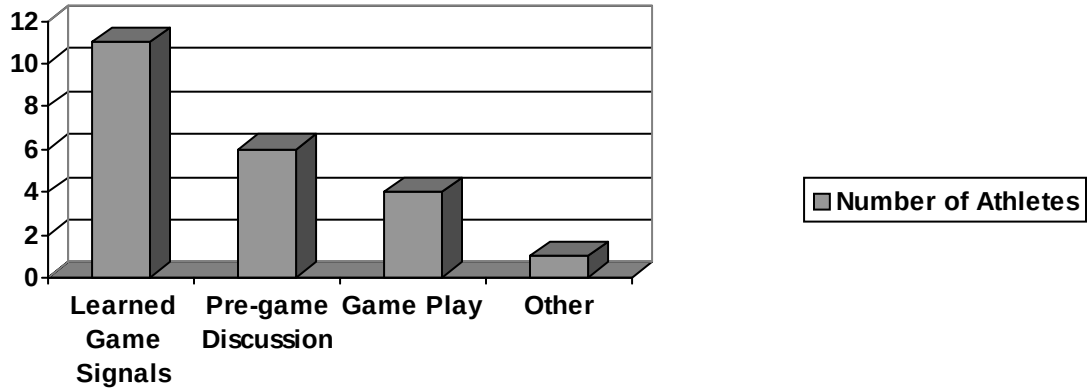

12
10
8
6
4
2
0
Learned Game Signals
Pre-game Discussion
Game Play
Other
Number of Athletes

FIGURE 10

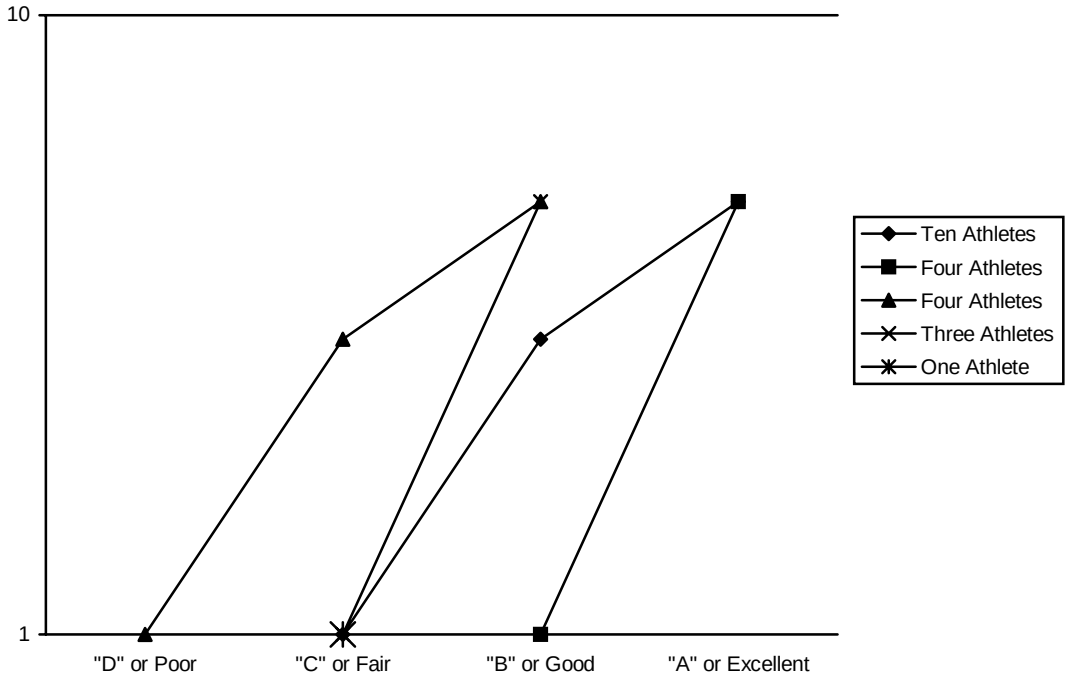
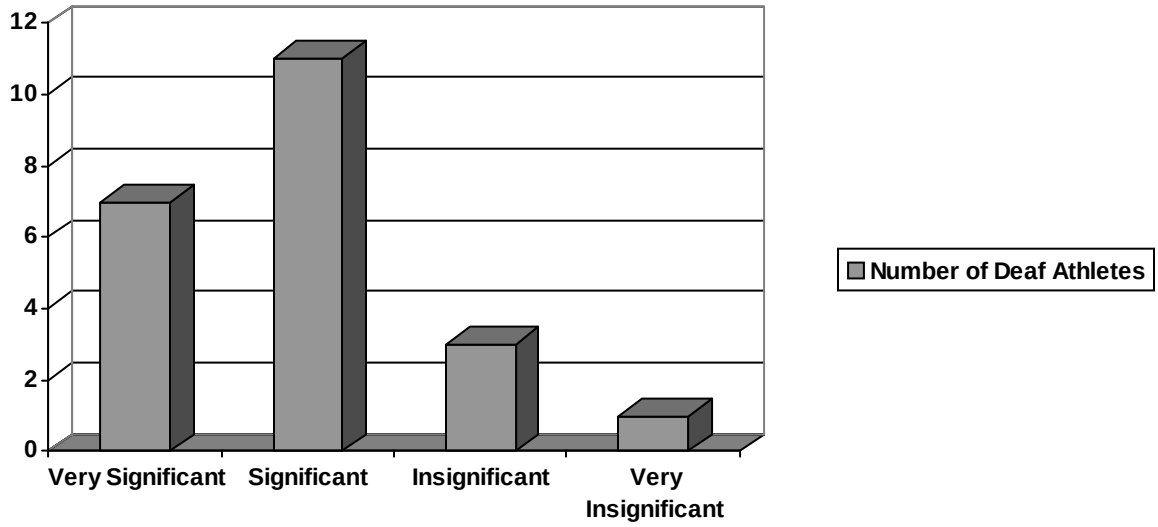

10
1
"D" or Poor
"C" or Fair
"B" or Good
"A" or Excellent
Ten Athletes
Four Athletes
Four Athletes
Three Athletes
One Athlete

FIGURE 11


12
10
8
6
4
2
0
Very Significant
Significant
Insignificant
Very Insignificant
Number of Deaf Athletes