

Strategies of constructing positive coach-athlete relationship in the sports teams

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Abstract: *The relationship between coach and athlete has played the most basic and significant part in the social groups engaged in competitive sports, becoming the main reason that affects the athletic level of athletes. Given that individual athletes typically spend more time with their coaches, the importance of interaction and relationship-building is amplified. Thus, exploring the nature and methodologies of fostering a positive coach-athlete relationship is essential for identifying the elements that contribute to its positivity and success.*

Keywords: *Coach-athlete relationship; strategies of constructing relationship; Sports team*

1. Introduction

In daily sports training and competitive competitions, coaching concerns two people: the coach and the athlete. These two people form a unique dyadic relationship that holds a great deal of power and allows its members to achieve their individual and relationship goals[1] (Jowett, 2017). Due to the unique nature of competitive sports, the relationship between coaches and athletes forms a complex structural dynamic characterized by significant developmental characteristics.

The same as a harmonious society, harmonious sports is also an ideal state of sports development. In this state, positive relationship between coach and athlete has an effective impact not only on athletic performance, but also on the psychological stage of both coach and athlete, even on the athletic life. To be specific, the trust and amicable, positive feedback significantly motivate athletes to enhance their performance in competitions. Jowett [1] (2017) think that the coach-athlete relationship has become the main reason that affects the athletic level of athletes. Strained relationships not only lead to the lack of confidence, excessive pressure, prolonged periods of low movement and even early termination of athletic career, especially on individual sports teams which the coach plays a core role in daily sports training and athletes are in competition with each other.

Consequently, exploring the nature and methodologies of fostering a constructive coach-athlete relationship is essential for identifying the elements that contribute to its positivity and success. The conclusions derived from this investigation will inform the formulation of strategies aimed at promoting robust, supportive, and effective athletic partnerships.

Prior to this endeavor, researchers in this field must engage in thorough deliberation regarding several pivotal matters, particularly the definition and assessment of the coach-athlete relationship construct

2. Relevant definitions and theories

The coach-athlete relationship is characterized as a social dynamic where both parties cultivate interconnected emotions, cognitions, and actions[2] (Jowett, 2005, 2007). This relationship is continually influenced by their interpersonal thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The definition further clarifies that coaches and athletes are mutually and causally interdependent, meaning that each individual's emotional, cognitive, and behavioral states are interconnected. Consequently, the actions and sentiments of one party influence and are influenced by the other. In summary, the interaction between coaches and athletes is essential; they do not function in isolation but rather must collaborate. These relationships serve as foundational elements for structuring activities aimed at achieving significant shared objectives.

This definition has established a foundation for an integrated conceptual framework aimed at illustrating the complex dynamics of the dyadic coach-athlete relationship. The framework consists of three interrelated constructs: closeness (emotional aspects), commitment (cognitive elements), and complementarity (behavioral attributes) — collectively referred to as the 3 Cs [3](Jowett, 2007).

The concept of closeness encapsulates the emotional quality inherent within the relationship [3](Jowett, 2007). It serves as an indicator of the extent of appreciation, trust, respect, and valuation shared between the coach and the athlete. Commitment denotes the mutual intention and eagerness of both coaches and athletes to sustain their relationship devoid of any expectations. Complementarity can be characterized as the collaborative dynamic between the coach and the athlete; both parties aspire for victory, exhibiting a kind and amicable demeanor towards one another while assuming accountability. This exemplifies the complementarity aspect of their behavioral characteristics [4](Gullu et al., 2020). Besides, the member's 3 Cs are interrelated (e.g., an athlete's closeness is linked to his/her commitment), but also the member's 3 Cs are interrelated to the other member's 3 Cs (e.g., an athlete's closeness is linked to his/her coach's closeness) in a dyadic relationship [5](Jowett, 2009).

3. The importance of constructing positive relationship

The dynamic between athletes and coaches is a framework utilized by both parties to elucidate the influence they exert on each other's emotions, perceptions, and actions [6] (Avcı et al., 2018). A constructive relationship fosters the social, personal, and physical growth of athletes [7](Bezci, 2016). Conversely, a detrimental relationship can lead to heightened stress and burnout [8](Yıldız, 2015), potentially resulting in some athletes discontinuing their participation in sports [6](Avcı et al., 2018).

A responsible coach is required to aggregate a substantial amount of information and scientific research relevant to their sport and convert it into actionable coaching and training frameworks. The effectiveness of this endeavor is largely dependent on the coach's expertise, the accessibility of resources, and the rapport established with the athletes under their guidance.

From the perspective of athletes, favorable outcomes such as team cohesion might be more effectively forecasted by the leadership behaviors of coaches, in conjunction with athletes' perceptions of the coach-athlete relationship. This aligns with the notion that coaching strategies aimed at promoting positive results for athletes should be viewed as a combination of both coach behavior and the dynamics of the coach-athlete relationship [9] (Vella, Oades, and Crowe 2013). Conversely, the coach-athlete relationship serves as a vital resource for youth sports coaches in fostering the development of essential life skills [10](Gould et al. 2007). Thus, the coach-athlete relationship may represent a significant causal factor when evaluating positive youth development through sports.

Conversely, the role of a coach has evolved to a more corporate model, wherein each athlete is supported by a coach who aids them in achieving their goals and pursuing their passions. The success of an athlete hinges not only on the technical, tactical, and strategic guidance provided by the coach but also on the strength of the relationship between the athlete and coach [10](Gull et al., 2020). In other words, just as it is unfeasible for an athlete to exhibit high-level performance without the influence of a coach, a coach's success is equally dependent on the dedication, talent, and determination of the athlete [11] (Hampson and Jowett, 2014). Additionally, the behaviors and communication styles of coaches [12](Nicholls et al., 2017) play a critical role in an athlete's success.

In terms of individual sports teams, research indicates a strong prevalence of positive coach-athlete dynamics. The significance of the coach-athlete relationship is particularly pronounced in individual sports. A coach's leadership and guidance play a crucial role for athletes who engage in direct interactions with them. Rhind, Jowett, and Yang [13] (2012) conducted a comparative analysis of coach-athlete relationships across individual and team sports, revealing that individual athletes place a higher value on their connections with coaches, while athletes in team sports exhibited comparable levels of investment. Given that individual athletes typically spend more time with their coaches, the importance of interaction and relationship-building is amplified. Studies by Weiss & Friedrichs [14] (1986) provide evidence that teams benefiting from social support from their coaches experience greater success.

4. Measures of constructing positive coach-athlete relationship

4.1 Transformational leadership behaviors of coach

Coaches' leadership behavior has significant influence on athletes' sports involvement and coach-athlete relationship. Training and guidance behavior, democratic behavior, social support behavior and reward behavior have positive effects on the coach-athlete relationship, while authoritarian behaviors have a significant negative impact on the relationship. Thus, transformational leadership has played a core role in the teams of individual sports for coaches, which is a leadership style characterized by leaders who expand the interests of their followers, act ethically, inspire individuals to transcend personal self-interest for the collective benefit, and actively foster genuine commitment among each follower[9] (Vella, Oades, and Crowe, 2013).

Rowold [15](2006) established that the transformational leadership behaviors exhibited by coaches are positively linked to athlete satisfaction with their coach and the commitment athletes demonstrate towards their training. Furthermore, the extent of a coach's transformational leadership behaviors has been shown to predict various outcomes such as athlete performance, task cohesion, social cohesion, and intrinsic motivation. Vallee and Bloom [16](2005) further posited that these leadership behaviors form the foundation for the comprehensive development of athletes and the success of university athletic programs. More specifically, all aspects of transformational leadership were connected to the enhancement of personal and social skills, goal setting, and initiative. Notably, only the components of intellectual stimulation and effective role modeling were associated with the advancement of cognitive skills. Additionally, the perceived quality of the coach-athlete relationship demonstrated a positive correlation with favorable developmental experiences.

The individual consideration component of coach behaviour captures the extent to which the coach can recognise the strengths and abilities of each athlete and provide for his or her individual needs based on these strengths [9](Vella, Oades, and Crowe 2013). It is therefore recommended for coaches to prioritize strengths over weaknesses, attentively acknowledging the distinct attributes of each athlete and involving them in the development of these strengths to optimize performance outcomes. School-age athletes often face challenges in balancing the dual roles of elite competitor and student; consequently, it is crucial for coaches to establish collaborative relationships with educators. An effective coach must remain vigilant to even the most minor issues affecting the athlete's life, as these challenges are best addressed collaboratively. Given the substantial time commitment required for training, many student-athletes struggle to maintain their academic responsibilities, which could impede their overall preparation.

4.2 The coach's expectation effect

The expectancy theory, often referred to as the self-fulfilling prophecy, elucidates the phenomenon wherein coaches' perceptions of their athletes influence their behavioral interactions. This dynamic, in turn, fosters actions among the athletes that align with the original evaluations made by the coaches.

In the realm of sports psychology, the expectancy model consists of four distinct phases. Initially, coaches develop expectations regarding their athletes based on personal characteristics—such as physical attributes, ethnic background, and gender—as well as performance indicators including practice habits, historical outcomes, and skill assessments[17](Short, 2005). Subsequently, these expectations influence the coaches' behavior towards the athletes, impacting the nature and frequency of interactions, the quality and volume of instruction provided, and the type and frequency of feedback delivered. Over time, the coaches' behaviors can shape the athletes' performances, with those categorized as low-expectancy performers typically underachieving due to a lack of reinforcement and playing opportunities, diminished confidence, and a belief in their limited capabilities, in contrast to high-expectancy performers who tend to excel. The cycle culminates when the athletes' performance substantiates the coaches' initial expectations. Therefore, it is imperative for coaches to maintain elevated expectations for all athletes in order to foster a constructive coach-athlete relationship.

4.3 The exemplary role of coaches

Coaches occupy a pivotal role in youth sports, recognized as experts and role models by young athletes[18] (Coatsworth and Conroy 2006). Their frequency of interaction within the athletic environment surpasses that of other influential figures such as parents or policymakers, and their

impact remains notably strong from early adolescence through late adolescence [19](Chan, Lonsdale, and Fung 2012).

The findings of this study highlight that both victories and defeats create avenues for developmental advantages; therefore, the behavioral modeling of coaches serves as a crucial social learning experience for young athletes who regard them as essential role models during key developmental stages. It is recommended that coaches exemplify appropriate and constructive personal and prosocial behaviors that benefit young athletes, being mindful of the effects their conduct can have on the developmental outcomes for these individuals.

In the process of constructing positive coach-athlete relationship, coach has played a core role. We all know that leading by example is more effective than teaching by words. The exemplary behavior of educators is the best silent education for athletes, and it also earns the trust and respect of athletes. In daily interactions with athletes, coaches should possess a strong sense of professionalism, spirit of dedication, and noble moral character. Coaches should use the knowledge of broadcasting to make athletes have admiration, strict requirements of themselves, everywhere by example, play a positive role. Only in this way, the athletes will believe coaches from the heart, take the initiative to approach him, and accept his education and guidance, a positive and effective coach-athlete relationship will be formed naturally in the process.

4.4 Mutual trust and understanding

It became evident that the elements of mutual trust and understanding are often undervalued in relational dynamics. Both athletes and coaches concur that collaboration between these two parties can be significantly enhanced and that they can successfully realize their common objectives with the reinforcement of these attributes. However, these emotional components can further augment the coach-athlete relationship, rendering it more effective and nurturing. This encompasses aspects such as trust, positive emotions, and genuine care; respect for the coach; confidence in the relationship; dedication; consistent and ongoing communication; and the vital need for support and motivation.

Scholars emphasize that trust and commitment are essential characteristics within the coach-athlete dynamic [20](Trzaskoma-Bicsérdy et al., 2007). Additionally, an alternative conceptual framework for understanding the coach-athlete relationship highlights fundamental elements of human interactions and relationships from a multidisciplinary perspective. The degree of closeness in this relationship signifies a positive emotional state and facilitates open communication channels, which are vital for effective problem-solving. Trust and respect are paramount for successful coaching, as their absence can lead to diminished support and harmony in daily training sessions.

Research indicates that two-way communication is critical for fostering a proper understanding between coaches and athletes. All participants noted that the manner in which they are communicated with significantly influences their perception of their sporting experiences. In summary, a constructive coach-athlete relationship can only be cultivated if coaches and athletes engage in ways that foster trust, commitment, and a deep understanding of each other [1](Jowett, 2017).

4.5 Establishing reasonable incentive structures for rewards

Athletes in the long-term monotonous training practice, are easy to produce training burnout. The interference of various external factors will also affect the state of athletes in training and competition, which requires constant provision of reasonable positive incentives to athletes, so that athletes can maintain a positive state and enhance their participation in training and competition.

Everyone has a need for good interpersonal relationships, and also hopes to be affirmed and encouraged by the outside world through their own efforts. When the external motivation promotes the psychological needs of athletes to be met, individual psychological satisfaction can be improved, resulting in internalization, and athletes will participate in the training independently.

Therefore, coaches should create the positive incentive atmosphere and pay attention to athletes' bad emotions. When the athletes' competitive level has improved, they will not be stingy in giving encouragement and affirmation. In addition, through a comprehensive understanding of the underlying scientific principles related to their sport, one can formulate an expertly crafted training regimen that supports an athlete in achieving their maximum capabilities. The essence of effective coaching lies in the thorough comprehension and implementation of these scientific concepts.

4.6 Setting common goals with athletes' parents

In the realm of coaching, the alignment of athletes' shared objectives and their collaborative abilities to effectively manage and execute collective tasks is a critical consideration, as it can significantly influence both their individual performance and the overall success of the team[11](Hampson and Jowett, 2014).

Collaborative goal-setting and mutual respect for objectives enable all participants to comprehend their roles in reaching the defined targets. Through regular and collaborative evaluations, both the athlete and coach can identify pathways for optimal enhancement. All participants observed that the dynamics of coach-athlete relationships tend to evolve over time, particularly in individual sports teams. In these scenarios, the coach-athlete relationship often extends into a triadic partnership that includes the parent, as athletes engage in intense competition with one another.

The dynamic between the coach, athlete, and parent is crucial, particularly during the formative childhood years when a child relies heavily on parental assistance for social, emotional, ethical, and financial support. As children transition into adolescence, the direct influence of parents on their daily behaviors, attitudes, and decision-making tends to diminish. Coaches recognize that fostering a positive, ongoing, and reciprocal partnership with parents lays a strong foundation for everyday training and optimal performance. Ideally, both parents and coaches aim to cultivate athletes not just for sporting success, but also for life, emphasizing the importance of instilling values and principles. When this triadic relationship operates with open communication and collaboration on a regular basis, and when goal-setting is a shared endeavor, the potential for growth significantly enhances. The likelihood of a successful coach-athlete relationship is markedly diminished without parental support, especially during the initial stages of an athletic career.

4.7 Engaging in the development of team culture

The team culture is the essence of a group. Coaches must strategically cultivate and refine the team culture within sports teams, gradually establishing a distinctive cultural lineage that enhances team cohesion and fosters positive interpersonal relationships. Coaches should collaborate with athletes to regularly organize a variety of team-building activities, which will help athletes develop a proper value system and clarify training objectives. This approach enables athletes to feel a sense of participation and belonging, thereby facilitating open sharing and communication among members in a harmonious team environment, effectively regulating the physical and mental states of the athletes.

In this environment, athletes need to consciously exert their initiative, integrating with the team as a cohesive unit, while establishing a positive coach-athlete relationship to collaboratively strive toward common goals. This approach contrasts with a mechanical, passive daily adherence to the training tasks dictated solely by the coach's expertise.

Coaches need to strengthen the ambience of self-education and self-management among athletes, transforming continuous rigorous training into a conscious behavior for the athletes. This approach provides a persistent intrinsic motivation for enhancing athletes' engagement in sports. In this process, positive relationships are naturally established.

5. Conclusions

This paper presents relevant research on the relationship between coaches and athletes in sports teams, as well as other related issues. It analyzes the relevant theories and emphasizes the importance of the coach-athlete relationship. A positive athlete-coach relationship is beneficial for the development of both athletes and coaches, playing a significant guiding role. The paper also proposes management strategies based on research practice, including leadership style, expectation effect, and coach's expectation effect. However, this paper has not delved into in-depth research on the influence of coaches' leadership behaviors on athletes' sports input in different sports categories. Particularly, it has not addressed how to integrate the variables of athletes' individual influencing factors into the model or provided necessary explanations in this regard. These are key areas that the author will focus on in future research. Nevertheless, this study contributes to enriching the theory of coaches' leadership behavior, improving coaches' coaching level, and providing theoretical reference for enhancing athletes' sports involvement level.

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