

## ATHLETES – COACHS RELATIONSHIP

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### ABSTRACT

*The value of the coach-athlete relationship is important because its quality offers the context within which sport participation and performance can become a truly positive experience – an experience that both coaches and athletes remember fondly for years to come. There are many examples of high-profile athletes who reflect on their coach-athlete relationships as forces for good, creating a significant positive impact on their development as athletes and as human beings. For example, Michael Phelps, Tom Daley, Serena Williams, Michael Johnson, Bryony Page, and Cristiano Ronaldo to mention a few, have referred to the strong partnerships they developed with their coaches, the importance of connection and its transformative long-term effect. In this paper, I focus on the phenomenon of the coach-athlete relationship not as an idea but as a reality and as a research area that has made significant strides over the past 25 years. Guided by theoretical and empirical evidence, I highlight that relationships between coaches and athletes provide a significant avenue to better coaching and to a more wholesome sport experience that is based on partnership and dialogue leading to lasting personal and interpersonal fulfillment even well beyond the confines of sport.*

**KEYWORDS:** *coach-athlete, performance, positive experience.*

### INTRODUCTION:-

Athlete confidence and wellbeing can be enhanced through the support they receive and/or perceive and the relationships that they develop through playing sports. For many athletes; the coach is a key provider of social support. The confidence and psychological wellbeing of athletes are of great concern to coaches who look to nurture positive and impactful relationships although the coach-athlete relationship and social support are associated with increased self-confidence and wellbeing no studies have examined coach-athlete relationship and perceived support and received support simultaneously in the same study. Further research examining social support in relation to coach-athlete relationships is vital to help understand potential mechanisms underpinning confidence and wellbeing and distinguish nuances that may exist in support provision. The current study

addresses this gap in knowledge by examining the influence of coach–athlete relationships and the mediating role of social support in enhancing confidence and wellbeing.

One key factor influencing coaching effectiveness is the quality of the coach–athlete relationship. The coach–athlete relationship is defined as a social situation in which coaches' and athletes' perceived closeness (affective bond between individuals), commitment (intention in the dyad to maintain the relationship), and complementarity (interactions that underline cooperation) are interdependent. Although the coach–athlete relationship and social support are conceptually related, they are distinct constructs. For example, both constructs are underpinned by an interaction between individuals and the perceptions of these interactions. However, these constructs differ at the level at which they operate; social support encompasses perceived or received resources an individual experiences whereas the coach–athlete relationship pertains to an evaluation of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral quality of a relationship. Therefore, coach–athlete relationship could be considered a higher order construct with social support being a key behavior that maintains the quality of relationships.

Coaches are often important role models to athletes and can bolster athlete self-confidence through guidance, encouragement, and support. Coaches play a role in developing a nurturing environment to develop positive interpersonal relationships with their athletes, which contributes to building confidence. Previous studies demonstrated that perceived support from teammates boosts athlete self-confidence and both perceived and received support are crucial for self-confidence. Despite the importance of coaches to athletes, neither of the aforementioned studies directly examined coach support or considered other potentially influential factors such as the coach–athlete relationship.

### **THE PRESENT STUDY:-**

To the best of our knowledge, no previous research has examined the role of perceived coach support, received coach support, coach–athlete relationship, self-confidence, and psychological wellbeing in athletes. The present study aimed to

- (i) Examine the relationships among perceived coach support, received coach support, coach–athlete relationship, self-confidence, and psychological wellbeing.
- (ii) Investigate the influence of perceived coach support and received coach support as potential mediators of the relationship among coach–athlete relationship, self-confidence, and psychological wellbeing.

### **HYPOTHESIS:-**

Based on the previous research and theory, we expected a significant positive relationship among perceived coach support, received coach support, coach–athlete relationship, self-confidence, and psychological wellbeing (hypothesis 1), and that both perceived coach support and received coach support would mediate the relationship between coach–athlete relationship and self-confidence and the relationship between coach–athlete relationship and psychological wellbeing (hypothesis 2).

### **OBJECTIVES:-**

The relevant literature contains broad-scoped studies on the effect of the coach-athlete relationship on Performance.

Studies have examined the effect of relationship maintenance strategies on the coach-athlete Relationship and basic psychological need satisfaction the mediating role of the coach-athlete Relationship in the effect of coach leadership behavior on athlete performance.

The coach-athlete relationship in the effect of athlete gratitude on burnout. Mixed-methods research has investigated the effects of goal orientation and coach-athlete relationships.

The predictive role of coach-athlete relationship quality on training engagement and skill development Confirmed the mediating effects of the coach-athlete relationship.

### **COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP:-**

Coach-athlete relationship in a nutshell We propose a motivational model of the coach-athlete relationship (see Fig. 1) that extends Vallerand and Pelletier's (1985; see also Vallerand et al., 1987) previous motivational model. In line with cognitive evaluation theory (Deci and Ryan, 1980, 1985) and the hierarchical model of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Vallerand, 1997, 2000, 2001), we propose a motivational sequence where coaches' personal orientation towards coaching, the context within which they operate, and their perceptions of their athletes' behaviour and motivation influence their coaching behaviours. In turn, coaches' behaviours in the form of autonomy-supportive behaviours, provision of structure and involvement have a beneficial impact on athletes' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. Finally, the satisfaction of these three psychological needs determines athletes' intrinsic and self-determined extrinsic motivation .

Several reasons urged us to propose the present updated model. First, a more complete understanding of coaches' behaviors must go beyond the dichotomy of controlling versus autonomy-supportive behaviors presented in Vallerand and Pelletier's (1985) previous model. Here, we articulate the meaning of being autonomy supportive and identify the behaviors associated with this type of interpersonal style (see Table 1). Second, we propose that the impact of coaches' behaviors on athletes' intrinsic and self determined extrinsic motivation is mediated not only by athletes' perceptions of competence, as Vallerand and Pelletier's (1985) model suggested, but also by their perceptions of autonomy and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Finally, research conducted in the fields of education and parenting further supports the importance of autonomy-supportive behaviors for the motivation of subordinates (i.e. students and children) and sheds light on possible factors that influence people's autonomy-supportive behaviors. The present review thus integrates this literature.

Hence, the present coach-athlete motivational model clarifies the construct of autonomy support, underlines the importance of autonomy, competence and relatedness needs for intrinsic motivation and self determined extrinsic motivation, and offers additional research avenues, thereby extending significantly Vallerand and Pelletier's (1985) previous motivational model self. Rather, they have been dictated by external or internal forces, such as others' expectations, monetary incentives or one's sense of guilt or obligation. Although the person behaves as prescribed, he or she does not value the emitted behaviours. For example, athletes who fail to see the benefits of weight training may engage in muscular training because they want to avoid any argument with their coach. Such athletes would not endorse the value and importance of their coach's instructions and would not be self-determined in their extrinsic motivation.

In team sports, the coach's leadership behaviors and the quality of the relationship strengthen athletes' competence perceptions, thereby supporting team processes. This plays a critical role in managing performance expectations for young athletes (Hampson & Jowett, 2014). The alignment between athletes' developmental needs during

adolescence and the coach's supportive attitudes facilitates the satisfaction of psychological needs, fostering well-being and increasing long-term commitment to sport (Davis & Jowett, 2014).

Furthermore, relationship issues can trigger not only a negative emotional climate but also psycho-physiological burnout, which can adversely affect cognitive processes such as attention, decision-making, and executive functions (Davis et al., 2018). Relationship quality intersects with adolescent athletes' physical self-perception and evaluations of physical competence, directly impacting self-worth and motivational cycles (Jowett & Cramer, 2010). Quality of communication and empathic understanding form the cornerstone of the coach-athlete interaction, supporting closeness and complementarity, and facilitating the adoption of shared.

## **THE EFFECT OF THE COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP ON PERFORMANCE -**

The Motivational Model is prominent in explaining the coach-athlete relationship, suggesting that the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs positively reflects on motivation and performance. Similarly, conceptualizing relationship quality within the 3+1Cs model (Closeness, Commitment, Complementarity, and Co-orientation) contributes to a holistic evaluation of the relational structure. Communication strategies and empathic accuracy nurture these dimensions, providing a functional foundation for shared goals and coordinated tasks. Secure and consistent communication practices facilitate the satisfaction of young athletes' basic psychological needs, supporting self-regulation and sustained effort.

Scales developed to measure the relationship's quality allow for the quantitative evaluation of different dimensions, creating a common language for both research and practice. Increasing the cross-cultural validity and reliability studies of these measurements aims to reduce comparison problems in diverse contexts. The literature highlights findings that relationship quality, combined with leadership styles, communication, and emotional climate, supports motivational processes, increasing young athletes' participation and satisfaction. At the team level, higher-level constructs like collective efficacy and resilience, when integrated with the coach-athlete relationship, contribute to performance sustainability in competitive environments. Transformational leadership creates a strong impact, even at the elite level, by bridging relationship quality and team resilience.

These theoretical and measurement advancements contribute to a more holistic understanding of motivational fluctuations, burnout risk, and emotional flexibility in adolescent athletes. Furthermore, findings that well-being indicators such as life satisfaction and engagement are shaped through relationship quality offer critical clues for explaining young athletes' long-term commitment to sport. Comparative examination of different sport types and cultural settings strengthens the testability of theories and enriches practical recommendations (Washington et al., 2025). In sum, the integration formed by the theory-measurement-application triangle allows for the developmental processes of adolescent athletes to be explained through a relational foundation.

The concurrent consideration of performance and well-being in adolescent athletes becomes even more critical in the context of relationship quality and team climate (Jowett & Cramer, 2010). In well-structured relational environments, goal orientation and adherence to mastery goals increase, influencing future success profiles, especially in academy-level football players (Nicholls et al., 2017). Findings that burnout risk can be shaped through achievement goals and communication processes, with coach behaviors playing a mediating role, demonstrate the importance of protective factors in adolescent athletes.

The joint evaluation of psychological safety, social support, and relationship quality plays a significant role in maintaining well-being, even in high-demand sports. The link between resilience profiles and health-related behaviors and performance indicators strengthens the protective function of relationship quality in elite athletes.

The combination of engagement and thriving indicators with relationship quality offers a functional mechanism for explaining task commitment in adolescent team sports (Gu et al., 2023). Relationships established through life satisfaction provide valuable clues for the design of the motivational climate.

## CONCLUSION:-

Future world records and medal-winning performances will require collaboration like we have never seen or done before. Within the high-performance sport, the coach and the athlete as a unit relationship is often embedded in a cross-disciplinary team of experts. In this paper, I highlighted that a cross-boundary team of experts where the coach-athlete dyad is well embedded offers a unique opportunity to achieve extraordinary performances through working together to overcome challenges, explore solutions, create new processes or new ways of “doing” (e.g. training, recovery, rehabilitation), and build new products (e.g. prosthetics for disability sport, bespoke equipment,) - essentially innovate. The capacity of experts within cross-boundary discipline teams to lead, connect, and work as a highly interdependent and integrated system, is where competitive advantage in high-performance sport lies. While dynamic teaming can help deliver extraordinary achievements of human Endeavour, it won't come naturally. It will most certainly require deliberate and conscious effort from each one team member. Guided by the work largely conducted in organizational and business settings, a tentative model was discussed to support sport practitioners by reflecting on the ways they work within dynamic performance teams and sport scholars by providing a framework to guide research within high performance. The expectation is that the proposed model provides a platform for practical reflection and a springboard for knowledge building in an area that has yet to be fully explored and understood in sport and exercise psychology.

## LIMITATIONS:-

Based on the limitations and findings of this meta-analysis, several recommendations for future research are Offered. First, longitudinal research designs should be used to clarify the direction of causality between the coach-Athlete relationship and performance. Follow-up studies lasting at least one season or one year can reveal the temporal dynamics and interactions of the relationship. Moreover, randomized controlled experimental Intervention studies should be conducted to test the effectiveness of programs aimed at improving the coach-Athlete relationship. Educational interventions aimed at improving relationship quality can be compared with control groups to draw causal inferences.

Furthermore, studies should be conducted in underrepresented cultural contexts (Africa, South America, and the Middle East) to test the cross-cultural generalizability of the findings. In particular, the number of studies using Objective performance measures should be increased, and performance should be measured more accurately by Utilizing technological means (wearable devices, video analysis systems). Another recommendation is to adopt Multi-source data collection strategies and the perspectives of coaches, athletes, parents, and teammates should be evaluated simultaneously.

Research should examine the different dimensions of the coach-athlete relationship (closeness, commitment, Complementarily, and shared orientation) separately, and investigate the unique effects of each dimension on Performance. Mediating and moderating variables should be systematically tested, and the mechanisms through which the coach-athlete relationship influences performance should be thoroughly understood. Biological correlates of the coach-athlete relationship should be examined, particularly using neuropsychological and Psycho physiological measures.

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