

The coach-athlete relationship

It is widely accepted that significant personal relationships can influence the development and performance of athletes. None, however, as fundamental for performance as the relationship the athlete has with his/her coach. Here, Dr Sophia Jowett speaks to Claire-Marie Roberts about operationalising this relationship.

How significant are coach-athlete interactions in the context of athletic performance success?

The coach-athlete relationship defines coaching practice: coaches instruct on one hand and athletes execute instructions on the other. Thus, successful coaching or performance success more specifically is the combined interrelation between the coach and the athlete. It is certainly evident in the relevant literature that neither the coach nor the athlete can “do it alone” – they need one another to reach athletic performance success be it to win Olympic/Paralympic medals, to simply develop a skill, enjoy the sport, or maintain motivation. The quality of this relationship matters because it can make the journey to skill development and performance success much more satisfying, fulfilling, motivating, energising, you name it!

How are these interdependencies between the athlete and the coach represented?

We defined the coach-athlete relationship as the social situation in which a coach and an athlete's interpersonal feelings, thoughts and behaviours are mutually and causally interdependent. This definition provided the basis for building an operational model that was capable to help us study the coach-athlete relationship systematically and in an organised fashion. At the present time, the interpersonal constructs of *Closeness, Commitment and Complementarity* form an integrated model of the coach-athlete relationship (the 3Cs model) and define the quality of the coach-athlete relationship. Co-orientation is the fourth C of the model and essentially highlights the degree to which the dyadic members are similar and in agreement relative to how they view their relationship. The 3+1Cs model (and the accompanying psychometric tools: Coach-Athlete Relationships Questionnaires) provide a means to studying the content and functions of the coach-athlete relationship.

From a practical perspective, what variables are known to influence this relationship?

Our research suggests that there are a number of factors. For example, personality characteristics appear to influence how coaches and athletes perceive their relationship. For example, athletes with positive personality characteristics (e.g., openness, conscientiousness) are more likely to view the relationship quality more positively. Additionally, it would appear that same gender coach-athlete dyads have better relationship quality leading to athletes and coaches that are more satisfied with training, instruction, and performance than other gender coach-athlete dyads. In terms of sport, athletes in team sports would appear to be less satisfied with the relationship quality than

athletes in individual sports. These findings have clear theoretical and practical applications and pave the way for more and better research in this area.

In terms of increasing the chances of performance success are you saying that research suggests the coach should be the same gender as the athlete?

No, it would appear from the research that same gender coach-athlete dyads may be more interdependent (perceiving high levels of 3Cs) and more satisfied with sport, relationship, and training for example. This can be explained employing the similarity-attraction hypothesis (Byrne et al., 1986). Accordingly, these coach-athlete dyads may be attracted to one another and feel happy because they have something in common (i.e., their gender). Thus the fact that these dyads are of the same gender may give them a perceived advantage over other gender dyads (actual similarity leads to attraction). However, we have argued that communication is the key to developing and maintaining relationships that are effective and successful. Coaches (and athletes) can thus use communication to foster perceptions of similarity such as “we have things in common” such as our love for sport and similar goals (perceived similarity leads to attraction). Research in this area can certainly further promote our understanding about how different types of similarity (actual vs. perceived) influence the quality and functions of the coach-athlete relationship.

You mentioned the differences in levels of coaching satisfaction amongst individual and team athletes. What are the reasons for this?

We have speculated that one of the reasons for this may simply reside in coaching practices. Traditionally, coaches in individual sports although they will operate in a squad of athletes, each athlete will get, in one way or another, individual attention to improve his/her technique, tactics, attention/focus or some other aspect of performance. Thus, athletes in individual sports will get more individual instruction. Conversely, coaches in team sports provide most of their instruction at a team level. This may cause the effects we noted (i.e., individual sport athletes are more interdependent to their coaches; perceive higher levels of 3Cs and they are also more satisfied with performance and instruction than their team sport counterparts). The practical significance of this finding is that it may be useful for coaches in team sports to try to create situations where more one-to-one training/instruction takes place, thereby improving coach-athlete relationships, increasing satisfaction, and in the longer term, improvements in performance. ■



words: Dr Sophia Jowett
Sophia is a Reader in Psychology at Loughborough University. The coach-athlete relationship has been her research focus for over 15 years.

Interview by:
Claire-Marie Roberts,
University of Cumbria

Further reading:
Byrne, D. (1961),
Interpersonal attraction and
athletic similarity.
*Journal of Abnormal Social
Psychology*, 62, 713-715

Jowett, S. (2007),
*Interdependence analysis
and the 3 + 1C in the
coach-athlete relationship in
Sport Psychology in Sport*
(Eds. Jowett, S. & D. Lavallee).
Social psychology in sport,
106-127. Champaign, IL:
Human Kinetics.

Jowett, S. (2009),
*Validating coach-athlete
relationship measures with
the circumplex network
Measurement in Physical
Education and Exercise
Science*, 13, 1-18.