

The role of the coach-athlete relationship in world class coaching success

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Abstract

BACKGROUND: Coach-athlete relationships are at the core of successful sports performances. While the topic has been investigated using other sports, the unique purpose of this research is to qualitatively investigate: 1) the importance of coach-athlete relationships in world class coaching success, 2) identify any differences between world class and national level coaches on the subject, 3) identify the characteristics of successful relationships, 4) investigate the challenges faced by coaches in developing and maintaining effective coach-athlete relationships, 5) identify potential gaps in how coaches develop effective coach-athlete relationships and suggest possible solutions. **METHODS:** National and international level coaches (n=16), participated in semi-structured interviews. Grounded Theory was used to analyze the interviews and investigate the personal responses of the coaches. **RESULTS:** Coach-athlete relationships are at the heart of world class swimming performances. While these relationships are based on closeness, trust, respect and commitment, building and maintaining these relationships can be challenging. World class coaches were more adept at relationship management than national level coaches. **CONCLUSION:** One of the main keys to world class coaching success lies in the ability to form and maintain effective coach-athlete relationships. The importance of the coach-athlete relationship and the role of the coach should be recognized and acknowledged. Clubs and federations looking to produce world class performances should provide more support and training to help coaches manage these crucial partnerships.

Introduction

Athletes achieve when there is an effective coach-athlete relationship and without this functioning relationship there can be no meaningful and effective coaching (17). This coach-athlete relationship is the foundation of successful coaching as it enables the coach to influence, support, mentor and instruct: 'It is the unity of these two people that powers and empowers the entire coaching system' (17:157).

Coaches and athletes do not work in isolation, instead they are involved in a dyadic relationship, the quality of which can be a measure of effective coaching (17). While coaches may possess knowledge, it is the degree to which a coach and athlete can form a working relationship that determines performances, happiness and wellbeing for both parties (17).

Coaching is fundamentally about teaching, and to effectively teach the relationship must allow for understanding and communication (15). However, coaching is not simply a matter of teaching technique and skill. Coaching is about holistically managing the athlete. Ultimately, the coach has an opportunity to influence athletes as they progress through the sport and even into their post-sporting career (5, 11). Effective coach-athlete relationships are based upon feelings of closeness, being cared for, respected, trusted and valued (21, 28). Nevertheless,

building and maintaining the coach-athlete relationship can be challenging (18, 19, 25).

Researchers, such as Jowett (20) and Chelladurai (3) have modelled the coach-athlete relationship. The former provides the 3xCs+1C framework, namely: closeness, commitment, complementarity and co-orientation. Closeness concerns the emotional intention of both parties and includes trust and respect. Commitment refers to the athletes' and coaches' intention to maintain the relationship. Complementarity refers to how effectively the athlete and coach cooperate with each other during training and competitions. Finally, co-orientation reflects the similar views and opinions held by both parties for the continued establishment of common ground.

Jowett (20) analyzed the behaviors, emotions and actions of both coach and athlete. She found that the coach who can foster the correct balance of the 3xCs+1C is more likely to develop an effective sporting relationship with an athlete. Jowett, *et al.* (22), note that Olympic medalists in particular found the quality of the coach-athlete relationship had a significant impact on their sporting performance. Research by Davis, *et al.* (7) and Sánchez, *et al.* (30) confirm Jowett's model, by finding that relationships based on closeness, complementarity and commitment improve performances and personal satisfaction.

Chelladurai's (3) Multidimensional Model of Sport Leadership has also been used to examine the coach-athlete relationship. In contrast to Jowett, *et al.* (21), Chelladurai (3) includes contextual factors, such as age and the ability of the participants. The model proposes that the coach-athlete interaction is comprised of three basic tenets: required behaviors, actual behaviors and the preferred behaviors of the coach. The required behaviors are those obligations placed upon the coach by the situation and these obligations depend on the age profile of the athletes. The actual behaviors reflect the personal characteristics of the coach, for example, his or her innate moods and attitudes. The preferred behaviors are those coaching behaviors desired by the athletes themselves and may change with different training and competitive situations.

The congruence of these three types of behaviors provide for athlete satisfaction and performances (3). A discrepancy between coaching behavior and athletic satisfaction results in lower athletic performance (3, 4). Research from Davis, *et al.* (7) and Isoard-Gauthier, *et al.* (10) provide confirmation, in finding that, close, supportive, and functioning relationships may reduce both athlete burnout and anxiety, while also resulting in less time to physical exhaustion.

While previous research has examined the role of the coach-athlete relationship, the unique purpose of this paper is to specifically examine the role of the relationship within competitive swimming, by: 1) examining the importance of coach-athlete relationships in world class coaching success, 2) identifying any differences between world-class and national level coaches on the subject, 3) identifying the characteristics of successful relationships, 4) investigating the challenges faced by coaches in developing and maintaining effective coach-athlete relationships, 5) identifying potential gaps in how coaches develop effective coach-athlete relationships and suggest possible solutions.

Methods

Procedures

Grounded Theory was used in this study as it is a recognized qualitative research method whereby an analysis of the raw data results in an overarching theory (2). The aim of the research method was to analyze the personal responses of the participants through semi-structured interviews. It is believed that the use of qualitative interviews allows for the personal beliefs and opinions of the participants to be freely expressed, opinions which would otherwise not be adequately captured using quantitative methods.

An interview guide was used however, the semi-structured nature of the interviews also allowed the researcher to probe and explore new and emerging themes. The interviews were recorded and lasted between 1 and 2 hours. Ethical approval was obtained before any interview took place. The interviews were conducted using recognized interview techniques which allowed for more open and free conversation. Adopting this approach allowed more data to evolve naturally from the conversations (27).

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based upon each participant having a specific demographic profile (see Table 1.1) (8). There were two groups of participants: one group defined as world class, and one group defined as national level. World class coaches had at least 15-20 years' coaching experience, had coached at least one Olympic or World Championship medalist within the last 12 years, and are still currently coaching. In contrast, the national level coaches had at least 5-10 years' coaching experience, had coached a finalist at the British Championships within the past 8 years, and are still actively coaching. (see Table 1.1)

Table 1.1 Demographic profile of participant coaches

Demographic Profiles						
	Country	Gender	Years Coaching	Olympic Medalist	Olympic Coach	Currently Coaching
WCC1	Australia	Male	20+	Yes	Yes	Yes
WCC2	Germany	Male	20+	Yes	Yes	Yes
WCC3	Australia	Male	20+	Yes	Yes	Yes
WCC4	South Africa	Male	20+	Yes	Yes	Yes
WCC5	Britain	Male	20+	Yes	Yes	Yes
WCC6	Britain	Male	20+	Yes	Yes	Yes
WCC7	Canada	Male	20+	Yes	Yes	Yes
WCC8	USA	Male	20+	Yes	Yes	Yes

	Country	Gender	Years Coaching	National Finalist	Club Coach	Currently Coaching
NLC1	Britain	Male	10—15	Yes	Yes	Yes
NLC2	Britain	Male	10—15	Yes	Yes	Yes
NLC3	Britain	Male	10	Yes	Yes	Yes
NLC4	Britain	Male	12	Yes	Yes	Yes
NLC5	Britain	Male	10	Yes	Yes	Yes
NLC6	Britain	Male	10—15	Yes	Yes	Yes
NLC7	Britain	Female	9	Yes	Yes	Yes
NLC8	Britain	Male	25	Yes	Yes	Yes
WCC = World class Coach NLC = National Level Coach						

Data Analysis

Grounded Theory was adopted for this study, as it is an inductive analytical process, whereupon an overarching theory evolves from an analysis of the data (2, 29). NVivo 11, a specific software package, was used to analyze the qualitative data.

All the interviews were transcribed. After familiarization with the transcripts, open coding was the first step in the analysis. The data is broken apart by identifying and tagging substantive themes. Substantive themes are those topics that appeared significantly important to the participant coaches (2).

The second step in the process was to use intermediate coding. The initially tagged data were compared and contrasted with each other and formed into higher order categories. Relevant sections of transcript that address the research questions were identified. These intermediate categories were constantly refined, by comparing and contrasting them with the raw data to ensure they had full explanatory power (2).

The next step in the process was to use selective coding. Selective coding takes the higher order categories from the intermediate stage and continues to compare and contrast the categories until higher levels of abstraction are reached. Importantly, there were no predetermined categories, rather, the categories emerged from the analysis of the data. The process was continued until theoretical saturation was reached (the point where no new themes or concepts could be created). At this point a final overarching theme was developed (2). (see Table 1.2)

Table 1.2 Coding data into higher-level themes and categories

Overarching Theme	Coach-Athlete Relationship is of Critical Importance	
Selective Coding:	Building & Maintaining Relationships	
Intermediate Coding:	Key Elements	Challenges
Open Coding Themes:		
1	Communication	Necessary confrontations
2	Trust	Investment of coach's time
3	Closeness / Familial	Investment of coach's energy
4	Respect	Additional supplementary support outside of training
5	Ability to work with athletes	Coach's personal sacrifice
6	Empathy	
7	Passionately committed	

Results and Discussion

Central to all sporting success is the relationship between the coach and the athlete (14). Coaching can only be appreciated if these dynamic and complex partnerships are recognized, examined and understood (6, 12, 16). The results reveal: (1) the crucial importance of the coach-athlete relationship in world class coaching performances, (2) the differences between national level coaches and world class coaches on the subject, (3) the characteristics of successful coach-athlete relationships, (4) the challenge coaches face in building and maintaining effective coach-athlete relationships.

The results confirm earlier studies, that exceptional world class coaching performances are based on close, functioning personal relationships between the coach and the athlete (1, 21, 26, 28). In this study, all participants, both national and world class, strongly believed that the key to successful coaching lay in the foundation of a strong coach-athlete relationship:

I think the relationship between the coach and the athlete is probably the most important piece of coaching. (WCC 7)

The relationship, coaches felt, is the very core of the coach-athlete dynamic, and has the potential to provide a platform for success or, conversely, be a source of sporting failure:

...it's the relationships you build with the athletes that I think are the deal breakers. They are the ones that can produce the world class performances. (NLC 3)

Interestingly, all the coaches felt that the key to successful coaching did not lie in some secret training method but rather in the quality of the coach-athlete relationship. One national level coach commented on other world class coaches:

I don't think it's so much about their [world class coaches] technical knowledge in terms of X, Y and Z; or they have got a secret way of doing it ... what I can see is that they've got a great understanding of being able to work with people and that kind of personal relationship between themselves and the athletes. (NLC 2)

The sentiment was also expressed by a world class coach who believed that the key to coaching success lies in the relationship and not in any form of special training:

Everyone does the same sets; that's the honest truth ... If you were to sit down with all the coaches, everyone does more or less the same sets. There's one or two things that may be different, but it's the relationship and how you get that across ... is it the right athlete for the job, is the coach right for the job? But the sets more or less all the same. (WCC 4)

There was a difference between world class and national level coaches regarding the quality and effectiveness of the relationship as a factor in world class performances. The world class coaches were more passionate, vocal and specific about the importance of the relationships. On this point more than any other, the world class coaches were emphatic about the importance of the coach-athlete relationship in their own coaching success:

[The] relationship between coach and athlete I think is vitally important. I would say you'd have to be a real freak of nature talent to succeed if you had a bad attitude or if you didn't like your coach. (WCC 7)

Given the critical importance of relationships in successful coaching, building relationships is an investment that coaches must make to produce world class coaching performances. The world class coaches invested more time and maintained closer and more effective coach-athlete relationships:

It's crucial ... certainly between [swimmer's name], who was un-rockable. It was extremely tight ... and partly because I had to take a lot of additional roles in her life other than coaching. Some put a massive time imposition on myself and my family. But it was what was necessary ... even just get her over the starting line, never mind the finishing line. (WCC 6)

Confirming previous studies, the world class coaches understood that the characteristics of a quality relationship were based upon mutual respect and trust (18, 24, 28). One world class coach demonstrated not only the level of trust involved in the partnership but also referred to the relationship in familial terms, revealing again the closeness between the swimmer and the coach:

I believe relationships, [swimmer's name] trusts me with everything I do for him ... I mean it's like we've got a family relationship and I think that's a huge factor. (WCC 4)

Relationships are not always amicable and building a successful partnership can be a formidable task (9, 13, 21). While the quotes show the closeness of the relationships, the results also reveal that relationship building is a difficult and challenging process. It is an oversimplification to assume that effective coach-

athlete relationships are an automatic occurrence, or that these partnerships are unproblematic. On this point, world class coaches were more prepared, when necessary, to challenge the coach-athlete relationship than their national level colleagues. The results reveal that world class coaches believed it was necessary to understand the complexities of the coach-athlete relationship, recognize the challenges it may bring and accept that they require considerable effort to maintain:

Coach-athlete relations are massive ... you can achieve tremendous things if you get the relationship right and don't get me wrong, sometimes that relationship won't always be easy and plain sailing. There will be difficult times, there will be challenging times, there'll be all sorts of difficult experiences along the way, but I still think fundamentally it's the most important thing. (WCC 5)

If I think [they are] underachieving or under-reaching I will let them know ... if they tell me they want to win gold [at the Olympics] and are showing behaviors of someone who is not going to make the team, I just jump on them straight away. I just don't let them get away with anything ... you are talking here [gestures high-up] and you're training here [gestures low]. You need to lift up. (WCC 1)

The world class coaches all accepted and confronted the challenges that are part of a successful coach-athlete partnership. According to Jowett, *et al.* (21), Olympic medal results are dependent on effective and functioning coach-athlete relationships. However, the results show that the corollary is also true, dysfunctional relationships will not produce world class coaching performances:

Let's put it this way, I've never observed a swimmer and a coach fight 365 days a year and then all of a sudden they win an Olympic gold medal. There's gonna be disagreements, but there has to be a great relationship there. Trust, communication. You're not gonna agree. It's not all gonna be rainbows and unicorns every day, but there's an element of trust and there's great communication. (WCC 8)

The results confirm previous studies that show the basis of an effective relationship is trust, empathy and closeness (22, 23). As shown, these relationships are not always pleasant, there appears to be times when there are confrontations and difficulties. Coaches must build these partnerships on mutual respect and trust to survive these challenges and stay effective. The additional challenge is that the coaches must understand that each coach-athlete relationship is unique:

With a group of swimmers, you've got a pocket full of keys and ... each swimmer's got a lock and you've got to try and find the key that opens that swimmer's lock, and they've all got different locks. (WCC 1).

Successful coach-athlete relationships do not spontaneously appear but require a considerable amount of personal time and effort from both parties (9, 13, 21). The problem, and challenge for coaches is in knowing how to build these relationships. This balance is necessary as coaches are required to invest higher levels of commitment and personal energy. The results show that coach-athlete relationships are critical. Nevertheless, the problematic side of this relationship must also be acknowledged, and successfully dealt with.

Overall, regardless of the level of coaching, all the participants felt that the coach-athlete relationship was the most crucial factor in successful coaching. However, the results reveal that the world class coaches had more time and energy to invest into coach-athlete partnerships and were more passionate and strongly committed to maintaining these relationships. The same response was not forthcoming from the national level coaches, although it was not clear why this was so. One explanation might be that the national level coaches operated out of club programs with a larger number of swimmers and greater administrative responsibilities, whereas the world class coaches operated out of national performance centers or smaller elite training groups. Having more club responsibilities and a larger group of swimmers, meant national level coaches had less time and energy to invest into building close relationships with all the swimmers in their charge. It appeared that for national level coaches, these extra commitments compromised their coaching:

When you're dealing with club programs, you just don't have the time, and, unfortunately, in club programs, you have to compromise. (NLC 6)

We're looking at building our own pool I mean it's an enormous undertaking. In the back of my mind, I'm thinking 'Jesus, that is going to be even more time which will be taking me off deck if I am building a pool as well' ... but if that is going to keep the club going. (NLC 1)

Conclusion

The results confirm previous research by revealing that the coach-athlete relationship is the critical factor in world class coaching performances. Successful coach-athlete relationships include characteristics such as closeness, respect, empathy, trust and commitment. The challenge for coaches is finding a balance so that they can invest the considerable amount of effort, time and personal resources needed, into building and maintaining these relationships. World class coaches are better positioned to build and maintain coach-athlete relationships than their national level colleagues. It is suggested that future research expand on this last finding and investigate the challenges specifically faced by national club level coaches into managing coach-athlete relationships.

It recommended that the critical role of the coach be recognized and acknowledged by club and national federations as it appears that without the effort and commitment of coaches, world class swimming performances are not possible. It is further recommended that coaches be given better training and support (particularly club coaches) to allow them the time and energy to invest in building and maintaining these crucial relationships.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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