The Binding Force: A Practical Model for Building and Maintaining the Coach-Athlete Relationship in Canadian Intercollegiate Team Sport

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Abstract

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Coaches at Canadian post-secondary institutions have immense responsibilities: operating a successful sport program, managing the academic and athletic success of their athletes and ultimately delivering results, in other words, winning. “When athletes first join a team, they begin to familiarize themselves with their coach, the coach-athlete relationship, the environment, and the system” (Becker, 2009 p. 97) the athlete will compete in. Successful coaches are consistent in who they are (coach attributes), and how they maintain relationships, manage the team environment, and carry out their system (Becker, 2009); they provide a stable environment in order to develop the overall person and student-athlete. To date, the coach-athlete relationship remains to be an area of further exploration within team sport. The coach-athlete relationship is currently defined as a situation shaped by coaches’ and athletes’ interconnected feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (Jowett, 2005, 2007; Jowett & Poczardowski, 2007). This study addresses the need for a more systematic qualitative understanding of the coach-athlete relationship through the eyes of champion post-secondary team sport coaches. The emergence of various themes within the relationship are discussed, demonstrating a reciprocal bond that leads to, and continually feeds the connection between the coach and athlete, even afterwards, once it has been established. The importance of the coach-athlete relationship, its impact, the development, and maintenance are discussed.
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Building a program of excellence and maintaining a level of superior results year after year is a major challenge coaches face. Understanding what makes a coach successful on a consistent basis is fascinating to researchers in various domains outside of sport, such as: peer coaching (Showers, 1985), classroom management coaching (Sprick, Knight, Reinke, & McKale, 2006), content focused coaching (Staub, West, & Bickel, 2003), blended coaching (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005), organizational coaching, and executive coaching (Peltier, 2001). There are a multitude of factors that need to occur both through the season and over the course of multiple seasons for long-term program success. According to Vallee and Bloom (2005), there are four ‘higher-order’ categories that determine how university coaches of team sports can build successful programs. They were outlined as follows: Coaches’ Attributes, Individual Growth, Organizational Skills, and Vision. Within this arrangement, Vallee and Bloom (2005) outlined the grouping titled, coaches’ attributes, and stated that they “encompassed coaches’ traits, personalities, characteristics, and knowledge” (p. 190). Vallee and Bloom stated, “current results suggested that success may be partly attributed to the relationships these coaches formed with their athletes” (2005, p. 187). The past decade has seen growing interest in theoretical approaches that examine the coach athlete relationship (Lafrenière, Jowett, Vallerand, & Carboneau, 2011).

It is clear that the coach-athlete relationship is central to effective coaching (Jowett, 2009; Lyle, 2002); history of the coach-athlete dyad reflects success as a partnership wherein the coach and athlete when working productively together, escalates the levels of achievement (Jowett, 2009). Jowett and Ntoumanis (2004) conceptualized the coach-athlete relationship and partnership as the situation in which coach and athletes “emotions, thoughts, and behaviors are mutually and causally interconnected” (p. 245). Advancement in this area is still growing and the vast majority of empirical studies surrounding the Coach-athlete relationship have been published within the last decade. Among the contemporary discoveries, Jowett and colleagues (2000, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2010, and 2011) have been among the leaders in advancing our understanding of the coach athlete relationship. Jowett and colleagues have provided comprehensive empirical evidence linking the concept of the coach-athlete relationship and the elements of which it is comprised, to its developed tools (i.e. CART-Questionnaire). This framework outlines that the quality of the relationship as a
Building a solid relationship can assist in increasing an athlete's overall performance. Olympiou, Jowett, and Duda (2008) suggest, “the interpersonal dynamics between the coach and the athlete are central to the coaching process” (p. 423). A coach can increase an athlete's level of confidence by simply having the coach understand them and that they feel a sense of comfort and trust within the corresponding relationship (Kidman, 2006). Research by Werthner (2009) investigated identifying factors that contributed to successful or unsuccessful performances from the coach and athlete's perspectives. For example, what caused a personal best or had a strong influence behind an athlete's medaling performance. Five key themes were discovered and outlined in the Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching Online: the development, of a (1) high degree of athlete self-awareness; the (2) importance of a strong coach–athlete relationship; the (3) creation of an optimal training environment; the (4) creation of a strong support system, from both financial and human resource perspectives; and (5) excellent management of the Olympic environment (Werthner, 2009, p. 1). It was suggested that the second theme, the importance of a strong coach–athlete relationship, clearly emerged as a central factor in winning an Olympic medal or producing a personal best at the 2008 Olympic Games. Each of the 27 athletes interviewed spoke at length about her or his coach and how they worked together to create an environment that enabled them to succeed. This is in line with empirical evidence suggesting that performance success is positively influenced by coach–athlete partnerships that are stable and harmonious (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003), rather than unstable and conflicting (Jowett, 2005).

The coach-athlete relationship is strongly supported via quantitative research. For example, Jowett and colleagues have provided statistical evidence with the development of the Coach–Athlete Relationship Questionnaire (CART-Q; Jowett, 2009; Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004; Jowett, Poczwardowski, & Lavallee, 2007). Specifically three psychological constructs that represent feelings, thoughts and behaviors as the content of coach-athlete relationships, defined by closeness, commitment, and complementarity (3Cs; Jowett, 2007). The next step is to broaden our understanding of the coach-athlete relationship through an in-depth systematic qualitative approach in order to show how meaning is constructed and how coaches and athletes make sense of their association and their athletic environments (Merriam, 2014). The purpose of this present study is to continue to address the gaps within the coach-athlete literature by qualitatively examining elite post-secondary team coach perspectives and thoughts regarding the relationship; the contributing coaches are representative of the Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) system. It’s important that we continually investigate how a relationship perspective can affect a coach’s ability to impact his or her athlete, and to what extent, the performance of his/her athletes. After all, we are proposing that the dyadic relationship between coach and athlete is considered to be at the heart of athlete development (Lyle, 1999).

“The Coach-Athlete Relationship is recognized as the foundation of coaching and a major force in promoting the athlete’s physical and psychosocial skills” Jowett (2005, p. 412). Mageau and Vallerand (2003) suggest a strong interpersonal coach-athlete relationship contains positive growth and enhances motivation to perform well. This is aligned with athlete's views of the motivational features of the coach-created environment in which they train and compete; therefore, suggesting those athletes' perceptions of the coach-athlete relationship has motivational significance (Olympiou, Jowett, & Duda 2008). According to Jowett (2009) “studying the nature and content of the coach–athlete relationship as well as its functions would help discern what makes a coach-athlete relationship positive and successful” (p. 35). She stated, “the generated knowledge will help design strategies for the development of effective, supportive, and successful athletic relationships” (Jowett, 2009, p. 35).

“The coach-athlete relationship has been found to relate in theoretically meaningful ways, to such constructs as; personal and interpersonal satisfaction, social cohesion, and motivational climate” (Jowett, 2009, p. 48). Therefore, this study in coach-athlete relationship research focuses on personal views of elite head coaches within team sports. Complementing previous, and expanding current empirical evidence surrounding the coach-athlete relationship; through a qualitative, phenomenological approach. Adding to such frameworks as Wylleman’s (2000) model of acceptance–rejection, dominance–submission, and socio-emotional factors; Mageau and Vallerand’s (2003) motivational model of the coach–athlete relationship; and the 3+1Cs conceptual model of the coach–athlete relationship (Jowett, 2009; Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004; Olympiou et al., 2008). This study's methodological approach describes and explores phenomena, generating explanations by means of interviews of participants (head coaches), and their lived experiences (Giorgi, 1997).
Sports coaches assist athletes in developing to their full potential. They are responsible for training athletes in a sport by analyzing their performances, instructing in relevant skills and by providing encouragement. But you are also responsible for the guidance of the athlete in life and their chosen sport. Consequently, the role of the coach will be many and varied, from instructor, assessor, friend, mentor, facilitator, chauffeur, demonstrator, adviser, supporter, fact finder, motivator, counselor, organizer, planner and the Fountain of all Knowledge. In relation to sports, the role of t... Athletes first, winning second; Every decision you make and behavior you display should be based first on what you judge is best for you athletes and second on what may improve the athletes or teams chance to winning. 3. What are society's objectives for sport programs? The objectives for sports programs are primary short term is to have fun and learn the game, with winning clearly a secondary objective. 4. Are your objectives compatible with society's? Yes, I believe the objectives are compatible with my beliefs for the reason that programs should be about having fun and learning th Establishing relationships with athletes helps a coach understand what motivates or drives each individual. It also highlights a personal, caring approach on the part of the coach—demonstrating that the coach sees the player as more than just a ticket to victory. Mutual trust is beneficial to the team, to how athletes play their sports, and it often leads to positive results. Other Tips for Forming Positive Coach-Athlete Relationships. The coach-athlete relationship is considered particularly crucial because of its effect on the athlete. Young athletes are susceptible to their surrounding environment and to the ideas of others, making the coach-athlete relationship critical to the development of athletes as individuals as well as sports participants. Journal of Sports Sciences, 2003, 21, 883–904. The coach–athlete relationship: a motivational model. GENEVIE`VE A. MAGEAU and ROBERT J. VALLERAND*. Laumann and the Canadian rowing team witnessed the tremendous difference coaches can make. It is thus not surprising that several authors such as Jowett (2000) have stressed the importance of building an effective coach–athlete relationship, as the quality of this relationship is a crucial determinant of athletes' satisfaction, motivation and improved performance. In the context of the coach–athlete relationship, it is thus in athletes' best interest that coaches nurture their athletes' intrinsic motivation and self-determined types of extrinsic motivation.