

Elite Athletes' Experiences of Athlete-Centred Coaching

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ABSTRACT

Athlete-centred coaching is a method of sport coaching proposed to enhance performance (Lyle, 2002), develop life skills (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010), and prevent athlete maltreatment (Kerr & Stirling, 2008). Despite these proposals, very little is known empirically about athlete-centred coaching, the extent to which it is implemented, or athletes' experiences with this style of coaching. The purpose of this study therefore was to examine recently retired elite athletes' perspectives on the extent to which their most athlete-centred coach demonstrated the behaviors representative of this style of coaching. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight male and female recently retired Olympians. The findings of this study indicated that some athlete-centred behaviors such as using a process-oriented approach were commonly experienced while others, including the asking of stimulating questions, were reportedly absent. Explanations for the mixed findings are discussed and a continuum of athlete-centred coaching is proposed. Lastly, suggestions for future research and practical implications are presented.

KEYWORDS: Athlete-centred, Coaching, Coach Education, Elite Athletes

Introduction

An athlete-centred coaching philosophy has been recommended consistently within the sport literature (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994; Headley-Cooper, 2010; Kidman, 2005; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Lyle, 2002; Miller & Kerr, 2002); this philosophy advocates for the development of the athlete as a person alongside of the development of athletic skills. It is a process by which “athletes gain and take ownership of knowledge, development and decision making that will help them to maximise their performance and their enjoyment” (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010, p. 13).

The tenets of athlete-centered coaching are as follows: (1) fostering the holistic development of the athlete and the development of life skills through sport (e.g., developing independence, leadership, teamwork skills, and decision making skills; highlighting respect, trust, responsibility, accountability and the view that sport is only part of the life experience); (2) creating a partnership relationship between the coach and athlete (e.g., athletes are empowered and included in some of the planning, decision making and evaluation processes); (3) teaching by guiding not prescribing (e.g., teaching games for understanding and using stimulating questions); (4) establishing a quality team culture in which the athletes gain responsibility for establishing and maintaining a direction for the team (e.g., athletes are having fun, recognizing athletes as part of a greater whole, and defining ‘success’); and (5) utilizing resources (e.g., good assistant coaches, outside help, and feedback systems) (Clarke, Smith, & Thibault, 1994; Headley-Cooper, 2010; Kidman, 2005; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Miller & Kerr, 2002).

The tenets of an athlete-centred coaching approach are rooted in Deci and Ryan’s Self-Determination Theory (2008) which focuses on the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Research on Self-Determination Theory has highlighted the associations between development of these needs with enhanced psychological well-being as well as increased persistence and performance in experiential types of activities (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Given that the athlete-centred coaching tenets, including empowering the athlete, building relationships, and fostering autonomy, are derived from Self-Determination Theory, it is proposed that they will also be associated with such outcomes. For example, Lyle (2002) recommends that performance coaches adopt an athlete-centered coaching approach because it fosters the coach-athlete relationship, thus increasing coaching effectiveness, athletes’ motivation and satisfaction, and team performance. Kidman and Lombardo (2010) contend that a coach with an athlete-centred approach would optimize coachable moments

and/or organize the sporting experience to maximize the occurrence of such events to develop life skills.

Researchers have also proposed that an athlete-centred coaching approach diminishes the 'win-at-all-costs' approach that so often characterizes sport. It is well known that the primary concerns of performance athletes, coaches, and sporting organizations typically revolve around winning games, making money, and being champions (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). Further, these desires for performance excellence can eclipse coaches' focus on athletes' personal well-being (Miller & Kerr, 2002). In fact, Kerr and Stirling (2008) recommend that an athlete-centred philosophy may be the most effective way to diminish the 'win-at-all-cost' approach that has been associated with occurrences of athlete maltreatment, thus enhancing athlete protection.

In spite of the propositions that athlete-centred coaching enhances performance, develops life skills, and prevents athlete maltreatment, very little is known empirically about athlete-centred coaching. Studies by Kidman and Lombardo (2010) reported that athlete-centred coaching was associated with increased player engagement, communication on and off the playing field, competence, and motivation. These studies were conducted with adolescent athletes who had experienced athlete-centred coaching and elite coaches who used an athlete-centred approach. Kidman and Lombardo (2010) used a multi-method approach to observe a senior boys' high school volleyball team, interview the head coach and two players, and conduct several group interviews with the players. These findings are very detailed; however, they are only one team's experience of athlete-centred coaching. In addition, Kidman and Lombardo (2010) interviewed elite head coaches from a variety of sports to obtain their perspectives of athlete-centred coaching behaviours. Previous studies on athlete-centred coaching within the elite context have examined coaches' views only and as such, there is a paucity of research on elite athletes' perspectives of athlete-centred coaching behaviours and the nature of these experiences. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to empirically examine elite athletes' perspectives of the extent to which their most athlete-centred coach exemplified athlete-centred coaching behaviours.

METHODS

Participants

Eight recently retired Olympians who had experienced athlete-centred coaching at some point in their careers participated in this study. The participants were at least four months into retirement and no longer than four years into retirement. Retired athletes were chosen based upon the assumption that they would have the benefit of time and distance from the environment to reflect upon their entire sporting experience. Athletes from both individual (n=4) and team (n=4) sports were represented including one athlete from a para-sport (wheelchair basketball). Additionally, both male (n=4) and female (n=4) athletes participated. Based upon the assumption that the coach-athlete relationship likely varies from team to individual sports, as well as from female to male athletes, and between able-bodied and para-athletes, a diverse sample was sought. More demographic information about the participants is included in the table below (pseudonyms have been used to keep the participants' identities anonymous).

Table 1. Demographic Information about the Participants

Participants	Age	Gender	Sport	Time Retired	National team	Olympics
Sean	34	M	Aerial Skiing	2.5 years	10 years	3
Ben	32	M	Sailing	4 years	10 years	1
Tom	27	M	Swimming	5 months	11 years	2
Jim	37	M	Wheelchair B.ball	5 months	17 years	5
Sam	42	F	Hockey	4 years	19 years	3
Jill	31	F	Rowing	6 months	7 years	2
Emily	34	F	Basketball	6 months	15 years	2
Jane	26	F	Trampoline	4 years	6 years	1

These athletes had reached the highest level of sport performance. Together, five of the eight participants earned 5 gold, 2 silver, and 1 bronze Olympic medals; 11 gold, 2 silver, and 4 bronze World Championships medals; and 25 gold, 12 silver, and 11 bronze world cup finishes. The other three participants did not medal at these events but did medal at other smaller events.

Recruitment

Purposive sampling (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007) was used to recruit recently retired elite athletes who had had an athlete-centred coach. Variety in sports and athletes with different coaches were attained through multiple recruitment avenues. The authors maximized their existing networks with elite athletes and sport science providers to elite athletes to identify and contact potential participants. Once potential participants' names and contact information were gathered, they were contacted through email, sent a letter of information and informed consent explaining the study and inquiring about their willingness to participate. Once athletes confirmed that they would like to participate, a phone, Skype, or in-person interview was arranged with the researcher at a convenient time.

Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview guide was designed to encourage participants to provide rich details of their experiences with their most athlete-centred coach. The interview guide was designed in accordance with the five tenets of athlete-centred coaching: holistic development of the athlete; creating a partnership relationship between the coach and athlete; teaching by guiding; establishing a quality team culture in which the athletes gain responsibility for establishing and maintaining a direction for the team; and utilizing resources. Each section included numerous questions regarding specific behaviours. The participants were asked questions about their coach's behaviours, followed by probes for specific examples or stories of those behaviours. Some examples include: "Did this coach develop independence/decision-making?", "Did this coach help prepare you for a success post-career?", "If so, how did s/he do this?" "Can you provide specific examples?" The participants' opinions about the identified coaching behaviours were not sought although in some instances, these opinions were revealed.

Data Collection and Analysis

Three of the interviews were conducted in person, two via Skype, and three over the phone. All of the interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of the participants and ranged from 90 minutes to 120 minutes in length. To determine if the participants had experienced athlete-centred coaching, a preamble was given at the start of the interview describing some of the behaviours associated with the basic tenets (he/she asked you questions, believed in you, gave you responsibility, empowered you, involved you in decision-making, and developed you as a person outside of sport). After the preamble, the participants were asked to identify if any of their coaches fit the description and if so which coach best fit the description. The identified coach was then considered their most athlete-centred coach who served as the primary focus of the interview.

General data analysis occurred simultaneously during data collection. This concurrent process helped shape the direction of the research throughout the interviewing process. Once all of the data were recorded and transcribed verbatim, the transcripts were then reviewed numerous times before analyzing inductively for final themes, categories or patterns. Coding was used as a means of generating concepts from and with the collected data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Specifically, an inductive analysis allowed for themes and categories to emerge from the data in order to understand the lived experiences of the participants. Creswell (2007) identified inductive data analysis as including “the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem” (p. 37). Following the inductive analysis was a deductive analysis. The deductive analysis consisted of comparing the themes and categories that emerged from the participants against previous frameworks of athlete-centred coaching behaviours. Strauss (1987) highlighted that a key component when coding is to provide “provisional answers about the relationships among and within the data” (p. 31).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The participants' most athlete-centred coaches engaged in coaching the participants for 6.7 years on average, ranging from 2 to 15 years. Of the athlete-centred coaches addressed, one was a club team coach, one was a university coach, two were university and national team coaches, and four were national team coaches. Four of the coaches had athletes achieve Olympic medals and three

of those were some of the most decorated Canadian coaches. Additionally, two coaches have numerous university coaching records.

The following findings of this study will be divided into the five basic tenets of athlete-centred coaching, the first being holistic development.

Holistic Development

Mixed findings emerged with respect to the extent to which coaches demonstrated behaviours related to holistic development. An example of a coach who promoted a balanced life was represented by Jill's account:

“He used a lot of stories from his own life and personal experiences, and he would bring in a lot of examples of how life outside of sport was as important or as exciting or as big. So this (sport) is just one part of your life, it is not everything and he would do that through story telling.”

Similarly, Jim recalled when his coach reinforced that he couldn't play sport forever:

“He kind of told me how important it was to finish university before you go on, and that (sport) won't last forever, but at that time I thought I'd play (sport) forever, but he was pretty adamant about it, like “you need a fall back plan, like it might be a bit of money and you can travel the world now, but you need a strategy or alternative goal in life that is going to help you make money when you are done playing (sport).”

Conversely, several participants reported that their coaches did not do a good job of promoting a balanced life. For example, Emily recalled an experience of 40 straight days spent in dorms with lots of practice but no outside events. In addition, Sean reported how his coach did not want him in a relationship and did not approve of his girlfriend at the time.

Several of the coaching behaviours related to holistic development were supported by all of the participants' reports, including: the promotion of education, continued learning, and a successful attitude. Likewise, behaviours that developed confidence emerged in all the interviews. This finding supports previous research that used interviews from athlete-centred coaches to highlight the importance of developing confidence by enabling and empowering athletes (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). Similarly, research by Côté and Sedgwick (2003)

found that building athletes' confidence was one of seven effective coaching behaviours based on interviews with expert rowing coaches and elite rowers. Developing confidence and empowering athletes promotes autonomy within the athletes, one of the three basic psychological needs from Deci and Ryan's (2008) Self-Determination Theory. Furthermore, the development of leadership was reported by the participants from team sports, but was not highlighted by the participants from individual sports, except for Tom.

Creativity was reportedly promoted by all participants' most athlete-centred coach except for two. Lastly, the participants reported ways in which their coaches behaved with respect to managing pressure. For example, Jane described how her coach diffused pressure:

"He just had so many good athletes and so much other stuff going on in his own life; he has a wife, a daughter, and a (sport) company, builds (equipment), a full business. So I felt a lifted pressure from that, like he wants me to do well but he really doesn't care. Like if I screw up at the end of the day he is like whatever. He just wanted us to do our best. He didn't care necessarily about us winning. It just diffused the pressure a little bit."

Similarly, Jill elaborated on how she never felt pressure from her coach:

"I never felt pressured from him. If we did have a bad performance, if we did something that was obvious, that he knew that we could have done better, he would tell us, but if we had executed a performance perfectly, we had been training for it and it just didn't go our way, he would never make us feel bad about it. It was always, "you know what, you did this, you executed it perfectly, and this is where we are today." It was pressure to execute our perfect performance plan that we were practicing. It was never pressure to win, it was just be your best, go out there and be the best you can today. So I never felt like "oh my god I can't go back to the coach I will get in trouble" - never once.

On the other hand, two participants reported that their coaches added pressure, instead of helping to manage pressure. Sean described his experience with his coach resulted in so much pressure that it became all-consuming and distracted his focus:

"Everything was about winning; there was no talk of second. Second was first loser. We talked about that all or nothing, or win or nothing. And for sure, that was probably the worst part of it. There was so much pressure that it was all

consuming instead of just doing your job every day and let the results take care of themselves. If you do your job you are going to win... we were so focused on the outcome we lost sight of how we were going to make it happen.”

Similarly, Emily explained that her coach would get stressed and that would transfer to the players:

“Sometimes she can get a little bit high strung and stressed out, she would yell or she would call a timeout, come in and yell at us. It wouldn’t necessarily be the best productive time out. I think sometimes she could have done a better job at calming her nerves and her stress, and relaying the message to us that needs to be relayed... I think that sometimes her anxiety would get a little too much and she would make some of the other players that way too.”

These reports of coaches not helping the athletes manage pressure contradict previous research on athlete-centred and effective coaching. In Kidman and Hanrahan’s (2011) practical guide to becoming an effective coach, they emphasize the importance of coaches having self- control, not adding pressure during important games, and showing faith in the existing plan and in the athletes. Findings related to the second tenet will be discussed next.

Partnership Relationship

All of the participants recalled having a partnership relationship with their coach to some extent. Athlete-centred coaching behaviours related to partnership relationships that were well supported included providing independence and communicating openly and honestly. For example, Sam stated that she respected her coach for being honest:

“I think that when it came to evaluation meeting I don’t think she did a great job, but at the same time she was just being honest and I respect that. I’d rather her do that then say “okay you are doing this great, this great, this great,” then come back and you are not going to make the team. She is very real.”

These findings support previous works such as Kidman and Lombardo (2010) and Kidman and Hanrahan (2011), who emphasized the importance of communicating effectively. Likewise, McMorris and Hale (2006) highlighted the importance of coaches being honest and fair as effective coaching behaviours. Moreover, one coaching behaviour associated with the second tenet that was not

reportedly experienced consistently by the participants was democratic rather than autocratic coaching. Specifically, Tom's and Sean's coaches were more autocratic than democratic, giving them little to no say in their training plans. Kidman and Hanrahan (2011) encourage coaches to be more democratic than autocratic to cultivate ownership "by enabling and encouraging members to become involved in decisions that affect the team and themselves personally" (p. 59). These behaviours help produce autonomous motivation by fulfilling the basic psychological needs of autonomy and relatedness from Self-Determination Theory. Conversely, Ben provided an example of his coach being democratic:

"He would sit down with me and build the training program. Like "what are you doing to do? How are you going to get good? Where are you going to train? Who are you going to train with?"... it was my program that I was directing and he was advising on it. It wasn't the other way around... I am the guy in charge of my journey and I am asking for advice from my coaches."

Although relationships beyond sport were not reported by two of the participants with their most athlete-centred coach, the other six described strong relationships built beyond sport. They described their coaches as friends, mentors and 'father figures', with two participants reporting that their most athlete-centred coach attended their wedding. These findings are consistent with previous research that identifies establishing a positive rapport with each athlete as one of seven behaviours associated with effective coaching (Côté & Sedgwick, 2003).

Optimal Teaching

The tenet of optimal teaching was the least supported of all of the tenets according to the participants. Specifically, the behaviours associated with teaching democratically, such as using stimulating questions and providing freedom to learn, and not "over-coaching" were reportedly used by coaches infrequently. Only three participants reported that their most athlete-centred coach used stimulating questions. Sam was one of those three; she described how her coach would stimulate the team members and encourage them to understand why certain systems were being used in certain situations:

She would probably say "why would we use a 2 1 2 for check in this situation?"... She would do that, like "why would we do this? Why are we using a man on man down low defense or a box plus one?"

Similarly, Jim reported that his coach used stimulating questions to help the players make better decisions within and outside of sport: He would also do that in real life: “When do you decide to not have another beer?” He was very good at that, using his knowledge and relating it to his players to help make better decisions... He asks the questions instead of telling you to go from point A to B, he asks you “what do you think right now is the best situation?” If you say go from point A to C, “what if you took the route of going to point B first?” Creating the stimulation that way; I think that was his teaching style.

Furthermore, two participants recalled instances of over coaching. For example, Jim described a situation in which his coach learned from an instance of over coaching. The team was down by one with six seconds left in double overtime, and made a play to score, but the coach had called a timeout to set up a play. So the point didn’t count, they got the ball back, didn’t score, and lost the game. Jim recalled:

“Our coach felt he was trying to over coach, he wanted to control the situation, looking back on it, and he has never done it since. He told me after that he decided “at the end of the game I want you guys to be so prepared that it should be second nature what you guys should be doing, you don’t have the ball you go there, you do that, we don’t have to take a timeout we can just go with the flow.”

These findings contradict the athlete-centred behaviours highlighted in the literature, including Kidman and Lombardo’s (2010) and Kidman and Hanrahan’s (2011) work: utilizing questioning and teaching games for understanding. Furthermore, McMorris and Hale (2006) highlighted the importance of not overloading athletes’ short term memory with too many instructions, suggesting a specific form of instruction – shaping skills. “The coach instructs the performer to concentrate firstly on one small part of the skill. Once the learner is able to perform that part reasonably well, a second part is added and so on” (p. 92). McMorris and Hale also advocate “learning by guided discovery, i.e. the coach sets a problem and helps the learner solve it” (p. 92).

Given that the use of stimulating questions and strategies to empower the athlete are central behaviours to the theoretical framework behind athlete-centred coaching, these findings are particularly significant. The behaviours associated with this tenet of athlete-centred coaching are necessary to encourage autonomous motivation in athletes, which in turn has been linked with greater psychological health, increased persistence, and more effective performance on experiential types of activities (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Unfortunately, however, the current findings suggest the use of behaviours to encourage autonomy within athletes is a weakness amongst this sample of coaches. Compartmentalizing skills was the only athlete-centred coaching behaviour associated with the third tenet that was reportedly experienced by all of the participants in this study. For example, Sam reported how her coach reduced a skill or strategy into parts and teaching in a progressive manner: “Breaking down whether we are doing a d zone coverage and man on man with box behind. Moving slow at first and just kind of giving hypothetical examples.” This finding supports previous research by Côté and Sedgwick (2003) who reported one of seven effective coaching behaviours is teaching skills effectively.

Quality Team Culture

The behaviours associated with the fourth athlete-centred coaching tenet, quality team culture, received mixed support. Using a process-oriented approach in conjunction with goal setting is the athlete-centred coaching behaviour that was most commonly experienced by the participants in relation to the fourth tenet. For example, Ben described how his coach broke down his goals into smaller more meaningful goals:

“This coach would definitely focus on my goals, and help me think about like “I want to win this (performance),” well that doesn’t mean anything, so he would break it down into smaller pieces. Like if you have a big goal, you really need to focus on these littler goals, and littler goals, and need to break it down... The job of a coach is to really help the athlete figure out the really tiny things the athlete needs to improve upon whether it is fitness, equipment or techniques, and help them work on all those mini goals.”

Sam mentioned how her coach emphasized process over outcomes: “she always said that every time that we are playing was to give a gold medal performance, the outcomes are the outcomes as long as we give a gold medal performance.” This finding supports the emphasis McMorris and Hale (2006)

place on coaches to create rules, consequences, and team goals together to increase team cohesion. Likewise, research by Côté and Sedgwick (2003) identified the abilities to create a positive training environment and facilitate goal setting as two of seven effective coaching behaviours. Further, facilitating goal-setting by allowing athletes to determine their personal and team goals promotes autonomy which is a central component for producing intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

As part of establishing a quality team culture, the participants consistently reported that practices were fun and engaging for the most part. Jane recalled:

It was always really fun, mostly because of the environment he created; we were all really good friends. And he would be like “if you want to blast whatever music you want you are allowed to I don’t care, just have fun, make this a great environment.” When we didn’t have competition we would try and do new tricks and he was really open to letting us do whatever we wanted.

Jill remembered a situation in which her coach helped lighten the mood during an intense workout. Her coach had his 13 year old daughter with him that day and after she whispered something into the coach’s ear he told his daughter to relay the message to the athletes: She said to us “don’t listen to him, do whatever you want and have fun!” So that cracked us up and kind of lightened the mood... Even though it is push, push, push, he realizes when there needs to be a moment of laughter.

However, a couple of instances were recounted in which practices were not viewed as fun and engaging. Tom explained that there were times that he didn’t want to be there:

“In my last year he wasn’t particular nice with me, so that didn’t make me super excited to go to practice... Just like stupid remarks, being grumpy around me, being short, in general being less friendly and smiley... it did affect my enjoyment level.”

In addition, several participants claimed that team cohesion had not been achieved by the coaches; one participant reported that his coach had clear favourites within the team, while another allegedly displayed preferential treatment of athletes such as giving the star players more leniencies. For example, Sam described that some players got away with more than others:

“A certain player was in the bench and was pissed maybe at the play and from time to time to anybody would be like “move the F’ing (object)” you know which isn’t obviously that productive, and one time got a water bottle in a game situation and whipped it in the bench and hit the bench and team physio... But because she was one of the top players it was kind of okay. So not favouritism but leniency, there wasn’t discipline really for it. And I think that a lot of players believed that there should have been.”

A more extreme example was given by Tom, who reported that his coach displayed fairly blatant favouritism:

“Extremely bad effect if you happened to be someone he didn’t like. Because he would be non-stop doing anything to make your life miserable, like putting people off to train by themselves away from the team, doing other sets and practices, literally not talking to people for days. Those were the worst cases, and even if he didn’t like you, like you didn’t do anything particularly bad, he would just not be particularly friendly with you. But the guys he did like could get anything from him.”

Kidman and Lombardo’s (2010) interviews with athlete-centred coaches highlight the importance of establishing a quality team culture as an athlete-centred coaching behaviour. More specifically, Kidman and Hanrahan (2011) suggest coaches can keep motivation and enjoyment levels high by “training in a different place, learning something other kids don’t know, playing music at training, trying something a bit daring, having a chance to really scream or yell, getting a special treat, trying out original strategies or tactics, and playing games” (p. 108). These behaviours were reportedly not implemented consistently by the participants’ coaches.

Utilize Resources

The behaviours associated with the fifth athlete-centred tenet, utilizing resources, were reportedly used by the participants’ coaches. More specific examples included: utilizing standard help, specialists, assistant coaches, special tools, technology, and knowledge of the sport. For example, Jane explained the level of special tools, technology, and knowledge her coach used to help her improve:

“He is the best; he is by far the best [sport] coach in the world, my opinion. Technically he understands mechanics. He has like multiple cameras set up so you can watch your performances over again. He has every bell and whistle you can imagine. He is just like technically superior. He has just a really good feel for the sport. Technically one hundred percent awesome...”

These findings support research such as Côté and Sedgwick's (2003) work in which they highlighted proactive planning as one of seven effective coaching behaviours.

Possible Explanations for Findings

The participants in the current study provided examples of athlete-centred coaching behaviours that had been implemented by coaches they considered to be athlete-centred. However, there were also several athlete-centred behaviours that were not reportedly demonstrated by the participants' coaches. The barriers to implementing an athlete-centred approach could help explain these divergent behaviours. These barriers have been documented previously by Kidman and Lombardo (2010) and McCallister and colleagues (2000). In particular, the professional sports model with its 'win-at-all-costs' approach has been identified as a major barrier to the implementation of the athlete-centred coaching model (McCallister et al., 2000). The professional sports model that promotes a 'winning is everything' culture can be used to explain the absence of several of the athlete-centred coaching behaviours in the current study. Foremost, coaches with a professional sports model approach likely assume the common misperception that the performance outcome of 'winning' and the athlete's personal development are mutually exclusive (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Consequently, the professional sport model approach may explain the lack of emphasis from some of the coaches on the more personal, development-related behaviours, such as promoting post-sport careers, general life outside of sport, and personal attributes. It is important to reiterate that according to the athlete-centred literature, developing an athlete as a person and as an athlete will increase athletic performance (i.e., personal development helps athletic success; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Lyle, 2002; Miller & Kerr, 2002).

Similarly, fun and engaging practices are not always perceived to be associated with optimizing performance outcomes; possibly explaining the divergent findings. Although managing pressure has been identified an important athlete-centred behaviour, several participants reported that their coaches were too focused on winning causing them to underperform from the

immense pressures and lack of process-oriented focus. Hence, the professional sports model could explain that some coaches did not manage pressure well because they let the 'winning is everything' mentality consume their focus, contributing to choking under the pressure. In summary, the professional sports model is proposed as a plausible explanation for the absence of certain athlete-centred coaching behaviours.

Another major barrier to implementing an athlete-centred approach is a coach's knowledge of the approach. Unless a coach has received formal training on the athlete-centred approach or had extensive experience with an athlete-centred coach as an athlete, she or he is unlikely to naturally adopt athlete-centred coaching behaviours. One way to facilitate an athlete-centred coaching approach is through coach education. Taylor and Garratt (2010) argue for the professionalization of coaching where required coach education programs ensure all coaches are properly educated. Furthermore, current coach education programs are not well informed by pedagogy with respect to the principles of Self-Determination Theory and athlete-centred behaviours, which could explain why these behaviours were the least supported in the current study (e.g., teaching skills more democratically than autocratically, such as using stimulating questions, teaching games for understanding, and providing freedom to learn, not over-coaching). One of the challenges pertaining to coach education is the prevailing assumption that the major determinant of becoming a successful coach in sport is believed by many to be one's past experience as an athlete (Taylor & Garratt, 2010). In reality however, the ability to play a sport does not translate well to the ability to coach or teach the sport. Until cultural views around coaching and coach education change, the promotion of an athlete-centred approach will remain a challenge.

A Proposal for an Athlete-Centred Coaching Continuum

The variability in the extent to which athlete-centred coaching behaviours were reportedly implemented, according to the participants' reports in the current study, implies that athlete-centred coaching may exist on a continuum. On one end of the continuum is the ideal athlete-centred coach who implements all of the athlete-centred behaviours; in the middle are coaches who demonstrate some but not all athlete-centred behaviours; and at the other end is the non-athlete-centred coach or coach-centred coach who does not implement any of the athlete-centred coaching behaviours. Theoretically, as the barriers to implementing an athlete-centred coaching approach increase, the more a coach will move away from the ideal athlete-centred coach. In addition, based on the

preliminary insight from this study and the proposed benefits from the literature on the relationship between athlete-centred coaching and performance success, we suggest that the closer a coach is to the ideal athlete-centred coach, the more performance success will follow. Such a continuum would also account for flexibility in the use of various coaching behaviours according to the age and maturity of the athletes as well as situational variability.

Effectiveness of Athlete-Centred Coaching

It was significant that the participants were athletes who had reached the pinnacle of sport performance, namely the Olympics and World Championships. The fact that these high performing athletes had reportedly had athlete-centred coaches begins to debunk the common misperception that athlete-centred coaching and performance success are mutually exclusive. Not only did they identify the behaviours, it was noticed that the participants also spoke favourably of many of the athlete-centred coaching behaviours. Although an assessment of the participants' opinions of their coach's behaviours was not a focus of this current study, it was still noticed. Likewise, the positive relationships the participants had with their coaches and the respect they conveyed for their coaches must be highlighted.

While future research needs to address the effectiveness of athlete-centred coaching behaviours empirically, the participants' comments provided some preliminary insight. Particularly, the findings of this study suggest a potentially positive relationship between athlete-centred coaching and performance success. In general, the more successful Olympic athlete participants reported that their most athlete-centred coach displayed more athlete-centred coaching behaviours than the less successful Olympic athlete participants. The performance success of the participants was operationalized based on medals earned at Olympic, World Cup and World Championship competitions. Specifically, three out of the four, or 75% of the athletes who reported their coaches displayed almost all the athlete-centred coaching behaviours were the most 'medal-winning' participants, and only one out of four, or 25% of the participants who reported their coach did not display all of the athlete-centred coaching behaviours was from the more successful participants. The theoretical framework of athlete-centred coaching helps to explain these findings. Self-determination theory states that autonomous motivation leads to greater psychological health, increased persistence, and more effective performance on experiential types of activities (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Therefore, if a coach does not implement the necessary athlete-centred coaching behaviours that foster

autonomous motivation, then it is plausible that the athletes will not achieve the associated benefits, including enhanced performance. Again, future research is needed to further examine this relationship.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

One of the strengths of the current study is the inclusion of voices of recently retired Olympians with respect to their most athlete-centred coach. Each participant painted a concise picture of his or her most athlete-centred coach. It is also important to note that the approach used in the current study provided a unique view of coaching behaviours, such that we were able to gather information about elite level coaching behaviours through the athlete's eyes.

Limitations to this study include potential retrospective memory recall and related biases. It is possible that the participants exaggerated their coaches' behaviours to portray them in a better or worse light even though the participants gave the impression of honesty as they described their coach's weaknesses and strengths. Similarly, issues of memory recall could have affected the participants' reports. Recalling specific memories was found to be problematic for some of the participants as they tried to recall their coaches' behaviours from up to over ten years ago. Also, the notion of recalling more positive memories as time progresses may have influenced the reports of the participants. Using one measure for data collection further limits the validity or trustworthiness of the data.

Several recommendations for future research are derived from the present study. Research is needed to inquire further into the many proposed benefits of athlete-centred coaching, in particular, the relationship with performance success, and the transferability of life skills. The concept of an athlete-centred coaching continuum could be utilized to examine these relationships. In addition, future research could take a closer examination of the differences in athlete-centred coaching between different sports, including individual and team sports, able-bodied and para-sports male and female coaches, and male and female athletes. Gender, sport, (dis)abilities and group differences likely play a role in the athlete-centred coaching relationship.

Future research would be strengthened by supplementing the interviews with such measures as observation and or questionnaires. Specifically, future research could take a triangulation approach, including the perceptions of the athlete and coach about the coach's behaviours, followed by several video

recordings of the coach in practice or competition. Furthermore, if an athlete-centred assessment survey were to be developed, then more data could be collected from a larger population.

The findings of this study could inform future coach education and coach assessment programs. Specifically, the detail and examples provided by the participants could help develop a more behaviourally-focused athlete-centred coaching model. Therefore, future research would benefit from designing a comprehensive behaviourally-focused athlete-centred coaching model. From there, athlete-centred coach education and assessment could be developed. As a result, future research may ascertain the extent to which athlete-centred coaching 'works' by assessing the effectiveness of interventions.

CONCLUSION

Eight recently retired Olympians provided insightful reports of their most athlete-centred coach. These coaches reportedly implemented athlete-centred coaching behaviours to various degrees. Specifically, the participants' coaches reportedly promoted a successful attitude, developed confidence, provided independence, communicated openly and honestly, compartmentalized skills, used a process-oriented approach, and resources. However, behaviours that were not reportedly implemented by all the participants' coaches included: managing pressure, being more democratic than autocratic, having fun and engaging practices, creating team cohesion, and developing leadership, encouraging relationships beyond sport, and creativity. Furthermore, at least half of the coaches were more autocratic than democratic in terms of their behaviours. This is concerning as using stimulating questions and providing freedom to learn and not over-coaching are central components to Self-Determination Theory, the theoretical framework behind athlete-centred coaching. These behaviours provide the autonomy necessary to stimulate intrinsic motivation and subsequent outcomes of greater psychological health, increased persistence, and more effective performance on experiential types of activities (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Based on the reported variability of athlete-centred coaching behaviours being implemented, the concept that athlete-centred coaching exists on a continuum is proposed. This continuum is a conceptual contribution to the athlete-centred coaching literature. Furthermore, the common misperception that athlete-centred coaching hinders performance success is challenged by the findings of this study. More specifically, a relationship between athlete-centred

coaching and successful athletic performance is suggested by the inclusion of Olympic medalists as participants. Further research is needed to empirically assess the proposed benefits of athlete-centred coaching. In other words, to examine the extent to which athlete-centred coaching does what it purports to do with respect to integrating personal and performance development.

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