



IT TAKES TWO: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

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YOUNG REVIEWERS



TOTS &
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Have you wondered why coaches are often the first people athletes turn to, both when they are performing poorly and when they are winning? It is because the coach-athlete relationship is the most important relationship developed in sport. Athletes spend more time with their coaches than with any other people in their lives generally. They look up to their coaches and rely on them for technical, tactical, and personal advice. Gold medal-winning Olympic athletes like Wayde van Niekerk, Simone Biles, Michael Phelps, Laura Muir, and LeBron James have said that their coaches are the reason for their success. In this article, we will discuss what makes a successful coach-athlete relationship, describe the impact of the coach-athlete relationship on an athlete's success, and provide tips that you and your coaches can use to develop a good working partnership.

RELATIONSHIP

Relationship is a social situation involving the connection between two people

WHY IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN COACHES AND ATHLETES IMPORTANT?

Forming meaningful **relationships** with others is an important part of our lives. We develop many important relationships—with our friends, families, teachers, and romantic partners. In sport, athletes also form several important relationships—with their peers, managers, and trainers. Have you ever wondered why coaches are the first people athletes turn to when they are performing poorly or when they are winning? It is because the relationships that athletes develop with their coaches are key to the athletes' success and satisfaction. Coaches are the people that athletes spend most of their time with. They rely on their coaches for their expertise, guidance, and their judgement about selection for competitions, team and matches. Coaches play other important roles too: they can be mentors and motivators, and they can provide a shoulder to cry on. For example, Usain Bolt, eight-time Olympic gold medallist, admitted that "there is times when you want to doubt yourself, but coach is always there to say, 'Do not worry, I know what I can do to make you run faster, and what you need to do to go faster'" [1]. The connection between a coach and an athlete can influence a large part of an athlete's life. That is why coaches and athletes must focus on developing a relationship that is effective (liking, caring for, and respecting each other) and successful (helping each other to win/be successful).

IS THERE ONLY ONE TYPE OF COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP?

There are four main types of relationships between coaches and athletes that we see in sport [2]. The first is a coach-athlete relationship that is effective and successful—this is the ideal relationship, one that all coaches and athletes strive to develop. These relationships not only experience success but the coaches and athletes also develop deep, mutual care and respect for each other. A wonderful example of this type of relationship is the one between Michael Phelps and his coach Bob Bowman [2]. Bowman began coaching Phelps when Phelps was 11. Bowman supported Phelps to become the most successful Olympian of all time, with 28 Olympic medals (23 of which were gold medals)! Phelps also said that his coach knew him better than anybody, apart from his mother! Bowman commented that he was more than a coach to Phelps; he was also a friend, a counselor, and a confidant. Can you think of any other examples of this type of coach-athlete relationship in sport?

The second type of coach-athlete relationship is an effective but unsuccessful one. In this relationship, coaches and athlete build good quality relationships. These strong ties allow coaches to influence athletes and help the development of athletes' psychological, emotional, and social skills, as well as their physical, technical, and

SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIP

Successful relationship is the extent to which the coach-athlete partnership is successful in terms of performance.

tactical skills. Examples of this type of relationship can be found in youth sport, where the focus is on being “the best you can be,” enjoying the sport, and having fun—without worrying about winning. If you have played sport before, or are playing sport now, you may have experienced this kind of relationship.

The third type of relationship is an ineffective but **successful relationship**. These relationships may experience sport success, but the coach and the athlete do not get on. In such cases, coaches and athletes can either try to fix the relationship or they can break up. A classic example is the relationship between Sir Alex Ferguson and David Beckham [2]. There is no doubt that this partnership was hugely successful. They also liked and cared about each other in the beginning, and Beckham often called Ferguson a father figure. Although they continued to be successful, the personal relationship between the two soured in 2003. As a result, Beckham left Ferguson and Manchester United.

The final type of coach-athlete relationship is one that is unsuccessful and ineffective. This is the most undesirable coach-athlete relationship, as it does not have any benefits for coaches or athletes. We do not usually see many examples of these relationships, as the costs of staying in such relationships outweigh the benefits, so they often break up.

THE 3+1 C MODEL OF THE COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP

Stop for a moment and think about your own experiences—what makes a good coach-athlete relationship? How would you describe a good-quality, effective, functional, rewarding, and satisfying coach-athlete relationship?

The most studied framework of the coach-athlete relationship is called the **3+1 C model** (Figure 1). In this model, the coach-athlete relationship is defined as a situation made up of athletes’ and coaches’ feelings, thoughts, and behaviors [2]. The “feelings” element of this model is defined as closeness, which reflects the strength of the emotional bond between coach and athlete. For example, the extent to which the coach and athlete like, trust, and respect each other. The “thoughts” element is defined by commitment. For example, the intention of coach and athlete to work together in the short- and long-term. The “behaviors” aspect of this relationship is called complementarity, which is the extent to which coach and athlete are comfortable in each other’s presence and adopt a friendly (rather than hostile) attitude. Complementarity also taps into the coaches’ and athletes’ unique roles in the relationship. For example, the coach is expected to lead and direct the athlete, while the athlete executes the coach’s instructions.

3+1 C MODEL

The 3+1C is a framework that describes the key relationship ingredients for a successful coach-athlete partnership.

Figure 1

The ingredients of a successful coach-athlete relationship. Research suggests that athletes who have high levels of 3+1 Cs are more likely to perform better, feel more motivated to train and compete, have better relationships with teammates, and have more belief in themselves and in their team's potential.



Figure 1

This model was originally called the 3Cs model because it consisted of closeness, commitment, and complementarity. However, based on developments in our research, it was revised to include co-orientation as an additional component. Co-orientation reflects the degree to which coaches and athletes have similar perceptions. These perceptions can range from their thoughts about their relationship to expectations about training and competition. Every given athlete and their coach develop mutual similarity and understanding that denotes their very unique common ground. Research shows that coaches and athletes who report high levels of the 3+1 Cs have better working relationships. It is important to note that the coach-athlete relationship does not stay the same—it is always evolving. As coach and athlete spend time together, experience successes, and face challenges, the quality and the nature of the relationship will change and fluctuate.

WHAT HAS RESEARCH SHOWN?

Research conducted over the last 20 years has shown how the coach-athlete relationship is linked to athletes' success [3–5]. The research suggests that athletes who have better partnerships with their coaches (such as high levels of 3+1 Cs) report more positive outcomes. These athletes are more likely to perform better, they feel more motivated to train and compete, and they have better relationships with their teammates. Further, they report greater levels of vitality, as well as greater belief in themselves and in the potential of their teams. Athletes who report poorer-quality relationships (such as low levels of 3+1 Cs) report fewer favorable outcomes. They are likely to perform poorly, they feel less motivated to train and compete, and they are more likely to feel overwhelmed and stressed.

COMPETITIVE SPORT

Competitive sport where participation in sport is focused on competing and training to achieve improvements and performance success.

Table 1

Tips for coaches and athletes to develop **effective**, successful coach-athlete partnerships.

EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIP

Effective relationship is the extent to which the coach-athlete partnership meets the personal and emotional needs of each other (or one another).

HOW TO DEVELOP EFFECTIVE, SUCCESSFUL COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIPS

If you are an athlete, after reading this you probably realize that you cannot become successful alone! To be a successful athlete, you will need a coach who is prepared to connect with you, to support and guide you through the ups and downs of **competitive sport**. Table 1 gives some tips on how to develop a good coach-athlete partnership with benefits for both you and your coach [3].

Relationship characteristic	Tip 1	Tip 2	Tip 3
Developing closeness	Take time to provide praise, encouragement, support, and constructive feedback to each other during training, competition, and non-sport-related contexts.	Engage in small talk: remember each others' birthdays, show interest in activities that take place outside of sport.	Engage in teambuilding and social activities that involve others (athletes, assistant coaches, parents).
Developing commitment	Ensure that you do not miss any competitions and trainings and be on time. Be mentally and physically ready for training (for example, by being the first to arrive and last to leave).	Be prepared to give up your time to your coach/athlete (for example, stay longer on the sport field to practice, receive/give instruction or feedback, and schedule/attend extra sessions).	Listen and learn from each other and set together individual (and team) goals
Developing complementarity	Establish clear team rules and expectations (like a code of conduct that coaches and athletes know and understand, as well as the consequences if rules or codes are not followed).	Ensure that both coaches and athletes provide input and actively participate in the training sessions.	Achieve a balance between order and freedom—provide a clear training or competition structure.
Developing co-orientation	Ensure the goals are agreed upon by coaches and athletes, are understood by all and are in line with everyone's capabilities, expectations, hopes, and aspirations.	Be curious, ask questions and actively listen to each other's responses.	Be sensitive and understanding of each others' needs; try to understand each others' views and perspectives.

Table 1

Overall, this article has outlined the importance of the coach-athlete relationship, the different types of relationships that can exist between an athlete and their coach, and the specific components of the relationship (i.e., closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-ordination) that have been examined within the research. We hope that by reading this article you have a better understanding of what makes the coach-athlete relationship “click” as well as taking away some helpful tips for how you can contribute to building a successful and effective sporting partnership.

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We are a small but mighty class of curious, multilingual learners. We are studying living things, life processes, natural habitats and environmental damage caused by humans in our second language, English! Some of us love science, there is even a budding scientist amongst us, but some of us are not so keen. We are hoping you can show us just how amazing science can really be.

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