

Coaches' Use of Positive Tactile Communication in Collegiate Basketball

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There is a growing body of research on positive tactile communication and its impact on athlete performance and team dynamics. The purpose of the present study was to examine the profile and perceived impact of positive tactile communication as a coaching strategy in a high-performance team sport setting. Participants were members of a successful American collegiate women's basketball team comprising the head coach, associate head coach, and 16 student-athletes. Methods of data collection included systematic observation and focus groups. Positive tactile communication was perceived to be an effective coaching strategy for enhancing relationships and athlete performance. To our knowledge, this is the first study to include both quantitative and qualitative data from multiple coaches on the same team, as well as athlete perceptions of coaches' strategic use of positive tactile communication.

Keywords: athlete performance, coaching behaviors, intercollegiate athletics, team dynamics

Athletes can often be seen celebrating through the use of positive tactile nonverbal communication (i.e., physical gestures, such as high fives or hugs following a score or important defensive stop). This type of athlete to athlete nonverbal communication has been shown to lead to improved team functioning and positive psychological momentum (Fransen et al., 2012; Moesch & Apitzsch, 2012). Despite being a frequent and normal form of interaction between teammates, positive tactile communication as a potentially effective coaching strategy has yet to be examined in real-time coaching situations (i.e., direct observations of positive tactile communication behaviors). However, any discussion of positive tactile communication as a potential coaching strategy requires careful consideration of the context, type of tactile behavior, and power differential between coach and athlete. For example, interpretations of tactile communication behaviors are affected by a wide range of factors, including cultural differences, relative age, and sexual orientation (SafeSport, 2020). Given the increasing awareness of abusive and hazing-like behaviors in sport and society in general, the potential negative impact of tactile communication behaviors in sport must be considered. In the most extreme cases, tactile communication behaviors could be perceived as grooming behaviors (i.e., physical, psychological, and social) to build trust and rapport, which could lead to sexual abuse and mistreatment (Bisgaard & Stöckel, 2019; SafeSport, 2020; Stirling & Kerr, 2008, 2013). Grooming behaviors have been documented in previous coaching research surrounding sexual harassment and abuse (see Bisgaard & Stöckel, 2019; Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005; Fasting & Sand, 2015) and are critical when discussing tactile communication in sport. Thus, the following examination of positive tactile communication as a potential coaching strategy must be interpreted with caution and always with the utmost consideration for athlete health and safety.

There is a growing body of research on different aspects of nonverbal communication, more broadly referred to as tactile communication, and its impact on athlete performance and team dynamics. Heckel, Allen, and Blackmon (1986) completed what appears to be the first study of tactile communication in sport. Studying the touch behaviors of winning team members in men's intramural flag football, they found patterns of touch interactions exhibited by athletes on winning teams were dramatically higher compared with athletes on losing teams. For example, elite netball athletes' nonverbal behaviors of physically embracing their teammates each time they scored worked to get in their opponents' heads. Subsequent research with high-performance sport teams also found that showing visible signs of support and encouragement, such as cheering after successful plays and showing confident body language after failures, was critical in building collective efficacy (Ronglan, 2007). Moreover, athletes also believed that these forms of tactile communication during a competition helped demoralize an opponent. For example, elite netball athletes' nonverbal behaviors of physically embracing their teammates each time they scored worked to get in their opponents' heads (Moesch, Kenttä, Bäckström, & Mattsson, 2015). From the 18 matches observed, Moesch et al. also found that "high fives," "low fives," and "high tens" were the most commonly demonstrated teammate positive tactile behaviors, and all types of positive tactile behavior decreased across the game.

Positive tactile communication has also been shown to be a strong enabler of trust between members of a group partly because of the release of oxytocin (Field, 2010; Gallace & Spence, 2010). Raising levels of oxytocin has been found to increase levels of trust (i.e., prosocial behavior) among both people and animals (Kosfeld, Heinrichs, Zak, Fischbacher, & Fehr, 2005). Taken together, these findings suggest that positive tactile communication may contribute to enhanced team performance by cultivating athlete interpersonal relationships and trust.

The most cited study to examine this hypothesis was completed with professional basketball athletes during the 2008–2009 National Basketball Association season (NBA; Kraus, Huang, & Keltner, 2010). Positive tactile behaviors of 294 players from all 30

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