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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Developing Close, Trusting Coach–Athlete Relationships With High-Performance Adolescent Tennis Players

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The purpose of this study was to understand why and how experienced tennis coaches developed quality relationships with their high-performance adolescent athletes that prioritized athletes' needs and well-being. Five highly regarded Canadian tennis coaches of internationally ranked adolescent players engaged in two semistructured interviews and three story completion tasks. The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings outlined that coaches unanimously believed establishing a close, trusting relationship with their adolescent athletes was fundamental to creating a caring environment in which empathy for athletes' athletic, academic, and personal demands could be demonstrated. Coaches also described the difficulties of navigating these close relationships in a climate that is under severe scrutiny because of athlete maltreatment allegations. Examples of coaching behaviors that fostered closeness and maintained athlete safety included demonstrating care towards athletes' social, emotional, academic, and athletic challenges, encouraging dialogue in which athletes expressed their wants and needs, and involving parents to help maintain transparency regarding the establishment of closeness. Uniquely, this study provides practical suggestions for how coaches can nurture closeness while promoting safe environments that prioritize athletes' welfare.

Keywords: coach–athlete closeness, athlete wellness, high-performance youth sport

Key Points

- Coaches developed coach–athlete closeness by demonstrating care towards athletes' social, emotional, academic, and athletic challenges and by encouraging athletes to express how they were feeling.
- Coaches were transparent and engaged in continued dialogue with parents to ensure the behaviors used to establish coach–athlete closeness were appropriate and continuously verified.
- To improve high-performance sport culture, safe sport education should provide coaches with specific guidelines on how to build close, trusting relationships with players that prioritize welfare and safety.

A coach's effectiveness relies on their ability to teach the technical, tactical, and physical acumen of sport (*professional knowledge*), engage in self-reflection and self-awareness for continued learning (*intrapersonal knowledge*), and build and maintain relationships with sport participants (*interpersonal knowledge*; Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Gilbert & Côté, 2013). A coach uses their interpersonal knowledge to build high-quality relationships with athletes of different ages, competitive levels, and personalities (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Specifically, the coach–athlete relationship is a social situation where each person's interpersonal feelings (*closeness*), thoughts (*commitment*), and behaviors (*complementarity*) continuously shape one another (Jowett, 2007). Because each athlete has varying needs, goals, and expectations, it is important that coaches recognize these differences and find ways to relate to each athlete on an individual level (Becker, 2013; Côté & Gilbert, 2009). As such, developing these relationships requires coaches to invest a great deal of time and effort as each coach–athlete relationship is as "difficult to manage and as complex to understand as the people concerned" (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016, p. 472). In fact, according to Jowett and Shanmugam (2016), the interpersonal connection built between a coach and athlete lies at the heart of effective/successful coaching. In addition, this relationship may be even more important in individual sports such as tennis, for which the primary coach has a direct influence on an athlete's sporting experience.

When the quality of the coach–athlete relationship is high, the coaching process contains mutual trust, respect, and appreciation, and the relationship becomes a medium that motivates, assures, and comforts each member (Jowett, 2007). High-quality coach–athlete relationships are associated with increased or enhanced athlete motivation (Adie & Jowett, 2010; Riley & Smith, 2011), passion (Lafrenière et al., 2011), performance (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003), communication (Rhind & Jowett, 2011), and psychological well-being (Felton & Jowett, 2013). Importantly, with numerous athlete maltreatment allegations in Canadian high-performance sport (see MacIntosh et al., 2022; Willson et al., 2022), coaches must promote and prioritize positive values and ensure athletes feel safe in their care. To this end, coaches can create psychologically safe environments where athletes feel comfortable taking interpersonal risks by speaking up, sharing concerns, asking questions, and offering new ideas (Edmondson, 2018). In fact, Jowett et al. (2023) recently found that openness[1] and conflict management[2] were positively associated with high levels of psychological safety that impacted the coach–athlete relationship. While controlling relationships and

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