The experiences of high-performance coaches in the management of difficult athletes

William J. Heelis [a], Jeffrey G. Caron [b], Gordon A. Bloom [a],[*]

[a] Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education, McGill University, Canada
[b] School of Kinesiology and Physical Activity Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, Université de Montréal, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Although research on effective coaching strategies is well documented, researchers are still learning how coaches effectively manage problematic athletes. The purpose of this study was to investigate how high-performance coaches managed difficult athletes. We interviewed eight experienced ice hockey coaches from the premiere development stream in Canada for athletes who aspire to play professionally. Through our analysis of the data, we found that these coaches identified problem athletes early, fostered relationships, provided clear expectations and roles, and transformed their behaviors to match the team culture (although this was not always possible). We also found that managing difficult athletes takes a great deal of patience, introspection, and emotional intelligence on the coach's behalf. Our findings contribute to a limited understanding of the knowledge and strategies used by coaches to manage difficult athletes and maintain a positive team climate.

Great things can be achieved when individuals come together to work as a cohesive unit. Conversely, when an individual or a group is not committed to a collective effort, the result is often a dysfunctional group or team. Indeed, researchers have found that the dynamics of a group can be undermined by a single individual if they are not identified and managed by the group leaders (Felps, Mitchell, & Byington, 2006). In order for any team to be successful, leaders must ensure that difficult individuals buy-in or accept the group's vision and values. When an individual's negative behavior is not addressed, it can spread contagiously to other members and impact team cohesion (Cope, Eys, Schinke, & Bosselut, 2010). Researchers have previously found how leaders can promote cohesion in various group settings (Bucci, Bloom, Loughead, & Caron, 2012), however the effective management of difficult athletes has rarely been the central focus of coaching science research.

There is evidence from the fields of business and education regarding the management of difficult individuals. In these contexts, leaders have reported spending approximately 80% of their time with 20% of group members who have behavioral issues (Brough, Bergmann, & Holt, 2013; Felps et al., 2006). Sport coaches have roles that are similar to teachers and business leaders. In particular, coaches of interdependent sports such as ice hockey, gridiron football, and basketball have stated that the success of their team often relied on the collective effort of each individual athlete (Bucci et al., 2012). However, dealing with difficult athletes is a major factor impeding the job of the coach, so it is surprising that there is minimal research on this topic (Cope et al., 2010). Cope and colleagues noted that "… [difficult] athletes end up taking a lot of management time. If 80% of the time is spent with the negative players, not enough time is spent on reinforcing positive or good behaviors" (p. 430) of the other athletes. Thus, the presence of a difficult team member who withholds effort, expresses negative emotions, breaks team rules, and/or mistreats teammates can negatively affect the team in terms of cohesion, satisfaction, and performance (Cope et al., 2010). Performance is a vital team outcome to achieve success in sport, while satisfaction is a critical outcome for most athletes (e.g., Hodge, Henry, & Smith, 2014). Therefore, understanding the processes that enhance both outcomes is of clear importance.

Difficult athlete behavior has been of interest to sport psychology researchers for some time. It began with the seminal work of Ogilvie and Tutko (1966) who first discussed the behavior of "problem athletes" in track and field. Since then, researchers have investigated "antisocial athlete behaviors" (e.g., Kavussanu, 2019), "team cancers" (e.g., Cope et al., 2010), "problematic players" (Leggat, Smith, & Figgins, in press), and coach-athlete conflicts (e.g., Wachsmuth, Jowett, & Harwood, 2017; Wachsmuth, Jowett, & Harwood, 2018a, 2018b). To our knowledge, Cope et al. (2010) conducted the first empirical study on difficult