

Coach-athlete Relationships: A Qualitative Study of Professional Sport Teams in Australia

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This paper examines perceptions of effective coaching and coach-athlete relationships within professional team sports in Australia. The findings are based on interviews with six male professional coaches and 25 players from cricket, rugby league, and rugby union. Qualitative data analysis reveals that relationships within professional sport settings are based on mutual respect, trust and honesty. The results also indicate that professional coaches and players describe two different types of coach-athlete relationships—the close, ‘family’ oriented relationship or the ‘professional’, arms-length relationship—both of which are considered equally effective as long as the coaches and athletes share the same attitude towards the relationship. These findings have implications for effective coaching and how coaches interact to develop relationships with their athletes. They demonstrate that if coaches are to be perceived as effective, it is crucial to consider individual athlete preferences with respect to the type of relationship formed. This highlights the need for specialised coach training in people management as the professional coaching role increasingly requires attention to personal development in conjunction with the technical, tactical and physical training of their athletes.

Keywords: interpersonal relationships, coach-athlete relationships, professional sports coaching, qualitative methodology

1. Introduction

In sport, interpersonal relationships exist within the team or club where coaches regularly interact with athletes, assistant coaches, medical and support staff as well as administrative employees. Bloom (1996b) highlights that interpersonal skills are essential for the coach, particularly in order to develop the athlete on and off the field. Similarly, Côté and Sedgwick (2003) identify that expert coaches demonstrate effective interpersonal skills in their ability to recognise individual differences and establish positive rapport with each athlete. At the professional level, one football (soccer) coach stated that the interpersonal nature of coaching was the most essential feature for practitioners to consider if they wish to be successful (Potrac and Purdy, 2004).

Until recently, the majority of research in coaching addressed the psychological, physiological, tactical and technical development of the athlete (Lyle, 2002). Lyle (2002) asserts that coaching studies have not investigated interpersonal relationships sufficien-

tly well to be able to describe these with confidence. Moreover, Jones (2004) claims that little research examines the interaction between athletes and coaches. Given the importance of interpersonal relationships within various team and individual sport settings, it is surprising that the topic has received such minimal attention from coaching researchers (Poczwarski et al., 2002b). Further research is required in order to provide contextual examples of interpersonal relationships within the professional team sport setting.

There is a considerable gap in the literature with respect to interpersonal relationships in professional sport. Research is needed to discover whether findings from a professional context are similar to studies within college and Olympic/World Championship settings because these environments have received considerable attention over time. Finally, the Australian context—a leading setting for cricket, rugby union and rugby league worldwide—has rarely been examined. This paper explores the coach and athlete perceptions of effective coaching and related

coach-athlete relationships in professional sport settings within Australia.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Professional coaches and athletes from the National Rugby League (NRL), Super 15 Rugby (rugby union), and the Sheffield Shield, One-day and Twenty-20 competitions (men's national cricket league) participated in the current study. The sample included six coaches (three head coaches and three assistants). The 25 athletes included a mixture of experienced (i.e. eight to ten years participation in professional sport) and early career (i.e. first two years of participation) athletes from various team positions (e.g. in rugby league, an assortment of forwards and backs). For further details about each sport competition, please refer to Bennie (2009).

2.2. Data generation

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002) with questions that asked coaches and athletes to describe their perceptions of effective coaching and interpersonal relationships. The initial interview topic explored participants' individual definitions of effective coaching with the aim of eliciting detailed responses in relation to the topic. Coaches and athletes were also asked about effective and ineffective coach-athlete relationships as well as factors perceived to be crucial for developing team cohesion. Probing questions were implemented to confirm or provide specific examples from their individual contexts. The principal author carried out all interviews before or after training over a period of four months during each team's season in 2007-8. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

2.3. Data analysis

The constant comparative method (Côté et al., 1993) was used to generate key themes from the perceptions of professional coaches and athletes both within and across each team context. Constant comparison is a multi-stage analysis process that initially involves the identification of key text segments or meaning units which contain ideas relevant to

research topic (Côté et al., 1993; Tesch, 1990). These meaning units are appropriately coded with descriptive names, representative of the included content. Following this, the transcripts are re-read to check for links or disparity between pertinent meaning units. They are then refined and given Tags (Côté et al., 1993). For example, the meaning unit "... you want to play for a coach that you have the respect of. I think it's the same for the coach, he wants to coach the athletes that respect him" (Lenny, rugby league athlete) was assembled into the tag called Respect. The next phase of the analysis process involved the creation of properties where similarities or differences between the tags are collated (Côté et al., 1993). For example, the tags named Family atmosphere and Respect were allocated into the property entitled Relationships. Links between property groups were identified and organised into broader categories (Bloom, 1996a; Côté et al., 1993) such as People Management. This procedure was replicated for each level of analysis; first within the individual cases, then as part of the cross-case analysis.

2.4. Establishing trustworthiness

This study received ethical approval from the University of Sydney's Research Ethics Committee. To ensure trustworthiness (ethical rigour) in the research process, the following steps were taken based on the advice of previous qualitative research (Bloom, 1996a; Patton, 2002; Côté and Sedgwick, 2003). The chief investigator triangulated (Patton, 2002) the views of coaches against the athlete and vice versa to authenticate the participants' and researcher's interpretations. Throughout this process, academic staff (i.e. Chief and Associate Supervisors) at the University of Sydney assisted in formulating ideas and reviewing research procedures (peer debriefing, Bloom, 1996a). Each participant was provided with a full copy of the interview transcript and encouraged to edit or correct any information they deemed incorrect or damaging (member checks, Côté and Sedgwick, 2003). No participants requested changes. Finally, there was no attempt to generalise beyond the research context as qualitative research merely attempts to propose theoretical propositions (analytic generalisations) rather than populations or universes (statistical generalisations). This paper provides rich descriptions of data so that

readers can make their own generalisations from the findings.

3. Results

The analysis process generated a total of 953 raw data units which were refined to 6 tags relating to the property Relationships including Open door policy, Honesty trust and respect, Demonstrate an interest in athletes, Regular dialogue, Family atmosphere, Professional relationships. While the six tags are split into separate groups, many of the features identified are contingent on each other. For example, effective coaches were said to (a) take an interest in athlete development both on and off the field; (b) initiate regular dialogue with athletes in both formal and informal contexts to develop trust and respect; and (c) create an open-door policy to enhance feelings of approachability. Each of the tags are explored below.

3.1. Open door policy

Athlete and coaches describe how effective coaches are approachable and have an open door policy to help establish rapport and build relationships with the player group. For example, Lee (rugby league athlete) states that “I think the more relaxed and approachable [the coach is] it definitely means the athlete can get a bit extra out of the relationship.” Similarly, Richard (rugby union athlete) claims that an effective coach “. . . gives off the presence the player can come up and have a chat to you about stuff, not be untouchable, or unapproachable.” Approachability is an appealing coach quality because it is linked to creating an open, relaxed environment or enhancing two-way communication between athlete and coaches. These factors are important qualities for effective coaching and suitable coach-athlete relationships.

3.2. Honesty, trust and respect

In this study, effective coaches developed open, honest and respectful relationships with athletes. According to Ronnie (rugby union assistant coach), this is because “a relationship with the athletes can't exist without honesty and trust”. The data analysis also reveals that coaches who display respect and trust for athlete have more positive relationships and

greater rapport with athlete than those who lack these qualities. For example, Lenny (rugby league athlete) asserts that:

. . . you want to play for a coach that you have the respect of. I think it's the same for the coach, he wants to coach the athlete that respect him . . . if he sees that we respect him and that . . . we believe [that] what he's doing is right and is the best for the team, that makes him feel more confident and . . . it's just that mutual trust kind of thing. We trust what he's doing is right and he's got the trust that we can go out on the field and pull off his ideas . . .

This indicates the value of respect and trust to not only relationships between athlete and coaches but also the preparedness of athlete to align with the coach's daily mantra and overall objectives.

3.3. Demonstrate an interest in athletes

In response to interview questions regarding how coaches form open relationships with their athletes, Leopold (rugby league head coach) suggests that “I think you earn their respect by showing an interest in people and . . . showing . . . that you're there to improve them.” Leopold's comments identify that demonstrating interest in each individual are other crucial factors that help establish trust and respect between coaches and athletes. Each of the coaches mention that informal conversations in the corridor or when travelling assist with showing an interest in athletes, as Ronnie (rugby union assistant coach) demonstrates:

You just have your conversations with them and sometimes they're structured and organised. But some of the more important ones I've been in it's just casually . . . You do a lot of them in travelling and touring. You just . . . checked in and sit down at a table with them and have a coffee and you just talk generally . . .

Several cricket and rugby league athletes indicate that they enjoy having a beer with their coaches in order to get to know a little about them, find something in common and to relax and feel comfortable in their coach's presence. The premise here is that if a coach fails to communicate with their athletes or give off the impression that they are unapproachable, they are likely to be considered aloof and thus ineffective as Lee (rugby league athlete) states:

... the kind of coach who, if you go up to and you say 'ohh coach can we have a chat?' and he's just like 'ohh I'll talk to you later' and he's just really cold and that kind of thing ... if I had a coach like that it'd be disgraceful.

3.4. Regular dialogue

In relation to initiating regular dialogue with athletes, Richard (rugby union athlete) explains that effective coach-athlete relationships involve:

... touching base with them maybe not every week but maybe once every fortnight, seeing how they're going, what they're thinking, what their thoughts are on the team's development, and just get a feel for how they are and just not to lose touch with them ...

Curtis (cricket athlete) supports this view, stating that if "you don't talk to your coach a lot then I think you can feel a little bit alienated and that they've not been helping you as much as what you think they could". Similarly, Callum (cricket athlete) suggests how regular dialogue is integral when dealing with athlete selections:

... with getting dropped, I think a good coach, when athletes do have those down times, is that they're treated and communicated with in a pretty similar to when they were in the team. I remember a situation with 'Cornelius' (former head coach) in my first year I had a good year, and he was great, he was always communicating and bringing me up, went out of his way to help me in training out of hours ... and in the following year, my form dropped, I got dropped and all communication and helping ceased, and that is something that I found extremely negative.

What this suggests is that Callum feels it is necessary for coaching staff to maintain contact with athletes during periods of good and bad form if they wish to preserve positive coach-athlete relationships. Furthermore, the coach's personal characteristics, such as empathy, are important for supporting coach-athlete relationships when athletes have been deselected from a team.

3.5. Family atmosphere

Participants from the cricket and rugby league contexts perceive that effective coaches form close

relationships with their athletes. For example, Lenny (rugby league athlete) suggests that effective coaches are "... a kind of people person, someone you can approach and talk to ... have a joke with here and there ... you don't just wanna be [talking] footy 24/7". This shows how important it is for some athletes to be able to relate to coaches, share jokes with them and even possess a similar "hobby ... outside the game" (Curtis, cricket athlete). Leonardo (league head coach) indicates that close relationships should be established between coach and athlete in order to encourage those involved to become like a 'family':

... a lot of these boys, they become virtually family to you and that's how I think it should be ... you gotta be a little bit careful that you don't get too emotionally attached but at the same time I think it's pretty important that there's that little bit of a family atmosphere ...

In the cricket context, they built their relationships on the concept of "Together Each Achieves More" (or the acronym 'TEAM'). With respect to this concept, Cyrus (cricket head coach) indicates that he aims to develop close relationships between athletes, coaches and support staff:

I think that 'TEAM' situation ... includes everybody ... So I have a physio bowling in the nets or whatever, so they feel part of what it's about ... you might have a room attendant, ok, you don't treat him like a piece of shit because he's important to what you're about ... because without him, the team's not going to function well.

This demonstrates how Cyrus' attempts to ensure everyone involved with the team feels comfortable and part of the team environment. He feels that when all personnel involved with the team are closely aligned, effective working relationships eventuate and it is more likely that people will work together to achieve team goals.

3.6. Professional relationships

In contrast to the cricket and rugby league participants, rugby union athletes and coaches claim that a professional distance must exist if the coach is to be considered effective. The "professional" (Rex, rugby union head coach) relationship exists where coaches and athletes remain at arm's-length distance from the coach in which coaching staff remained

“approachable but not matey” (Rafael, rugby union athlete). In this context, the coach and athletes make a distinction between being a ‘coach’ and a ‘mate’ because decision-making became easier if a professional distance is maintained. For example, Rex (rugby union head coach) states that:

I don’t socialise with the athletes . . . I’m pretty controlled . . . it doesn’t mean I won’t have a beer with them or something but . . . I’ll never go out with the athletes . . . So I’m quite clear where the lines of responsibility are . . . Some people say well maybe it’s a bit impersonal but it makes it better, [when] the hard decisions come it makes it much easier to make them . . .

Ricardo (rugby union athlete) shares this perspective and explains that, “It’s very hard when you’re one of the boys because you’re picking teams and making tough selection choices, you can’t be staying one of the boys”. Several rugby athlete also believe that both athletes and coaches need time away from the team environment. For instance, Ryan (rugby union athlete) claims that there is a “time and place [where] you’ve just got to step away from rugby” while Robert (rugby union athlete) asserts that “too much rugby rots your brain”.

Perhaps these participants believe that coaches do not need to be friends with athletes in order to be effective, but must be prepared to work for one another. Being liked and respected is a bonus in the coach-athlete relationship but as Rex (rugby union head coach) points out, “it’s easier to be liked than respected” as a coach. Alternatively, being liked but not respected or neither liked nor respected can be disastrous for the coach-athlete relationship. This is because a lack of respect in relationships restricts communication between coaches and athletes. Furthermore, limited or no respect may also have a negative impact on athlete selections, the team culture, and ultimately, commitment to and achievement of team goals.

4. Discussion

Coach-athlete relationships that foster trust and respect may enhance the atmosphere at the club and in turn encourage athletes to be more receptive of coach feedback, decisions regarding team strategy, training activities and selections. In the Poczwadowski et al. (2002a) study, the gymnastics college coaches and athletes acknowledged that trust

and respect work as both the product and the building tools in the coach-athlete relationship. This suggests that some college and professional athletes possess a similar mentality to coaching staff concerning the formation of personal bonds with the coach outside the traditional performance-based relationship to enable both the coach and athlete to perform effectively.

Much like the participants’ explanations about demonstrating an interest in order to generate respect between coaches and athletes, Jones et al. (2004) argue that being aware of what individual athletes are experiencing both on and off the field helps establish rapport and positive relationships between elite athletes and coaches. Similarly, results from the Potrac et al. (2002) study reveal that to be completely successful, an elite football (soccer) coach needs to be easily approachable and able to relate to his athletes not only as footballers but more importantly, as people, to gain their confidence, trust and loyalty. Instigating these actions demonstrates that effective coaches care about team members and attempt to make athletes feel comfortable in the team environment.

Similar to the ambiguous nature of the current findings, previous research in amateur and college contexts has been inconclusive in relation to the type of interpersonal relationships coaches and athletes consider most effective (see Cassidy et al., 2004; Poczwadowski et al., 2002a). Like some of the rugby union athletes; coaches and athletes from Olympic team sports indicate that a personal relationship is crucial but it must be kept at arm’s-length in order to remain one-step away from athletes (Cassidy et al., 2004; Côté and Sedgwick, 2003; Sedgwick et al., 1997).

In contrast, Poczwadowski et al. (2002a) describe relationships as negative when limited interaction occurred between athlete and coach. They also explain that negative relationships surface when relationships are purely based on working towards sport-specific goals. Similar to the professional cricket and league contexts, Poczwadowski and colleagues (Poczwadowski et al., 2002a; Poczwadowski et al., 2002b) demonstrate that a positive relationship occurs when college coaches and athletes intentionally interact with each other during practice, competitions and in other situations not directly related to their sport. This scenario creates a situation where the athletes and coaches enjoy

spending time together on both a personal and professional level.

The results from the current research suggest that professional or family-style relationships are considered appropriate for effective coaching. This demonstrates that various types of relationships can exist across different sport contexts yet still be considered effective. The type of relationship established within the team reflects the coach's philosophy and the beliefs of the athletes. Therefore, the type of individual relationship coaches have with each athlete may differ given that one athlete might want a close, amicable relationship with the coach while another could prefer an arm's-length, professional relationship. This highlights the importance of considering the athletes' needs, wants, and beliefs when developing a team and once again illuminates the need for alignment between coach and athlete perceptions for effective coaching to result.

Although differences existed amongst coach and athlete perceptions within and across sport contexts regarding the type of relationship that is most suited to effective coaching, all participants highlighted the need for some form of relationship to exist. This correlates with Vergeer (2000), who stated that the significance of interpersonal relationships is likely to differ across varying competitions, and social circumstance. The results from the current study suggest that the nature of the sport has no bearing on the relationship developed—it is more of a personal choice of the athletes and coaches. Without a genuine relationship, management of the team falters because developing relationships assist coaches in managing the team, establishing a comfortable team environment, and enhancing communication between the athletes and coaches.

5. Practical Implications

The above findings suggest that success as a coach is not solely judged on the quantity of wins you have, but also on the quality of relationships you develop with your athletes. Despite the importance of establishing mutual respect and rapport amongst athletes and coaches, a sense of ambiguity still exists in relation to the most suitable type of interpersonal relationships in team sport settings. If a coach does not interact positively with the team, the effectiveness of instruction and athlete application to training may be undermined. Furthermore, Reimer and

Chelladurai (1998) point out that the coach-athlete relationship is very important because a satisfied athlete is a necessary pre-requisite for athletes to perform at the highest level.

These findings have implications for effective coaching and the future role of coaches in professional settings. One of the implications from the current study reflects the need for additional coach training in personal skills and people management. This highlights the changing expectations of the professional coach, whose role increasingly requires greater attention to personal development as opposed to the mere technical, tactical and physical training of their athletes. This is especially poignant given the expansion of professional sport in Australia during the past 20 years, along with the advent of technology and rising number of staff and athlete involved in each professional sport team's daily operations.

Certain parameters that influenced the present research included the time of the year in which research took place, the limited sample size and the focus on male-only perspectives. In respect to the timing for data collection, the participants' beliefs and behaviours may have been influenced by whether the team was in preseason or in competition and winning or losing. These forces could affect the coach's involvement and communication style in training while also shaping their athletes' personal outlook on the research topic. An ethnographic or action-research project, whereby the researcher is involved with a team or several teams during the course of an entire season, would offer great insight into ongoing coaching behaviours and strategies as they occur in various sport contexts.

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