

Behaviors and Actions of the Strength and Conditioning Coach in Fostering a Positive Coach-Athlete Relationship

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Abstract

Carson, F, Blakey, M, Foulds, SJ, Hinck, K, and Hoffmann, SM. Behaviors and actions of the strength and conditioning coach in fostering a positive coach-athlete relationship. *J Strength Cond Res* 36(11): 3256–3263, 2022—A number of models have been developed to explain the various factors that affect coach-athlete interactions; however, they have had limited application to strength and conditioning (S&C). A systematic review of the literature was completed using the databases SPORTDiscus Full Text, MEDLINE, Global Health, Academic Search Complete, and PsychINFO, sourcing articles related to S&C coach-athlete relationships. An initial search yielded 1,364 articles, which when screened against the inclusion criteria was narrowed to 8 articles relating specifically to the S&C coach-athlete relationship. Four major themes were identified throughout the included articles: leadership styles; perceptions of leadership; coach knowledge, experience, and training; and building relationships. These themes highlighted that positive coach-athlete interactions are fostered through a mutual understanding of the S&C coach's responsibility to improve performance and reduce injury through scientific methods, with an awareness of different psychosocial behaviors of both the coach and the athlete. This will create a mutual interconnectedness whereby both parties can participate in a functional dyad. Three practical applications deduced from the findings identified the importance of building an autonomy-supportive environment, keeping knowledge and expertise at a high standard, and embracing the whole person rather than just the athlete. These teachings aim to guide S&C coaches through the necessary actions and behaviors recommended to successfully build and foster positive S&C coach-athlete relationships.

Key Words: leadership, leadership styles, coach knowledge, building relationships, coach behaviors

Introduction

The role of a strength and conditioning (S&C) coach is to create a systematic training program with the goal of preparing athletes for competition. From an athlete's perspective, considerable trust is placed in the S&C professional to assist them in reaching their specific performance goals and to keep them injury free. Jowett and Poczwadowski (16) define the coach-athlete relationship as “a situation in which a coach's and an athlete's cognitions, feelings, and behaviors are mutually and causally interrelated” (p.4). To this extent, the coach-athlete relationship is a dynamic process that can be both positively and negatively affected by the actions and thoughts of either individual. This dyadic relationship evolves over time (25), and relationships that are perceived as stronger have reportedly led to a perception of better performance (12). Positive coach-athlete relationships have also been influential in reducing athlete dropout (8), reducing fear of failure during competition (24), and enhancing athlete commitment (22). Jowett and Poczwadowski (16) recognized the importance of researching these interpersonal dynamics as a means to establish practical applications to be implemented by coaches.

Historically, coach-athlete relationship research has focused on the primary skills of coach and individual athletes or teams (23) and less commonly between head coaches and team-sport

athletes (1). To date, there has been minimal investigation into these relationships within subdisciplines of coaching, such as S&C. Philippe and Seiler (23) believe that this could be due to the makeup of high-performance departments which include a combination of coaches, rather than one specific discipline. Potentially, the S&C coach-athlete relationship can be more complex than the general coach-athlete relationship because the relationship does not purely revolve around the dyad and the S&C coach's philosophy but must also fit in with the boundaries and goals of the broader high-performance team and the head coach (18,28). However, the overall responsibility of the S&C coach is to apply their scientific knowledge to the athlete's needs, enabling enhancement of athletic performance, and reducing the risk of injury (18,28). Developing a positive working relationship with the athlete is a key part of this responsibility (13).

Most research on S&C coaches has focused on the technical expertise required (3,9) and ignored the psychosocial behaviors required to be an effective coach. Although having an understanding of the biophysiological components is important (10), general sport coaching literature has begun to recognize the importance of building relationships with athletes as a means of improving coach effectiveness (30). Côté and Gilbert (2) provided an integrated model combining professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge to identify the skills and behaviors required to be an effective coach. Applying this to the S&C environment, Gilbert and Baldis (9) suggest that the development of emotional intelligence and self-awareness can assist the coach in

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improving coach-athlete relations. Jowett (14) proposed the quality of the coach-athlete relationship is key to effective coaching. The benefits of a positive relationship include increased investment in reaching performance targets, identified and clear priorities, and a willingness to work together (14). The leadership style used seems to play a significant part in developing positive relationships (30), but how this plays out in the S&C training environment is unknown.

General coaching literature has demonstrated that autocratic and controlling leadership styles negatively influence coach-athlete relations (6). Creating these types of coaching environments leads to athletes being timid and anxious and reduces the potential for performance success (6). Jowett and Cockerill (15) suggest that an incompatibility in the coach-athlete relationship may be a result of the coach spending too much time on technical components and forgetting to consider the athlete’s feelings and emotions. By doing so, the athlete’s performance and well-being may be affected. Currently, it is not clear what actions and behaviors negatively influence the coach-athlete relationship in an S&C setting.

As a result, the aim of this study was to review the literature related to S&C coaches and S&C training environments to determine the behaviors and actions of S&C coaches in fostering a positive coach-athlete relationship. With this in mind, a secondary aim was to provide practitioners with evidence-based strategies to enhance coach-athlete relationships that can be easily implemented into S&C coaching environments.

Methods

Experimental Approach to the Problem

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines (21) were used to guide this review. An electronic literature search was conducted using 5 databases (SPORTDiscus, MEDLINE, Global Health, Academic Search Complete, and PsychINFO) between July 2018 and September 2018 (an updated search using the same parameters was completed in September 2020 after an initial review of the article). Searches were conducted using multiple search terms connected to the 4 key concepts of “coach,” “athlete,” “relationship,” and “strength and conditioning” (Table 1). A separate search of individual journals with the same search parameters was also

Table 1
Database search terms.

1. Coach	Coach or instructor or trainer
2. Athlete	Athlete or player or sportsperson or sportsmen or sportswomen or basketballer or “basketball player” or baseballer or “baseball player” or cricketer or “cricket player” or golfer or footballer or “football player” or netballer or “netball player” or “rugby player” or “soccer player” or swimmer
3. Relationship	Relationship or “coach-athlete dyad” or interdependence or “mutual dependence” or “mutual agreement” or “dyadic relationship” or inclusive or “mutually empowering” or “interpersonal relationship” or complementarity or co-operation or support or guidance or instruction or leadership or satisfaction or “motivational climates” or “interpersonal behavior” or “coach effectiveness”
4. Strength and conditioning	“Strength and conditioning” or “strength training”
1 AND 2 AND 3 AND 4	

conducted to retrieve any article that had been missed within the database search. After this, citation pearl growing (26) was undertaken on articles and authors deemed key to the topic area to find additional relevant articles.

Subjects

To ensure that the identified articles were relevant to the aims of this review, a number of inclusion and exclusion criteria were established. The inclusion criteria required studies to be of qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method design and be related to S&C settings. Furthermore, articles were to be full text and available in peer-reviewed academic journals, written in the English language, and published from January 2000 onward. Articles were excluded if (a) they were not related to coach-athlete relationships, (b) they were not original studies, (c) they were review articles, (d) they focused on athlete behaviors, (e) they focused on coaching behaviors outside of the coach-athlete relationship, (f) they were not specific to S&C (e.g., general sports coaching), and (g) they focused on youth athletes. Refer to Figure 1 for the full PRISMA flowchart. This study was approved by the Human Ethics and Advisory Group of Deakin University (HEAG-H 108_2018).

Procedures

All articles in the final sample were read and annotated, with significant characteristics of each article extracted. The extracted data provided details related to the study subjects, study design, and any potential limitations to the study. Kmet et al.’s (17) checklist for quality assessment was used to evaluate each article on an individual basis, with a quality score calculated for each article that was then converted to a percentage for calibration purposes. All authors agreed with the final quality scores awarded (Tables 2 and 3).

Results

A total of 1,364 articles were retrieved from the searches. Titles of resulting articles were assessed with 1,334 being excluded pertaining to the criteria of (a) not relating to the coach-athlete relationship or (b) not being original studies. Duplicates (*n* = 13) from the combined searches were removed, leaving 17 articles. A further 9 articles were removed based on exclusion criteria, leaving a final sample of 8 articles (5 quantitative and 3 qualitative). Study characteristics of the final articles are detailed in Table 4. Overall, 1,493 subjects (149 coaches and 1,344 athletes) took part in the 5 studies. The main findings from the identified studies and practical applications to S&C are provided in Table 5. Findings from the studies primarily support the coach-athlete relationship as a dyadic interaction that is led by the actions and behaviors of the 2 involved parties.

Discussion

The aim of this systematic review was to analyze the current literature related to the coach-athlete relationship in the S&C environment. Eight studies were included in the final sample. Collectively, the studies support the coach-athlete relationship as a dyadic interaction, requiring satisfaction from both involved parties for it to be considered positive. Analysis of the results led to the identification of 4 major themes: *leadership styles; perceptions of leadership; coach knowledge, experience, and*

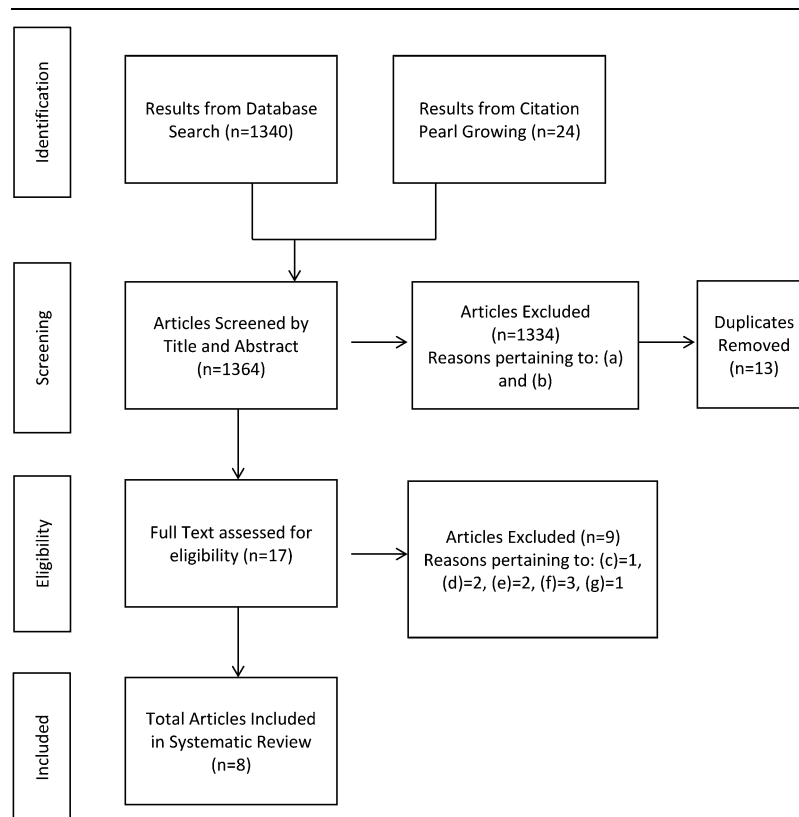


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart. A = not related to coach-athlete relationships; B = not an original study; C = review article; D = focused on athlete behaviors; E = focused on coaching behaviors outside of the coach-athlete relationship; F = not specific to S&C; G = focused on youth athletes. PRISMA = Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis.

training; and building relationships. Each of these will be discussed separately and form the basis of this discussion.

The manner by which an S&C coach approaches training sessions is integral to the way athletes react and perform. The S&C coach's actions should be situationally guided by an awareness for how their athlete perceives different actions and behaviors (18,19). The literature suggests autonomy-based, athlete-centered relationships that are driven by a democratic style of leadership are the most effective in achieving a positive coach-athlete relationship and subsequent performance (19,28). Using different leadership styles based on the context is recommended (18) because more autocratic leadership reduces athlete autonomy and negatively influences the relationship (19,28). Consideration of leadership style has been found to have a major impact on the relationship between a coach and an athlete as the coach's behavior guides the level of authenticity, trust, and closeness that are crucial to successful relationships (28). Strength and conditioning coaches should adapt their style of coaching to the sport-specific environment and use the athlete's responses to guide their leadership approach (19,20). In practice, this will require the S&C coach to be confident in their use of a variety of leadership styles. The practical approach should still be underpinned by a personal coaching philosophy, but with flexibility as to how this is applied. Being flexible and adaptable is important in creating an autonomy-supportive environment (28). Foulds et al. (7) noted that athletes preferred individualized plans, attention, and feedback as important means of developing an autonomy-supportive environment and enhancing the S&C coach-athlete relationship. An athlete-centered leadership style can also

positively influence both the physical and emotional development of the athlete (19).

Traditionally, S&C environments at high-performance levels seem to have preference for more autocratic approaches and less individual approaches (5). Szedlak et al. (28) contradicted this notion suggesting greater results in athlete development can come from creating autonomy-supportive environments at all levels. Like general sport coaching, S&C coaches need to improvise and adapt to what is occurring in front of them (28). Although it may be difficult to individually manage large groups of athletes, the S&C coach should aim to meet the needs of all athletes (18). Grant and Dorgo (11) provided strategies to achieve this, including identifying what is critical for the athlete to learn and what is less important, developing good teaching practice, spending time preparing for practice, and using self-reflection.

Demonstrating positive psychosocial behaviors (e.g., helping manage athlete anxiety) is an important leadership approach to developing positive S&C coach-athlete relations (18). Strength and conditioning coaches are encouraged to focus on the positive aspects of performance and provide constructive criticism to engage with athletes (18). Magnusen (19) suggested S&C coaches implement a leadership style that focuses on teaching and instruction because this will enhance the relationship with the athlete. It is therefore recommended that the S&C coach considers the development of their psychosocial skills alongside their education in the technical components of the profession. With no differences in coach behavior identified between levels of competition (19), this is important for all S&C coaches.

Table 2
Assessment of quantitative studies.*

Article	Quality assessment score														Total	Quality score
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14		
Eisner et al. (5)	2	2	2	2	n/a	n/a	n/a	2	2	2	2	n/a	2	2	20	100%
Lee et al. (18)	1	2	2	2	n/a	n/a	n/a	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	20	90%
Magnusen (19)	2	2	2	2	n/a	n/a	n/a	2	2	2	2	n/a	2	2	20	100%
Magnusen and Rhea (20)	2	2	2	2	n/a	n/a	n/a	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	20	100%
Tiberi and Moody (29)	2	2	1	1	n/a	n/a	n/a	2	2	2	2	n/a	1	2	17	85%

*Note: 1) Question/objective sufficiently described? 2) Study design evident and appropriate? 3) Method of subject/comparison group selection or source of information/input variables described as appropriate? 4) Subject (and comparison group, if applicable) characteristics sufficiently described? 5) If interventional and random allocation was possible, was it described? 6) If interventional and blinding of investigators was possible, was it reported? 7) If interventional and blinding of subjects was possible, was it reported? 8) Outcome and (if applicable) exposure measure(s) well defined and robust to measurement/misclassification bias? Means of assessment reported? 9) Sample size appropriate? 10) Analytical methods described/justified and appropriate? 11) Some estimate of variance is reported for the main results? 12) Controlled for confounders? 13) Results reported in sufficient detail? 14) Conclusions supported by the results? 2 = yes, 1 = partial, 0 = no, and n/a = not applicable.

The outcomes of a coach-athlete relationship are largely driven by an athlete’s perception of a coach’s leadership style, with Lee et al. (18) reporting a positively perceived relationship as integral to success within an S&C environment. The athlete’s perception of the leadership style was strongly influenced by the S&C coach’s behaviors and this affected the relationship (7,28). Athletes evaluate their S&C coach in all settings and their perception is formulated from both formal and nonformal interactions with the S&C coach (18). As such, S&C coaches need to maintain a high degree of professionalism at all times. Caution should be practiced here because this should not mean the S&C coach is available 24 hours a day for athletes, rather they set professional boundaries that are self-regulated and underpinned by personal philosophy. Being supportive was critical to an athlete’s perception of coach-athlete compatibility (18). This can be demonstrated by showing care in both sport and non-sport-related settings, exhibiting emotional intelligence, and giving athletes choice (7,27). Positive nonverbal communication, which demonstrates self-confidence, is also important (18). In practice, this can include presenting open and engaging body language and acknowledging athlete effort. Athletes appreciate S&C coaches who make them accountable for their own engagement and work ethic (5,7) and act as a role model for positive attitudes toward training (29). These positive coaching behaviors can lead to increased athlete motivation and commitment (27), with having high expectations of the athlete associated with positive effects on athlete development (19,28).

Magnusen and Rhea (20) reported that male and female athletes had different attitudes to different sex S&C coaches, with female athletes reporting no preference and male athletes having negative attitudes toward female S&C coaches. The authors speculated that the female athletes may have had effective male and female S&C coaches previously, whereas the male athletes may have primarily worked with male S&C coaches. Recently, Tiberi and Mooney (29) found no differences in athletes’ preferred sex of their S&C coach. Hegemonic masculinity associated with the S&C profession may influence athlete perceptions of preferred leadership styles. Further research is needed in these different perceptions, especially as there are fewer female than male S&C coaches (4). Therefore, many athletes (of both sexes) may not have experience working with female S&C coaches and, as such, cannot compare them to male S&C coaches. It is acknowledged in the literature that female athletes favored emotional support more than male athletes (18); however, other demographic factors (i.e., age, sport type, and motivational orientation) have greater influence on athletes’ preferred leadership style. Eisner et al. (5) identified that being a specialist and not a

head coach involved with team selection seems advantageous for positive relationships, particularly at lower levels where a specialist S&C coach is a privilege.

Experience and knowledge are viewed by athletes as important for the credibility of the S&C coach (7,20,28). Strength and conditioning coaches need to be educated and understand their role and responsibility (27), with the ability to demonstrate competency helpful for fostering athlete relationships (7). Higher levels of education may influence the S&C coach’s behaviors (19) and having a strong ability to teach is essential for developing relationships (29). Foulds et al. (7) advocated for the inclusion of psychosocial skills training to be part of the education program for S&C coaches. Developed psychosocial skills are also important for dealing with the complexities and diverse nature of the dynamic S&C working environment (29). Traditionally, many S&C coaches are former athletes transitioning to the profession and, as such, may have developed a preconceived approach to coaching and lack specific teaching skills. The inclusion of mentoring programs or a community of practice may be a means to address this limitation and should be a key component to S&C education (27).

Magnusen and Rhea (20) discussed experience, education, and teaching ability as the driving factors in an S&C coach’s ability to maximize an athlete’s performance through S&C protocols. The S&C coach’s credentials and qualifications add to athlete willingness to engage (5). Before attempting to coach professionally, individuals should complete the required level of education and endeavor to gain high-quality experience (9). At the elite level, the minimal requirement for an S&C coach is an undergraduate degree (13) and for many roles specific postgraduate qualifications are required. It is recommended that S&C coaches remain up to date with the latest training and short courses as an extension of

Table 3
Quality assessment of qualitative studies.*

Article	Quality assessment score										Total	Quality score
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
Foulds et al. (7)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	0	18	90%
Szedlak et al. (27)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	0	18	90%
Szedlak et al. (28)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	0	18	90%

*Note. (1) Question/objective sufficiently described? (2) Study design evident and appropriate? (3) Context for the study clear? (4) Connection to a theoretical framework/wider body of knowledge? (5) Sampling strategy described, relevant, and justified? (6) Data collection method clearly described and systematic? (7) Data analysis clearly described and systematic? (8) Use of verification procedure(s) to establish credibility? (9) Conclusions supported by the results? (10) Reflexivity of the account? 2 = yes, 1 = partial, and 0 = no.

Table 4
Characteristics of articles included in the final review.*

Author(s) and Year	Subjects	Study design
Eisner et al. (5)	268 collegiate athletes from 14 different sports (145 men; 123 women)	Quantitative Original 41-item survey designed to analyze beliefs and attitudes toward S&C, using a 5-point Likert scale Differences in sex and performance level were assessed using a Mann-Whitney <i>U</i> test
Foulds et al. (7)	12 high-performance athletes from 9 different sports (6 men; 6 women)	Qualitative Semistructured interview guide Audio recorded and transcribed verbatim Braun and Clarke's 6-step thematic analysis procedure
Lee et al. (18)	471 collegiate athletes from team sports (270 men; 201 women)	Quantitative Coaching Behavior Questionnaire—alterations to suit S&C coaches Rating of perceptions of strength coach compatibility 3 × 2 MANOVA
Magnusen (19)	149 basketball S&C coaches from NBA, D1-A and D2 level (146 men; 3 women)	Quantitative Revised Leadership Scale for Sport Questionnaire—language modified for an S&C coach Data collected for sources of information, goals of S&C, attribution to athletic success, athletic testing, plyometrics, and equipment ANOVAs completed for the 6 dependent variables of training and instruction, democratic, autocratic, social support, positive feedback, and situational considerations
Magnusen and Rhea (20)	476 collegiate athletes (275 men; 201 women)	Quantitative Attitudes of Athletes toward Male versus Female Coaches Questionnaire—modified for S&C language 2 × 2 MANOVA to compare the independent variables
Szedlak et al. (27)	8 international level athletes from 6 different sports (6 men; 2 women)	Qualitative Interview Semistructured interview guide Audio recorded and transcribed verbatim Braun and Clarke's 6-step thematic analysis procedure
Szedlak et al. (28)	10 international level athletes from 3 different sports (4 men; 6 women)	Qualitative Interview Semistructured interview guide and vignette Audio recorded and transcribed verbatim Braun and Clarke's 6-step thematic analysis procedure
Tiberi and Moody (29)	99 collegiate athletes from a range of individual and team sports (56 men; 43 women)	Quantitative Original 17-item survey designed to analyze S&C experience, traits, and physical attributes, using a 5-point Likert scale Differences in perceptions were assessed using a Mann-Whitney <i>U</i> test

*MANOVA = multivariate analysis of variance; ANOVA = analysis of variance; S&C = strength and conditioning.

this education. Strong teaching skills, such as planning, clear communication and instruction, and accurate provision of feedback, are important to be an effective S&C coach (20,28), and S&C coaches may consider further training in these psychosocial skills (27). Again, a structured mentoring or community of practice may be an important educational component for S&C coaches. Likewise, implementing self-reflection is important for personal development (28) and this should incorporate reflection on teaching effectiveness and relationship building. Further research is required to investigate how these concepts are implemented into S&C coach education programs, but continued reflection is recommended for enabling a lifelong

learning approach to both psychosocial and technical components (28,29).

Athletes' trust in their S&C coach is key to building a positive relationship (5,7). Although trust is built over time (7), S&C coaches ought to make a conscious effort to engage with the athlete outside of the training environment and demonstrate holistic care for the athlete (20,28). In practice, this can include active listening and creating individual goals (7). Even with large groups, an attempt should be made to engage on an individual level with each athlete. Further trust and respect can be developed using confident body language, expressed by good eye contact, and a tall, open stance (18). Szedlak et al. (28) advocate the use of

Table 5
Application of previous findings to the S&C environment.*

Author(s) and Year	Main findings	Practical applications
Eisner et al. (5)	Trust is key to developing a positive relationship Credentials and experience as an S&C coach aid the willingness of athletes to engage Relationships are built over time Being a specialist S&C coach and not involved in team selection help the relationship	Making athletes accountable for their own performance is important The S&C coach should help athletes recognize improvements An athlete-focused training environment encourages athlete engagement Having recognized S&C qualifications is important for athletes
Foulds et al. (7)	Trust in the relationship is built over time by being open and honest S&C coaches need to demonstrate competency in the training environment Athletes prefer individualized training plans, attention, and feedback The S&C coach's ability to be flexible and adapt to the athlete's needs is viewed as good leadership	Displaying appreciation of athlete success helps foster the relationship Work with the athlete to develop shared goals The S&C coach should display a strong work ethic
Lee et al. (18)	Demonstrating positive psychosocial behavior is important for the relationship Athlete age, sport type, and motivational orientation have greater influence on the preferred leadership style for athletes Female athletes favor more emotional support than male athletes Positive nonverbal communication is important to athletes	Different leadership styles are required dependent on the context of the coaching environment S&C coaches need to be adaptable and meet the needs of their athletes Focus on the positive aspects of performance and provide constructive criticism to help the athlete improve Offering social support and positive feedback enhances S&C coach-athlete compatibility
Magnusen (19)	Both formal and nonformal interactions influence the relationship No differences are observed in the level of performance and preferred leadership style Leadership style needs to match the environment Higher levels of education may influence the S&C coach's behaviors More autocratic leadership reduces autonomy of the athlete and negatively influences the relationship	It is important to consider the differences of each individual athlete, the level of competition, and the sport Implementing a leadership style that focuses on teaching and instruction is beneficial Developing an athlete-centered coaching environment enhances athlete engagement
Magnusen and Rhea (20)	Male and female athletes have different attitudes to different gendered S&C coaches Male athletes prefer male S&C coaches Female athletes had no sex preference S&C coach's experience and knowledge are important for developing credibility Teaching ability is essential for developing positive relationships	S&C coach's behavior should be dictated by the coaching context S&C coaches may need to consider investing in psychosocial aspects Engaging with the athlete outside of the training environment is important
Szedlak et al. (27)	The behaviors of the S&C coach influence the relationship Gaining trust is important and can be developed by providing positive feedback Having a sense of humor and making athletes feel relaxed is beneficial Effective communication and planning are key coach actions	Create an autonomy-supportive environment and be flexible in approach Demonstrate high expectations and belief in the athlete Provide clear instruction and corrective feedback to encourage athlete engagement Displaying care away from the training environment is essential Self-reflection is important for personal development
Szedlak et al. (28)	Developing trust and respect is essential between the athlete and S&C coach The S&C coach needs to be knowledgeable and understand their role and responsibility Teaching skills are important, with emphasis on preparation and communication	The S&C coach should demonstrate caring for the athlete in both training and nontraining environments Positive coaching behaviors lead to increased athlete motivation and commitment Consider developing psychosocial behavior and nontechnical skills
Tiberi and Moody (29)	Demonstrating competence and knowledge are important for the S&C coach No differences in desirable attitudes and behaviors between athlete sexes Teaching ability is essential for developing the relationship	Role modeling positive attitude and behavior enhances the S&C coach-athlete relationship Understanding both technical and psychosocial aspects of coaching is important

*S&C = strength and conditioning.

humor as a means to making athletes feel relaxed. A greater understanding of athletes as individuals will assist in interrelating the thoughts, motivations, and behaviors of both the coach and athlete to increase satisfaction within the relationship (5). Without this trust, the influence of the relationship will be minimal (27).

Having trust and respect encourages the athlete to engage in the S&C process and reduces absenteeism (27). Therefore, it is important to get to know athletes personally and professionally and find creative ways to incorporate the specific needs and goals of each athlete into their S&C sessions (18). Working together to achieve shared goals aids the development of autonomy for athletes, which can have a direct impact on the S&C coach-athlete relationship (28). The ability to be flexible and adapt to the athlete's needs is viewed as good leadership (7) and can help the S&C coach build credibility by demonstrating their understanding of scientific knowledge (27). An S&C coach should try to be aware of their athlete's likes and dislikes in the gymnasium environment to prescribe unique, individualized programs (18). This will help to achieve a two-way relationship involving input from both parties and a mutually built bond, which will enable feelings of value and belonging in the athlete (5).

Strength and conditioning coaches have a unique role to play within an athlete's training program. For the S&C coach to be effective, she/he needs not only to design and deliver a systematic, biophysical and technical training program but also to engage and support the athlete to reach set targets. The development of a positive S&C coach-athlete relationship seems important for long-term performance success and athlete well-being. Applying positive psychosocial behaviors and effective teaching skills are highly important for this. The S&C coach can build trust in both formal and informal settings and is encouraged to adapt their leadership style to meet the contextual needs of the athlete.

Practical Applications

From an applied perspective, the findings from this review show that coach-athlete relationships are dynamic and can be positively or negatively influenced by the S&C coach. Although aspects of the relationship are outside of the S&C coach's control, the S&C coach can take steps to encourage a positive professional relationship. Three key findings from this review can be acted on by the S&C coach. First, the leadership style used by the S&C coach needs to be athlete centered and focused on creating an autonomy-supportive environment. It is recommended that the S&C coach adapts his or her approach to the needs of the athlete because this will create a sense of connectedness. Having high expectations of each athlete is crucial, and the S&C coach needs to use a style that encourages the athlete to understand how to exceed their current limits and focus on empowering them. Second, S&C coaches' knowledge, experience, and training seem to be important to the athlete. Having high-level qualifications and up-to-date training provides the S&C coach with the ability to develop creative and highly individualized training programs, which are specific to the needs of each athlete. Further training in effective teaching practice and the development of psychosocial skills should be encouraged alongside specific performance competency training. The final application of this review relates to the S&C coach's ability to build relationships with the athlete. Coaches should attempt to create relationships with every athlete as a

complete individual and not just as an athlete in their training environment. This can create a bond built around trust and mutual respect whereby both parties feel comfortable enough to voice their opinions and make educated decisions that will benefit the athlete's sports performance. Building relationships does not necessarily need to involve intense bonding activities and could be as simple as taking opportunities for informal conversations on topics separate from training and their sport.

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