

Coaching Dynamics: The Impact of Behavioral Styles on Collegiate Athletes' Performance, Motivation, and Relationships

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Abstract

This study examines how collegiate athletic coaches' behaviors impact student-athletes' performance, motivation, and relationships, using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a framework. Semi-structured interviews with senior athletes explore how coaching behaviors affect performance, communication, and team dynamics. The study emphasizes the importance of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, identifying autonomy, competence, and relatedness as key needs. Findings reveal that positive coaching improves athletes' performance and trust, with gender differences observed. Female athletes were more emotionally affected by negative feedback, while male athletes showed greater resilience. The results suggest coaches should tailor their approaches based on athletes' emotional and motivational needs. Limitations include a small sample size and focus on one institution. Future research should expand to larger, diverse samples across multiple universities.

Keywords: Coaching dynamics, Self-determination theory, Collegiate athletics, Motivation

This study explores how collegiate athletic coaches' behaviors influence student-athletes' performance, motivation, and relationships, using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as its guiding framework. Coaching styles have evolved over time to better align with athletes' performance needs (Horn, 2008), and this study seeks to understand how these evolving behaviors impact athletes' perceptions. Focusing on senior collegiate athletes who have spent at least three years on their teams, the research uses semi-structured interviews to examine how

coach-athlete relationships affect performance, communication, and overall team dynamics. SDT provides the lens through which both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are addressed, specifically looking at the core needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

The justification for this study is grounded in the extensive time athletes spend with their coaches, forming relationships through training, instruction, and social support

(Hollembeak & Amorose, 2007). The behaviors and communication methods used by coaches are critical to an athlete's success, influencing both performance and mental well-being (Horn, 2008). The financial investment in collegiate athletics further underscores the importance of this dynamic, as institutions collectively awarded \$4.23 billion in scholarships during the 2019–2020 academic year alone (Knoester & Ridpath, 2021; NCAA, n.d.). As such, it is vital to understand how coaching behaviors shape athletes' motivation and long-term success.

While this study provides important insights into the coach–athlete relationship, it is a conceptual brief report with preliminary findings that highlight the need for further exploration, as noted by Bagley (2023). Due to its limited sample size and focus on athletes from a single institution, future research should include a more diverse group of athletes across different universities and sports. Expanding the scope in this way will provide a more comprehensive understanding of coaching strategies and their effects, contributing to improved coaching methods and enhanced student–athlete well-being across collegiate athletics.

Literature Review

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human motivation, particularly in distinguishing between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2012). SDT emphasizes how social and cultural factors influence an individual's sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are essential for well-being and optimal performance (Bentzen et al., 2014). Intrinsic motivation stems from internal drives such as personal values and interests, while extrinsic motivation arises from external factors like rewards and evaluations (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In the realm of athletics, SDT has been widely applied to explore the motivational processes influencing athletes' experiences. Research has shown that coach behaviors can either support or undermine athletes' feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which in turn affect their motivation and performance (Bartholomew et al., 2009). For instance, controlling coach behaviors can lead to negative outcomes like decreased motivation and well-being among athletes (Bartholomew et al., 2009). Studies on coach burnout also highlight the need for sports organizations to address coaches' psychological needs to prevent burnout and maintain motivation (Bentzen et al., 2014).

The coach–athlete relationship is critical in shaping athletes' perceptions of themselves, their performance, and their relationship with

their coaches. Effective communication between coaches and athletes is essential for building trust and improving performance (Martin et al., 2009). Athletes respond differently to various coaching styles based on their personalities, making it important for coaches to tailor their approaches to meet individual needs (Macquet, 2013). When coaches effectively communicate feedback and adapt their behaviors, it enhances the coach–athlete relationship and contributes to team success (Turman, 2008).

Research further indicates that strong relationships between athletes and their teammates, as well as with their coaches, contribute to greater athletic satisfaction (Outlaw & Toriello, 2014). Adaptive coaching behaviors, which consider both individual athletes' needs and team dynamics, can lead to improved performance and stronger coach–athlete dyads (Outlaw & Toriello, 2014). Overall, the literature underscores the importance of understanding the role of motivation and relationships in sports to foster positive outcomes for both athletes and coaches.

After a thorough review of the literature, the following research questions were designed to frame the study and scope of the eventual interview protocol.

RQ1: What are the perceptions that student-athletes hold about how a coach's behavior affects their athletic performance?

RQ2: What are the perceptions that student-athletes hold about how a coach's behavior affects their interpersonal relationships with teammates and coaches?

Method

This study employed a thematic analysis research design to investigate collegiate athletic coaches' behaviors and how they impact student–athletes' perceptions of their performance and relationships with their coaches. Thematic analysis was chosen for its ability to uncover patterns across a data set, allowing for a deep understanding of experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The study's data consisted of transcripts from six semi-structured interviews with current student–athletes. These interviews were guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and analyzed through an open coding process to identify key themes such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

The participants were selected using purposive sampling, which ensures that the individuals chosen had relevant characteristics for the study (Coombs, 2022). The sample included

three then-current male and three female student-athletes. Data collection consisted of open-ended, semi-structured questions, with interviews lasting 45 minutes each. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, allowing for a thorough analysis of verbal and nonverbal communication (Morgan, 2019).

Approval from institutional review boards was obtained prior to conducting the study, ensuring that all ethical guidelines were followed. Confidentiality was maintained throughout, with participants' names and personal information kept private. Ethical assurances included the option for participants to skip questions or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Data saturation was reached after six interviews, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the research questions (Yin, 2018).

Results

This study explored how collegiate athletic coaches' behaviors impact student-athletes' perceptions of their performance and relationships with their coaching staff and teammates. Using a thematic analysis framed by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), interviews with six student-athletes revealed key insights into how athletes perceive their coaches' behaviors. The findings showed that trust and communication were central to the athlete-coach relationship, with participants describing their interactions with coaches as open and supportive. Differences emerged in how male and female athletes responded to both positive and negative coach behaviors, particularly under stress, with female athletes more likely to report emotional reactions to critical feedback. This study examined six student-athletes' perceptions of their coach's behavior and its impact on their performance and relationships within the team, guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT). All participants, who received full athletic scholarships to Southern Utah University, highlighted the importance of trust and open communication with their coaches, with some describing their coach as a "father figure" or "second parent." While most athletes preferred discussing performance privately, others were comfortable with more open discussions. Overall, the findings revealed that trust and strong relationships with coaches significantly influenced athletes' perceptions of their performance and team dynamics. Only one participant mentioned that they could only trust their coaching staff with specific personal information. She stated

"I feel like I can only share certain personal information. Depending on how personal it is I can share it, but I don't want them knowing

my whole business because the coach that share my personal information with will share the information with the whole coaching staff. I don't want each coach knowing my business and talking behind my back."

Performing poorly can be stressful on both the student-athlete and coaching staff. During stressful moments or experiences a person may behave or react differently than they would if the situation was going smoothly (Bentzen et al., 2014). The male participants answered this question differently than the female participants. One of the male participants sees that their coach has the best interest at heart by knowing their coach's reaction to their poor performance is showing that they care.

"My coach's reaction to my poor play is just him, knowing that I 'm not my best, and I could be a lot better. The high expectations that the coach has for me, that is the end of it, you can react to it poorly, or you can react to it, and turn it into motivation. And just prove your coach wrong, which is, which is really what it's all about."

Another participant noted that he is fine with frustration and anger during his poor performance:

"Yells, gets frustrated, curses and is mad at the situation not us the athletes". Coach gets mad at the play or practice, but moves on from it quickly, he doesn't hold onto the past. He wants to be able to lead or coach the team and make us better players."

The female student athletes have a different experience with their coaching staff when they are performing poorly. The participants answered:

"When we are practicing or in competition and we mess up or it isn't going perfect, they tell us more things that we are doing wrong. They have high expectations for us and when we mess up it is a big deal and continue to talk about our mistakes."

Performing at the best of your ability can be exciting and motivating to continue to succeed. Exceeding expectations for not only the student-athlete, but the coach can be beneficial for the whole athletic program. All participants in this research answered positive answers about their coach. One student-athlete expressed:

"He gets excited, happy, gives me a hug, and he makes a joke. This makes me perform better and it makes it easier to practice, play or compete. You're doing a great job, just keep it up. And that goes a long way, he

doesn't have to be constantly babysitting, you're doing good. You're doing so good. And then you have to have higher expectations for yourself."

Emotional or psychological experiences can be triggering to someone's ability to perform at the best of their ability (Standage & Ryan, 2020). The females in this research had important and beneficial information for this research. Both participants expressed:

"If my coach yells at me I cry and break down. I no longer can perform well, I don't yell well and do very badly."

The male student-athletes acknowledged that yelling is different than frustration and answered:

"I respond well to him yelling at me, it motivates me, it shows me he cares, and is mad at my mistake."

Another participant focused on why their coach is yelling at them with the following quote:

"If you have a coach that is constantly yelling, and napping, you don't want to play for that person. There's a difference between reacting to poor performance and just yelling. I think yelling can be seen as highly negative. You never want to play for a coach that just yells, yells, and yells no matter what you do. So it definitely affects you. At the end of the day, you're an athlete, and if that's the coach, you play for them. You got yourself in that situation in the first place, you got to know who you're playing for, what their style is. And if you put yourself in that situation where you're playing for coaches, yells yells, yells, and you got to work through that. And like I said, turn it into motivation."

A coach's behavior can change under stressful situations as practice and games are different pressure environments. Practice has a different expectation versus game day expectation. The male participants had similar answers to their coach's behavior on practice or game days:

"Coach is the same on game day and practice. He does whatever we need to adjust to making us better athletes, he is more locked in on game days because he is focused on the game. There is a lot more pressure and he just thinks about what we can do to win."

The female student-athletes notice that the coaches do act differently on game days versus practice, as seen in the following quote:

"The beginning of the week practices are

very different from the end of the week practices. If it is going to be a stressful one then practices are a lot more stressful and more intense versus every day and a meet day. Meet days the coaches try to stay calm and do less crazy things, but that doesn't always happen. They are different on the day of competition versus practice day."

The findings from this study closely align with existing research on the impact of coaches' behavior in collegiate sports, emphasizing how coaches' interactions with athletes influence performance, relationships, communication, and team dynamics. Guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the research highlighted the significant role that both positive and negative coaching behaviors play in shaping athletes' perceptions of themselves and their teammates, particularly during practices and competitions.

The results underscore the importance of coaches acting as mentors and leaders, as their behavior significantly affects athletes' motivation and overall team dynamics. Furthermore, the study emphasized the pressures athletes face, reinforcing the need for supportive and personalized coaching approaches. While some participants viewed criticism as motivating, others felt overwhelmed by negative feedback, demonstrating the importance of tailoring coaching styles to individual needs. Overall, the study confirms that trust and effective communication within the coach-athlete relationship are critical to athletes' performance and emotional well-being. These findings reinforce the relevance of SDT in understanding the social and cultural aspects of coaching, providing valuable insights for improving coaching strategies across various sports disciplines.

Analysis

This study explored how collegiate athletic coaches' behavior influences student-athletes' relationships, communication, self-perception, and performance. Using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as the guiding framework, the research focused on the core needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Semi-structured interviews revealed that student-athletes tend to perform better when their coaches exhibit positive and supportive behavior. While male athletes were less affected by negative coaching behavior compared to female athletes, all participants agreed that positive behavior from their coach led to improved performance. However, the study's focus on a single institution limits the generalizability of the findings, suggesting that further research across different sports and genders is needed.

The findings emphasize the critical role coaches play in shaping athletes' performance and relationships, particularly through their behavior and communication. This study reinforces existing literature on the importance of the coach-athlete relationship, highlighting how female athletes may respond differently to behavior and criticism than male athletes.

Research Question 1

The findings of this study suggest significant gender differences in how student-athletes perceive and respond to their coaches' behaviors, underscoring the complexity of the coach-athlete relationship. Previous research has predominantly focused on athletes' perceptions without delving deeply into how these perceptions vary by gender. This study fills that gap by revealing that female athletes tend to experience more emotional and performance-related consequences when subjected to negative coaching behaviors. These behaviors, such as harsh criticism or lack of support, led female participants to feel less motivated and more emotionally impacted, which directly influenced their athletic performance. This suggests that female athletes may have a greater need for emotional support and positive reinforcement in their athletic environments to optimize their performance and overall well-being.

In contrast, male athletes in this study displayed a more resilient approach to coaching behaviors, especially negative ones. While they were also affected by their coaches' actions, they appeared to manage their emotional responses more quickly and continue performing at a higher level despite criticism. Interestingly, male participants also reported feeling comfortable discussing personal matters with their coaches, indicating a more open coach-athlete relationship in terms of personal support. This contrasts with female athletes, who were less likely to seek personal advice from their coaches, possibly due to a perceived lack of trust or discomfort in disclosing personal information.

These findings suggest that coaching strategies should be adapted to meet the different emotional and motivational needs of male and female athletes. For female athletes, fostering an environment that prioritizes emotional well-being, open communication, and positive reinforcement may lead to better performance outcomes. Male athletes, while generally less affected by negative reinforcement, may still benefit from tailored feedback that supports both their athletic and personal development. Overall, this study highlights the importance of personalized coaching approaches that take gender differences into account, ensuring that all athletes receive the support they need to thrive both on and off the field.

Research Question 2

The findings from this study emphasize that communication and relationship-building between coaches and student-athletes are fundamental to athletic success. A strong, trusting relationship allows athletes to feel more supported and understood, which directly impacts their confidence, mental resilience, and ultimately, their performance. Previous research supports this notion, indicating that athletes who perceive their coaches as autonomy-supportive and communicative tend to exhibit higher levels of motivation, engagement, and satisfaction (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2006). This study reaffirms that positive coach-athlete communication strengthens an athlete's mental health by fostering an environment where athletes feel comfortable seeking guidance and expressing concerns.

Moreover, this research highlights that the benefits of strong communication and relationships extend beyond the athletic domain and can be applied universally. Whether in sports, business, education, or personal settings, effective communication from leaders or mentors creates a positive environment where individuals are more likely to thrive. The interpersonal dynamics between a leader and those they guide can shape their performance, self-perception, and ability to overcome challenges. In this context, a coach or leader who takes the time to understand, motivate, and communicate effectively with individuals will cultivate a culture of trust and personal growth, leading to improved performance in all areas.

The implications of these findings suggest that for coaches and leaders to maximize the potential of those they lead, they must prioritize building genuine relationships that foster open communication. This relational foundation provides the emotional and psychological support athletes and individuals need to push their limits, address setbacks, and ultimately reach higher levels of achievement. As the findings demonstrate, the quality of these relationships can make a measurable difference in both individual and team success.

Conclusion

As collegiate athletics continue to grow into a billion-dollar industry and NCAA regulations evolve, it becomes increasingly important to study the emotional and educational experiences of student-athletes. Coaches play a critical role in shaping these experiences by fostering strong relationships, effective communication, and emotional support. Since each student-athlete responds differently to coaching styles, coaches must tailor their methods to meet individual needs. This study, consistent with previous

research, emphasizes the need for coaches to understand the significant impact their behavior has on athletic performance and self-perception, highlighting the importance of creating supportive environments that reduce burnout and enhance well-being.

While this study provides valuable insights into coach-athlete relationships, it serves as a starting point for broader research. The study's limited sample size and focus on athletes from a single institution point to the need for more comprehensive work that includes participants from multiple universities and diverse sports programs. Expanding the research to include additional participants will allow for a more nuanced understanding of how different coaching behaviors impact athletes across various contexts. Future studies should address these limitations to provide more generalizable results and deepen our understanding of the complex dynamics between coaches and student-athletes.

The principles of effective communication, emotional support, and relationship-building are crucial for successful coaching and leadership in any context, whether in sports, business, or education. As coaches continue to adapt to evolving demands in collegiate sports, future research should focus on larger and more diverse samples, exploring both athletes' and coaches' perspectives on performance. Such studies can deepen our understanding of team communication and leadership dynamics, benefiting both coaches and athletes alike. Ultimately, improving coaching strategies will contribute to more successful collegiate programs and healthier, more motivated student-athletes.

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