



Associations between the perceived quality of the coach–athlete relationship and athlete burnout: An examination of the mediating role of achievement goals



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The aim of the current study was to examine (1) associations between the quality of the coach–athlete relationship as perceived by athletes and athlete burnout and, (2) the role of achievement goals in mediating the association between the coach–athlete relationship and burnout.

Design: Cross-sectional.

Method: 359 athletes completed measures of the perceived quality of the coach–athlete relationship (the 3Cs model), achievement goals (the 2 × 2 model) and burnout (the athlete burnout model).

Results: Structural equation modeling revealed negative relationships between the perceived quality of the coach–athlete relationship and the three dimensions of athlete burnout ($df = 118$, $\chi^2 = 215.37$, $RMSEA = .05$ [.04; .06], $TLI = .97$, $CFI = .97$). Moreover, results suggested that mastery-approach goals partially mediated the relationship between the coach–athlete relationship and two dimensions of athlete burnout: sport devaluation (i.e., indirect and direct effects: $p < .001$) and reduced accomplishment (i.e., indirect and direct effects: $p < .01$).

Conclusion: The current study confirms and broadens previous knowledge on the socio-cognitive correlates of athlete burnout by demonstrating that the level of athlete burnout is associated with the perceived quality of the relationship with the coach. Results also highlight that achievement goals partially mediate these relationships.

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In the context of high-level sport, the coach–athlete relationship is at the heart of the competitive endeavor. Earlier work indicated that athlete perceptions of coach attitudes and behaviors such as the level of autonomy support (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003), the coach-created motivational climate (Ntoumanis, Taylor, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2012), and social support (Reinboth, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2004) influence athlete motivation, well-being, and performance. These perceptions of coach behaviors, leadership, and the climate represent distinct yet interrelated social environmental constructs in the sporting context. For example, when athletes

perceive that their coach is providing inadequate or non-contingent feedback, they may develop negative attitudes towards the coach, low perceived self-competence, higher levels of anxiety, and reduced motivation (e.g., Weiss, Amorose, & Wilko, 2009). Moreover, it has been reported that athletes consider their interaction with coaches to be a risk factor for developing burnout (e.g., DeFreese & Smith, 2014; Price & Weiss, 2000). Using tenets of the relationships model (Jowett, 2005), the present study was designed to extend previous research on the coach–athlete relationship by examining associations between the quality of the coach–athlete relationship and athlete burnout. We also sought to examine whether such relations were mediated by achievement goals.

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Quality of the coach–athlete relationship: closeness, commitment and complementarity

Jowett and her colleagues (e.g., [Adie & Jowett, 2010](#); [Jowett & Meek, 2000](#); [Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004](#)) defined the coach–athlete relationship as a unique interpersonal relationship in which the emotions, thoughts, and behaviors of the coach and the athlete are mutually and causally interconnected. These authors identified three dimensions that reflect these interconnected emotions, thoughts, and behaviors respectively: closeness, commitment, and complementarity (i.e., the 3Cs model). Closeness is defined as feeling emotionally close in the coach–athlete relationship; it reflects mutual trust, respect and appreciation, as well as a predilection towards liking one another. Commitment is characterized by the intention to maintain a long-term athletic partnership. Finally, complementarity refers to complementary or cooperative coach–athlete interactions, especially during training. In the 3Cs model, these three dimensions are considered to be indicators of the quality of the coach–athlete relationship.

Several studies have examined the consequences of the three dimensions of the coach–athlete relationship on motivational, affective, and behavioral components among athletes. Results suggest that the perceived quality of the coach–athlete relationship is related to enhanced athlete performance ([Rhind & Jowett, 2010](#)) and satisfaction ([Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004](#)), and greater collective efficacy ([Hampson & Jowett, 2014](#)). Moreover, some studies have highlighted that perceptions of the quality of the coach–athlete relationship may influence athletes' motivational dispositions ([Adie & Jowett, 2010](#); [Riley & Smith, 2011](#)). For example, a study with track and field athletes ([Adie & Jowett, 2010](#)) revealed that a higher quality coach–athlete relationship was positively linked to mastery-approach goals and negatively to performance-avoidance goals. Indeed, an athlete perceiving a good relationship with his/her coach in terms of closeness, commitment and complementarity may be more likely to adopt approach goals in order to demonstrate competence to him/herself and to others (e.g., he may try to attain his highest athletic potential). Conversely, an athlete perceiving a poor relationship with his/her coach may adopt avoidance goals in order to hide a lack of personal competence (e.g., he/she will try to not regress and/or to avoid doing worse than competitors). Moreover, in this study, mastery-approach goals partially mediated the link between the coach–athlete relationship and intrinsic motivation. Another study ([Riley & Smith, 2011](#)) suggested that the quality of the coach–athlete relationship was linked to self-determined motivation, and that this relationship was partially mediated by the satisfaction of athletes' psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Although researchers have used the 3C perspective to explore a number of motivational consequences of the perceived quality of the coach–athlete relationship, to the best of our knowledge, researchers have yet to examine the relationship between athlete perceptions of the quality of the coach–athlete relationship – as measured by the 3C's – and burnout.

Athlete burnout

Given the negative consequences of burnout for athlete well-being and performance ([Gustafsson, Kenttä, & Hassmén, 2011](#); [Lemyre, Hall, & Roberts, 2008](#)), preventing its occurrence is of clear importance. Raedeke and Smith (e.g., [Raedeke & Smith, 2009](#)) conceptualized athlete burnout as “a multidimensional construct consisting of three dimensions: (a) emotional/physical exhaustion, characterized by feelings of emotional and physical fatigue stemming from the psychosocial and physical demands associated with training and competing; (b) a reduced sense of accomplishment, characterized by feelings of inefficacy and a tendency to evaluate

oneself negatively in terms of sport performance and accomplishments; and (c) sport devaluation, defined as a negative, detached attitude toward sport, reflected by lack of concern about sport and performance quality” ([Raedeke & Smith, 2009](#), p.1).

Coach influence on athlete burnout

Past research on athlete burnout suggests that coach attitudes and behaviors may play a role in the process of athlete burnout, in particular, through the influence of coaching style, social support, and the coach-created motivational climate ([Isoard-Gautheur, Guillet-Descas, & Lemyre, 2012](#); [Quested & Duda, 2011](#); [Raedeke & Smith, 2001](#)). Some quantitative studies – based on leadership perspectives ([Chelladurai, 1990](#)) or Self-Determination Theory (SDT; [Deci & Ryan, 2002](#)) – showed that athletes were more at risk of experiencing burnout when they perceived low social support from their coaches ([Raedeke & Smith, 2001](#)), when coaches were seen as rigid and controlling ([Raedeke, 1997](#)), or when they failed to provide autonomy support ([Quested & Duda, 2011](#)). One study indicated that the level of controlling vs. autonomy support in the coaching style predicted the three dimensions of athlete burnout (i.e., a reduced sense of accomplishment, physical and emotional exhaustion, and sport devaluation) directly and indirectly through psychological needs and motivational regulations ([Isoard-Gautheur et al., 2012](#)). Moreover, another study using an Achievement-Goal Theory (AGT) perspective revealed that an ego-involving coach-created climate positively predicted a reduced sense of accomplishment through mastery-avoidance goals, and a task-involving climate indirectly and negatively predicted sport devaluation through mastery-approach goals ([Isoard-Gautheur, Guillet-Descas, & Duda, 2013](#)). Several qualitative studies have also indicated that athletes' perceptions of the coaching style influenced their level of burnout. Perceptions of high pressure, high expectations, and low social support from the coach, as well as conflict and dissatisfaction with the coach have also been associated with athlete burnout ([Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996](#); [Gustafsson, Hassmén, Kenttä, & Johansson, 2008](#)). These findings underline the importance of perceived coaching behaviors in athlete burnout, and suggest that the way in which an athlete perceives, interprets, and reacts to coach behaviors is fundamental for understanding athlete burnout.

While the extant literature provides a solid foundation for understanding the influence of coach behaviors on athlete burnout – using SDT, AGT and leadership frameworks – the social relationship perspective has not been explored. As mentioned above, the coach–athlete relationship refers to athlete perceptions of the coach–athlete dyad. It has been well established that the characteristics of the relationship cultivated between coaches and athletes play a central role in the latter's physical and psychosocial development ([Jowett & Cockerill, 2002](#)). Qualitative studies on athlete burnout ([Cresswell & Eklund, 2007](#); [Gustafsson et al., 2008](#)) have highlighted that a poor coach–athlete relationship (e.g., open conflict, poor communication, lack of empathy from the coach) was associated with burnout. Moreover, negative social interactions (i.e., unwanted advice or intrusion, failure to provide help when requested, unsympathetic or insensitive behavior, and rejection or neglect from individuals salient to the sport context) have been shown to predict athlete burnout ([DeFreese & Smith, 2014](#)). In order to understand these associations more fully it seems important to broaden studies on the influence of social relationships on athlete burnout. Despite the numerous studies addressing the influence of the coaching context on athlete burnout, a number of salient characteristics of the coach–athlete relationship have not been explored. We suggest that the quality of the coach–athlete relationship may be related to athlete burnout, and that the study of this relationship will deepen

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