COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

Coaches are influential forces in the development of athletes' potential within favourable sports environments. This is because coaches are ideally expected to guide athletes to achieve levels of performance to degrees that they may not realize if they are left on their own. However, in order for an athlete to gain from the work of his/her coach, there must be a healthy relationship between them. The coach should cultivate a relationship that makes his/her compatible to his/her athlete. Due to the uniqueness of each coach and athlete, such a compatible relationship can be elusive in being realized. The question of what can be described as an 'ideal' coach-athlete relationship can be a complex phenomenon that needs to be explored. This paper therefore, reviews information that may guide coaches in establishing healthy relationships with their individual athletes.

Key words: athlete, coach-athlete relationships and coach.

Introduction

The coach is the most influential force in the development of athletes within the sports environment (Beashel & Taylor, 1992; Jones, 1992). According to Frost et al (1995) and Nebiolo (1991) the work of qualified coaches is vital in the development and success of sports programmes. This is because the coach plays the role of enabling the athlete to achieve levels of performance to a degree that may not have been possible if left to his/her own endeavours. The coach develops not only the fullest physical potential in his athletes, but also those capacities and habits of mind and body which will enrich and ennoble their later years. The coach’s role also involves creating the right conditions for learning to take place and find ways of motivating the athletes. However, in order for the athlete to gain from the work of the coach, there must be a healthy relationship between them. To emphasize on the importance and nature of such a relationship, Hendrix (1993) developed an adage which states that:

'Individuals are born in relationships, they are hurt in relationships, and they need to heal through relationships'.

In an ideal or healthy coach-athlete relationship, both of them learn to coordinate their respective skills by appreciating each other’s technical and disposition attributes. This relationship between a coach and athlete evolves over time. It mostly starts out with the coach as the authoritarian member of the partnership, and as the years together progress, the relationship becomes more of a partnership. However, it is important to note that each coach and athlete relationship is different and complex (Martens, 1990; Haslam, 1988).

This is because every athlete is unique in his/her own way in terms of emotions, physical ability, body responses, background and perception, and every coach should therefore, cultivate a relationship that makes him/her compatible to his/her athlete (Bloom et al; 1998).

Attributes of the ‘Ideal’/ Healthy Coach – Athlete Relationship

- The relationship should be mutual i.e. the athlete must adjust to the coach, but this needs to be a two-way process, the coach should also adjust to some degree to be able to interact well with the athlete.
- It should be devoid of, or have minimum number of conflicts between the coach and athlete.
- There should be mutual respect between the coach and athlete. The coach should manifest the kind of behaviour that can earn him the respect of his athlete; he should set the example to be followed
by his athlete e.g. adhering to rules and regulations just as the athlete, being mentally, morally and physically fit. The behaviour of the coach has a bearing on the kind of relationship that will flourish between him and his athlete.

- The relationship should be based on mutual trust and honesty.
- It is also important to involve some degree of friendship. A personal relationship or companionship should be allowed to build up over the years as the coach and athlete work together.
- The coach-athlete relationship should involve commitment to the achievement of each other’s goals of involvement in the sport (Jowett & Gale, 2002). The coach should be committed to the discovery and development of the athlete’s potential, and the athlete also dedicated to achieve his/her maximal athletic potential.
- It needs to be a relationship in which the coach thoroughly understands his/her athlete in terms of physical ability, emotions, body responses, background and perception so that he is able to handle him/her in ways that accepted and appreciated by the athlete. Improved athlete awareness can help the coach to select a method of communication and feedback that will be more understood and integrated in a positive way.
- There should be fairness. The athlete should be given a chance to share whatever information he wishes with the coach; he should not be ignored or treated ruthlessly.
- There should be high degree of Psychological endurance (tolerance) even in the face of poor performance. The coach should appreciate and accept the athlete unconditionally even in the face of sub-par performance.
- It should be a relationship in which there is free communication between the coach and athlete. Schinke & Tabakman (2007) emphasize that a good coach-athlete relationship embraces rapport between the two. For instance, collaborative discussion on feelings and responses between coach and athlete can help the coach with a better understanding of where and to what extent his athlete’s insecurities reside. According to Schinke (1999), the coach needs to spend some time exchanging thoughts and experiences with his/her athlete.

The coach-athlete relationship is one in which the coach is a caregiver to the athlete. He provides technical guidance and emotional support to the athlete. The coach counsels the athlete by resolving his/her emotional problems on the basis that sharing anxieties can be both relieving and reassuring.

- It should be a relationship in which the coach is a mentor to the athlete. The coach is responsible to the athlete’s parents and family for ensuring that he is safe and secure while in training and support him in the event of problems or should he sustain any injuries.
- A healthy coach-athlete relationship is one in which the athlete has confidence in the coach. The coach should build such confidence in the athlete by competently guiding the athlete in technical development, supporting and sharing the athlete’s problems, giving positive feedback on athlete’s performance and motivating the athlete (Schnike, 1999).

**Factors that Influence Coach-Athlete Relationships**

Several factors dictate the nature of relationship that may flourish between a coach and his athlete. These factors include the following:

- Coach’s level of training and competence. The coach must be well-versed in coaching theory, and practice so as to earn the trust and confidence of the athlete (Bandura, 1997). This suggests that the coach should be a lifelong student to enable him/her master the art and science of coaching.
- Coach’s understanding of his athlete in terms of physical ability, body responses to physical activity, background, perception and emotions is important in determining the most appropriate way to relate with the athlete.
- Coaching or leadership style is a major determinant of the kind of relationship that will flourish between the coach and athlete. One school of thought suggests
that since coach-athlete relationship evolves over time, there should be progression in the application of coaching roles and leadership styles i.e.

(i) At the start of an athlete’s involvement in the sport / event, the coach’s role is to direct the athlete in all aspects of training (autocratic role).

(ii) As the athlete develops he demonstrates a sound technical understanding of the sport / event then gradually the coach’s role changes to one where the coach and athlete discuss and agree on appropriate training requirements (democratic role).

(iii) As the athlete matures and demonstrates a sound understanding of training principles then the athlete will determine his own training requirements. The coach’s role becomes one of the mentor providing advice and support as and when required (Leissze-faire role).

Another school of thought suggests that the coach’s leadership role/style should be varied according to situation. This school of thought emphasizes on the application of various leadership approaches as every situation dictates.

The Nature of Coach – Athlete Relationships

It is worthwhile noting that coaches do not coach the same way and that what works for one athlete might not work for another. In this respect, a number of coach-athlete relationships become distinct as the two relate to each other.

(i) Parent – Child Relationship

In this kind of relationship the coach plays the role of substitute / surrogate parent especially for the younger athletes. It works best in cases where the younger athlete doesn’t have enough guidance at home and needs a father or mother figure to fill in the gaps. At times it can be simply a matter of age differences; an older coach and a younger athlete falling into parent / child roles. This kind of coach-athlete relationship has also been widely acknowledged by elite athletes e.g. Summer Sanders, who won four medals at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, had this to say about his coach:

“I think when you get to the level I got you do have a close relationship with your coach because you rely so much on him for advice. I actually considered Mike Hastings, my coach, a third dad. There was my real dad, my step dad and Mike. I think the key is to always look at the coach as a father figure” (The Orange County Register, November 7, 1993)

It is important to note that the Coach – athlete relationships that take the of parent-child approaches can be very nurturing and supportive, and usually work if the athlete is young and his/her real parents either approve or don’t care. However, these relationships cannot work well when the coach and parents find themselves battling for the control of the athlete or when the athlete is too old or independent to be parented any longer.

(ii) Manager Coach – Athlete Relationship

In this relationship the “manager” coach is as involved in the athlete’s life as the substitute parent coach but the relationship is more businesslike. The manager coach monitors the athlete on and off the field, and oversees every detail of his life. However, the manager coach expects respect (based on his professional wisdom and experience) rather than love. In this kind of relationship the coach is in command and the athlete accepts this because he/she is eager to learn. This relationship works well when the athlete is emotionally stable and inexperienced competitively and professionally. However, it doesn’t work as well for an experienced athlete unless he/she hits a slump and wants to be remade.

(iii) Director Coach – Athlete Relationship

In this relationship the coach is less involved in an athlete’s private life. The coach wants to be listened to during training
and competition, but doesn't want to be bothered after hours. It is a working relationship rather than one of companionship with the athlete. This is usually evident amongst old coaches who are secure in their jobs and well-established, and their interest is to determine the best abilities an athlete has and can give. Such coaches do not bother about being liked or respected by the athletes.

The director-coach-athlete relationship is effective for an athlete who is emotionally self-reliant and respects the coach's expertise. However, since the coach in this relationship can seem distant, it may not be good for an emotionally insecure athlete of any age.

(iv) Companionship / Friendship as a Coach-Athlete Relationship

In this relationship, the coach hardly coaches but is more of a friend to the athlete. The athlete makes most of the decisions and the coach is there primarily to serve as a familiar, supportive audience. The coach and athlete respect and appreciate each other, discuss everything (good or bad) and even share interests hence, it is good for both technical, social and psychological support for the athlete. This type of relationship takes a long time to establish; it evolves over time as the athlete reaches his/her peak and no longer needs formal instruction. However, it is a rare relationship because most coaches can hardly tell at what point to step back and let the athlete take over. In addition, many athletes never develop emotionally to the point where they begin to make their own decisions.

Conclusion

It is the responsibility of the coach to cultivate the type of relationships that enhance his/her compatibility to each of the athletes. The most healthy relationship is the one that is based on the coach’s understanding of each of his/her athletes and on the individual differences amongst the athletes.

References


The Orange County Register, November 7, 1993.