

Epilogue

A commentary and reflection on sport psychology in the discipline of sports coaching

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31 **Abstract**

32 In this epilogue to the special issue of *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* on the psychology

33 of sports coaching, we provide a brief commentary on the field of sports coaching and some

34 reflections on three key themes emerging from the research presented within the issue. In

35 drawing our reflections together, we offer recommendations for the future directions of both

36 research and practice in the area, namely: (a) coach effectiveness; (b) relationships within

37 coaching; and (c) wider coach psychology research considerations.

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39 **A Commentary and Reflection on Sport Psychology in the Discipline of Sports Coaching**

40 Whilst we appreciate that the field of sport psychology has considered the *coach* and
41 the role that they play in athletic development for some time, we are also very aware that the
42 exploration of the psychological principles associated with sports coaching and the individuals
43 who operate in this role has not received the attention it deserves. Perhaps not surprisingly,
44 research has primarily focused on coaches' influence on athletes' physical and psychological
45 development (cf. Thelwell, Harwood, & Greenlees, 2017). However, as highlighted by
46 Zakrajsek and colleagues in this issue, "This emphasis on a particular aspect of coaching likely
47 limits the overall understanding of the profession and neglects the wide-ranging impact that
48 coaches truly have in the sport environment." Further, based on the increasingly accepted view
49 that the coach should be considered as a performer, research has only recently begun to explore
50 more critically and explicitly the *psychology of the coach*.

51 There has been a recent growth in media reports that highlight, at all levels of sport, the
52 significant demands that are placed on coaches, which tend to get magnified as the stakes
53 increase. For example, Nick Pedrazzini, an Australian Olympic swim coach, recently spoke
54 openly about his spiral into depression, the break-up of his family, and the sacrifices made to
55 support athletes as a result of the all-consuming nature of coaching. The emphasis that has been
56 placed on exploring the *act* of coaching at the expense of gaining a better understanding of the
57 *person* doing the coaching is, therefore, remiss (cf. Allen & Shaw, 2009; McCarthy & Giges,
58 2017). This contention is further strengthened by the research presented in this issue that has
59 highlighted (amongst other factors): the contextual, cultural and situationally-laden nature of
60 coaching knowledge and effectiveness (e.g., Alexander et al.; Fransen et al.; Gould et al.;
61 Villalon & Martin); the evolving role, and associated expectations, of the coach (e.g., Fransen
62 et al.; Gould et al.; Zakrajsek et al.); the contested nature of sport that requires coaches to
63 balance seemingly conflicting agendas (e.g., Hamilton & LaVoi); and the influence of
64 individual differences on coaching practice (e.g., Alexander et al.; Fransen et al.; Villalon &

65 Martin). It would appear, therefore, that in order to better understand the psychological health,
66 well-being, and functioning of sports coaches, and thus the wider contexts and environments in
67 which coaches operate, researchers and practitioners alike have to place the coach at the center
68 of their work.

69 A further development, also highlighted in this issue (see Hamilton & LaVoi), that
70 should be considered by sport psychology researchers and applied practitioners, is that the field
71 of sport coaching is evolving into a *profession*. Indeed, the field of sports coaching meets a
72 range of criteria required to achieve this classification, such as: the formation of governing
73 bodies of coaching; distinct educational and vocational certification routes; employment
74 pathways; a specific underpinning evidence-base; and codes of conduct/ethics (cf. North,
75 Piggot, Lara-Bercial, Abrahams, & Muir, 2019). In spite of such progression, however, the
76 majority of the coaching labor-force remain volunteers or part-time employees who
77 simultaneously hold other job roles (Lyle & Cushion, 2017). This renders the profession of
78 coaching a special case in that coaches are being asked to *act professionally* (e.g., uphold codes
79 of conduct, engage in evidence-based practice, engage in professional development, address
80 the effectiveness of their work) without necessarily holding the position as a professional
81 coach. The rapid development of the status of the field, and the resulting gap in the
82 professional training and employment of a qualified workforce, has brought with it a range of
83 personal (e.g., work-life balance; engagement in professional development) and interpersonal
84 (e.g., coaches ill-equipped to manage the micro-politics associated with coaching) issues for
85 coaches that further influence their ability to function (personally, socially, and professionally)
86 and thus effectively fulfil the multitude of tasks aligned to the job.

87 Given the circumstances surrounding the emergence of coaching as a profession (e.g.,
88 nature of the workforce), as well as the types of knowledge/evidence traditionally valued
89 within the field (e.g., professional and experiential knowledge of the act of coaching; Cassidy
90 & Rossi, 2006; Cropley, Miles, & Knowles, 2018), there appears to be a lag between the

91 production of empirical sport psychology research and the translation of the emergent
92 evidence-base into better and more informed action at the coalface of the coaching profession.
93 The dissemination of research that focuses on the psychological elements of the coach is,
94 therefore, a concern. Certainly, the consideration of the psychology of the coach has been
95 largely overlooked in coach education programs (as highlighted in this issue by Hamilton &
96 LaVoi, and Villalon & Martin), which tend to focus instead on briefly introducing coaches to
97 the psychological principles associated with athletic performance. Further, the growth of social
98 media, and the resources available within, as well as the expansion of the grey literature (e.g.,
99 literature that is unpublished or published in non-commercial form, such as blogs, policy
100 statements, lectures, and audio-visual media), appears to have taken precedent as the *resources*
101 *of choice* amongst many coaches seeking to develop their knowledge. Whilst these resources
102 undoubtedly have the potential to enhance the dissemination of *good evidence* (e.g.,
103 knowledge, understanding and application generated from rigorous, scientific research), they
104 also pose a threat to the propagation of an appropriately informed evidence-base for practice.
105 Consequently, sport psychology researchers and applied practitioners must carefully consider
106 how their work reaches and impacts the desired end-user to ensure that good evidence filters
107 quickly into coaching practice.

108 **Special Issue: Emergent Themes and Future Directions**

109 The articles published in this special issue all make a significant contribution to
110 extending knowledge within their respective lines of enquiry. Together, they offer a key
111 reference point for future research and practice within the field. Offering a full commentary on
112 each of the published articles goes beyond the scope of our intentions of this epilogue. Instead,
113 we have drawn on three key themes pertinent to the studies in this issue and provide some
114 discussion on the theoretical and practical implications of each. The themes cover: (a) coach
115 effectiveness; (b) relationships within coaching; and (c) wider coach psychology research
116 considerations.

117 Coach Effectiveness

118 Within the literature focusing on sports coaching, much attention has been given to
119 coach effectiveness and its associated components, such as: coach leadership (e.g., Arthur,
120 Woodman, Ong, Hardy, & Ntoumanis, 2011); developing motivational climates and learning
121 environments (e.g., Keegan, Spray, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2010); coach-athlete relationships
122 (e.g., Jowett & Nezelek, 2012); and coach efficacy (e.g., Feltz, Chase, Moritz, & Sullivan,
123 1999). However, as the research in this issue has identified, coach effectiveness is contextually
124 dependent, meaning that frameworks of effective behaviors, actions and/or relationships are
125 unlikely to support effective practice across different situations and across time (see Alexander
126 et al.; Gould et al.; Villalon & Martin). For example, Gould et al.'s research, published in this
127 issue, highlights the importance of coaches individualizing their practices based on the
128 characteristics and needs of their athletes. They attempted to make sense of the attention,
129 motivation, and communication characteristics of Generation Z athletes, with findings
130 revealing a range of strengths (e.g., being open to learning, visual learning skills) and
131 limitations (e.g., communication skill deficits, short-term outcome goal focus) of the
132 Generation Z athlete. This research offers insights into the specific foci (e.g., creating task-
133 orientated motivational climates; adopting varied digital communication techniques) required
134 for coaches and applied sport psychologists in their quest to engage in effective practice when
135 working with this specific population. In support of this theme, Villalon and Martin's research,
136 presented in this issue, identified that coaching efficacy (particularly *motivational efficacy* –
137 the confidence a coach has in their ability to foster their athletes' motivation) might decrease
138 for coaches who do not understand the motivational preferences of Generation Z, which are
139 likely to differ from other generations. Lower levels of coaching efficacy, born out of a lack of
140 understanding of the context in which the coach is working, is likely to subsequently decrease
141 the effectiveness of coaching practice. Similarly, building on Côté and Gilbert's (2009)
142 conceptualization of coach effectiveness as the consistent application of coaches' knowledge to

143 improve athlete outcomes *dependent on particular coaching contexts*, Alexander and
144 colleagues explored the effective practices of coaches working in female parasport. This
145 research is particularly timely, given the lack of available coaching resources and context
146 specific insights into coaching Paralympic athletes (cf. Taylor, Werthner, Culver, & Callary,
147 2015). Having identified the importance of coaches in this context being open-minded,
148 creative, adaptable, and valuing the development of both sport- and person-related (e.g.,
149 transferrable life skills) skills, Alexander et al. proposed that coaches working in parasport
150 must ensure that they seek educational and developmental opportunities to gain a better
151 understanding of effective coaching practices specifically related to female athletes with
152 physical disabilities. Collectively, this research highlights: (a) the need for coaches to gain a
153 holistic and critical understanding of the context in which they are working and shape their
154 practices accordingly; (b) the importance of focusing of process elements (e.g., coach attitudes,
155 behaviors and philosophy) associated with effective practice, rather than on specific outcomes
156 (which will be contextually specific); and (c) the need for researchers and coach education
157 providers to be more inclusive and consider the different contexts in which coaching takes
158 place (e.g., athlete/coach gender) to ensure that knowledge specific to the reality of coaches'
159 practice can be developed.

160 In consideration of the amount of attention that continues to be afforded to the concept
161 of effective coaching, we propose, in line with our argument regarding the need to place a
162 spotlight on the individual actually doing the coaching, that work in this area changes
163 direction. Specifically, we call for researchers and applied sport psychology practitioners (who
164 might be tasked with supporting the development of effective coaching practice) to explore
165 coach effectiveness through the lens of *coach well-being*. Increasingly, researchers are
166 advocating the significance of a coach's ability to cope with stress in determining successful
167 outcomes (e.g., Olusoga & Thelwell, 2017; Thelwell, Wagstaff, Chapman, & Kenttä, 2016).
168 Research has also recently indicated that a coach's ability to cope is linked to the level of their

169 well-being, which is also associated with improved health (physical, mental, and social),
170 productivity and performance (cf. Norris, Didymus, & Kaiseler, 2017). Further, well-being is
171 widely related to *happiness, life satisfaction, individual growth, and self-acceptance* and refers
172 to an individual's ability to *function* (cf. Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012). Exploring
173 how levels of coach well-being might be augmented appears, therefore, to offer an efficacious
174 approach to understanding how coaches might be better positioned to engage in effective
175 behaviors and practices and subsequently add a different dimension to the coach effectiveness
176 literature. In addition, placing more attention on the concept of coach well-being provides
177 timely opportunities for research into: (a) substantiating links between stress, coping, well-
178 being, and ill-being (e.g., negative processes and outcomes associated with *being ill* - a state
179 where an individual experiences grief, anxiety, and potentially anger); and (b) the wider
180 investigation of the mental health of sports coaches (*NB* – whilst mental health and well-being
181 are two separate constructs, it is likely that they are linked. Chronic experiences of ill-being,
182 for example, potentially increase the risk of the onset of mental illness, although research is
183 needed to corroborate such relationships, cf. Huppert, 2009; Weich et al., 2011).

184 **Relationships within Coaching**

185 The quality of the coach-athlete relationship has been reported as a key factor of
186 successful outcomes in sports coaching (Jowett, 2017). It is thought that the unique dyadic
187 relationship is required for both the athlete and coach to achieve their individual and combined
188 goals (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016). It is no surprise then, given that the coach-athlete
189 relationship is constantly shaped by interpersonal thoughts, feelings and behaviors, that it has
190 received growing research interest in the field of sport psychology.

191 Jowett (2017) detailed that the coach-athlete relationship holds significant power in that
192 the coach and athlete are mutually and causally interdependent. Indeed, in Alexander et al.'s
193 research, published in this issue, the participating female Paralympians acknowledged the vital
194 role their coaches played in their success. Perhaps as a result of this, however, the athletes also

195 defended the negative behaviors (e.g., inappropriate physical contact; lack of empathy)
196 demonstrated by their coaches, even when their coach's actions bordered on harassment. This
197 raises a serious issue concerning the way in which coaches exert and manage the power that
198 their position affords them. For example, whilst the athlete has considerable power in the
199 relationship (i.e., if athletes remove themselves from the coach-athlete relationship the coach
200 ceases to be), ultimately coaches are given *legitimate power*, which is derived from their
201 formal position (cf. French & Raven, 1959). Without careful management of such power
202 within a relationship, coaches and athletes can start to ratify inappropriate and/or unethical
203 coach behaviors. Coaches must consequently develop a range of personal (e.g., self-awareness;
204 emotional regulation; emotional intelligence) and interpersonal (e.g., empathy, genuineness)
205 skills required for the creation and management of relationships that are productive yet ethical
206 (Jowett & Nezlek, 2012). This can be difficult when working in competitive sport where
207 coaches have to manage the competing agendas of athlete welfare and winning. In this issue,
208 Hamilton and LaVoi's research offers a unique insight into these matters by exploring how
209 coaches maintain integrity and effective relationships built on solid moral foundations in the
210 context of highly competitive sport. This research provides insights into moral exemplar
211 coaches who placed significant importance of building relationships on the principles of *having*
212 *the best interest of athletes at heart* and *working with athletes as people*. As Hamilton and
213 LaVoi's research is relatively exploratory in nature, future research and practice should seek to
214 understand how congruence between a coach's morals, values, and behaviors is established and
215 maintained, whilst exploring the wider impact of this on the quality of the coach-athlete-
216 performance relationship.

217 The notion of building the quality of the coach-athlete relationship by placing the
218 athlete at the center of the coaching process was also addressed in Fransen et al.'s research in
219 this issue. This work considered the impact of adopting a shared leadership approach on
220 athletes' perceptions of coach leadership quality, with the researchers finding that if leadership

221 is shared amongst multiple leaders in the team, the better the leadership of the coach is
222 perceived to be. It would appear, therefore, that the act of sharing responsibility for significant
223 aspects of team processes (e.g., leadership) helps to empower athletes and in turn demonstrates
224 (and builds) trust between the coach and athlete. Fransen et al.'s research offers a much needed
225 insight into the concept of shared leadership and its potential impact on the relational dynamics
226 between coach and athlete. Indeed, many researchers have extolled the benefits of a shared
227 leadership approach in sports coaching without offering critical insights into the potential
228 barriers associated with its application (e.g., Bucci, Bloom, Loughhead, & Caron, 2012; Jones,
229 2006). Perhaps as a result, coaches have been a little reluctant to fully embrace shared
230 leadership due to the lack of supporting evidence base and subsequently overlooked a
231 potentially valuable mechanism for facilitating more positive coach-athlete relationships.

232 Finally, the work of Zakrajsek and colleagues in this issue, provides us with an
233 important reminder that “a comprehensive understanding of the coaching profession
234 necessitates an exploration not only of the interactions between coaches and athletes but also of
235 all other dyads that exist within the athletic environment.” Whilst Zakrajsek et al.'s research
236 focused on the role that head coaches play in satisfying or thwarting their assistant coaches'
237 basic psychological needs, we have to consider that coaching teams have grown considerably,
238 particularly at the elite end of sport. Coaches now have to form effective working relationships
239 with a host of support staff (e.g., physiotherapists; sport scientists; doctors; assistant coaches)
240 and other stakeholders (e.g., sponsors; managers; performance directors), the quality of which
241 will undoubtedly impact on the level of coach functioning. Relationships that are low in
242 quality, for example, are likely to be characterized by a lack of trust and the absence of four
243 core components of effective relationships: *closeness*, *commitment*, *complementarity*, and *co-*
244 *orientation* (see Jowett, 2017). In line with Zakrajsek et al.'s findings, relationships that are
245 high in quality have the potential of supporting coaches' need fulfillment, which can result in a

246 greater sense of self-actualization and more effective levels of functioning (Bartholomew,
247 Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011).

248 **Wider Coach Psychology Research Considerations**

249 To bring this epilogue to a close, we would like to draw your attention to a number of
250 considerations relating to the ongoing study of the psychology of the sport coach. First, we
251 urge researchers to consider adopting a wide range of paradigmatic approaches to addressing
252 the pressing research questions in the field. We do this for two reasons: (1) we need to consider
253 the constraints associated with conducting research with coaching as a population; and (2) it is
254 imperative that we begin to build a more diverse and robust evidence-base that incorporates
255 different forms of knowledge. Certainly, building connections between quantitatively identified
256 relationships and qualitative explorations of the mechanisms that underpin those relationships
257 will only help to construct a more complete picture of the psychology of the coach and, in
258 doing so, offer greater support for both coaches and applied practitioners who work with
259 coaches. In agreement with Olusoga and Thelwell (2017), we therefore advocate the wider use
260 of idiographic, case-study, action research, and single-subject designs. Second, the field would
261 benefit from further intervention studies with the coach as the primary participant. Certainly,
262 applied and/or empirical intervention research that focused on stress management, improving
263 psychological well-being, managing the psychological needs of the coach, supporting coach-
264 athlete relationships, and improving self-care strategies (amongst other topics) would be a
265 welcome addition to the literature. In line with this, research that facilitates a deeper
266 understanding of the coach as a person and relatedly how coach self-awareness can be
267 augmented should become a key focus of our work. Finally, given the cultural and context
268 specific nature of coaching, the field would benefit from research that investigates comparisons
269 of demographically, geographically, and culturally diverse coaching populations. Again, such
270 research can offer varied and rich insights, allowing for a more representative understanding of
271 the field to be gleaned.

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