Relationship quality in elite sport: the perspective of athletes and coaches

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Introduction

Performance development in strive toward world-class performances is key for elite sport coaches and athletes alike. The interpersonal relationship between coach and athlete is considered central in athletes’ development. Through time, attachment theory has evolved to become a significant theoretical framework in terms of explaining how emotional bonds develop within close relationships. A study by Jowett and Davis (2010) also shows that the coach-athlete relationship may be recognized as a close relationship, with the coach fulfilling the attachment figure properties; proximity maintenance, safe haven and secure base.

Aims

From the framework of attachment theory, the focus of this study was to further investigate what elite coaches and athletes perceive to be important features of a high quality coach-athlete relationship.

Method

In-depth interviews with six former elite athletes, four female and two male. All together they have achieved seventeen medals from the Olympic Games, eight of which were gold medals. They also have attained forty-eight medals from the World Championship, twenty-three of which were gold medals. In-depth interviews with four elite coaches with extensive experience in elite sport was also conducted. All of the coaches were male. The main themes of the interviews were what constitutes a good coach and what does it mean to know an athlete well and what distinguishes a good coach. The analytical process was completed within the hermeneutical tradition with an emphasis on double hermeneutics where both the participants’ perspectives and experiences and the further interpretation within the theoretical framework are considered important.

Results

The athletes highlighted that it was important for them that the coach knew them well enough to give them optimal coaching in any situation. The coaches also had to have faith in them as athletes and their ability to make the right choices and master critical situations. “As an athlete, I had to feel that my coach trusted me to make the right choices. He [the coach] had to convey that I had so much experience, knowledge and skills that I could master any situation.”

Athletes at this level have acquired a large knowledge base both about their sport and themselves as athletes. Therefore, the opportunity to be involved in the design and formation of their own training process in close collaboration with their coaches was emphasized as a significant factor.

Among the coaches it was revealed a need for them to be familiar with the overall life situation of their athletes and how this could affect their training. They also needed to know each athlete well enough to understand how they would react in stressful situations (e.g. competitions) to ensure an optimal interaction at all times. “You need to understand how they [the athletes] think when things go well and how they are thinking when they are under pressure. It means that you know how they are doing and that they are functioning on the arenas they intend to function.”

Mutual commitment to the athletes’ goal of becoming world- and/or Olympic champions and mutual respect for each other’s efforts, also emerged as important features in an optimally functioning relationship.

Discussion

The type of coach interaction the athletes believe to characterize a coach-athlete relationship of high quality, appear to be similar to the fulfillment of the attachment figure properties. In planning of their daily training, the need for a degree of closeness was important to them, while their opinions also had to be acknowledged. Seen in relation to attachment theory, these aspects may be said to contribute to the fulfillment of both proximity maintenance and secure base. In order to provide optimal coaching in any situation it most likely would be required of a coach to provide comfort to relieve stress if that is needed and provide the necessary platform of security to ensure optimal circumstances for further development.

In regard to the coaches in this study, it appears that what they believe to be important characteristics of a high quality coach-athlete relationship is a form of interaction that is primarily possible if athletes develop a secure attachment style toward their coach. For athletes to be willing to share their private life events it is probably necessary that they feel that this sharing of information with their coach indeed helps to create a sense of security that enables them to focus fully on their athletic development. And to make athletes seek to their coach in stressful situations it will probably require that the coach take their reactions and experiences seriously and show genuine interest in helping them. Thus, the type of interaction the coaches seek in relation to their athletes will be an outcome of them acting as an attachment figure in the first place.

Research within the attachment theory perspective in the sport context is recognized by scarcity. Thus, it would be interesting in future research to investigate if coaches’ interaction with their athletes actually contributes to fulfilling the attachment figure properties and thereby contributing to the development of a secure attachment style among their athletes.

Conclusion

Based on this study it appears that the use of attachment theory as a theoretical framework might contribute to valuable information in regard to relationship quality within the coach-athlete relationship at the elite level.