

Athletes' and Coaches' Impressions of Questionable Coaching Practices and Bullying (Emotional Abuse)

*By Brad Strand**

Coaches have a profound and long-lasting impact on the athletes they coach. Coaches' behavior affects athlete anxiety, stress levels, burnout, and eventually, their mental health. This study aimed at gathering relevant information on coaches' use of inappropriate behaviors towards athletes as reported by athletes and to make comparisons between the responses of the athletes in this study with those of coaches in a previous study. Participants were 251 college students from ten midwestern states who completed a 25-item survey that included a listing of coaching actions described as bullying. Three specific research questions guided the study: 1) has your coach ever done the identified action to you, 2) do you think this is an inappropriate coaching action, and 3) do you consider this bullying. Results indicate that athletes and coaches' interpretation of the frequency of inappropriate actions, if the actions are considered inappropriate, and if the actions are considered bullying are markedly different. Athletes were more likely to report that the various physical, relational, and verbal actions occurred than were coaches.

Keywords: *coaching, bullying, athletes, inappropriate*

Introduction

It is commonly acknowledged that 70% of children who participate in youth sports drop out by age 13 (Dilworth 2015). More recently, it has been reported that about 80% quit after age 15 (Swanson 2019). Similarly, Møllerløkken et al. (2015), reported that one in every four young athletes will walk away from sports every year. Many (Fraser-Thomas and Cote, 2009, O'Sullivan 2015, Project Play 2019, Scandiffio 2021, Strand et al. 2021c, Strand et al. 2021d, Trudel and Gilbert, 2006) have searched to find the reason why so many children drop out of sport at such an early age and have posited a plethora of reasons

Many athletes recall the positive experiences they had with their coaches (Trudel and Gilbert 2006), while others remember the negative experiences (Fraser-Thomas and Cote 2009). In fact, young athletes, when asked to identify the most positive aspect of their youth sport coaches, described the relationships formed, the encouragement and praise, and their coaches being supportive and trustworthy (Strand et al. 2021c, Strand et al. 2021d). Those same athletes, when asked to identify the most negative aspect of their youth experience, stated the coaches. Further identifying spotlighting, yelling/scolding/bad attitude/rude, and picking favorites as the most negative attributes of the coaches.

Witt and Dangi (2018) suggested three main constraints, or hindrances, why young athletes drop out of their sport. The first is intrapersonal in that the children

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no longer enjoy the sport, have feelings of physical inadequacy, feel stressed out, and have negative feelings toward teammates and coaches (Brenner et al. 2019, Logan and Cuff 2019). The intrapersonal constraints are compounded by coaches or parents who push young athletes to win at any cost, pressure them to perform at unachievably high levels, and use negative feedback when the children fail to meet their oftentimes exceedingly high expectations (Elliott 2018, Most 2015).

The second constraint is interpersonal and includes pressure that comes from parents, from feeling a lack of ownership in the sport, and from reduced time for other appropriate activities. The interpersonal constraints that exist between the children, their parents, their coaches, and teammates are directly impacted by parents and coaches. When parents and coaches put high pressure on the athletes to perform, take away any control that the children have over the sport, and demand so much of the children's time that they have no time left over for other activities, they foster interpersonal constraints (Abrams 2002, Mazzella 2020).

The third constraint is structural and includes the time it takes for practices and travel to games, injuries, financial cost, and lacking facilities. Structural constraints are created by parents and coaches through making practices unnecessarily long, pushing the children to injury, demanding high pay-to-play fees, and using ill maintained facilities (Project Play 2020, Thompson 2018). Although none of the constraints point directly at coaches, they may be indirectly created or influenced by coaches.

It is well understood that coaches have a profound and long-lasting impact on the athletes they coach (Dohsten et al. 2020, Hanson n.a., Loy 2019 Stankovich 2011). Scholars (Mottaghi et al. 2013, Seongkwan et al. 2019) have described how coaches' behavior affects athlete anxiety, stress levels, burnout, and eventually, their mental health. Mottaghi et al. (2013), along with Weathington et al. (2010), implied that overt coaching behaviors are perceived and given meaning by each individual athlete. These perceived behaviors impact an athletes' attitude towards self, the coach, and the playing experience (Seongkwan et al.). When athletes perceive their coaches' actions or words as disrespectful, intentionally hurtful, demeaning, and embarrassing, it is easy to understand why they choose to quit.

With that as a preface, this study was aimed at gathering relevant information on coaches' use of inappropriate behaviors towards athletes as reported by athletes. Three specific research questions guided the study: 1) has your coach ever done the identified action to you, 2) do you think this is an inappropriate coaching action, and 3) do you consider this bullying? In addition, comparisons were made between the responses of the athletes in this study with those of coaches in a previous study (Strand 2021a).

Methods

Participants

Participants (251 college students, males [$N = 136$, 54.1%] and females [$N = 115$, 45.8%]) from ten midwestern states (MO, ND, MN, KS, UT, OR, LA, MT,

OK, TX) completed a 25-item survey that included a listing of actions described as bullying. Potential subjects received an email inviting them to participate in the survey. The email was distributed to students via an email sent from an identified colleague within seventeen universities. The email included an informed consent and a link to the survey. Data were collected via a Qualtrics survey. In addition to the usual demographic information, participants were asked to indicate if: 1) if they had ever done this action to an athlete, 2) if they think this is an inappropriate coaching action, and 3) if they consider this action bullying.

The racial composition of the sample was largely White/Caucasian (85.8%), followed by Black American (6.2%), Hispanic (3.5%), multiple ethnicity/other (2.7%), Asian/Pacific Islander (1.5%), and Native American (0.4%).

Measures

The survey used for this study contained seven questions with six of them being demographic in nature. Question one asked participants to review (twenty-two) coaching actions and indicate if: 1) a coach has ever done this to them, 2) they think this is an inappropriate coaching action, and 3) they consider this action bullying.

The twenty-two items that were evaluated came from an inventory titled "Bully-Spotter: What is Bullying in Sports?" (Haber 2004). Haber's original Bully Spotter included fifty-three items categorized as physical, relational, or verbal bullying and then as mild, moderate, or severe in nature. The Bully Spotter was initially designed to be used to identify student-to-student bullying. For our purposes, we elected not to include all the items because many are student-to-student actions, for example, towel snapping, taking possessions (clothing, equipment, etc.), blame-placing, and gossiping. This inventory has been used in previous research (Strand et al. 2017, Strand 2021a). Demographic questions asked about gender, race/ethnicity, participation in high school sports, if they had dropped out of sports due to a coaches' behavior, if they were a college athlete, and if they were a physical education and/or coaching major or minor, and age.

Procedures

Upon University Institutional Review Board approval, the questionnaire was formatted into the online data collection system of Qualtrics. Colleagues in ten different states were asked to email the survey invitation to students enrolled in a general education wellness course at the respective institutions. All individuals who participated were current college students. Each participant receiving the email was initially invited to participate in the study by opening a link that informed the recipient of the purpose of the study and content. In this same document, each participant was given the option to proceed with the survey by clicking a link to the actual survey. Clicking the link also indicated implied consent to participate in the study. The Qualtrics document was designed to accept only one response from each participant.

Data Analysis

All data were initially collected via Qualtrics. At the end of the data collection period, data were transferred to Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 27) for further analysis. The methods applied were means and frequency distributions, cross tabulations, Pearson correlation tests, and Chi-square tests.

Results

Ninety six percent (n=251) of participants had played high school sports while only 4% (n=9) had not participated in high school sports. Fourteen percent (n=35) of participants had dropped out of a junior high or high school sport due to a coaches' behavior towards them or a teammate. Forty-eight percent (n=127) of the participants were college athletes while 51% (n=133) were not. Approximately one-third (35%, n=91) of the participants were physical education and/or coaching majors or minors.

As shown in Tables 1, 2 and 3, the coaching actions can be categorized as physical, relational, and verbal in nature. Also shown in these tables is the percentage of subjects who reported their coaches had done the listed action, the percentage who consider the action inappropriate, and the percentage who consider the action as bullying.

Table 1. Athletes Perceptions of Physical Actions

Physical Actions	Has a coach ever done this to you as an athlete?	Do you consider this an inappropriate coaching action?	Do you consider this bullying?
Threw something at an athlete	18.3	71.3	47.4
Hit, slapped, or heckled an athlete with intent to hurt	8.0	83.3	77.7
Struck an athlete with equipment	7.6	79.3	68.1
Inappropriate unwanted touching towards an athlete	5.2	84.5	65.3
Locked an athlete in a room	3.6	81.3	69.7
Physical violence to deliberately inflict pain on an athlete	3.2	84.9	79.7
Threw something at an athlete with intent to hurt	2.8	83.3	74.9

Table 2. *Athletes Perceptions of Relational Actions*

Relational Actions	Has a coach ever done this to you as an athlete?	Do you consider this an inappropriate coaching action?	Do you consider this bullying?
Embarrassed an athlete in front of others	45.0	70.5	57.8
Dirty look meant to hurt an athlete	33.1	66.9	50.2
Critical comments meant to hurt an athlete	32.7	75.3	67.7
Set an athlete up to look foolish	23.5	74.1	59.4
Shunning an athlete from the team	13.5	77.7	65.3
Mild ethnic slurs towards an athlete	6.4	82.5	70.9
Obscene gestures toward an athlete	6.4	80.5	59.4
Hurtful ethnic slurs towards an athlete	2.8	83.7	78.9

Table 3. *Athletes Perceptions of Verbal Actions*

Verbal Actions	Has a coach ever done this to you as an athlete?	Do you consider this an inappropriate coaching action?	Do you consider this bullying?
Poked fun at an athlete	45.4	43.0	32.7
Name calling without hurtful intent	45.0	37.8	22.7
Taunting at athlete	18.7	72.1	53.4
Use of nickname when asked not to	17.1	65.7	45.4
Name calling with hurtful intent	12.0	77.3	73.3
Verbal threats of aggression towards an athlete	8.4	80.9	66.5
Inappropriate language towards an athlete; comments on sexual preferences	7.2	79.7	67.3

Did a Coach Ever do this to you as an Athlete?

Based on the percentage of affirmative responses, the top questionable actions reportedly done by coaches were: 1) poked fun at an athlete (verbal), with 45.4% of participants indicating a coach had done that to them; 2) embarrassed an athlete in front of others (relational), with 45% of participants indicating a coach had done that to them; 3) name calling without hurtful intent (verbal), with 45% of

participants indicating a coach had done that to them; 4) dirty look meant to hurt an athlete (relational), with 33.1% of participants indicating a coach had done that to them; and 5) critical comments meant to hurt an athlete (relational), with 32.7% of participants indicating a coach had done that to them.

No statistical differences were found when comparing college athletes to non-college athletes. By gender, a statistical difference was found for one action, "use of nickname when asked not to" ($p=.039$). Comparing physical education/coaching majors/minors to others, a statistical difference was found for one action, "inappropriate unwanted touching towards an athlete" ($p=.025$). When comparing sport drop outs to non-drop outs, a statistical difference was found for seven actions; "embarrassed an athlete in front of others" ($p=.006$), "dirty look meant to hurt" ($p=.000$), "critical comments meant to hurt an athlete" ($p=.000$), "set an athlete up to look foolish" ($p=.008$), "shunning an athlete from a team" ($p=.006$), "poked fun at an athlete" ($p=.019$), and "taunting an athlete" ($p=.024$). For each of the seven statements, sport drop outs were more likely to indicate the action had happened to them.

Do you Consider this Action as Inappropriate?

The two actions considered least inappropriate were: 1) poked fun at an athlete, with 43%; and 2) name calling without hurtful intent, with 37.8%. Eliminating the two actions mentioned above, between 70-85% of participants indicated they thought the remaining actions were inappropriate.

No statistical differences were found when comparing sport drop outs to non-drop outs. When comparing physical education/coaching majors/minors to others, a statistical difference was found for two actions; "dirty look meant to hurt" ($p=.025$), and "use of nickname when asked not to" ($p=.025$). By gender, three differences were noted; "embarrassed an athlete in front of others" ($p=.018$), "dirty look meant to hurt" ($p=.002$), and "taunting an athlete" ($p=.007$).

When comparing college athletes to others, statistical differences were noted for 16 of the 22 actions. Within the physical actions, a difference was noted for "locked an athlete in a room" ($p=.032$) and "threw something at an athlete with intent to hurt" ($p=.037$). Within the relational actions, differences ranged from ($p=.006$ to $p=.024$) for all eight of the actions. Within the verbal actions, differences were noted for six of the seven actions, ranging from ($p=.004$ to $p=.047$). No difference was found for "name calling with hurtful intent". For all the actions with a statistical difference, college athletes were less likely to think the action was inappropriate than were non-college athletes.

Do you Consider this Action as Bullying?

The two actions considered least likely to be bullying were: 1) poked fun at an athlete, with 32.7%; and 2) name calling without hurtful intent, with 22.7%.

Eliminating the two actions mentioned above, between 45-79% of participants consider the remaining actions as bullying.

No statistical difference was found when comparing sport drop outs to non-drop outs. When comparing physical education/coaching majors/minors to others, a statistical difference was found for one action, "name calling without hurtful intent" ($p=.049$). When compared by gender, statistical differences were found for seven actions, five of them relational actions and two verbal actions. Statistical differences for the seven actions ranged from ($p=.000$ to $p=.045$). In all seven instances, female participants were more likely to indicate they considered the action as bullying.

When comparing college athletes to non-college athletes, statistical differences were found for seven of the actions. Three of the physical actions, three of the relational actions, and one verbal action. Statistical differences ranged from ($p=.006$ to $p=.023$). In all seven instances college athletes were less likely to consider the actions as bullying.

Discussion

A fundamental aspect of coaching is a coaches' and an athletes' ability to accurately perceive each other's thoughts and feelings, aka, emotional intelligence (Galli n.a., Goleman 2005). This coach – athlete relationship becomes the foundation of coaching and is a major factor in promoting a coach's ability to develop working partnerships and enhance optimal performance in his or her athletes (Enoksen et al. 2014, Yukhymenko-Lescroat et al. 2015). The coach – athlete relationship is important and influential and the behavior of coaches has a significant impact on the quality of the coaching performance, athlete performance, athlete satisfaction, and athletes' psychological and emotional well-being (Bachand 2017, Enoksen et al. 2014, Misasi et al. 2016, Pavlovich 2021).

Athlete-centered coaches plan diligently and meticulously for practice and contests and focus on developing positive psychological characteristics, i.e., self-confidence, self-worth, and motivation, along with competence (sport skills), connection (positive relationships), and confidence (self-belief) within their athletes (Gearity 2012, Gilbert 2017). Based on the results of the studies reported in this paper, athletes and coaches' interpretation of the frequency of inappropriate actions, if the actions are considered inappropriate, and if the actions are considered bullying are markedly different.

Specific coaching actions have been identified by athletes that have negatively affected their performance; for example, poor communication; poor personnel and selections decisions; equipment changes and problems; lack of support and encouragement; poor planning; tactical or strategic errors; lack of enthusiasm and effort; unfair treatment; sarcasm to demean; ignoring injuries, depression, and burnout; and negative attitude (Gearity and Murray 2010, Misasi et al. 2016, Nein 2013). Researchers have labeled some of these coaching actions as emotional abuse. In the past year, collegiate coaches (Niecee Nelson, Purdue-Fort Wayne; Marlene Stallings, Texas Tech; Cameron Newbar, University of Florida; AnnMarie

Gilbert, Detroit Mercy) have been accused of emotional abuse, among other things, and have lost their positions as coaches (Benbow 2021, Dodgson 2020, Pao 2020, Smith 2021, Solari 2021, Wimbley and Komer 2021, Zehntner 2019).

Emotional abuse, defined as controlling another person by using emotions to criticize, embarrass, shame, blame, or manipulate another person (Gordon 2020), has been reported to be an extremely common but underrecognized form of maltreatment (Stirling and Kerr 2014) and has been correlated with negative effects including poor self-esteem, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and difficulties with relationships (Mwakanyamale and Yizhen 2019, Radell et al. 2021, Rai et al. 2019). Stirling and Kerr (2014) reported that emotionally abusive coaching practices are experienced by 22-25% of competitive athletes. Similarly, Shields et al. (2005) found that 45% of their respondents reported their coach had called them names, insulted them, or verbally abused them, and that 35% indicated their coach had angrily yelled at a player for a mistake. Further, Alexander et al. (2011) reported that 76% of their subjects reported at least one incident of emotional harm playing sports, and that 33% identified their coach as the main source of bullying. For many athletes, this manifests as a mental health issue. Martin (2020) wrote that 35% of elite athletes deal with mental health issues and some experts suggest that college athlete depression is at epidemic levels (NCAA 2020).

Unfortunately, emotional abusive behaviors are accepted in the sport environment and are often normalized in youth sports as athletes are reluctant or scared to report abusive experiences (Stirling and Kerr 2014, Wilinsky and McCabe 2020). One's involvement in sport begins with an induction phase, typically during youth sport participation (Jayanthi et al. 2013). This initial engagement then transitions into an investment phase and a commitment to a coach. The inappropriate or abusive behaviors from a coach usually begin innocently enough, as a coach encourages, pushes, and challenges young athletes. As winning becomes more important and stakes increase, these once thought to be innocent comments, transition into degrading comments, personal criticisms, threats, acts of humiliation, belittlement, and the silent treatment appears (Stirling and Kerr 2013). For some, a coaches' nonverbal actions of kicking equipment, throwing things, glaring, and posturing, leads athletes to believe this is how successful coaches respond to the challenges of coaching. Athletes feel it themselves and they see it happening to fellow teammates. But if they want to continue participating, they must accept the coaches' behavior, no matter how disgraceful, intimidating, or hurtful it might be. If one plays sport for a length of time, these actions, in many cases, become normalized, and athletes often fail to recognize them as even being inappropriate (Merkel 2013).

In fact, parents, coaches, and other players and coaches are often present while these harmful practices occur. Mottaghi et al. (2013) suggested that if athletes do not have coping skills to appropriately deal with abusive experiences, they will be exposed to risk of poor performance, failure, loss of confidence and self-worth, and in some cases, serious injury. It is essential that coaches acknowledge the ramification of their verbal and nonverbal behaviors and actions on their athletes. Knowing such, coaches must then tailor behaviors directly to particular athletes in

an effort to positively affirm effort and influence motivation levels (Weathington et al. 2010).

As noted earlier in this paper, Strand (2021a) conducted a similar study with 500 high school coaches. Tables 4, 5, and 6 show the differences between the percentage of athletes versus coaches who reported using the action, if the action was considered inappropriate, and if the action was considered bullying (Strand 2021b).

Table 4. Comparison of Athletes' and Coaches Perceptions of Physical Actions

	Have you ever done this to an athlete?		Do you think this is an inappropriate coaching action?		Do you consider this bullying?	
	Athlete	Coach	Athlete	Coach	Athlete	Coach
Physical Actions						
Hit, slapped, or heckled an athlete with intent to hurt	9.0	2.3	88.8	82.4	84.1	64.8
Threw something at an athlete	21.8	9.8	86.2	77.3	57.3	45.3
Threw something at an athlete with intent to hurt	3.1	0.8	95.0	80.1	85.5	60.9
Struck an athlete with equipment	8.0	3.7	89.3	78.9	76.3	54.3
Physical violence to deliberately inflict pain on an athlete	3.1	1.0	95.1	82.0	88.9	62.1
Locked an athlete in a room	4.0	0.8	91.9	81.6	79.3	60.5
Inappropriate unwanted touching towards an athlete	5.33	1.6	94.7	82.0	73.3	49.4

Table 5. Comparison of Athletes' and Coaches Perceptions of Relational Actions

	Have you ever done this to an athlete?		Do you think this is an inappropriate coaching action?		Do you consider this bullying?	
	Athlete	Coach	Athlete	Coach	Athlete	Coach
Relational Actions						
Critical comments meant to hurt an athlete	35.6	6.6	84.1	77.0	75.7	56.1
Dirty look meant to hurt an athlete	38.5	13.7	80.3	70.3	59.6	43.0
Embarrassed an athlete in front of others	50.4	34.0	80.9	61.3	66.4	41.6
Set an athlete up to look foolish	27.3	7.6	84.1	75.8	68.2	49.2
Mild ethnic slurs towards an athlete	7.2	2.0	94.1	80.9	81.0	57.2
Hurtful ethnic slurs towards an athlete	3.1	1.0	95.0	81.1	89.6	60.2
Shunning an athlete from the team	15.6	5.7	91.6	75.0	76.3	50.6
Obscene gestures toward an athlete	7.3	1.8	93.2	81.1	69.4	51.8

Table 6. Comparison of Athletes' and Coaches Perceptions of Verbal Actions

Verbal Action	Have you ever done this to an athlete?		Do you think this is an inappropriate coaching action?		Do you consider this bullying?	
	Athlete	Coach	Athlete	Coach	Athlete	Coach
Poked fun at an athlete	55.0	44.9	56.0	43.0	42.5	25.4
Inappropriate language towards an athlete; comments on sexual preferences	8.3	3.1	93.5	80.5	79.6	51.6
Name calling without hurtful intent	56.0	30.9	50.0	50.4	30.0	26.2
Name calling with hurtful intent	14.2	1.6	90.4	81.1	84.4	61.3
Verbal threats of aggression towards an athlete	10.1	2.5	93.1	79.7	76.7	58.8
Use of nickname when asked not to	21.6	6.1	83.9	74.8	58.8	45.1
Taunting at athlete	22.6	3.3	86.8	78.7	64.6	54.4

When comparing the three categories of actions, coaches were least likely to do physical actions as reported by both coaches and athletes. This makes sense as one can often see the results of physical actions, that is, bruises and visible marks on the body. For many years, teachers and coaches have been instructed not to touch or physically engage with students and athletes.

Athletes were more likely to report that the various physical, relational, and verbal actions occurred than were coaches. This too is not surprising as many coaches value the knowledge of winning and experienced coaches more than that of coaching education instructors or programs (Zehntner 2019). The items reported being done most frequently by both coaches and athletes were: poked fun at an athlete (athletes 55%, coaches 45%), name calling without hurtful intent (athletes 56%, coaches 31%), embarrassed an athlete in front of others (athletes 50%, coaches 34%), critical comments meant to hurt an athlete (athletes 36%, coaches 7%), dirty look meant to hurt an athlete (38% athletes, coaches 14%), and set an athlete up to look foolish (athletes 27%, coaches 8%).

Both athletes and coaches reported the physical actions, as opposed to the verbal and relational actions, as being more inappropriate and labeled as bullying. Perhaps this is another reason why they are less likely to do the physical actions. Athletes, however, were more likely to think the actions were inappropriate and considered bullying than were coaches. For example, 81% of athletes compared to 61% of coaches considered embarrassing an athlete in front of others as inappropriate and 60% of athletes compared to 43% of coaches considered a dirty look meant to hurt an athlete as bullying. Verbal actions were least likely to be considered inappropriate and bullying but those were the actions that athletes and coaches both reported to happen most frequently. The simple reason why these actions happen more frequently is that they are not considered to be inappropriate or bullying. Collectively, for all actions, approximately three-fourths of the coaches indicated the actions were inappropriate, and approximately half indicated they considered the action as bullying. As mentioned earlier, responses for athletes were even higher.

Based on these results it is easy to understand how some coaches might be accused of inappropriate or abusive practices. When a coach does not believe an action is inappropriate, bullying, or emotionally abusive, there is no reason for that coach not to use that action when interacting with his or her athletes. For many coaches, their coaching practices reflect that of coaches for whom they had previously played (Moen et al. 2015), perhaps many years earlier when some of these actions were still considered acceptable, and they simply recycle the practices as acceptable (Zehntner 2019). Fortunately for today's athletes', coaching actions that were once acceptable (i.e., grabbing and twisting a facemask of a football player or hitting a player on the helmet) are no longer accepted (Zehntner 2019).

It is difficult, however, to understand how any coach today is not adequately informed to know what is acceptable, unacceptable, and emotionally abusive. Do some coaches believe they have freedom for their actions because they are coaching, and what happens during practice stays within the bounds of the practice field? Coaches use lots of excuses to rationalize their actions including moral justification ("All coaches lose it now and then"), backhanded apology ("I'm sorry, I got carried away a little bit; but we really need the athletes to try harder if we're going to win"), it could have been worse comparison ("I didn't touch anybody, it's not like I push them around"), escalation of stakes ("If you can't take how I am doing things, get off the team"), mental toughness argument ("We are tough on our athletes so they can handle the competition – we build mental toughness"), and secrecy and building team culture ("we'll handle this stuff in our family") (Swigonski et al. 2014, Strand et al. 2017).

Coaches also defend their actions in many ways (Stirling 2013). For example, a coach might say it was simply a spur of the moment thing. He or she might say, "I hate to lose and athletes need to be accountable and if not, there needs to be consequences." As mentioned previously, many coaches experienced ill treatment as athletes and learned bad coaching habits from their exposure to their coaches' harmful or inappropriate coaching practices.

For many coaches, there is a lack of knowledge for alternative strategies and they simply and quickly default to what they know best and have seen other coaches demonstrate. Unfortunately, athletes, and likewise, their parents, historically accept these questionable and inappropriate behaviors from their coaches. From an athlete's point of view, a coach's fame, or reputation of success, significantly impacts an athletes' acceptance of the coaching practices as an essential ingredient in their athletic development (Bloom et al. 2014). Over time, the questionable and inappropriate coaching practices become normalized for coaches, athletes, and parents, and no one questions them (Stirling and Kerr 2009).

Most coaches, despite their questionable behaviors, say they care about their athletes and the closeness and uniqueness of the relationship (Stirling 2013). Coaches care for their athletes as athletes and people and want them to achieve their athletic best. Many coaches say they enjoy watching talent development, love the athletes, and want them to become good citizens. Similarly, athletes say, "my coach would scream at me, but I knew she cared about me." Due to the closeness of the athlete-coach relationship, athletes come to trust their coaches and coaches take on the role of a parent figure and mentor (Becker 2009, Jowett 2017).

Conclusion and Further Research

From this study, insight into the differences in perceptions of coaches and athletes regarding the meaning of inappropriate and bullying practices came clearer. In many cases, what coaches perceive as appropriate, athletes perceive as inappropriate, and in fact, bullying. As coaches are increasingly being accused by players of emotional abuse, it is imperative that they (coaches) more clearly understand athlete perceptions of their (coaches) actions and the words they (coaches) use. Every coach wants to help his or her athletes to become more confident, competent, and connected, while building character. Results of this study provide an explanation why this may not be happening in a way a coach desires it would.

The racial composition of subjects in this study does not fully represent the racial composition of the population in the United States in general, or more specifically, colleges and universities. Further research should seek greater representation of minority athletes and coaches, and additionally, a greater representation of athletes and coaches from other sections of the United States. For example, how do athletes and coaches from the southern states of Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Louisiana differ in their perceptions compared to athletes and coaches from the New England states?

Implications

A major challenge in coaching is to think critically about the distinctions between behaviors designed to instruct and motivate, behaviors that are teasing or engaging, and behaviors that cross a line into being hurtful or harassing toward a young person (Strand et al. 2017). One coach said, "There is a fine line sometimes in disciplining your team and challenging your team to get to another level. Even in conditioning. Kids get tired and they want to stop and you have to push them to another level. When kids are going through it, it's tough. But when it's all said and done, most kids appreciate being pushed because you find out more about your inner self having been through that than if somebody does not push you to demand your best."

It is certainly clear that not all coaches perceive and define inappropriate and bullying actions in the same way. It is therefore incumbent upon coaching education programs in colleges and universities, coaching associations, and sport/coaching related organizations to more thoroughly help coaches understand what coaching practices are unacceptable and considered emotionally abusive and should not be used. Granted, some of these actions are difficult to interpret. For example, what is a dirty look meant to hurt? A coaches' glance at an athlete may be interpreted in different ways by different athletes, and certainly different from what a coach intended. Do we simply prevent this by telling coaches not to look at athletes? Of course, that is not the answer.

Coaching practices, be they good or bad, are interpreted by each athlete and result in an attitude toward both the coach and the sport experience (Gearity and

Murray 2010, Mottaghi et al. 2013). Coaches must be aware that words and actions carry many meanings and are understood differently by different people (Hjelseth 2020). For example, a nickname used in jest by a coach is deemed hurtful by an athlete because of previous issues of teasing or self-worth issues. Coaches must make every effort to listen to their athletes and eliminate or clarify those actions that are blatantly inappropriate. For example, throwing something at an athlete. Just do not do that. Problem solved.

Emotionally abusive coaching practices might be best prevented through an enhanced focus on the education of coaches on things such as ethical coaching, conduct, and alternative non-abusive strategies for athlete development (Stirling and Kerr 2014). Attending conferences, talking with assistant coaches, listening to athletes, and additional coaching education will help coaches better understand appropriate and inappropriate coaching practices and learn how athletes interpret questionable coaching behaviors.

For sure, coaches learn from mistakes and get better with maturity and experience. It was once said, “Wisdom comes from experience and experience comes from mistakes.” To learn from mistakes and get better, the habit of self-reflection is essential. Reflecting on the effectiveness of specific behaviors, finding a new appreciation for athlete well-being, learning of a concern of personal reputation, and discovering that coaching in an emotionally abusive way is simply not enjoyable, all lead to positive coaching changes.

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