

SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

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Relations of swimming coaches towards their athletes

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Abstract:

Many authors agree that a coach is a key person in any athlete's career. A swimming coach should have sufficient knowledge of numerous technique and distance types. Training groups usually include athletes of both genders which makes coaches' work even harder. With our survey we intended to determine the relationship of swimming coaches with their athletes. The survey included 76 swimming coaches (51 male and 25 female coaches, aged 34.9 ± 9.8 and 11.6 ± 8.7 years of working experience). In order to analyze specific characteristics of a relationship between a swimming coach and an athlete we used a questionnaire for coaches [Doupona Topič 2005] based on socio-demographic and coach-athlete relations characteristics.

We analyzed relevant statements on coach-athlete relationship and associating factors on the basis of factor analysis. Four factors exposed in the survey are pressure exertion, support, devotion and personal relations. The results of the analysis of a personal relationship show that female swimming coaches are more likely to develop better personal relationships with their athletes. Relationships of swimming coaches with their athletes were not affected by the athlete's status (categorization). In addition, the results indicate that coaches with big families usually had worse attitude towards their athletes because it was difficult for them to find a compromise between their families and professional training. Also, coaches with longer experiences provided better support for the athletes, were more devoted, developed more positive personal relationship and demanded lower pressure exertion.

Introduction

Status of professional sport is constantly changing and developing. The system is getting more complex and dynamic, therefore more and more depends on a coach. Many authors agree that a coach is a key person in any athlete's career [Sabock 1985; Martens 1990; Gummerson 1992; Krevsel 2001; Solomon 2001; Tušak, Tušak 2001].

To get necessary help in a case of a crisis, athletes need to develop trustworthy relations to the coach. The role of a coach includes planning and applying training, encouraging (motivation) of competitive athletes, guiding and solving of conflicts. Martens [2004] states in *Successful Coaching* that coaching is an occupation different from other occupations in the society. A coach is expected to be introduced as a gentle and good person to the society. There are no doubts that a profession of a coach is difficult and requires different skills. A coach should have a

proper way of leading the athlete to achieve success. Undoubtedly, having leadership skills is one of the most important characteristics of an effective and a successful coach [Khalaj, Khabiri, Sajjadi 2011]. Responsibility of a coach does not end when an athlete achieves a successful career but continues to the very end of this career. Conflict situations in a coach-athlete relationship is a primary cause for the end of the athlete's career [Bubmann 1996]. The coach is a leader of a training process. According to Mayer, leading the training process means that on the ground of special skills, personal characteristics and knowledge a leader (a coach) influences persons (athletes) in a way that they accomplish their goals [Mayer 2003]. In many cases coach is a person responsible for planning and applying training and also for organization and solving of conflicts. Conflict situations often emerge when a mutual decision about training methods cannot be easily reached. Coach's work

should definitely include establishing and keeping a successful coach–athlete relationship which plays an important role in achieving happiness and success. It can help in difficult times (injury, burn out), in case of emotional crises (disqualification from a major competition) and transitions (termination of a career) [Jowett 2005].

Communication between a coach and an athlete plays a significant role in a training process. A coach who is afraid of communication or builds a high wall between himself/herself and an athlete is in an unenviable position [Tušak, Misja, Vičič 2003]. The role of communication is also emphasized by Martens [1990]. In their survey Garland and Barry [1990] discovered that successful athletes stated that their coaches were more democratic. Black and Weiss [1992] completed a survey among young swimming athletes and discovered that those who were communicating with their coaches showed better self-confidence and were more satisfied even when they failed.

The research in this field shows that more democratic coaches achieve better results in individual sports [Pur 2005].

As a sport, swimming consists of many disciplines categorized according to technique and distance types. For that reasons swimming coach should have different skills required in training sessions. It is not enough for a coach to have a merely "know-how" about a particular discipline, he/she should take on a role of a motivator and an advisor, and should have knowledge of psychology, sociology and sport medicine. There are less and less coincidences in achieving top results in world's professional swimming [Kovačič 2010].

Swimmers need a coach who can spot and develop talents and who has a vision of where swimmers can go and how to get them there. Even the best coach has to find a way to reach the swimmers and have them grab his/her vision for them. Coach must balance perspective of what is best for swimmers with the needs of the team or a training group that can range in size and abilities.

Progress could only be achieved as a result of implementing new technologies and exercise methods and in this process a coach plays a very important role: his/her knowledge should be passed on rationally and step by step but even this is not enough. It is essential to create a dialog between a coach and an athlete. An athlete's success in a competition mostly depends on a quality of a coach-athlete relationship mentioned above.

In our research we intend to define a relationship between a swimming coach and his/her athlete (a swimmer) because we believe that a successful and long sports career depends on relationship between

coach and swimmer. In swimming, the systematic training of children starts at an early age (6 years and older). The first major drop off swimming happens when children finish primary school (15 years). Especially a lot of girls in that period end sports career for a reason that they are not well understood by their coaches. Therefore, we are interested in what kind of profile swimming coaches would need in order to have more swimmers competing in the older age categories (seniors).

Our primary aim is to analyze basic social and demographic characteristics which affect a coach-swimmer relationship as well as to define an ideal profile of a swimming coach from social and demographic view.

Methods

Sample

The survey includes 76 swimming coaches who are responsible for planning and implementation of training programs for different categories of athletes (world, international, perspective, national and junior category) and also for non-categorized athletes. The sample included 67.1% male and 32.2% female coaches; 48.7% of coaches worked with categorized athletes and 51.3% with non-categorized¹. The majority (80.3%) is married or lives with their partners, is between 20 and 64 years old and has from 1 to 40 years of work experience. They work with athletes who have OCS categorization (from world class to junior class) and with athletes without categorization who competed in major domestic and international competitions (OG, WC, EC). The level of education varies from professional schools to master's degrees or specialization. Data were collected during a seminar for coaches with license. Detailed sample data is presented in Table 1.

Variables

The questionnaire for coaches [Doupona Topič 2005] included socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, profession, coaching, data, experiences, marital status, number of children, education). The main part included thirty-eight items on relations towards athletes. The items were evaluated according to the five grade Likert scale from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. When presented for the first time [Doupona Topič 2005] the instrument was not structured yes, while this research is the first attempt to organize 38 items into a structure and to remove redundant items.

¹ As categorized according to the Slovenian Olympic Committee.

Table 1. Sample introduction – swimming coaches

	n=76	%
Gender		
Male	51	67.1
Female	25	32.9
Are you a professional coach?		
Yes	28	36.8
No	48	63.2
Are you coaching a categorized athlete?		
Yes	37	48.7
No	39	51.3
Marital status		
Single or divorced	15	19.7
Married or living with partner	61	80.3
	range	M±SD
Age in years	20-64	34.9±9.8
Years of working experience	1-40	11.6±8.7
Highest grade OCS category (1 - world class, 6 - amateur)	1-6	4.6±1.5
Top quality athletes (1- OGP, 6- national competitor)	1-6	4.3±1.6
Number of own children	0-3	.8±.9
Education level	3-7	4.9±1.0

OCS – Olympic Committee of Slovenia, OGP – Olympic Games participant

Sample reliability

Sample reliability was tested by the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Cronbach alpha coefficient was calculated at 0.69 and has approximately reached 0.70 which is considered a reliable data sample [Nunnally, Bernstein 1994].

Statistical analysis

Survey sample factors were presented on the basis of frequency and percent disposition or median values and standard deviation (M±SD). Relevant statements on the relations to an athlete were calculated on the basis of a factor analysis. The PAF (principal axis factoring) method was used with varimax rotation. The significance of an individual statement had to exceed the level of 0.40 to be included into a factor [Polit, Beck, Hungler 2006]. Relevant items describing individual factors were added into new variables by mean values [Teeri, Välimäki, Katajisto, Leino-Kilpi 2008]. Linear regression was used to conduct relations among demographic data, athlete's categorization and extracted factors describing relations to athletes. Statistical analysis was made with SPSS 15.0 software (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). P-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results

Coach relationships with athletes and additional factors

As a result of a factor analysis four factors were isolated and analyzed (pressure exertion, support, devotion and personal relationship), which explained 29,6% of the original variance, 24 items were preserved and 14 items were excluded from the analysis (Table 2). The "pressure exertion" factor most clearly illustrates the statement that the pressure on the athletes is exerted mainly because of the desire to win. The second factor of "support" most clearly illustrates the statement concerning coach's patience with an athlete. The third factor of "devotion" is best defined by the statement that a coach is ready to spend his/her free time with an athlete. The fourth factor of "interpersonal relation" is defined by the statement that in the case of problems an athlete seeks help with his/her coach. After the items were added to extracted factors, sample reliability was measured again. This time the calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 4 extracted factors resulted above the recommended threshold of 0.70 (F1: 0.74, F2: 0.72, F3: 0.71, F4: 0.81).

Multivariate analysis of impact factors on relation to athlete

In the multivariate analysis we calculated how demographic characteristics of gender, age, years of

Table 2. Extracted factors and items describing relation to athlete

Statement (item)	Factors		
	Pressure exertion	Support	Devotion
I exert pressure because I desire to win	.80		
I exert pressure because I want the athlete to meet my expectations	.67		
I exert pressure very often	.45		
I'm patient with athletes		.57	
I think the athlete wants me to accompany him/her on competitions		.50	
I have a strong positive relation towards the athlete		.48	
I'm assuming the role his/her parents should be		.46	
I'm outraged if he/she has different opinion		-.45	
I'm supporting the athlete if he/she is having problems on competitions and if he/she is under pressure		.45	
I get upset easily		-.43	
As a coach I don't interfere in parents-child relations		-.41	
I'm prepared to spend my free time with the athlete			.54
The athlete is ready to sacrifice himself/ herself for me			.51
I'm ready to sacrifice myself for the athlete			.47
I expect the athlete to perform on a professional level			.46
The athlete seeks help when he/she is in trouble			
The athletes are listening to me and consider my advice			
I always notice when an athlete is in trouble			
When the athlete is not doing well I help him/her to regain self respect			
I try being objective to the athlete			
I support athlete's effort in school			
I think athletes feel my support and encouragement			
The athlete respects my knowledge			
I achieved good results through my work with an athlete			
Cronbach's alpha coefficient	.74	.72	.71
Excluded items			
I provoke feelings of guilt by the athlete	.30		
I help athlete to shake off feelings of guilt			
I believe to spend too much time with athletes		-.33	
I show mercy when athlete is in trouble			.38
When athlete is loosing I stay "cool"			.25
I show disappointment if expected results are failed		-.38	
I encourage student that he/she is successful even if he/she loses			.24
I am critical about athlete results			
I am critical towards my work			
I often say; "today we compete" (as I would participate myself)			.24
I use to frown when mistakes are made		-.34	
I realize that perhaps this is the athlete's last sport activity for today			.38
I always accompany athlete to competitions			
I demand perfectionism from athlete			.32

working experience, education level, marital status, number of children and athlete's categorization are connected to four extracted factors which define a coach-athlete relationship.

The results of multivariate linear regression in table 3 show that only gender of a coach had an independent connection to relationship with an athlete in a "personal relationship" factor. Female gender was connected to a more positive relationship (beta=0.24; p=0.040). This was also the only calculated model where demographic variables explained significant proportion of variance in one

of the four extracted factors ($R^2=0.212$; $p=0.010$). Other demographic variables which influenced the relation to athlete did not meet the criteria of statistical relevance. There were some occasions where beta coefficients resulted above $|0.20|$. We observed some tendencies when coaches with bigger families were more likely to develop a more negative personal relationship and coaches with longer coaching experiences tended to show better support, higher devotion, positive personal relationship and lower pressure exertion.

Table 3. Multivariate analysis of demographic data and athlete's categorization on relation to athlete

	Beta	t	p-value
Pressure exertion ($R^2=.082$; $p=.540$)			
Female gender	-.03	-.22	.829
Age	.16	.84	.370
Working experience	-.41	-1.48	.144
Education level	.17	1.27	.209
Being married or cohabiting	.10	.79	.431
Number of children	-.18	-1.09	.278
Athlete's categorization	-.12	-.84	.402
Support ($R^2=.102$; $p=.368$)			
Female gender	.00	-.03	.972
Age	-.17	-.25	.415
Working experience	.30	1.07	.287
Education level	-.09	-.71	.482
Being married or cohabiting	.07	.58	.563
Number of children	-.16	-.98	.332
Athlete's categorization	.10	.70	.488
Devotion ($R^2=.162$; $p=.088$)			
Female gender	.14	1.13	.264
Age	-.09	-.36	.579
Working experience	.31	1.17	.246
Education level	.22	1.69	.096
Being married or cohabiting	.09	.73	.467
Number of children	.04	.23	.816
Athlete's categorization	.14	.75	.484
Personal relationship ($R^2=.212$; $p=.010$)			
Female gender	.24	2.09	.040
Age	-.10	-.37	.712
Working experience	.44	1.93	.058
Education level	.06	.47	.639
Being married or cohabiting	-.08	-.66	.509
Number of children	-.20	-1.33	.190
Athlete's categorization	.11	.81	.424

Discussion and conclusions

The results show that among the extracted factors which might affect a positive coach-athlete relationship female gender stands out, while other factors do not contribute to a clearer picture. We discovered that coaches with bigger families have worse relations towards their athlete because of a compromise between their families and professional training. Work experience also plays a significant role and mostly has a positive impact on relations towards athletes. More experienced coaches exert less pressure on the athletes. In swimming training many children finish their competition career early (at the end of primary school). The pressure exertion of coaches on young athletes makes such a situation even worse. As a consequence of very difficult training sessions, 12-year-old children finish their

sport career earlier. The most important goal of any athlete and any coach is to win. To win means to achieve success and satisfaction, to justify hard work, to gain material and other benefits and it is also a proof for everybody who did not believe in the athlete's goal [Tušak 2008]. Due to the coaches' desire to win the meaning of the competitions for young athletes is frequently misunderstood. Young athlete should not compete merely for winning, but to keep their form, to overcome their fear and to learn how to fight. The winning as such (in this period) does not have and should not have any significant meaning. Competition and fighting for results are essential for adult athletes. Our results to a certain extent showed that women have better relationships with their athletes, that work experience is more important than age of a coach and that number of children in a family influences

coach's attitude towards an athlete. Coach's indulgence is very important since swimming is a relatively monotonous sport. During training session a swimmer faces a bottom of the pool and does not communicate with the others. This makes coach's task even harder. A number of coach's own children influence relationships with athletes in a more negative way as they depend on a compromise between family and professional training.

Coach wants to spend most of his/her time with an athlete. This time is used for guidance necessary for goal achievement. This is precisely the reason why coaches sacrifice their free time to work with an athlete, and it also clear that they are prepared to sacrifice a lot for their common goal. Thus, the athletes are additionally motivated to achieve a goal.

Interpersonal relations usually develop as a result of long lasting and repetitive communication between two people based on cooperation, trust and affection. The results depend largely on mutual communication and cooperation. Poczwardowski, Barott and Henschen [2002] and Schinke and Tabakman [2001] claim that good results depend mainly on a coach-athlete relationship. A survey [Massimo 1980, in: Poczwardowski *et al.* 2002] that included female gymnasts and their coaches showed that high-ranked athletes particularly emphasized coaches' ability to establish good relationship. There are numerous anecdotal illustrations of the importance of a coach-athlete relationship for achieving satisfaction and performance accomplishments. In his 2004 autobiography, Sir Clive Woodward (former coach of the England rugby team) argued that a partnership between a coach and an athlete is a key ingredient in creating a winning team [Woodward 2004]. Similarly, the manager of Manchester United Football Club, Sir Alex Ferguson, explained that loyalty and commitment are key elements of effective coaching [Ferguson 2000]. Reports by media, fans and athletes also portray coaches as performing experts who work hard to create a more positive climate in which relationships can function [Jowett, Clark-Carter 2006].

Velepec and Doupona Topič [2005] made a survey among top biathlon athletes, who were competing for the World Cup and their coaches. Relatively few conflicts between coaches and athletes were discovered, which confirmed the idea that only a good coach-athlete relationship leads to top results. An interpersonal relationship approach to sports coaching is important for two major reasons: (a) because of the impact of coaching on individual athletes' performance and (b) because a large number of similar relationships combined through a positive dynamic influence athletes,

coaches and sporting environment in a broader sense. The coach-athlete relationship, like any other relationship, has great psychological significance for development and stability or changes of the individuals involved [Jowett, Clark-Carter 2006]. However, only recently attempts have been made to explore the specific characteristics of a coach-athlete relationship, such as S. Jowett's work *When the honeymoon is over: A case study of a coach-athlete relationship in crisis* [Jowett 2003] as well as S. Jowett's and I. M. Cockerill's research *Olympic Medallists' perspective of the athlete-coach relationship* [Jowett, Cockerill 2003] which illustrates predictive and clear functions of that relationship. We can also mention Jowett and Choudy and their work *An investigation into the impact of coach leadership and coach-athlete relationship on group cohesion* [Jowett, Chaundy 2004].

In the coach-athlete relationship a problem often arises, when an athlete wants his/her coach for himself/herself only. Swimming is an individual sport but a coach should train a larger groups of athletes, who are all competing as individuals and must be treated equally. Usually coaches train swimmers of different age, gender and even different competitive levels. Therefore, it is extremely important for a coach to establish good relationship with each individual swimmer to ensure swimmers' successful career. According to Jowett and Cockerill [2003], several qualitative studies have illustrated the significance and quality of the athlete-coach relationship. Kalinowski [1985] analyzed interviews with 21 Olympic swimmers and concluded, referring specifically to coaches and parents, that "no one can become an Olympic caliber swimmer without direct support, instruction, etc. of many people" (p. 140). Furthermore, Hemery's [1986] work referred to the athlete-coach relationship through the experiences of some of the greatest sportsmen. For example, Steve Cram described his relationship with his coach Jimmy Hedley as "being supportive... it goes beyond an athlete-coach relationship. He's a friend of the family and another sort of a father figure".

When researches make an attempt to define a coach's role in a specific sports situation, they focus on their personal characteristics and skills, trying to define, whether coach's personal characteristics and working-with-people skills prevail over professional knowledge; how the coach's personality influences his/her behavior and attitude; how a coach follows and applies new methods of training; how he/she accepts external co-workers in their working groups. Numerous authors also focus on leadership, defining whether the attitude is democratic or autocratic and on the ability of a coach to establish relationship with his/her athletes which is not solely

professional but also friendly. On the other hand not so many researches take into consideration social and demographic characteristics, especially in swimming.

Based on the findings of our research we could say that Slovene swimming sport should have more women as swimming coaches, who have longstanding experience and do not have families of their own. Such female coaches are hard to find which only confirms current findings that professional coaching in sports is dominated by male gender.

Women who wish to become coaches face numerous obstacles, from social and economic to organizing and purely personal (individual) aspects. It is often the case that female coaches remain professionally on the level of training the beginner athletes and do not make further progress. There are many reasons for previously mentioned situation among which we can expose a conflict between time sacrificed for professional life and time spend with a family, lack of self-confidence and prevalence of men in coaching. Training athletes on a higher competitive level demands even more time and therefore even more sacrifice of family life. Developmental psychology in sport suggests that when athletes become more and more involved into specialized sport activities, coaches' influence gets stronger while parents' influence weakens as they play a less direct role in their child's sport career [Monsaas 1985; Wylleman, Lavalée 2004]. In a similar manner, coaches may distance themselves from the rest of the team and even from their own family to spend more time with their athletes or the team as a whole [Jowett, Timson-Katchis 2005]. In a research, when 5 coach-athlete-parent triads of Greek-Cypriots (the athletes were female swimmers, of average age of 16 years and with 6 and a half years of swimming experience in average) were questioned about coach-athlete relationship within broader social networks, we recognized the principle of the dyadic deviation of a coach-athlete group from other social networks or a triade of coach-athlete-parents. We are talking about a mutual dependence between a coach and an athlete which is developing over time and which one of the parents described as the following "it's hard to know what to do . . . sometimes it seems as the two of them had their own little club . . . she doesn't listen to us the same way she listens to him [the coach]" [Jowett, Timson-Katchis 2005].

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Relacje między trenerami pływania a ich zawodnikami

Słowa kluczowe: trener, sportowiec, relacje interpersonalne

Abstrakt

Wielu autorów zgadza się, że trener jest kluczową osobą w karierze każdego sportowca. Przykładowo trener pływania powinien posiadać wystarczającą wiedzę dotyczącą licznych technik oraz dystansów pływania. Grupy szkoleniowe obejmują zwykle sportowców obu płci, co sprawia, że praca trenerów jeszcze trudniejsza.

Celem autorów pracy było określenie relacji trenerów pływania z ich zawodnikami. Ankieta obejmowała 76 trenerów pływania (51 trenerów i 25 trenerek, w wieku $34,9 \pm 9,8$ i z doświadczeniem zawodowym wynoszącym $11,6 \pm 8,7$ lat). W celu analizy cech szczególnych relacji pomiędzy trenerem pływania i sportowcem wykorzystano kwestionariusz dla trenerów oparty na charakterystycznych cechach społeczno-demograficznych relacji trener - sportowiec.

Cztery czynniki pojawiające się w badaniu obejmowały: natężenie wysiłku, wsparcie trenera, poświęcenie i osobiste relacje. Z wyników analizy osobistej relacji wynika, że kobiety-trenerzy pływania lepiej rozwijają osobiste relacje ze swoimi zawodnikami. Na relacje trenerów pływania z ich zawodników nie ma wpływu status sportowca (kategoryzacja). Ponadto wyniki wskazują, że trenerzy z dużymi rodzinami zwykle mają gorszy stosunek do swoich zawodników, bo trudno im znaleźć kompromis pomiędzy własną rodziną i szkoleniem zawodowym. Trenerzy z dłuższym doświadczeniem zapewniają lepsze wsparcie dla sportowców, są bardziej oddani i rozwijają bardziej pozytywne relacje osobiste oraz stawiają mniejsze wymagania wysiłkowe wobec swoich zawodników.

Autorzy zwracają także uwagę na fakt, iż wielu młodych ludzi szybko kończy karierę zawodniczą ze względu na wysokie wymagania i presję wygraną ze strony trenera, natomiast zdaniem autorów inne walory sportu (utrzymanie dobrej formy, przełamanie strachu, radość z osiągnięcia celu) powinny być ważniejsze. Rozwój relacji interpersonalnych jest wynikiem długotrwałej i ciągłej komunikacji opartej na współpracy, zaufaniu i oddaniu. Związek trenera z zawodnikiem jest bardzo ważny, ponieważ ma wpływ na osiągnięcia zawodnika, a także w szerszym sensie - na całe środowisko sportowe.