



The Path to Athlete Burnout: A Mediation Model of Coaching Behavior, Communication, and Coach–Athlete Relationships

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Abstract:

This systematic literature review examines the interplay between coaching behavior, communication patterns, coach–athlete relationships, and athlete burnout. Drawing on findings from diverse studies, the review identifies key factors influencing athlete well-being and burnout susceptibility. Controlling coaching behavior, characterized by criticism and strict directives, correlates with heightened levels of athlete burnout. In contrast, autonomy-supportive coaching practices, which prioritize athletes' self-initiation and decision-making, mitigate burnout risk and enhance intrinsic motivation. Positive coach–athlete relationships emerge as a protective factor against burnout. Athletes who perceive their coaches as supportive and empathetic report lower levels of burnout symptoms, highlighting the importance of trust, mutual respect, and effective communication. Effective communication between coaches and athletes is essential for reducing burnout risk and promoting athlete well-being. Clear, constructive feedback and open dialogue foster understanding, trust, and motivation, while poor communication increases stress and undermines athlete confidence. This review emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive and empowering coaching environment to optimize athlete well-being and performance outcomes. By prioritizing autonomy-supportive coaching practices, cultivating positive coach–athlete relationships, and promoting effective communication, coaches can foster athlete flourishing and resilience in competitive sports settings.

Keywords: Coaching behaviour, Communication patterns, Coach–athlete relationships, Athlete burnout, Autonomy-supportive coaching

Introduction:

In contemporary sports psychology, athlete burnout has emerged as a critical area of study due to its detrimental effects on athlete well-being and performance. Burnout is a multifaceted phenomenon characterized by emotional exhaustion, reduced accomplishment, and depersonalization, predominantly observed in high-pressure competitive environments (Edú-Valsania, et al., 2022). While various factors contribute to athlete burnout, the role of coaching behavior, communication patterns, and coach–athlete relationships has garnered significant attention in recent years.

Effective coaching is integral not only to enhance athletic performance but also to safeguard athlete mental health (Lopes Dos Santos, et al., 2020). Understanding the intricate dynamics between coaching practices and athlete burnout is paramount for the development of tailored interventions aimed at prevention and mitigation. To address this pressing issue, this systematic review synthesizes existing literature to construct a mediation model elucidating the pathways through which coaching behavior, communication strategies, and coach–athlete relationships influence athlete burnout.

Moreover, the role of communication in coach–athlete interactions cannot be overstated. Effective communication not only facilitates the transmission of knowledge and feedback but also fosters trust, rapport, and mutual understanding (Kim & Park, 2020). Conversely, poor communication can exacerbate misunderstandings, increase stress, and contribute to feelings of alienation among athletes. Thus, examining the communicative patterns within the coach–athlete dyad is crucial for discerning its implications for athlete burnout.

Furthermore, the quality of the coach–athlete relationship has been consistently linked to athlete well-being and performance outcomes. A positive and supportive coach–athlete bond fosters a sense of belonging, autonomy, and competence, buffering athletes against the detrimental effects of stress and pressure (Simon & Bird, 2023). Conversely, dysfunctional coach–athlete relationships characterized by conflict, lack of trust, or excessive control can undermine athlete motivation and contribute to burnout symptoms.

In light of these considerations, this systematic review adopts a comprehensive approach to elucidate the intricate interplay between coaching behavior, communication patterns, coach–athlete relationships, and athlete burnout. By synthesizing existing research findings, we endeavor to construct a mediation model that delineates the underlying mechanisms driving the relationship between coaching dynamics and athlete psychological well-being.

Through this endeavor, we aspire to inform evidence-based interventions aimed at fostering positive coaching environments conducive to athlete flourishing and peak performance. Ultimately, our pursuit aligns with the broader



objective of promoting athlete welfare and optimizing the sporting experience for individuals across various competitive levels and disciplines.

Literature Review:

Athlete burnout represents a significant challenge in modern sports psychology, with profound implications for athlete well-being and performance. As the demands of competitive sports intensify, understanding the factors contributing to burnout becomes increasingly crucial. This literature review aims to provide a comprehensive synthesis of existing research on coaching behavior, communication patterns, coach-athlete relationships, and their roles in the development of athlete burnout.

Coaching Behavior and Athlete Burnout:

Coaching behavior plays a pivotal role in shaping the psychosocial environment within sports teams. Different coaching styles have been linked to varying athlete outcomes, including burnout. Decades of research have identified two primary coaching styles: autonomy-supportive and controlling. Autonomy-supportive coaches encourage athletes' self-initiation, decision-making, and goal setting, fostering a sense of competence and autonomy. In contrast, controlling coaches emphasize external rewards, punishment, and strict adherence to directives, leading to feelings of pressure and reduced autonomy among athletes (Deci & Ryan, 2013).

Studies examining the impact of coaching behavior on athlete burnout consistently highlight the detrimental effects of controlling coaching styles. Athletes coached by individuals exhibiting high levels of controlling behaviors report higher levels of burnout symptoms, including emotional exhaustion, reduced sense of accomplishment, and depersonalization (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2010). Conversely, athletes under the guidance of autonomy-supportive coaches tend to experience lower levels of burnout and higher levels of intrinsic motivation, engagement, and satisfaction (Reinboth & Duda, 2006).

Communication Patterns and Athlete Burnout:

Effective communication between coaches and athletes is essential for fostering understanding, trust, and motivation within sports teams. Communication patterns encompass verbal and nonverbal exchanges, feedback delivery, and the creation of a supportive team climate. Research suggests that open, honest, and supportive communication enhances athlete well-being and reduces burnout risk (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004).

Conversely, poor communication characterized by criticism, hostility, or ambiguity can exacerbate stress and undermine athlete confidence and motivation. For instance, studies have found that athletes who perceive their coaches' feedback as excessively negative or vague are more likely to experience burnout symptoms (Stebbing, Taylor, & Spray, 2011). Moreover, ineffective communication may lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and a breakdown in coach-athlete relationships, further exacerbating burnout risk (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003).

The quality of the coach-athlete relationship is a key determinant of athlete well-being, motivation, and performance outcomes. A positive coach-athlete bond characterized by trust, mutual respect, and support serves as a protective factor against burnout (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). In contrast, dysfunctional coach-athlete relationships marked by conflict, lack of communication, or perceived favoritism can contribute to burnout symptoms and hinder athlete development (Jowett & Meek, 2000).

Research suggests that athletes who perceive their coaches as supportive, caring, and responsive to their needs are less likely to experience burnout (Lorimer & Jowett, 2009). Furthermore, coaches who foster a collaborative and empowering coaching environment facilitate athlete autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby reducing burnout risk (Amorose & Anderson-Butcher, 2007).

Mediating Mechanisms:

The relationship between coaching behavior, communication patterns, coach-athlete relationships, and athlete burnout is complex and multifaceted. Several mediating mechanisms have been proposed to elucidate these relationships. For instance, self-determination theory posits that autonomy-supportive coaching fosters athletes' intrinsic motivation, psychological needs satisfaction, and well-being, buffering against burnout (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Similarly, social exchange theory suggests that positive coach-athlete relationships create a supportive social context conducive to athlete engagement, commitment, and resilience, thereby reducing burnout risk (Rhodes & Eisenberger, 2002). Moreover, communication competence theory emphasizes the role of effective communication in promoting clarity, understanding, and trust within coach-athlete dyads, mitigating burnout (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984).

Coaching behavior, communication patterns, and coach-athlete relationships are critical determinants of athlete burnout. Autonomy-supportive coaching, open communication, and positive coach-athlete relationships have been



consistently associated with lower burnout risk and enhanced athlete well-being. Conversely, controlling coaching styles, poor communication, and dysfunctional coach–athlete relationships increase burnout susceptibility.

Understanding the intricate interplay between these factors is essential for the development of effective interventions aimed at preventing and mitigating athlete burnout. By fostering autonomy, competence, and relatedness within sports teams, coaches can create a supportive and empowering environment conducive to athlete flourishing and peak performance.

Methodology:

A systematic literature review was conducted to synthesize existing research on coaching behavior, communication patterns, coach–athlete relationships, and their associations with athlete burnout. The systematic review followed established guidelines outlined in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Moher et al., 2009).

A comprehensive search strategy was developed to identify relevant studies. Electronic databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, SPORTDiscus, and Web of Science, were systematically searched from inception to [insert end date]. The search terms included combinations of keywords related to coaching behavior, communication, coach–athlete relationships, athlete burnout, and relevant synonyms. Boolean operators (e.g., AND, OR) were used to refine search queries.

Two independent reviewers screened titles and abstracts of retrieved records to assess eligibility based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. Full texts of potentially relevant articles were then reviewed to determine final inclusion. Discrepancies were resolved through consensus or consultation with a third reviewer. Data from included studies were extracted using a standardized form. Key information extracted included study characteristics (e.g., author(s), publication year), participant characteristics (e.g., athlete population, sample size), study design, measures used to assess coaching behavior, communication patterns, coach–athlete relationships, and athlete burnout outcomes, as well as main findings relevant to the research question.

The methodological quality of included studies was assessed using appropriate tools tailored to study designs (e.g., Newcastle-Ottawa Scale for observational studies, Critical Appraisal Skills Programme checklist for qualitative studies). Quality assessment was conducted independently by two reviewers, with any discrepancies resolved through discussion. Data synthesis involved organizing and summarizing findings from included studies. Themes related to coaching behavior, communication patterns, coach–athlete relationships, and athlete burnout were identified, and relevant data were synthesized narratively. Where appropriate, meta-analysis was considered for quantitative studies, although heterogeneity in study designs and measures may have precluded statistical pooling.

Findings and Discussion:

Controlling Coaching Behavior Correlates with Higher Levels of Athlete Burnout:

Research consistently demonstrates a significant correlation between controlling coaching behavior and heightened levels of athlete burnout. Athletes subjected to coaches characterized by controlling behaviors, such as excessive criticism, imposition of strict directives, and a dearth of autonomy support, are more likely to experience symptoms indicative of burnout (Bartholomew et al., 2010). These behaviors foster an environment marked by pressure and diminished autonomy, contributing to emotional exhaustion, reduced feelings of accomplishment, and depersonalization among athletes.

Bartholomew et al. (2010) emphasize the detrimental impact of controlling coaching behavior on athlete well-being. Coaches who employ authoritarian tactics, including harsh criticism and micromanagement, often instill a sense of fear and inadequacy in athletes, eroding their motivation and self-esteem. Consequently, athletes may experience heightened stress and fatigue, ultimately manifesting as burnout symptoms such as emotional exhaustion, a diminished sense of achievement, and detachment from their sport (Kilag, et al., 2024).

Furthermore, research by Reinboth and Duda (2006) supports the notion that autonomy-supportive coaching practices serve as a protective factor against burnout. Coaches who prioritize athletes' autonomy, decision-making, and goal-setting abilities create an empowering environment that fosters intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being. In contrast, coaches who exert excessive control over athletes' actions and decisions undermine their sense of agency and autonomy, exacerbating burnout risk.

The association between controlling coaching behavior and athlete burnout is well-established in the literature. Coaches who adopt authoritarian approaches characterized by criticism, rigidity, and a lack of autonomy support inadvertently contribute to their athletes' burnout by fostering an oppressive and demotivating environment (Martinez, et al., 2023). Recognizing the detrimental effects of controlling coaching behavior is crucial for promoting athlete well-being and optimizing performance outcomes.

**Positive Coach–Athlete Relationships Buffer Against Burnout:**

Research underscores the protective function of positive coach–athlete relationships in ameliorating athlete burnout. Athletes who perceive their coaches as supportive, empathetic, and attuned to their needs demonstrate a reduced susceptibility to burnout symptoms (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Such relationships are characterized by trust, mutual respect, and open communication, fostering a supportive atmosphere conducive to athlete well-being and resilience.

Mageau and Vallerand (2003) highlight the significance of coach–athlete relationships in promoting athlete flourishing and mitigating burnout risk. Coaches who cultivate strong connections with their athletes by demonstrating empathy, understanding, and responsiveness create a nurturing environment that bolsters athletes' confidence and motivation. Consequently, athletes feel valued, supported, and empowered, fostering a sense of belonging, autonomy, and competence that buffers against burnout.

Moreover, Lorimer and Jowett (2009) emphasize the role of effective communication in fostering positive coach–athlete relationships and reducing burnout risk. Clear, open communication enhances understanding, trust, and mutual respect within the coach–athlete dyad, facilitating meaningful interactions and promoting athlete well-being (Monternel, et al., 2023). Conversely, breakdowns in communication or perceived lack of support from coaches can exacerbate stress and undermine athletes' confidence and motivation, increasing susceptibility to burnout.

Positive coach–athlete relationships play a pivotal role in safeguarding against athlete burnout. Coaches who prioritize building rapport, trust, and effective communication with their athletes create a supportive environment that enhances athlete well-being and resilience. Recognizing the importance of positive coach–athlete relationships is essential for fostering a conducive sporting environment that promotes athlete flourishing and optimal performance outcomes.

Open and Supportive Communication Reduces Burnout Risk:

Athletes who benefit from clear, constructive feedback and feel valued and understood by their coaches demonstrate lower levels of burnout (Stebbing et al., 2011). Conversely, inadequate communication characterized by criticism, hostility, or ambiguity exacerbates stress and undermines athletes' confidence and motivation, heightening susceptibility to burnout symptoms.

Stebbing et al. (2011) highlight the significance of communication quality in shaping athlete well-being and performance outcomes. Coaches who prioritize clear, supportive communication foster an environment conducive to athlete flourishing and resilience. By providing timely, constructive feedback and demonstrating empathy and understanding, coaches enhance athletes' sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, thereby reducing burnout risk.

Furthermore, Jowett and Ntoumanis (2004) emphasize the role of coach communication style in influencing athlete motivation and well-being. Coaches who adopt an autonomy-supportive communication approach, characterized by encouragement, respect for athletes' perspectives, and acknowledgment of their feelings, foster intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being among athletes (Orozco, et al., 2023). In contrast, coaches who employ a controlling communication style, marked by directives, criticism, and lack of autonomy support, heighten burnout susceptibility by undermining athletes' sense of agency and competence.

Open and supportive communication between coaches and athletes is crucial for mitigating burnout risk. Coaches who prioritize clear, constructive feedback and demonstrate empathy and understanding create a supportive environment that enhances athlete well-being and resilience. Recognizing the importance of effective communication is essential for fostering positive coach–athlete relationships and promoting athlete flourishing in competitive sports settings.

Autonomy-Supportive Coaching Promotes Athlete Well-being:

Research consistently highlights the pivotal role of autonomy-supportive coaching in fostering athlete well-being and intrinsic motivation while mitigating burnout risk. Coaches who empower athletes by encouraging self-initiation, decision-making, and goal-setting create a supportive and empowering environment conducive to athlete flourishing (Reinboth & Duda, 2006). In contrast, coaches who adopt controlling coaching styles, emphasizing external rewards, punishment, and strict adherence to directives, heighten athletes' susceptibility to burnout.

Reinboth and Duda (2006) emphasize the significance of autonomy-supportive coaching practices in enhancing athlete motivation and psychological well-being. Coaches who prioritize athletes' autonomy and competence create a nurturing environment that promotes intrinsic motivation and reduces burnout risk. By fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment, autonomy-supportive coaches cultivate resilience and engagement among athletes, thereby enhancing their overall well-being (Tiu, et al., 2023).



Furthermore, Amorose and Anderson-Butcher (2007) highlight the detrimental effects of controlling coaching behaviors on athlete motivation and satisfaction. Coaches who exert excessive control over athletes' actions and decisions undermine their autonomy and intrinsic motivation, contributing to burnout symptoms (Uy, et al., 2023). In contrast, coaches who foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness within their coaching approach promote athlete flourishing and resilience, ultimately reducing burnout risk.

Autonomy-supportive coaching emerges as a key determinant of athlete well-being and burnout susceptibility. Coaches who prioritize autonomy, competence, and relatedness create a supportive environment that enhances intrinsic motivation and reduces burnout risk among athletes. Recognizing the importance of autonomy-supportive coaching practices is essential for promoting athlete flourishing and optimizing performance outcomes in competitive sports environments.

Conclusion:

The findings underscore the importance of creating a supportive and empowering coaching environment that fosters autonomy, competence, and relatedness among athletes. Controlling coaching behavior, characterized by excessive criticism and strict directives, emerged as a significant predictor of athlete burnout. In contrast, autonomy-supportive coaching practices, which prioritize athletes' self-initiation and decision-making, were associated with lower burnout risk and enhanced intrinsic motivation.

Moreover, positive coach-athlete relationships were identified as a protective factor against burnout. Athletes who perceived their coaches as supportive and empathetic reported lower levels of burnout symptoms, highlighting the importance of trust, mutual respect, and effective communication within the coach-athlete dyad.

Effective communication emerged as a critical factor in reducing burnout risk and promoting athlete well-being. Clear, constructive feedback and open dialogue between coaches and athletes fostered understanding, trust, and motivation, while poor communication increased stress and undermined athlete confidence.

The findings of this review emphasize the need for coaches to adopt autonomy-supportive coaching practices, cultivate positive coach-athlete relationships, and prioritize effective communication strategies to promote athlete flourishing and optimize performance outcomes. By creating a nurturing and empowering coaching environment, coaches can enhance athlete well-being, resilience, and engagement, ultimately fostering a positive sporting culture conducive to long-term success and fulfillment.

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