

It's Not What They Do, It's How They Do It: Athlete Experiences of Great Coaching

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this study was to explore athlete experiences of great coaching. A total of 18 in-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted with elite level athletes (9 female; 9 male) representing a variety of sports (i.e., baseball, basketball, football, soccer, softball, volleyball, and water polo). Participants ranged in age from 22 to 42 years ($M = 29.11$, $SD = 5.52$). Interviews lasted between 30-90 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. Analyses of the transcripts revealed a total of 1,553 meaning units that were further grouped into sub-themes and general themes. This led to the development of a final thematic structure revealing six major dimensions characterizing athlete experiences of great coaching: *Coach Attributes*, *The Environment*, *Relationships*, *The System*, *Coaching Actions*, and *Influences*.

Key words: Coach Behaviors, Coach Effectiveness, Coaching Model, Leadership, Life Skills, Coach-Athlete Relationship

INTRODUCTION

The importance of coaching is self-evident. Coaches are responsible for developing athletes' mental, physical, technical, and tactical abilities, and in addition to all of these responsibilities, they are also expected to win. The few individuals who meet *all* of these expectations emerge from their peers as superior coaches. We come to know these individuals as the coaching greats (e.g., Vince Lombardi, Pat Summitt, John Wooden). The context of sport lends itself to the study of coaching greatness; however, no studies have directly explored this phenomenon. In addition, a clear definition of coaching greatness does not exist.

In general, society identifies coaches as "great" based on two criteria: win/loss records and media attention. This narrow definition limits the study of coaching greatness in two ways. First, the media focuses its coverage on high-visibility sports and on coaches participating at only the highest levels of competition. If you ask any one individual in the USA to make a list of coaching greats, three primary sports are likely to be represented: baseball, basketball, and football. Furthermore, the list will probably only include collegiate and professional level coaches. Therefore, coaching greatness is limited to the handful of coaches who are known to many. This excludes the everyday coaching greats whose names and faces remain unknown to the public, those who coach less popular sports (e.g., rowing, volleyball, wrestling) or at lower competitive levels (e.g., youth, club, small college).

Relying solely on wins and losses to identify great coaches is also limiting. A winning record may indicate that a coach is effective, but may not necessarily mean that a coach is great. Take Bob Knight for example. This former Division I collegiate basketball coach is known for his unruly behaviors. However, he is also known for winning. In 42 seasons as a head basketball coach, Knight's teams accumulated 902 wins, 11 conference championships, and three national titles. Among his long list of accomplishments, Knight was also honored as National Coach of the Year on four occasions. While it is debatable whether Bob Knight is a great coach, there is no doubt that he is effective. He has the ability to teach and inspire his athletes to perform up to their potential and come together in pursuit of common goals. Perhaps it is the manner in which coaches accomplish this task that separates those who are effective from those who are truly great. As a result, we cannot rely solely on win/loss records or the media to define greatness or to gain a thorough understanding of the factors that underlie great coaching. Another, and potentially more insightful way of determining coaching greatness is to examine the experiences of the athletes who play for them.

To date, sport researchers have focused attention on understanding the factors associated with effective (rather than great) coaching. According to Horn [1], effective coaching is defined as "that which results in either successful performance outcomes (measured in terms of either win-loss percentages or degree of self-perceived performance abilities) or positive psychological responses on the part of the athletes (e.g., high perceived ability, high self-esteem, an intrinsic motivational orientation, high level of sport enjoyment)" (p. 240).

In conjunction with Horn's definition, research has relied heavily on *quantitative instruments* (i.e., questionnaires and observational methods) to examine the coaching process [e.g., 2-9]. However, there are two significant reasons why the coaching literature is incomplete. First, there are shortcomings with the questionnaires that are most commonly used to assess perceived coaching behaviors. The Leadership Scale for Sports (LSS) [9], for example, was developed according to knowledge extracted from industrial and organizational psychology. And, although the LSS is primarily administered among male and female athletes (who represent a variety of sports and competitive levels), the five dimensions which comprise the LSS were validated solely according to responses provided by physical education students and male athletes. As a result, the findings from studies which utilized this instrument must be examined with caution. The Coach Evaluation Questionnaire (CEQ) [7] represents another one of the most widely used questionnaires to assess perceived coaching behaviors. While the criteria used to develop the CEQ is more sport relevant (i.e., previous sport literature, pre-existing questionnaires, observation instruments, and expert opinions), the perceptions of coaches and/or athletes were not taken into account during its construction. Therefore, it could be argued that the two most commonly used questionnaires do not provide a comprehensive assessment of perceived coaching behaviors.

The second major reason why the coaching literature is incomplete is due to the exclusive focus on the study of coaching behaviors. In addition to the questionnaires used to examine *perceived* coaching behaviors, observational instruments (such as the Coaching Behavior Assessment System and the Arizona State University Observation Instrument) are often used to examine *actual* coaching behaviors [10, 11]. Although utilizing a behavioral approach to psychological inquiry conforms to the assumptions of traditional scientific methods (i.e., phenomena must be observable, measurable, and replicable), it neglects to address those aspects of the coaching process that are not observable. More specifically, research on coaching behaviors provides valuable information regarding leadership styles, feedback patterns, and expectancy effects [e.g., 2-5, 8], but it does not provide insights into the athletes' *experiences* of being coached. Considering that athletes are the ones who are most

impacted by coaches on a daily basis, it is reasonable to assume that understanding their experiences would serve to provide a more complete picture of the coaching process.

In recent decades, the definition of psychology was expanded to include the study of both human behavior and experience [13]. Because previous research has focused on the examination of coaching from a behavioral perspective, only a handful of studies have addressed this topic from an experiential perspective [e.g., 14-18]. Thus, the majority of coaching research has focused on the behavioral and the ordinary (i.e., effectiveness) rather than the experiential and the extraordinary (i.e., greatness). The purpose of the present study was to begin to address these gaps in the literature by examining athlete experiences of great coaching.

METHOD

Phenomenological research methods were implemented to capture athlete experiences of great coaching. The procedures used in this study were based on Pollio et al.'s [19] recommended steps for conducting this form of qualitative inquiry. These steps included: Exploring Researcher Bias, Selection of Participants, Data Collection, Data Analysis, and Confirming Thematic Structure.

STEP 1 – EXPLORING RESEARCHER BIAS

The goal of phenomenology is to “attend to the phenomena of experience as they appear” [20, p. 34]. Rather than using pre-existing beliefs to provide participants with an explanation of the phenomenon under investigation (i.e., define great coaching from a theoretical perspective), researchers seek to gather rich and thorough descriptions from the participants’ own experiential perspectives [18, 21]. Edmund Husserl (twentieth century philosopher) referred to this process as eidetic epoché [22]: “Epoché requires that looking precedes judgment and that judgment of what is ‘real’ or ‘most real’ be suspended until all the evidence (or at least sufficient evidence) is in” [20, p. 36]. Therefore, it is important for qualitative researchers to identify and attempt to suspend their own pre-existing beliefs that may impose biases throughout the research process. A bracketing interview is used to accomplish this task [23]. For the purposes of the present study, the researcher participated in a bracketing interview with an expert in qualitative methodology [23]. This allowed the researcher to more openly examine the phenomenon of coaching greatness from the experiences of the athlete participants.

STEP 2 – SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Upon approval from the University Institutional Review Board, the researcher sent a letter of invitation to elite-level athletes from a variety of team sports. The letter included a description of the purposes, procedures, and criteria for inclusion. Individuals who had: i) participated at a high level of competition (NCAA Division I, national, and/or international); ii) experienced great coaching; and iii) were willing to openly share their experiences were scheduled for an interview. Consistent with phenomenological research methods, great coaching was defined according to the athletes’ perceptions of whether they had experienced a great coach. The final sample of participants included 18 elite level athletes (9 female; 9 male) representing various sports (i.e., baseball, basketball, football, soccer, softball, volleyball, and water polo). Participants ranged in age from 22 to 42 years ($M = 29.11$, $SD = 5.52$). A description of the participants (and the coaches they discussed) is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of Athlete Participants

Athlete Information					Coach Descriptions	
Gender	Age	Race	Sport	Highest Level	Gender	Competitive Level
Female	22	Caucasian	Soccer	USA National Team	Male	Collegiate
Female	24	Caucasian	Volleyball	NCAA Division I	Male	Club (18u)
					Female	Collegiate
Female	25	Pacific Islander	Softball	NCAA Division I	Female	Collegiate
Female	25	African American	Basketball	WNBA Professional	Male	Youth (12u)
					Female	Collegiate
Female	25	Caucasian	Water Polo	NCAA Division I	Male	Collegiate
Female	27	Caucasian	Basketball	NCAA Division I	Female	Collegiate
Female	28	Asian	Soccer	Olympic Team	Male	Collegiate
Female	28	Asian	Soccer	USA National Team	Male	Collegiate
Female	35	Hispanic	Volleyball	NCAA Division I	Female	Collegiate Setting Coach
Male	22	Caucasian	Baseball	Major League	Male	Professional
					Male	Club (16u)
Male	27	Caucasian	Baseball	NCAA Division I	Male	Collegiate
Male	28	Caucasian	Volleyball	NCAA Division I	Male	Collegiate
Male	28	Caucasian	Baseball	Minor League	Male	Collegiate
						Pitching Coach
					Male	Junior College
Male	32	Caucasian	Basketball	NCAA Division I	Male	Collegiate
Male	35	Caucasian	Volleyball	NCAA Division I	Male	Collegiate
					Male	High School
Male	35	Caucasian	Soccer	NCAA Division I	Male	Collegiate
Male	36	African American	Football	NFL Professional	Male	High School
					Male	Professional Position Coach
Male	42	African American	Football	NFL Professional	Male	High School
					Male	Collegiate
					Male	Professional Position Coach

STEP 3 – DATA COLLECTION

According to Pollio et al. [19]: “The opening question in any phenomenological interview is worded to allow for a broad range of descriptive responses from each participant” (p. 32). Therefore, interviews are typically guided by open-ended questions [22]. For the purposes of the present study, athletes were asked to respond to the following question: “Can you talk about your experiences of great coaching?” Based on participant responses, subsequent questions were asked to clarify points, dissect metaphors, and/or obtain more examples of the phenomenon under investigation. To ensure that nothing was overlooked, participants were also periodically asked if they had anything else to share about their experiences.

A pilot interview was conducted with a former Division I basketball player (female, aged 24). The resulting transcript was analyzed to verify the quality of the research question. It also provided the researcher with an opportunity to refine her interviewing skills on this particular topic.

Interviews were conducted at each participant’s home or office. Due to logistical difficulties, four interviews were conducted by telephone. Regardless of the mode of communication, the main question and follow-up probes remained consistent across

interviews. Prior to beginning each interview, participants were provided with a detailed explanation of the study and asked to give their consent to participate. Interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes in length. At the end of each interview, demographic information was obtained (e.g., gender, age, sport, and level of experience) and participants were given a pseudonym to preserve their anonymity throughout the process.

STEP 4 – DATA ANALYSIS

Once data collection was complete, each interview was transcribed verbatim. This resulted in 220 single-spaced pages of data. Existential phenomenological interpretation requires researchers to continually relate parts of the text to the whole [21]. To get a sense of the whole text, complete transcripts were read. During a second reading, recurring patterns and/or significant statements were identified as meaning units [21]. Similar meaning units within each transcript were clustered into groups to develop sub-themes. The researcher participated in this process with the help of an interpretive research group, which consisted of 10 to 15 faculty members and graduate students from a variety of academic disciplines: “The use of an interpretive research group is important for maintaining the rigor of phenomenological research methods” [21, p. 35]. Throughout the interpretive process, group members helped to ensure that all meaning units and themes were supported by the text. Group members also offered a variety of perspectives that enhanced the quality of the interpretive process.

After sub-themes were identified for each individual transcript, the next step was to develop general themes. This was achieved by making comparisons across the 18 transcripts. To ensure the accuracy of groupings, all themes and meaning units were continually referenced against the original data [23]. This led to the development of a general thematic structure, which was further examined and refined by the researcher and members of the interpretative group [19].

STEP 5 – CONFIRMING THEMATIC STRUCTURE

The final step, which is perhaps the most important, was to obtain feedback from the participants [21]. For the purposes of the present study, feedback was obtained in two ways. Participants were first sent a copy of their interview transcript and were provided with an opportunity to correct errors, clarify points, and/or add additional information. After the analysis of transcripts, participants were then sent a draft of preliminary results, which included the general thematic structure. Those participants ($n = 12$) who responded to feedback opportunities did not offer any additional information and/or changes. Therefore, it was concluded that the themes accurately represented their experiences of great coaching. The thematic structure was finalized when agreement was achieved between the researcher, the participants, and the original data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analyses of the transcripts revealed a total of 1,553 meaning units that were further grouped into sub-themes and general themes. This led to the development of a final thematic structure revealing six major dimensions that characterized these athletes’ experiences of great coaching: *Coach Attributes*, *The Environment*, *The System*, *Relationships*, *Coaching Actions*, and *Influences*. A visual depiction of the thematic structure is presented in the Appendix. One of the major findings to emerge was the interaction between dimensions (illustrated in the Model of Great Coaching provided in Figure 1). When athletes first join a team, they begin to familiarize themselves with their *coach*, the *coach-athlete relationship*, the *environment*, and the *system*. These four dimensions formed the background of athlete experiences of great

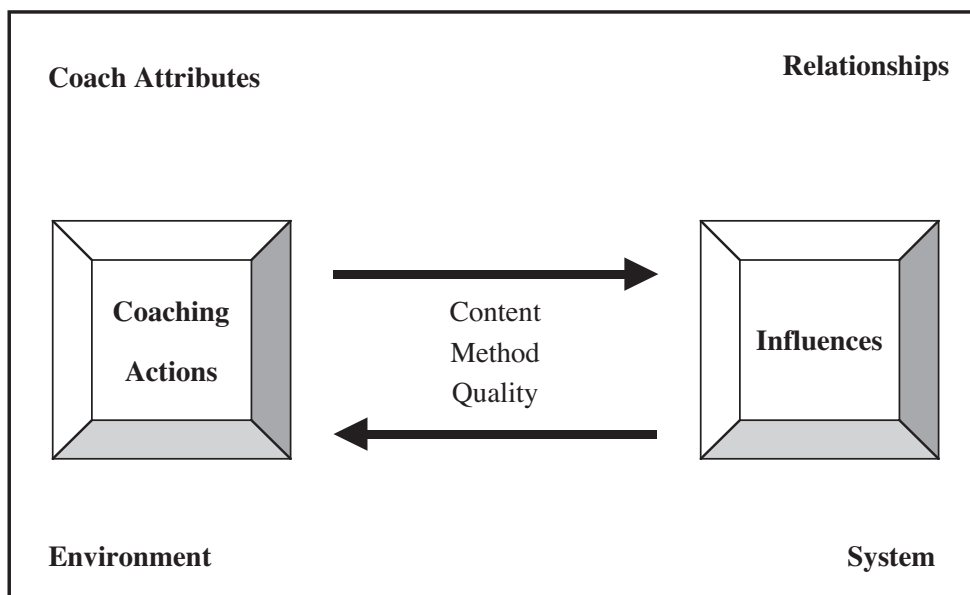


Figure 1. Model of Great Coaching

coaching, much like the scenery in the background of a play. When the curtains in a play are first drawn, audience attention is focused on the lighting, sounds, and stage props. When the play begins, attention shifts to the actors; however, the background scenery still contributes to the overall impact of the performance on the viewer. In the present study, *coaching actions* and *influences* took center stage to all of the other dimensions.

Furthermore, athletes described the background dimensions to be *stable* throughout their experiences. These great coaches were consistent in who they were (*coach attributes*), and how they maintained *relationships*, managed the team *environment*, and carried out their *system*. As a result, there was no uncertainty and the athletes knew exactly what to do and what to expect from their coaches. This allowed the athletes to focus on their coaches' actions and their own development and performance. The background dimensions only became figural (or stood out) when there was a lack of consistency or stability. This finding became evident when athletes compared their experiences of great coaching with experiences of coaches who were less than great. In these experiences, the athletes discussed various breakdowns in the background dimensions (coach-athlete relationship problems, negative team environment, etc.), which served to distract them from key elements of their preparation and play. The great coaches who were described in the present study appeared to avoid breakdowns by maintaining a stable interaction within and between all of the coaching dimensions. This is perhaps one of the major factors that separates great coaches from their peers. The themes that emerged within each dimension (beginning with the background dimensions) are discussed in the following sections.

COACH ATTRIBUTES

This dimension encompassed athletes' descriptions of their coaches' core qualities or internal makeup, and includes six general themes: *More Than Just a Coach*, *Personality Characteristics*, *Abilities*, *Knowledge*, *Experience*, and *Imperfections*.

More Than Just a Coach

The athlete participants expressed an appreciation for playing for great people who willingly served in a variety of roles that went beyond the playing field. Athletes viewed their coaches as *teachers*, *mentors*, and *friends*. Consistent with previous research, they also viewed their coaches as *parental figures* [24, 25]. This was especially significant when athletes described their experiences at the collegiate level; for example: “Being away from home and really having someone to look up to and coach you, and mentor you, and help you with anything you needed [was important]. It gave you a sense of not only to want to win for your team, but to want to win for [your coach] and make him proud of you” (p6). When discussing their experiences, athletes frequently compared their great coaches to other coaches. One athlete described how her coach was “light years ahead of any other coach [she] had ever played for” (p12). This illuminated another sub-theme, which suggested that great coaches are not average, but are *experts*: “People who are experts in their field see things more clearly and quicker than lay people” (p17). As a result, they become known for who they are and what they do. One athlete referred to his coach as “an absolute legend” (p7).

Although the athletes often placed their coaches on pedestals, they also saw them as *human*. The athletes described how their great coaches were not afraid to make mistakes, show faults, or admit that they did not have all the answers. “They don’t act like they are better than you or above you. [Instead, they] come down to your level and act human” (p3). The athletes felt that their coaches were particularly human when they expressed emotions. One athlete recalled a time when his coach cried in front of the team after receiving news about the death of a former player: “They called while we were in a video meeting and he totally broke down right there. The human side of him came out a little bit there too. You just picture this old school guy who was willing to cry in front of a bunch of guys. I remember being pretty impressed. I think it just expanded on who he was as a person” (p7).

Personality Characteristics

Athletes discussed their coaches’ core qualities, which were *cognitive*, *emotional*, *social*, and *psychological* in nature. One of the fundamental characteristics that emerged within the *cognitive* domain was *knowledge*. Participants viewed their coaches’ knowledge as one of the more obvious requisites for achieving greatness: “If you don’t know what you’re doing, you’re not going to be very good at it” (p2). The athletes emphasized how their coaches were knowledgeable about the most up-to-date techniques, strategies, and tactics of the game. They also expressed how their coaches were “always learning and always bringing that [information back to the team]” (p2).

Within the *emotional* domain of personality, *passion* emerged as a key characteristic. One athlete expressed how: “You could feel it in [the coach’s] presence, the way he ran his practices... in everything he did” (p5). The passion that these great coaches exuded was not only for the game, but also for the people: “I think my coach wanted to work with young people. He enjoyed the process of getting his team better. He liked seeing a kid develop personality wise” (p14), and it was always about “making sure that you were okay as a person before addressing [anything related to the sport]” (p12). In addition to being passionate, athletes viewed their coaches as *inspirational* and *enthusiastic*. These qualities were particularly important when the athletes experienced performance lulls or fatigue.

In addition to expressing emotions, it appears that great coaches also use emotion to regulate their athletes’ energy during competition. A soccer player described how her relatively calm coach used an emotional outburst to recharge her team during a halftime break. In contrast, a volleyball player described how his coach’s calm emotional state helped

to decrease player excitement during close games: “If player emotions started taking off, he would call a time out and you would come over and he was very calming and it kind of hit a reset button on you to be able to go back out on the court and perform” (p6). In other situations, these coaches were “able to elicit emotions out of players without coming off as being very emotional” (p12). While situational factors (such as athlete attitudes) dictated the timing and manner in which these coaches expressed emotions, they always had control. In general, the athletes viewed their coaches as *emotionally stable*: “He would get excited and he would get down” (p6), but “he wasn’t emotionally fragile” (p17); “He was like our rock” (p12); “The key to our confidence was his steady emotional state throughout the season” (p6).

Another sub-theme within personality characteristics included the coaches’ *social* qualities. This category encompassed the core attributes that influenced how these great coaches acted toward others. More specifically, athletes described their coaches as *genuine*, *honest*, and *loyal*. This helped the athletes believe and trust in them: “It makes you want to go out there and do a good job and play hard every day” (p9). Regardless of whether it was dealing with a behavioral issue or a recurring performance problem, the athletes perceived their coaches to be *patient* and *non-judgmental*. One athlete felt comfortable enough to tell his coach that he was experiencing fatigue and needed some time off: “I knew that he would be positive about it and would try to help me out” (p2).

Characteristics in the *psychological* domain were related to achievement, attitude, and organization. The athletes described their coaches as *committed* and *disciplined*. One athlete suggested that her coach was more disciplined than anybody she had ever met. Another athlete discussed how his coach was always the first to arrive and the last to leave: “If you don’t work at it, you won’t be great. You could have all the talent in the world and you’ll be mediocre. All great coaches push themselves” (p1). They hold themselves to the highest of standards and are driven by their *competitive* attitude and desire to win: “[My coach] hated to lose and you knew that when you played for him (p5)”. Ultimately, the athletes described their great coaches as *perfectionists*. This was evident in the way that they carried themselves, but also in the way that they were *organized*: “[Coach] always had sort of a master plan in terms of practices” (p10); “The guy was meticulous” (p7). These findings parallel previous research on John Wooden (former UCLA men’s basketball coach), which suggested that much of his success was “the product of extensive, detailed, and daily planning based on continuous evaluation of individual and team development and performance” [26, p. 124].

Finally, the athletes in the present study described their coaches as *professional*. No matter what they were doing, they did it with *character*, *class*, and *respect for others*: “You would see them on the field acting the same way they acted off the field” (p2). They were *consistent* in every aspect of their personality and it was evident in the way they managed the team, prepared for games, and communicated with athletes: “When they are consistent, it’s very clear what they want from you” (p9). The athletes knew exactly what was expected of them, but also what to expect from their coaches [27]: “If he said he was going to be there, he would be there. If he said that he was going to help you do something, he would help you” (p15). The *professionalism*, *consistency*, and *integrity* that coaches exhibited were some of the more prominent qualities that helped gain these athletes’ admiration, trust, and respect.

It is apparent that personality characteristics played a major role in these athletes’ experiences of great coaching. To date, only a handful of studies have examined coach personalities, and a common profile for successful (or great) coaching does not currently exist [e.g., 28-30]. However, in a previous study of Olympic athletes, coaches were viewed

as possessing many of the same characteristics (e.g., passion, caring, honesty) that athletes discussed in the present study [24]. This suggests that there might be some truth in Bruce Ogilvie's assumption "that top class coaches do possess certain qualities in their psychological make-up which distinguishes them from other coaches" [30, p. 303]. Taken together, there appears to be potential for the revitalization of personality research on coaches.

Abilities

In addition to personality characteristics, the athletes in the present study described their coaches as possessing exceptional *abilities*. This emerged as another major theme within the dimension of *Coach Attributes*. *Abilities* were characterized as special talents and/or competencies. One of the dominant sub-themes within this category was these coaches' superior *ability to evaluate* player potential: "Sometimes it's about putting people in the right positions" (p14); "He's good at knowing what people are capable of doing. When I came in, I didn't know what position I played and he told me [I would] be a great outside hitter" (p5); "He was just a brilliant assessor of talent" (p17). This speaks to these coaches' ability to *read* and *analyze*. They were exceptionally good at evaluating performance techniques, processing tactical strategies, and scouting opponents.

While athletes identified many abilities that made their coaches great, it did not mean that they were perfect: "I don't think any coach is fully developed in all areas" (p9). A few of the athletes discussed how their coaches sometimes lacked *interpersonal*, *emotional*, and/or *management* skills. This exposed another sub-theme, which was these coaches' *ability to overcome shortcomings*: "I never thought that I would put him at the top of my best coaches list because he was so young and inexperienced, but he was just so inspirational. He was a natural leader and because of this, his shortcomings as a tactical coach didn't matter" (p12); "You can't change who you are and you can't be something that you're not. You just have to emphasize what you're good at and let your assistants do what you're not good at" (p10). The athletes felt that their coaches *effectively integrated support staff* (i.e., assistant coaches, strength and conditioning coaches, athletic trainers, and sport psychologists), and also discussed their coaches' *ability to adapt*. They adapted to changes in their respective sports and to the different types of athletes who played for them.

Experience

The final theme to emerge within the dimension of *Coach Attributes* was *experience*. For the most part, athletes described veteran coaches who were highly respected within their sports. Furthermore, the athletes granted an automatic level of credibility to coaches who were well known or had positive reputations. When coaches have experience: "it's easier to buy into what [they're] trying to teach" (p7). One athlete described how: "most younger coaches will stop play more often [in practice]. My coach didn't stop play as much. When he did stop play, he made a point that was very salient and I think that just comes with experience" (p12). Another athlete talked about how his coach "was good at using past coaching experiences to help him make current decisions" (p11).

The athletes also appreciated playing for coaches who were former players: "He wasn't just basing himself on something he read" (p17); "He played on the national team and he played in college and I think that gave him more respect and credibility" (p6); "I've always listened a little bit more attentively to coaches who have done the things that they are teaching and have been on the court and in those situations. They can draw from their experiences and they know what works and what doesn't work" (p17); They know what it's

like to be “fighting in the trenches” (p16). These great coaches had an idea of what their players were actually experiencing. This enhanced their level of understanding and contributed to their ability to provide additional information: “He played the game, so he kind of gave us the inside... he taught us all the ins and outs and that made him an exceptional coach” (p1).

ENVIRONMENT

The environment was defined as the overall context in which all coach-athlete actions and interactions occurred. According to athlete descriptions, great coaches fostered three types of environments: *the general team environment*, *the one-on-one communication environment*, and *the practice environment*. Although these three environments are discussed separately, they should be viewed as interconnected and part of the backdrop in which athletes experienced great coaching.

The General Team Environment

This represented the overall climate that coaches created. One of the fundamental components of this climate was that it was *athlete centered*: “There was never any jealousy or worrying about your coach stealing the limelight” (p14); “Every single day you could tell that they were putting their best out there for you” (p7). When these athletes performed well, their coaches “never actually took any credit” (p12). One athlete quoted his coach as saying: “This game is about you. It’s not about me. When I was playing the game, it was about the players, not about the coaches” (p2). This appears to be an important aspect of great coaching, because coaches that “put their players first are the [ones] that in the end get better results for themselves” (p2).

In addition to being *athlete centered*, participants described the general environment as *team centered*: “Coach was always doing what was best for the team” (p9). These great coaches didn’t want anyone around “that was going to hurt or jeopardize the team” (p3); “They limited us from talking to the media. They would try to keep us from spreading any kind of gossip or rumors outside. They would tell us that whatever was going on to keep it within the team” (p16). These coaches didn’t want their athletes “doing or saying anything that would be a distraction to the team. It wasn’t an issue about you crossing [the coaches’] line, it was an issue about you crossing the team’s line” (p6). In fact, “rules were set up so that players would be accountable to themselves and to the team” (p6).

The rules that coaches established also helped to facilitate a *general team environment* that was *structured*: “As young guys, you like to goof off and monkey around and [my coach] would tolerate that to an extent, but the rules were the rules. You didn’t do anything to embarrass your team or your school, and certainly not your coach” (p17). There wasn’t any room for breaking the rules: “If you did, you would sit out a game or you would get kicked out of practice. The consequences were stern and everyone knew what they were, and therefore the rules were so rarely broken that they never really had to be enforced” (p6). Athletes expressed that when disciplinary actions were necessary, they were put into place without favoritism. Coaches “equally applied the rules to the star [players] and the bench warmers” (p17).

Athletes also described the team environment as *family-like* and believed that this “atmosphere stemmed from the coaches all the way down to the players” (p3). Coaches established a family-like environment by caring for their players and engaging with them both on and off the field: “Our team went to the coach’s house [on several occasions] and we were like a part of the family” (p3); “We were all in it together trying to win and I think that’s why we did” (p1): “Even when you are finished playing and you leave the program, you never

really leave. You can't go out [on the field] and practice anymore and you can't play [in games], but you're still a part of the family" (p3). The athletes in this study suggested that their coaches created a *general team environment* that fostered *support, caring, and mutual trust*.

The One-On-One Communication Environment

The overall environment was also conducive to one-on-one communication. Athletes discussed how their coaches made themselves *accessible*, but also *approachable*. One athlete didn't think there was ever a time when her coach's office door was closed. In fact, many athletes shared how they could talk to their coach about anything, regardless of whether it was related to their sport or personal lives. These athletes experienced coaches who were not only *open* to conversation, but who were also *good listeners*: "You could go into the coach's office and he would be all ears" (p6). This helped to create an atmosphere that was *comfortable* for the athletes: "You never felt like you were stepping over a boundary if you were to walk into their office and ask them a question" (p9). These findings parallel previous research on Olympic athletes, who reported that good coach-athlete relationships are "characterized by mutual trust, confidence in each other's abilities, good communication (especially good listening skills) and a sense of collaboration or working together" [15, p. 2].

The Practice Environment

Athletes described the practice environment as being well planned, highly structured, and game-like: "Everything had a purpose" (p8); "We practiced situations that were likely to occur in games" (p15); "We had to focus in on every possession. We didn't just going through the motions" (p8). These great coaches expected hard work and "were demanding of every player no matter what they did. We were always hustling whether we were playing a scrimmage or getting a drink" (p8). The practice atmosphere that these athletes described was *intense* and *competitive* [2, 8]: "The guys competed at such a high level for such a long period of time that we just developed more than other teams. Our second team could beat a lot of teams in the country" (p7). Despite the high level of competitiveness, athletes also experienced a sense of security. Once they earned a starting position, they didn't feel as if they could lose it by making a mistake or performance error. In general, athletes experienced the practice environment as positive and although their coaches sometimes joked around, these athletes clearly understood that there was a time for fun and a time to be serious: "When you got on the court whether it was practice or game time, it was all business and everyone knew that" (p6).

THE SYSTEM

In sport, coaching actions and interactions are often based on established beliefs and/or philosophies. In the present study, athletes described the *system* as the framework in which coaches implemented their philosophies: "Coach believed that we could play nine guys and get our nine guys better than [another team's] six guys. The offensive strategies that he implemented were based on this philosophy. We ran the Flex offense and it was pretty simple how we were going to beat other teams. We were going to wear them out and we were going to foul them out, and that's what it came down to all the time when he talked" (p14). Another athlete described how her coach's system "was based on the team [they] were playing or what [they] were good at during that particular year" (p4); "It was all about figuring out everyone's strength and focusing on those strengths and how to put everyone together with those strengths to make the team great" (p7).

Basically, "the system is just the way they put things in, the installation of a plan, the work

week, the philosophy of practice, and how the days are structured” (p1). Athletes viewed their coaches as great not just because of the system that they implemented, but also because of the way they believed in the system: “It’s the way they believed in teaching and coaching and having relationships” (p14).

RELATIONSHIPS

The relationships that athletes experienced with their coaches were *professional*, but also *personal*: “She was my coach, but also a friend” (p13). Establishing a close relationship was one of the more significant aspects of these athletes’ experiences: “There are so many things going on [and if you have a good relationship with your coach], that’s just one piece of the puzzle that if you don’t have to worry about makes it a lot easier” (p2); “If you can’t have that kind of connection, it makes it rough” (p3). For the most part, these athletes were able to develop *strong* and *lasting* relationships with their coaches. When coaches display a genuine interest in their players (not only as athletes but also as individuals), they establish relationships that often extend beyond the sport environment [24, 31-33]: “I’m still friends with coach to this day. I feel like I could walk into his office tomorrow and not miss a beat” (p14); “It’s rare to get to have a [coach] like that” (p2). When coaches are truly great, “you always remember who they are, what they do, and where they are now” (p16).

Personal Relationship

The athletes never felt as if their coaches imposed a personal relationship on them: “As much of a relationship you wanted to have with coach, whether big or small, you could have” (p8). However, there were also *boundaries*: “You could have fun with coach and he would let you pick at him, but there was never a sense that you would ever disrespect him or that you were on the same level. He was always the coach and you were always the player” (p6). The athletes discussed how their coaches effectively managed boundaries by remaining objective. Personal connections never influenced these coaches’ ability to make fair and difficult decisions. The athletes weren’t “being treated or asking to be treated differently than anybody else on the team” (p11).

The personal relationship that athletes developed with their coaches was also predicated on *trust*, *confidence*, and *respect*. The athletes discussed how their coaches “gained respect out of love, rather than fear” (p4). They made an effort not to embarrass, berate, or publicly humiliate their players in front of teammates or people outside the team. This was important for these athletes because “if you sit there and tear a [player] apart, they’re just going to end up going more and more downhill” (p3). Instead, many of the athletes described how their coaches “got people to respond without yelling” (p5). If they got upset, the athletes could see it in their demeanor and/or mannerisms. These coaches did not need to over-exert their power or demand respect from their athletes. Instead, they earned it with their experience, knowledge, and relentless hard work. One athlete expressed how her coach’s “respect for the players ended up winning their respect for him” (p12). These coaches were *honest*, *loyal*, and *treated the athletes with kindness*. This served to strengthen the coach-athlete relationship, but also the athletes’ motivation and coachability: “When you have that in the mix, then it’s easy to buy into what the coach is selling” (p13). These aspects of the relationship made the athletes more open to their coaches’ instruction, feedback, and criticism: “That’s how you get the best out of athletes” (p3).

The personal relationship was also described as *athlete centered*. These great coaches *showed an interest* in their athletes not only as players, but also as people: “I was between the 12th and 15th man [on my basketball team] the majority of my career and my coach was

always interested in me, always interested in my parents, and he didn't have to be" (p14). The athletes felt like they were a priority: "Coach invested time, and energy, and effort into me" (p5). "She never told me "no" for anything whether it was watching extra tape before practice or doing an extra workout. Whatever it was, she never said no" (p8). This made these athletes feel valued. "I wasn't just one of the 25 players on the team. I was more than just a number" (p11); "If you have value and worth, that's when you want to do your best and perform to the best you can" (p3); "It helps you play better too because you are not just playing for yourself. You're playing for yourself, your teammates, and your coaches" (p5).

Athletes also viewed their coaches as *people they could relate to*. One athlete expressed how his coach could "get on the level of the player no matter what their personality was" (p15). Another athlete felt that his coach "related to the guys because he was a player himself and he knew players' mentalities" (p6). Other factors that helped these coaches relate to their athletes included sharing similar interests, telling stories, and using humor. The athletes often described how their coaches "would laugh and joke about things" (p15). Having a sense of humor also appeared to increase the degree to which athletes perceived their coaches as likeable [31].

Not only did these great coaches relate to their athletes, but they also *got to know them*. This is perhaps one of the most important aspects of the coach-athlete relationship. According to John Wooden, "You've got to study and analyze each individual and find out what makes them tick and how you can get them under your control" [26, p. 126]. Getting to know individuals on a personal level enhances a coach's ability to relate to his or her athletes, get their attention, and treat them in a manner which accommodates individual needs [16, 32, 35, 36]. While the great coaches described in the present study invested time and effort into getting to know their athletes, they also let themselves be known: "My coach shared enough about his own life and his own past experiences and his own kids and his wife that it made him seem human" (p6). Learning about their coaches off the field helped these athletes understand what their coaches expected on the field: "If you know them, it's easier for you to play because you know what they want and you can relax and not second guess yourself" (p13); "Him really getting to know who I was and vice versa made for a really strong bond" (p15).

The personal relationship was also strengthened due to the *care and support* that these coaches provided: "Coach was literally there for me every step of the way no matter what I was doing" (p15); "[He] wanted me to grow and develop as a player and a person, and the office door was always open if you had a problem or needed anything" (p9). These athletes genuinely believed that their coaches cared about more than just performance outcomes. They wanted them to succeed and they "made sure that the players were okay as people (like what was going on in their life) before addressing [anything related to the sport]" (p12). This level of caring gained the athletes' respect and made them want to "do extra and go the extra mile" (p7).

Professional Relationship

Although many components of the personal and professional coach-athlete relationship are interconnected, the *professional relationship* pertained more specifically to the manner in which these athletes were treated as players. One of the major themes to emerge within the professional relationship was *accountability*. The athletes described coaches who never pointed the finger after a loss or put the blame on others. When the team failed, they took responsibility. However, they also encouraged their athletes to take responsibility and *held them accountable* for their actions: "Somebody has to hold you accountable. A great athlete

doesn't always hold himself accountable" (p1); "Sometimes you'd go through the motions, but [with this coach] everything was charted" (p8). Some of the methods these coaches used to hold their athletes accountable were team rules, peer pressure, playing time, and performance statistics: "There was something attached to everything, whether it was positive reinforcement or some type of repercussion" (p8). Although these athletes were sometimes punished, they never felt that their coaches held grudges: "There were rules and there were going to be punishments, but [coach never] held anything over your head or kept anything against you" (p6); "If you go out there and make a bonehead play and lose the game the night before, he'll get into you a little bit after the game and tell you what you need to be told, but he'll come back the next day and it's like it never happened" (p2). The athletes also explained how their coaches never showed favoritism toward certain players. One athlete expressed how she "never got the feeling that [her coach] disliked someone. Outwardly, he treated everybody the same" (p12); "The majority of the time, you were playing or not playing based on your numbers. If your numbers are up and you're doing the things that he needs you to do then he will play you" (p6). These athletes felt that their coaches were fair regardless of whether it was a starter or a non-starter: "I never worried. I just knew that I would get a shot and I just knew that it was up to me to take advantage of that shot" (p7). This finding is particularly important because it contradicts a body of research which suggests that many coaches (i.e., high school, college, and elite) provide differential treatment to their athletes [37-40]. However in recent studies, highly successful coaches (e.g., Pat Summitt) have been found to provide an equitable distribution of feedback to both the starters and non-starters on their teams [2, 26, 41]. Therefore, it could be assumed that the provision of fair and equitable treatment is one major factor that separates the great coach from the average coach.

The *professional relationship* was also athlete centered: "They accept who you are [as a player] when you come in. It's not like their way or the highway. You have habits in the way you play and coach isn't going to transform you into a different player" (p3); "There are a lot of ways to get things done" (p2). The athletes described how it was more important to their coaches that tasks were performed successfully versus perfectly. Rather than focusing on minor imperfections, these great coaches *built on players' strengths*: "My coach would always find the one thing that you did well and he'd run with it. Instead of saying, 'Okay, we're going to work on a bunch of different things to make you the guy I want you to be,' he would say, 'Alright, this is what you do well, let's try to make it the best that we can.' He would look at what you did well and he would milk it for everything that it was worth" (p15). Not only did these great coaches build on player strengths, they also showed confidence in their athletes: "I wanted to do well and [my coach] looked and talked to me like I was going to. There was no doubt in his mind and therefore I didn't have the ability to question myself" (p6); "It was almost like [coach] put faith in people and people would perform" (p7). These athletes got the feeling that their coaches *believed in them*: "Even when he'd rip into you, he would never make you feel like you were a horrible player, but he would let you know, 'Hey, I think you can do better'" (p9). The athletes described coaches who never settled for mediocre. They inspired their athletes both mentally and physically to play hard, believe in themselves, and reach their full potential.

The athletes discussed how their coaches provided them with opportunities to get involved in the decision-making process. Coaches let them make decisions regarding off days, pre-season conditioning, practice schedules, uniforms, and where they would eat on road trips: "The guys on the team never got to design or call plays, but he made it feel like it was our team. He gave us ownership" (p14). Although the athletes were only involved in (what might be considered to be) minor decisions, research suggests that athletes do not like

participating in decision making when issues are highly important or complex, and/or the outcome of the decision will pose a threat to the athlete [42, 43]. Therefore, it appears that these great coaches appropriately integrated their athletes into the decision-making process.

In addition to making decisions, athletes felt *empowered* when their coaches involved them in the recruiting process. When a recruit was visiting, several of the athletes said they would each get an assignment. One coach told his players, “Here is [the athlete] we’re bringing in. I want you to tell him what it’s like to be here, but I want to know what you think of him too” (p14). These coaches were looking to recruit good players, but also good people who would fit in with their program and their athletes. As a result, these coaches took their athletes’ opinions seriously: “We always had veto power and sometimes we exercised it” (p14). Providing these athletes with opportunities to get involved and make decisions made them feel empowered. It helped them buy into their coach’s system and the team concept.

COACHING ACTIONS

As previously mentioned, one of the most central dimensions of these athletes’ experiences was *Coaching Actions*, which included seven general themes: *Teach*, *Communicate*, *Motivate*, *Respond*, *Prepare*, *Perform*, and *Disregard the Irrelevant*. Furthermore, each coaching action was mediated by its content, method, and/or quality (Figure 1). It became evident from these athletes’ experiences that greatness is not about what coaches do, but rather *how* they do it. For example, all coaches teach. Great coaches teach the details. All coaches communicate. Great coaches communicate honestly. All coaches prepare. Great coaches prepare meticulously. All coaches develop expectations. Great coaches develop high expectations and do everything in their power to help athletes achieve them. For the athletes in the present study, it was the *content*, *method*, and *quality* of their coaches’ actions that distinguished them as great. The general themes that emerged within the dimension of *Coaching Actions* are discussed in the following sections.

Teach

One of the most basic actions that these great coaches engaged in was *teaching*. Athletes discussed how their coaches taught *sport skills* that were *cognitive* (strategies, tactics, and systems of play), *physical* (fitness, performance techniques, and fundamental game skills), and *mental* (focus, imagery, anticipation, and mindset). However, these athletes also expressed how “great coaches actually teach you about life” (p16) [44]. The category of *life skills* included *values*, *attitudes*, and *beliefs*. Some of the skills that these athletes learned were how to deal with pressure, handle adversity, and work with others. They also learned respect, patience, and self-reliance. Their coaches didn’t just teach these skills, they modeled them: “We learned to have a good attitude because coach had a good attitude” (p2).

In addition to modeling behaviors, these great coaches adopted a multi-dimensional approach to teaching their athletes. Athletes discussed how their coaches used a combination of *verbal*, *visual*, and *physical methods*: “Some people get it from reading it, some people get it from the visual, and some people get it from actually doing it, but those are the three ways [that these coaches] presented it” (p1). *Verbal methods* included basic instruction, feedback, and questioning. The coach encouraged athletes to be active rather than passive learners. “He would question you and make you think about what you were doing and why it was wrong and what you needed to do next time” (p11); “Then he would tell you what he saw” (p1).

Some of the *visual methods* that these coaches implemented to teach skills were physical demonstrations, chalk talks, scouting reports, and video clips: “I’m a visual learner so she didn’t just talk to me. She kind of got in there and showed me, held my hand, and we video-

taped” (p13); “A lot of coaches teach you how to study film, how to study a different player, how to study your opponent” (p16). As a result, these athletes also developed the ability to identify their own strengths and weaknesses. Some athletes got to the point where they could coach themselves.

Physical teaching methods included manual manipulation and repetition. Manual manipulation represented instances in which the “coach physically moved [players] to certain places” (p17). However, most of these athletes focused on how their coaches emphasized repetition: “It was just making you do it over and over and over again until you got it right” (p5). Repetition did not mean going through the motions. It meant performing with precision: “I think we ran 80 something perfect plays one day after practice. If you do it perfect in practice, it carries over to the game” (p1). It appears that great coaching involves utilizing a combination of teaching methods, which maximize athlete learning.

The athletes also spoke about the *quality* of their coaches’ teaching methods. Specifically, they emphasized how their coaches paid “great attention to the little details” (p13). These coaches had the ability to “pull out the finer things when teaching a player” (p14), and instructions were specific. They did not tell their players to “just get it done” (p1). Instead, they explained exactly how to get it done [2, 3, 8]. The athletes also mentioned how their coaches simplified the process. One athlete explained how his coach “always found a way to break things down to the most simplistic sense” (p15). Another athlete said that his coach sometimes had players practice their skills in slow motion. In general, training sessions were designed so that there was a progression from simple to complex: “You would start out small and go big and he would build on his teachings. When we moved from simple to complex, the purpose of the drill was not lost. The same theme ran through each progression” (p12). These athletes’ comments suggest that great coaches pace their instruction according to each athlete’s learning curve.

Communicate

Athletes repeatedly discussed how their coaches communicated *basic performance information, player roles, expectations, individual goals, and a common team vision*: “We knew exactly what coach wanted us to do in terms of getting better, improving, and helping the team” (p17). In addition, coaches wanted “things to be done in a particular way for a reason” (p4) and provided explanations for what they asked the athletes to do (e.g., *why* they were conducting a particular drill or *why* a certain individual might not play). Taking the time to explain *why* was an important aspect of communication that made these coaches great.

According to the athletes, coach communication methods were both *direct* and *indirect*. Direct communication included one-on-one verbal dialogues, which occurred on the playing field, but also during individual player meetings that were designed to gather opinions, discuss goals, or simply check the players’ status in terms of academics and/or personal issues. In order to communicate effectively, coaches must have their athletes’ attention. Athletes described how coaches got their attention. For some athletes this meant “speaking softly or yelling and screaming” (p1). For others, it was using analogies, telling stories, or “saying things that had a little bit of shock value” (p6). These coaches figured out “what excited each player and found a way to grab their attention” (p8).

The athletes also discussed methods of communication that were *indirect*: “My coach communicated through his organization of practices. The way that practices were organized helped us know where we stood [on the team]” (p10). A baseball player discussed how his coach communicated messages through certain players that were highly respected on the team. The athletes also expressed how their coaches communicated through facial

expressions and/or physical mannerisms. “We just knew when he was getting heated or excited or whether it was an angry mad or if he was happy that we were winning. You could tell by his demeanor” (p5).

The *quality* of these coaches’ communication was described as *clear*, *consistent*, and *honest* [45]. Rather than telling players what they wanted to hear, they would tell them the truth: “Coach would never say something false. He wouldn’t give you false compliments” (p9). In addition, they didn’t send mixed messages: “If you’re telling somebody that they’re awesome and they’re playing great, and then in training you take them out of the starting line-up and play them in the reserves, then you’re sending them a mixed message” (p9). In contrast to this example, the athletes described their coaches’ words and actions as consistent.

Coaches also communicated in a manner that was *appropriate* and *positive*: “You have to have constructive criticism, but you don’t want to have a coach who continually bangs on you until you wear down. It’s okay to have some negative points sometimes, but it can’t always be negative, there’s got to be a balance” (p2). One athlete described how she never heard a negative word come out of her coach’s mouth. Finally, athletes discussed how their coaches’ communication was *well-timed*: “He would only instruct you before or after plays, but never during actual play” (p6). These coaches knew what to say, but also when to say it. Furthermore, the content, method, and quality of communication appeared to be dependent on factors related to the situation, the coach, and the athlete who was receiving the information [46].

Motivate

Athletes described how their coaches motivated them to learn the game, work hard, and become the best players they could be: “When you have a coach that is super motivating, it makes you want to play for them” (p5). Part of what was motivating to these athletes was who their coaches were. The other part was what their coaches did. However, the most important factor for these athletes was that their coaches “touched something inside of them” (p8).

Some players were motivated because their coaches were enthusiastic, caring, and/or passionate. Others were motivated by the desire to please their coach. The athletes described how their coaches motivated by helping them set goals and/or providing a vision for the future. Regardless of whether it was joking around or telling stories, the athletes felt that their coaches’ motivational strategies were individualized: “[Some athletes] are motivated by carrots and some by sticks. Some follow for reasons of wanting to please their coach and succeed and others follow because they’re just scared to death” (p17); “[My coach] found a way to motivate each player, and then did it. He found a way to motivate everyone” (p9).

Prepare for Competition

One aspect of the preparation was *physical*. Athletes discussed how their coaches emphasized the importance of staying in shape. A baseball pitcher noted that his coach was “big into the physical conditioning, but also the [mechanical] conditioning of your arm” (p15). Coaches also prepared athletes by running game-like practices. For these athletes, “practices were harder than the actual matches” (p7).

Another aspect of the preparation was the utilization of *mental skills training*. The athletes described a variety of activities their coaches implemented to mentally prepare them for competition [47]. These included performance routines, focusing strategies, and visualization: “He literally would lay me down on the ground on my back and tell me to visualize seeing myself on the mound throwing with the perfect mechanics” (p15). Coaches

also *prepared* for competition by developing meticulous game plans: “Coach was very good at figuring out the tactics to stop an opponent. There is only so much you can do to execute a game plan but you knew that he had it all broken down, every last number. He had it calculated out” (p7). Coaches also had their athletes study opponents: “We used to have to go through every single pitching chart from the game before on each hitter and highlight when they swung through a fastball (were they ahead or behind in the count?)” (p15).

Finally, the athletes described their coaches’ preparation as *consistent*: “Whether we were playing in front of 20,000 or 2,000 people, I don’t think you saw a difference in his personality. He didn’t prepare differently. His life didn’t change. His actions didn’t change” (p14); “Everything was drawn out and we knew what we were going to do and how we were going to do it and we did it over and over and over again” (p10).

Respond to Athletes

The manner in which these coaches responded to athlete behaviors and performance emerged as another major theme within the dimension of *Coaching Actions*. Participants discussed how their coaches responded to effort, mistakes, emotions, and performance outcomes. Regardless of whether it was positive or negative, the athletes appreciated getting a response from their coaches: “If the coach just stands there and watches, you never know if you’re doing something right. It’s nice for coaches to show a bit of emotion and not be so stoic that they can’t be human as well” (p9). The three primary coaching responses that athletes described were excitement, enjoyment, and displeasure.

One of the factors that influenced these coaches’ excitement was their athletes’ excitement: “He got excited about things that he knew we got excited about” (p15). However, their coaches also got excited when players performed well: “When somebody would make a great dig or a great hit or it was a great play, his face literally would light up and he would be the first person to say, ‘That was a career dig!’ Or, ‘That was your best hit!’” (p13). The athletes described how their coaches got excited about factors associated with the process more often than with performance outcomes: “Coach didn’t just get excited over the goals, but he got excited about a great defensive tackle or a defensive header, the things that were not glorious, but selfless” (p9). In addition to their excitement, these coaches expressed enjoyment when their players improved and/or developed: “If a player is better than he was a month ago, that made him happy. I think that’s where he got his enjoyment” (p14).

Coaches responded with *displeasure* when athletes were goofing off, not paying attention, or being lazy: “Coach had zero patience for people who wouldn’t work hard and he made that very clear at the beginning” (p12). They also had no tolerance for mental mistakes. A baseball player quoted his coach who said: “‘Nobody wants to strike out. Nobody wants to make an error. I will never criticize you about that. Those things happen, but I will get upset if you make a mental mistake’” (p2). When it came to physical mistakes, these coaches were more forgiving. “You had a margin of error. If you are playing your hardest, you are going to make mistakes, it’s inevitable” (p6). Several athletes discussed how their coaches encouraged aggressive play and wouldn’t take players out of the game or punish them for making physical errors. As a result, the athletes rarely worried about making mistakes. Instead, they were able play aggressively, yet relaxed.

Perform Under Pressure

While the focus in sport is primarily directed toward player performance, coaches are also performers. The participants in this study primarily discussed how their coaches *performed under pressure*. This emerged as another major theme within the dimension of *Coaching*

Actions. In pressure situations, these great coaches remained confident, calm, and emotionally stable: “[My coach’s] true gift is that in the heat of the battle, she is the rock. Some coaches are emotional and want to win and forget to relax and execute, but my coach stayed calm and in the zone. She never blew up unless she wanted too. She never shows fear. She never shows her uneasiness or nervousness. Her communication is direct and to the point. She chooses her words wisely. Her voice is not soft, but loud and everything is matter of fact. The key is that coach already had everything in the playbook. She never drew up a new play when the game was on the line. It was being able to pull out one more trick, but pulling out a trick that she already had” (p4). When these coaches maintained a high level of poise in pressure situations, the athletes experienced a sense of calmness and comfort. “Having the coach be more of a steady figure gave the whole team a comfort level to know that it was never going to get out of control. I think it really kind of calmed my mind” (p6). Displaying a calm and confident coaching style was also found to facilitate athlete performance at the Olympic games [24, 48].

Disregard the Irrelevant

The athletes expressed how their coaches showed disregard for anything that was irrelevant to the team’s primary mission, goals, and/or objectives. This emerged as another major theme within *Coaching Actions*. These athletes described their coaches as being able to see the big picture and as a result, they “would let the little things go sometimes” (p6); “He didn’t care one iota about how you dressed, whether you were shaven or unshaven, if you had long hair or short hair, or if you wore a bandana. Nothing mattered to him, but how you played the game” (p7).

As long as the athletes were prepared to compete come game time, they were not punished for minor infractions such as losing drills in practice or arriving late for road trips: “If you missed a flight, your ticket was at the gate and there was no bologna” (p7). The athletes were largely responsible for themselves and their progress and this was even evident in one of the football player’s experiences of training: “If you were over 30, you conditioned in your own way. You’re old enough to know what you need to do to stay in shape to be able to play and you’re going to do it” (p1). The athletes in this study were expected to be self-motivated. The manner in which this athlete trained was less relevant to his coach than the fact that he was adequately trained, and maybe even more importantly that he was healthy to compete.

INFLUENCES

Ultimately, athletes were influenced by the interaction between *Coach Attributes*, *The Environment*, *The System*, *Relationships*, and *Coaching Actions*. While the impact of coaching actions was mediated by the content, method, and quality of delivery, all of the other dimensions served as the background that *influenced* athlete experiences. The participants in this study described how playing for great coaches was about “more than just becoming a better athlete, but also becoming a better person” (p3). These coaches influenced the athletes’ self-perceptions, development, and performance. Most importantly, they influenced the athletes’ desire and ability to become the best that they could be, not only in sport but also in life.

CONCLUSION

The goal of the present study was to expand on previous literature by examining athlete experiences of great coaching. By focusing on athlete experiences rather than on any specific aspect of coaching, the results revealed a more comprehensive picture of the factors that

underlie coaching greatness. The athletes in this study experienced great coaches who represented all levels of sport (i.e., youth, high school, club, collegiate, and professional). They also described coaches who were male and female, young and old, experienced and less experienced. This reinforces the notion that great coaching cannot be solely determined on the basis of win-loss records or media attention. In the present study, the true essence of greatness was captured in athlete experiences of who their coaches were, what they did, how they did it, and how it influenced them. Ultimately, these athletes experienced individuals who were not only great coaches, but extraordinary people who left lasting impressions on the lives of those who were fortunate enough to call them “coach.”

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APPENDIX. THEMATIC STRUCTURE OF ATHLETE EXPERIENCES OF GREAT COACHING

