

# **Coaching in the community: Developing knowledge and insight**

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## Care in community sports coaching

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### Introduction

Although increasingly associated with rational and objective scientific processes, sports coaching is nonetheless a social activity. More specifically, sports coaching always involves a relationship between a coach and athlete / participant (Cronin & Armour, 2017; Jowett, 2007). This chapter aims to explore the perspective that coaching relationships are essentially caring relationships, and that the care facet of these relationships has hitherto been taken for granted and undervalued (Cronin & Armour, 2018; Jones, Bailey, & Santos, 2013; Jones, 2009). In doing so, the chapter argues that both community sports coaching policy and practice are implicitly concerned with care. Yet, to date, care has largely been under theorised and marginalised in coaching policy and practice. Indeed, to a large extent, coaching discourse is dominated by a concern for what performers do (i.e., sport and physical activity) rather than performers themselves (Harthill & Lang, 2014). This does not mean that coaching policy is not well intentioned, nor that coaching is wholly without caring practice. On the contrary, good caring practice does exist, but it is perhaps not as widespread and explicit as it should be. To address this challenge, the later section of the chapter details examples of care in coaching from across international contexts. This is a valuable resource that will prompt coaches, coach educators, employers, and policy makers to consider how they can ensure that care is not peripheral to, but rather at the heart of the coaching process. After all, caring about communities and their inhabitants is essential to community sports coaching.

### Sports coaching as a caring activity

In recent times, we have come to the view that coaching should be a more caring activity. Such a conclusion is not controversial given the recent high profile instances of abuse suffered by sport participants. For example, youth football (soccer) in the UK has been shocked by

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widespread sexual assaults perpetrated by coaches. US College Sport has been associated with allegations of fraud and sexual misconduct, and elite sport organisations in the UK and New Zealand have been accused of developing bullying environments. These acts reflect the power and influence that coaches may have upon sports participants (Lang, 2010; Purdy, Potrac, & Jones, 2008). Paradoxically, occupation of powerful positions also enables coaches to care for participants. For example, Jones' (2009) autoethnographic account illustrates how minor acts performed by a coach, can be conceived as caring, meaningful, and appreciated by athletes. Through an evocative narrative, Jones positions himself as a coach and also reflects on his own experiences as a young apprehensive football (soccer) participant. In doing so, Jones illustrates how simple caring acts such as a smile to acknowledge a young person's presence, may illustrate empathy and care and can have a positive influence on apprehensive young people, who may need support in competitive situations. On a similar theme, but from a different perspective, Gearity's (2012) phenomenological account explores athletes' perceptions of uncaring coaching. Gearity's synopsis is damning, with coaches depicted as dishonest, self-centred, and culpable of demonstrating degrading behaviour. Accordingly, Gearity (2012, p. 188) concludes that "these coaches failed miserably as moral educators." In reaching this conclusion, Gearity (2012), like Jones (2009), recognises that coaching is not always, but should be, a caring enterprise. Accordingly, both these authors challenge coaches to be caring practitioners who engage in ethically sound pedagogical relationships.

Since the calls from Jones (2009) and Gearity (2009) for coaching to be a more caring activity, a small corpus of burgeoning work has described how "successful" coaches care for athletes. For example, a case study of a Swedish Handball coach (Annerstedt & Eva-Carin, 2014) highlighted how listening, and generating a familial atmosphere, were key pillars of caring coaching practice. Similar insights were observed in US collegiate sport, which illustrated how coaches who were competitively successful also engaged in caring acts such as listening to, and advocating for, student athletes (Fisher, Bejar, Larsen, Fynes, & Gearity, 2017; Knust & Fisher, 2015). These examples are also consistent with Cronin and Armour's (2017) study of four youth performance coaches. Indeed, subsequent to phenomenological analysis, Cronin and Armour (2017)

declared that care was an ontological essence of being a coach. This does not mean, however, that all four coaches demonstrated care through a singular or uniform approach. On the contrary, how the coaches cared for athletes was the subject of a follow up text in which the case studies were further elucidated and problematized (Cronin & Armour, 2018). In that text, the relational and contextual nature of care was further described. For example, one coach, Jane, cared for athletes in a maternal and nurturing manner. Another coach, Terry, utilised technology and scientific measurements to care for an athlete's health. From these analyses, it was concluded that care is a key facet of coaching, but how coaches care for athletes in practice is a situated and temporal act. Specifically, how coaches care is influenced by the coaches themselves, athletes, and contextual factors (social, economic, political) surrounding the relationships. Thus, the coaches in the book (Cronin & Armour, 2018) cared for athletes through different and unique behaviours. That said, care was nonetheless an essential facet of being a coach (Cronin & Armour, 2017).

Positioning care as an ontological essence of coaching is logical when one considers the link between coaching and teaching. Teaching has a generally accepted duty of care, which has a well-established legal basis. Concomitantly, coaching has long established links to physical education teaching (Armour, 2011; Jones, 2006). Coaches and teachers will share concerns over learning, curricula, teaching methods, and attainment of knowledge and skills. Indeed, Armour (2011) recognises that although teachers and coaches may operate in different environments (schools versus clubs), with different rates of pay and conditions, both coaching and teaching practice have much in common (e.g., instruction, a focus on learning, the coach/teacher adopting a position of authority). It is not surprising, therefore, that all four coaches in Cronin and Armour's studies (2017; 2018) conceived coaching as a pedagogical activity, and to greater or lesser extents, had backgrounds in education (e.g., as physical education teachers). Moreover, they all recognised that coaches have a duty of care. Thus, although not all community sports coaches may be considered professionals (Taylor & Garratt, 2008) or operate under the same conditions as teachers, nonetheless, like PE teachers, they may have a duty of care to participants.

In the UK, a duty of care is rooted in case law, which illustrates the tort of negligence (Partington, 2017). This tort implies that coaches have a duty to ensure reasonable care for events that could be reasonably foreseen (e.g., injury during training sessions). This duty is linked to the neighbour principle, which means that the coach's duty for reasonable care extends to individuals who could reasonably be affected by their actions (e.g., athletes) (Partington, 2017). Such law is predominantly focused on reasonable attempts to avoid harm. In practice, community sports coaches may exercise their duty of care by completing risk assessments, ensuring equipment and facilities are safe, ensuring that activities are inclusive, and being mindful of potential abuse. To enable such care, national governing bodies of sport and national agencies, such as the United Kingdom's Child Protection in Sport Unit or SafeSport in the United States, provide training on how coaches can protect children and recognise the signs of abuse. It is, of course, crucial that community sports coaches engage in this training because they are likely to encounter a large number of children through work in schools, single sports clubs, or youth clubs. Moreover, community sports coaches may often work with vulnerable people as part of their efforts to deliver social outcomes. For example, community sports coaches may work with disaffected young people as part of a positive youth development programme (Armour, Sandford, & Duncombe, 2012; Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2014). Alternatively, community sports coaches may work with marginalised groups such as those from different ethnic communities or those with disabilities. It is therefore appropriate that community sports coaches ensure that participants are safe because they are well placed to care for these participants.

### **Theoretical understandings of care**

While the legal conception of care focuses on the tort of negligence, it is important to note that coaching researchers such as Jones, Bailey, and Santos (2013) have emphasised a more moral and ethical notion of care. This conception of care includes the reasonable non-malevolence associated with negligence, but also utilises Noddings' (1984) ethic of care. Noddings' ethic of care is rooted in a feminist approach, which positions care as an essential, yet undervalued, aspect of pedagogical relationships. More specifically, Noddings argues that care occurs

within reciprocal relationships in which both “a carer” and the “cared for” contribute. Noddings also emphasises that caring relationships are characterised by engrossment and motivational displacement (Noddings, 2014). Engrossment refers to the sustained attention and interest from the carer to the cared for. This sustained attention could manifest through observation or dialogue, and enables a carer to understand and focus on the needs of the cared for. Noddings also argues that understanding these needs is not enough; a carer needs to act on behalf of the other in order to support the cared for, and thus the motivation of the carer is displaced towards serving the other. Of course, as part of a reciprocal relationship, the cared for also contributes by engaging with, accepting, and receiving care.

For the community sports coach, these concepts are useful because they highlight that to care for participants with an ambitious moral and social ethic will require sustained commitment, interest, action, and the consent of an individual. In order to care in this manner, Noddings encourages dialogue between the carer (e.g., the coach) and the cared for (e.g., the athlete). More precisely, Noddings urges carers to listen to the cared for as a means of building trust, empathising with their needs, and understanding their concerns. If structured appropriately, community sports coaching provides opportunities for coaches to develop such relationships. For example, a recent study of netball coaches in a scheme aimed at re-engaging women with lapsed participation illustrated how coaches could engage in dialogue at the start of Netball sessions, at social events, and during training sessions (Cronin, Walsh, Quayle, Whittaker, & Whitehead, 2018). This listening approach enabled the coaches to understand the motives of participants and ensure that sessions were appropriate to their needs, or if not, to ensure that women were signposted to other opportunities that would meet their needs (e.g., more or less competitive clubs). Thus, although Noddings’ work is primarily focused on pedagogical relationships in schools, the key concept of striving for a reciprocal caring relationship holds much promise for coaches working in community settings.

### **Care in sport policy**

As a social institution, modern sport has been subjected to a diverse range of social and political influences, which have necessitated an

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internal focus on policies and practices concerning child welfare. Initiated primarily by the emergence of child sex abuse in the 1980s, sports organisations have been required to respond to such abhorrent cases and develop protective interventions. Brackenridge and Rhind (2014) contend that child protection has become an increasingly important theme amongst sporting centres of power and such a shift has predicated a movement from politicians and policy makers alike to ensure the welfare of children in sport.

From a global perspective, the Panathlon Declaration (2004) represented a commitment to extend beyond mere the discourse of protection in youth sport, through the establishment of clear codes of conduct. Central to the Declaration was a focus on the ethical practice of equality and children's rights. It called for all stakeholders in youth sport to endorse and uphold these rights in order for sport to realise its positive values. In 2012, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and its partner organisations forming the International Safeguarding Children in Sport Working Group, formulated a set of standards for children operating in international sport (Reynard, 2013). Thus, promoting the view that all children participating in sport should at least receive a minimum standard of care across international contexts.

Within the UK, a plethora of recent government sporting policies (DCMS, 2000, 2002, 2008, 2012, 2015) have extolled the potential for sport to provide health, educational, and societal benefits to all participants. Implicit within all of these policies was the need for participants to practice sport in an environment free from prejudice, discrimination, any form of abuse, and ostensibly to feel valued and cared for regardless of personal circumstance. These policies have argued that sport can be a mechanism for meeting the wider social needs of participants. In doing so, Government strategy reflects an implicit concern (care) with the holistic development of participants.

On a similar theme, the latest Sport England strategy (Sport England, 2016) promulgates a customer-focused approach to sport development, and is concerned with 5 key outcomes at its core: physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, individual development, social and community development, and economic development. Embedded within the



strategy is the recognition that in order for sport to flourish and enact its potential as a valuable tool for social good, sports organisations must tailor themselves and their actions to understand and meet customer needs. A major element of this is ensuring that programmes can produce positive social experiences for participants, and demonstrate that the participant is the major “cared for” focus of the interaction taking place. As a policy proposal, *Towards an Active Nation* (Sport England, 2016) has some features, which are consistent with Noddings’ (2014) notion of care (e.g., a focus on understanding (engrossment) and meeting the needs of participants (motivational displacement). Thus, both international and national policy has an implicit focus on care, in, and through sport participation.

Despite policy and discourse, non-recent high-profile cases of sexual abuse in football and more recent bullying cultures in other sports have received widespread attention, suggesting that sport is still not always a caring environment. In light of the increased scrutiny placed upon the sport sector and following publication of the government’s strategy for sport (DCMS, 2015), Baroness Fanni Grey-Thompson (UK Sport Independent Review Panel, 2017) was called upon to independently review the duty of care practices of national governing bodies in the UK. Grey-Thompson produced a set of recommendations that include a duty of care charter and a duty of care quality commission to hold national governing bodies accountable for the duty of care provided to all athletes, coaches, and support staff. Indeed, as part of the themes related to safeguarding, equality, diversity, and inclusion within the report, Grey-Thompson acknowledged the important role performed by the NSPCC Child Protection in Sport Unit in tackling child welfare. She called for the general public to be made more aware of its function and for more training to be provided to sports organisations to enable them to adopt and implement sound safeguarding, equality, and inclusion strategies within their practice.

In terms of policy implementation, it is important to recognise that minimum standard safeguarding training is already provided as part of coach education provision by many national governing bodies of sport. Indeed, as part of the UK Coaching Certificate, which is a coach education development framework, safeguarding training is a

fundamental element of coach education programmes. Primarily however, this takes the form of a short workshop or online course which is additional to the core educational element of the programme. It could therefore be argued that national governing bodies of sport may unwittingly serve to devalue its importance as it is often presented as a supplementary facet of coach education and thus may be perceived as not being central to coaching. Similarly, the use of welfare officers in elite sport (Lewis, Rodriguez, Kola-Palmer, & Sherretts, 2018) is promising but also “outsources” care away from coach-athlete relationships. Worryingly this view of care as a supplementary facet of coaching is also present in Harthill and Lang’s (2014) study that detailed how senior managers in sports organisations did not appreciate the importance of care in sport. Taking this perspective into account, the recommendations from Baroness Grey-Thompson, and the most recent government and quasi-governmental strategies, it is clear that sport organisations need to do more to move beyond the existing inertia regarding care in sport. International, national, and sport specific policies do exist which implicitly, and to a lesser extent, explicitly challenge organisations to address care. Yet unequivocal practical steps remain necessary to ensure that the care and welfare of all participants, moves beyond policy and into the heart of sporting environments.

### **Care in community sports coaching practice**

While media reports of abusive and uncaring coaching may abound, it is also important to note that many coaches do engage in caring acts. Such acts may be idiographic and part of isolated coaching interactions or consistently embedded in practice. The following two hypothetical examples may serve to illustrate how a coach can demonstrate caring practice. Firstly, a common issue which can test the coach-athlete relationship is when an athlete experiences deselection from a team. This is potentially a traumatic experience for many athletes who value participation in competitions (Blakelock, Chen, & Prescott, 2016). On such an occasion, it is incumbent for the coach to handle interactions with sensitivity. In this scenario, caring coaches may pre-empt conflict by conversing with athletes about the playing programme prior to the start of a season. This conversation will enable coaches to understand the athlete’s expectations and ambitions (engrossment). From here, caring coaches can meet the needs of athletes (motivational

displacement) by planning an appropriate competition schedule of events (e.g., extra or fewer tournaments). A pre-emptive conversation also allows coaches to clarify selection criteria and to ensure athletes understand the criteria. If deselection does then occur, the athlete is clear on what basis the decision has been made, and that the decision was made within a caring relationship.

A second example occurs when athletes experience injury that prevents participation in their chosen sporting endeavour. This scenario can engender athletes with feelings of distress, isolation, and peripheral importance to the team / coach (Clement & Shannon, 2011). In this situation, it is vitally important that the coach offers support to ensure the athlete continues to feel cared for. To this end, coaches may include injured players in other non-playing roles within the sport organisation. For example, injured athletes could be invited to support and assist coaches, contribute to media tasks, or organise off the field events. Such action, however, should always be based on a conversation with the athlete and aligned with their consent, ability, and wishes. Through this conversation, coaches can demonstrate that they are interested in injured athletes (engrossment), and are willing to meet the needs of those athletes (motivational displacement).

Beyond the hypothetical examples above, a series of research programmes have demonstrated the potential for caring to become a systematic part of community sports coaching. For instance, the seminal work of Don Hellison in Chicago is an example of a research informed programme that used sport and physical activities in order to achieve moral and social outcomes in specific communities. Hellison and his physical education students devised and delivered a Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model in Chicago High Schools (Hellison, 2011). The model aspires to develop character traits such as leadership as a means of positively impacting wider communities. To that end, Hellison's students delivered physical activities focused on teamwork, challenge, and leadership. In delivering these sessions, young participants who often lived in deprived areas were tasked with making decisions about activities and their own levels of engagement. Alongside this, both the participants and Hellison's students would also engage in group meetings, counselling time, self-reflection, and self-

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evaluation activities. These discussions would draw parallels between performance during activities and the wider lives of pupils outside of the school (e.g., how to be a leader, communicate in teams, respect others, and operate within rules). In doing so, many of Noddings' (2014) caring concepts such as listening skills and authentic dialogue, were enacted in order to develop caring and responsible young people. A body of evidence now suggests that although the model is challenging, it can have a positive influence on individuals. These effects have since been observed across a number of different cultural contexts including school based and non-school based settings and across international boundaries (e.g., Romar, Haag, & Dyson, 2015). Key to these outcomes are an intention to focus on participant needs, engage in authentic dialogue, and to develop suitable activities to challenge and support young people (Hellison, 2011).

Imbued by the evidence from Hellison's TPSR model, Newton and colleagues set about exploring the notion of a caring climate (Fry et al., 2012; Newton et al., 2007). This research also drew upon Noddings' care concepts and Battistich's caring school concept (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997). The caring school concept is premised on the notion of a school as a community, and Battistich and colleagues have demonstrated that the stronger a sense of community within a school, the more likely individuals are to adhere to the social norms of the school. Across several studies (Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010; Fry et al., 2012; Gano-Overway et al., 2009; Newton et al., 2007), it was demonstrated that coaches should emphasise caring acts and develop a sense of community so that caring behaviours are likely to be replicated by, and between, sport participants. For example, care was measured in a youth soccer league using the caring climate for sport scale (Newton et al., 2007). Findings revealed that "athletes who perceived a caring climate on their teams were significantly more likely to report higher enjoyment, more positive attitudes towards their coaches / teammates, greater commitment to soccer, and engage in more caring behaviours towards their coaches / teammates" (Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010, p. 294). As such, caring moves from a dyadic concept between a coach and a participant, to a concept that can have influence across a wider community. To enable the practical application of such work, Gano-

Overway and Guivernau (2018) tentatively proposed the SCENE system that may be relevant to community sports coaches. Specifically the authors used both philosophical argument and empirical evidence to argue that Supporting athletes, Connecting with players, Empowering athletes, Nurturing care, and Establishing a safe environment were key factors in developing sound and effective coach-athlete relationships. Coaches could engage in activities such as welcoming and greeting all athletes, rewarding athletes who support each other, and participating in community events as a team. Moreover, like Hellison's work beforehand, Gano-Overway and Guivernau illustrate that with intentional planning and action, coaching in community settings can be a caring activity that leads to positive sporting and social outcomes.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Community sports coaching is a relational activity, which involves engagement and, at times, a concern for social outcomes (Cronin & Armour, 2013). As a relational activity, coaches have a duty of care towards the participants whom they may work with. In this chapter, it has been argued that policy and practice should not simply view a coach's duty of care from a delineated legal perspective. Rather, the chapter has argued that positive social outcomes such as community cohesion, positive youth development, and the benefits of physical activity are more likely to be achieved within coach-athlete relationships that are authentically caring. Theoretically, care is associated with engrossment, motivational displacement, reciprocity, and authentic dialogue (Noddings, 2014). To that end, the chapter has described some empirical evidence that demonstrates how activities, which are grounded in these concepts, lead to caring relationships and ultimately aid the holistic development of athletes. Sadly, however, despite well-meaning policies and codes of conduct, these activities are not always present in coaching. Therefore, caring activities need to be explicitly planned for and implemented. In this sense, sport policy, which regularly suggests that the welfare and holistic development of participants is a priority, needs to be more explicitly focused on care. Specifically, care needs to be authentically enacted and not confined to policy text or ad hoc tangential workshops. Indeed, to date, too much sport policy and practice has not been committed to caring coaching. This is remiss because care is not an extra activity for coaches to

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complete. On the contrary, to coach effectively is to care for the holistic development of participants and communities at large.

### End-of-chapter tasks

1. Consider your own experiences of caring and uncaring coaching. In a “blog style” describe a caring relationship and consider how a coach cared. Does this description link to Noddings’ concepts such as engrossment, motivational displacement, and reciprocity? If so, how and why?
2. Observe a coaching session including the interactions before and after the session. How prominent is listening within the session? Consider who makes the decisions, who talks, and whose voice is heard. Is this a reciprocal environment?
3. Consider the coach education policies of a national governing body. Do the policies and resources enable caring relationships?

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