Managing conflict in coach-athlete relationships

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This study investigated coach-athlete conflict and focused on conflict management approaches employed to minimize dysfunctional and maximize functional outcomes of interpersonal conflict. A qualitative approach to data collection enabled the researchers to explore various conflict management strategies utilized by the participants. Within the scope of the current study, a total of 22 high performance coaches and athletes took part in semi-structured interviews. A thorough review of the recent literature (Wachsmuth et al., 2017) informed the interview guide which consisted of 26 questions. A cross-case content analysis revealed that coaches and athletes prevent the onset of conflict by (a) facilitating good quality relationships and optimal working environments (*implicit conflict prevention*) and (b) by engaging in active conflict prevention strategies (*explicit conflict prevention*). Further, athletes and coaches appeared to manage conflict by employing intra- and interpersonal strategies, as well as by seeking out external help. These strategies were found to be challenged by a range of conflict management barriers, and associated with functional or dysfunctional performance, intra- and interpersonal outcomes. Overall, the role of the coach was central to managing conflict effectively.

Keywords: conflict resolution, communication, interpersonal skills, coaching effectiveness, personal development

30   **Managing conflict in coach-athlete relationships**

31   Over the years, the relevant literature has emphasized an athlete-centred approach

32   (e.g., Becker, 2009) and more recently a combined coach-athlete-centred (Jowett, 2017) or

33   relational approach to coaching (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016) has been forwarded. Together,

34   these approaches underline the importance of recognizing and meeting athletes' needs by

35   creating a performance environment that is interpersonal, containing such characteristics as

36   support, care, acceptance, trust, commitment and hard-working ethos (e.g., Adie, Duda, &

37   Ntoumanis, 2012; Felton & Jowett, 2013). Despite coaches' and athletes' best intentions,

38   there will be times when such coaching environments are inevitably disrupted by

39   disagreements, misunderstandings or conflict. These disputes may be caused by unmet

40   expectations, disagreements about training load or content, underperformance or private life

41   choices (e.g., D'Arripe-Longueville et al., 1998; Kristiansen, Tomten, Hanstad, & Roberts,

42   2012), but also by individual behaviours, such as coaches' rigid and autocratic leadership as

43   well as belittling, volatile or aggressive behaviours towards athletes (e.g., D'Arripe-

44   Longueville, Fournier, & Dubois, 1998; Gearity & Metzger, 2017). Additionally, external

45   factors such as cultural and social norms, media, sport organizations, or significant others may

46   contribute to disturbances within coach-athlete interactions (e.g., Jowett, 2003; O'Malley,

47   Winter, & Holder, 2017; Wachsmuth et al., 2017; Wachsmuth, Jowett, & Harwood, 2018).

48   In an attempt to collate the scarcely available research on coach-athlete conflict,

49   Wachsmuth, Jowett and Harwood (2017) conducted a scoping review in which they defined

50   interpersonal conflict as "a situation in which relationship partners perceive a disagreement

51   about, for example, values, needs, opinions, or objectives that is manifested through negative

52   cognitive, affective, and behavioural reactions." (p.89). As a result of the review, Wachsmuth

53   et al. (2017) forwarded a conceptual framework of conflict within sport relationships

54   describing a feedback-loop that integrated conflict determinants, the nature and (potential)

55   management as well as outcomes of conflict. This framework suggests that the onset and

56   nature of conflict is determined by external, intra- and interpersonal variables as well as

57   conflict parties' efforts to prevent conflict (e.g., communication). One of the assumptions that

58   Wachsmuth and colleagues (2017) made was that if preventative strategies are not successful,

59   then conflict parties are likely to engage in conflict management strategies that are either

60   constructive or unconstructive leading to different performance, intra- and interpersonal

61   consequences of conflict. They concluded that ongoing conflict might undermine effective

62   coach-athlete relationships and can be detrimental to wellbeing, performance and optimal

63   sport development (e.g., Hodge, Lonsdale, & Ng, 2008; Kristiansen et al., 2012; Mellalieu,

64   Shearer, & Shearer, 2013; Stebbings, Taylor, Spray, & Ntoumanis, 2012). While there is an

65   apparent lack of systematic research into conflict management within sport, the proposed

66   framework may offer a scaffold for future research which could in turn contribute to more

67   knowledge and better understanding around coach-athlete conflict.

68   Acknowledging that conflict is a psychological process with potential negative intra-

69   and interpersonal outcomes, the literature thus far would seem to focus on preventing conflict

70   in coach-athlete interactions. Jowett and Carpenter (2015), for example, underlined the

71   importance of establishing rules in order to both pre-empt interpersonal conflict and facilitate

72   the quality of the relationship. While rules, such as keeping professional boundaries,

73   commitment and open communication, were identified (e.g., Carpenter & Jowett, 2015), the

74   specific interpersonal behaviours associated with the rules that could have prevented the onset

75   of conflict were not specified. In regards to communication, Rhind and Jowett (2010)

76   suggested multiple strategies which may help overcome some of the before stated problems

77   and thus promote high quality relationships. Moreover, Rhind and Jowett (2010) put forward

78   the COMPASS model containing seven communication strategies aimed at developing and

79   maintaining high quality CARs, one of which referred to conflict management. Conflict

80   management reflected efforts to identify, discuss, resolve and monitor potential areas of

81   disagreement. While Rhind and Jowett (2010) touched upon the importance of tackling

82   interpersonal conflict, they did not closely and systematically consider conflict management

83   strategies. It is important to highlight that conflict will occur in every relationship regardless

84   of its quality (Baiker & Kelley, 1979), and thus its management should be an important

85   concern for coaches and athletes.

86   In an effort to investigate interpersonal conflict in sport systematically, Mellalieu et al.

87   (2013) assessed the frequency in which sport participants engaged in diverse conflict

88   resolution strategies at major competitions. The authors reported that coaches, athletes, and

89   other staff members tried to solve conflict either alone or with the help of others, but most

90   frequently participants withdrew from conflict situations. It is plausible that sport participants

91   avoided conflict due to the contextual circumstances (e.g., performance focus) presented to

92   them at major competitions. Nonetheless, the literature indicates that conflict avoidance is a

93   common strategy among athletes experiencing low-quality or even abusive relationships with

94   their coaches (Gearity & Murray, 2011; Tamminen, Holt, & Neely, 2013) or due to the power

95   relations perceived within the dyad (O'Malley et al., 2017; Gearity & Metzger, 2017). In

96   addition, the power differentials between coaches and athletes as well as implicitly accepted

97   biases may lead to negative effects in terms of power abuse, stereotyping and micro-

98   aggression (e.g., Gearity & Metzger, 2017; Potrac, Jones, & Armour, 2002; Purdy, Potrac, &

99   Jones, 2008; Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997) that can be viewed as conflict provoking.

100   However, to the best of our knowledge, none of these studies investigated how resulting

101   dysfunctional coach-athlete interactions may be managed.

102   One area that offers some insight into conflict management strategies which may be

103   directly transferred or adapted to the coaching context, is group dynamics and its respective

104   studies exploring intra-team conflict (e.g., Holt, Knight, & Zukiwski, 2012; Paradise, Carron,

105   & Martin, 2014; Smith & Smoll, 1997). However, most recommendations have been made in

106   response to investigations focusing on how conflict unfolds rather than on its actual

107   management (e.g., Paradis et al., 2014). For example, it has been suggested that conflict may

108   be best approached in a task-orientated manner by focusing on the actual problem rather than

109   on personal attributes of the involved individuals (e.g., Holt et al., 2012). Furthermore, it has

110   also been thought advantageous to encourage conflict partners to take perspective in order to

111   establish a common ground to a problem; in doing so, it may provide opportunities to find

112   solutions which meet everybody's needs and expectations (e.g., Hardy & Crace, 1997).

113   Moreover, Holt and colleagues (2012) recommended that this process of collaboration should

114   ideally be led by a neutral individual within a structured meeting to avoid conflict escalation.

115   The reality, however, seems different: Taking the competitive nature of sport into account, it

116   may be of little surprise that athletes tend to engage in competitive win-loss strategies to

117   resolve conflict (Predoiu & Radu, 2013), while coaches may make use of controlling

118   behaviours or use their authority to punish athletes both, emotionally and physically (e.g.,

119   D'Arripe-Longueville et al., 1998).

120   In conclusion, there is evidence in the current literature to indicate that conflict is

121   likely to occur at some point within the context of the coach-athlete relationship (Wachsmuth

122   et al., 2018). It further highlights that environmental factors can restrict coaches and athletes'

123   attempts to manage difficult interactions constructively (e.g., power distributions, low quality

124   relationships). Nonetheless, there is only little evidence-based information available on *how*

125   coaches and athletes practically approach interpersonal disputes. Thus, while, for example,

126   Mellalieu et al. (2013) offer a frequency count of strategies utilized to manage interpersonal

127   conflict, no detailed information is provided about the quality and nature of these interactions.

128   Therefore, the purpose of the present was to explore conflict prevention and management

129   among high performance coaches and athletes. Specifically, the study aimed to answer the

130   following research questions: 1) *What* practical strategies do coaches and athletes utilize to

131   prevent and manage interpersonal conflict and *how* do they implement these, and 2) what

132   conflict outcomes do coaches and athletes experience as a result of successful/unsuccessful

133   conflict management? This research is warranted to substantiate and expand the limited

134   understanding that is currently available of coach-athlete conflict on both theoretical and

135   practical grounds (cf. Wachsmuth et al., 2017, 2018). The knowledge created can then

136   contribute to coaches and athletes' daily interactions by identifying practical mechanisms that

137   can prevent dysfunctional conflict and promote beneficial consequences of conflict through

138   its constructive management.

139   **Methods**

140   Overall, this study is based on a pragmatic philosophical viewpoint according to which

141   knowledge (i.e., warranted assertions) is formed through the actions and interactions of

142   individuals within a given context (Dewey, 1922). A qualitative approach to data collection

143   was deemed appropriate to capture the nature and quality of coach-athlete interactions in

144   times of interpersonal conflict within high performance sports. This study integrates various

145   relevant viewpoints (i.e., coaches and athletes) and focuses on individuals' actions and their

146   perceived consequences. Considering that the quality of pragmatic research is, among other

147   criteria, judged based on its transferability into practice, the study's findings are expected to

148   provide guidance for effective conflict management for sport participants and may facilitate

149   the development of healthy and effective coach-athlete relationships that are vital to sport

150   performance and wellbeing.

151   **Participants**

152   A purposeful sample was drawn for this study consisting of eleven coaches (9 males, 2

153   females) and eleven athletes (4 males, 7 females). Participants were chosen based on the

154   following inclusion criteria in order to facilitate the collection of meaningful, rich data:

155   Firstly, potential participants were to confirm previous experiences of coach-athlete conflict.

156   In addition, coaches and athletes had to be at least 18 years of age as individuals' maturity is

157   interlinked with the development of interpersonal skills and as such with conflict experiences

158   (e.g., Birditt & Fingerman, 2005). Lastly, participants were required to perform on national

159   level or higher in their respective sports. Overall, participants performed in team (11; e.g.,

160   rugby, cricket, volleyball, etc.) and individual (11; e.g., gymnastics, swimming, athletics, etc.)

161   sports, and competed at national (8) or international (14) level (see table 1 for detailed

162   information). Participants originated from GB (19), Romania (1), Slovenia (1), and Canada

163   (1), however, all were competent English speakers and part of the British sport system.

164   **Data Collection Procedure**

165   After approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the researchers' institution,

166   potential interviewees were contacted via standardized emails which provided information

167   about the purpose, requirements and ethical considerations of the study. Once participants

168   consented to take part in the study, one-to-one interviews took place at a mutually convenient

169   time and location. All interviews were audio-recorded and short screening questionnaires

170   were used to access demographic data, such as personal information (e.g., age, gender), sport

171   (e.g., performance level, training) and conflict experience ("How often have you experienced

172   conflict with your athlete?"). It should be noted that this study forms part of a larger research

173   project that explored coach-athlete conflict more broadly. The interview guide consisted of 26

174   questions based on a comprehensive review of the literature in and outside the sport domain.

175   Five topics were covered: 1) Sport experience and coach-athlete relationship, 2) interpersonal

176   conflict/ concept, 3) determinants, 4) conflict experience, and 5) outcomes.

177   This article only captures information on 10 of the 26 questions revolving around

178   conflict prevention (e.g., "How do you try to prevent conflict with your coach/ athlete?"),

179   management (e.g., "How was the conflict managed?"), and consequences (e.g., "What

180   happened after the conflict?"). Participants had an opportunity to draw upon various conflict

181   experiences they have had with coaches or athletes in the past. At the end of the interview, all

182   participants were invited to comment on any thoughts or information on the topic that had not

183   been covered yet. The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed for some degree of

184   flexibility, thus, even though all areas of interest were covered in each interview, the order of

185   the questions and prompts may have differed (e.g., Sparkes & Smith, 2014). This approach

186   ensured flowing conversations in which participants felt comfortable and motivated to share

187   their experiences (Smith & Caddick, 2012). Interviews were carried out face-to-face, with the

188   exception of one coach who was located in a distant part of the country. Interviews were

189   conducted by the lead researcher who had previously undertaken qualitative research, and

190   whose personal involvement in sports (e.g., equestrian, triathlon) as well as experience in the

191   work with athletes and coaches from a range of sports (e.g., futsal, volleyball) promoted

192   rapport between interviewer and participants. The researcher further engaged in personal

193   reflections and kept regular notes about the interview process in order to ensure high quality

194   interviews as well as to reflect upon the content of the interview. Data collection ended after

195   the variation within interviews became limited in that no new themes emerged from the data,

196   however, it was aimed at keeping equal numbers of coaches and athletes.

197   **Data Analysis**

198   Interviews lasted between 45 and 135 minutes and added up to 888 pages of double-

199   spaced text after transcription utilizing the f4transkript software (dr. dresing & pehl GmbH;

200   version f4, 2015); approximately 25% of the entire data has been used for this study. A

201   *directed content analysis* (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) approach was used to gain an

202   understanding of the data. According to Hsieh and Shannon this specific approach to data

203   analyses aims to "extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory" (p. 1281) and as

204   such complies with the use of Wachsmuth et al.'s review paper as a general guide for the

205   current study. In line with pragmatism as the underlying philosophical viewpoint, the directed

206   approach to content analyses as described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) permits a deductive-

207   inductive (i.e., abductive) approach to data analyses by acknowledging that previous research

208   offers guidance to the analysis while new themes may enrich and extend existing theories or

209   concepts. Both, Wachsmuth et al.'s (2017) proposed conceptual framework of interpersonal

210   conflict in sport relationships and the interview schedule offered direction for the initial

211   categorization of the data into the main categories of conflict *prevention*, *management* and

212 *outcomes*, while sub-categories (e.g., *implicit conflict prevention, conflict management*

213 *barriers*) were added inductively from the data.

214   According to recommendations by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), the first author initially

215 immersed fully in the collected data by re-listening to the audio-files, as well as reading,

216 annotating and highlighting the transcripts. Second, the highlighted quotes and excerpts were

217 organized deductively into the main three categories of conflict prevention, management, and

218 outcomes. Subsequently, data analyses within these main categories were conducted

219 inductively, dividing the data further into sub-categories and themes (e.g., implicit and

220 explicit conflict prevention, conflict barriers; please refer to Supplemental Material/ Appendix

221 A for specific examples). These steps of data analysis were initially carried out individually

222 for each participant, thereafter a cross-case analysis was conducted for coaches and athletes

223 separately, before finally comparing the sub-samples. This comparison was facilitated by

224 visually displaying the identified sub-/categories and themes across coaches and athletes.

225 Mapping the data enabled the lead researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the

226 collected information by drawing associations between the individual themes and to the

227 existing literature (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). However, Hsieh and Shannon warn that a

228 directed approach to content analysis may make researchers prone to an over-identification of

229 theory-supportive compared to non-supportive themes and blind for contextual influences.

230 Being aware of this limitation, the lead author made every effort to approach data with an

231 open mind-set necessary to identify non-theory conforming themes within the participants'

232 reports which resulted in the reconsideration of the original aspects the framework that guided

233 this study (e.g., management strategies, management barriers).

234   Multiple measures were taken to ensure quality and rigour of the conducted research.

235 Thus, the current research project was empirically embedded within an existing line of inquiry

236 into the nature of coach-athlete interactions. In this area, the study of conflict seems of

237 particularly high practical relevance considering its prevalence (Mellalieu et al., 2013) as well

238 as its potential detrimental consequences for performance and wellbeing (Wachsmuth et al.,

239 2017). Criterion-based, purposeful sampling further enabled the lead researcher to gain rich

240 and insightful data as presented in the quotes of this manuscript. Further, critical thinking and

241 reflection of the first author were facilitated by the co-authors who acted as critical friends

242 (Smith & McGannon, 2017) and as such continuously challenged interpretations and offered

243 different perspectives on the data throughout data analyses. The credibility of the current

244 findings was further promoted by revisiting reflective notes and interview transcripts in order

245 to examine whether the created categories indeed reflected participants' accounts on coach-

246 athlete conflict management. Final refinements of sub-categories (e.g., definitions and titles of

247 conflict prevention sub-categories) were made based on the reviews of interview transcripts

248 and ongoing critical discussion with co-authors in their role as critical friends.

249 **Results**

250   Data were classified in the main categories of *conflict prevention*, *management* and

251 *outcomes*, and further divided into sub-categories and -themes (*italic*) as described below.

252 Throughout this section, the term "participants" is only used when both, coaches and athletes,

253 referred to the respective theme.

254 **Conflict Prevention**

255   The main category of *conflict prevention* (Table 2) incorporated two sub-categories

256 reflecting two distinct approaches to reduce the likelihood of coach-athlete conflict: *implicit*

257 *conflict prevention* and *explicit conflict prevention*.

258   **Implicit conflict prevention.** This category comprises strategies that aim to naturally

259 *enhance relationship quality* and facilitate an *optimal performance environment* without

260 deliberately targeting a reduction of conflict. Most participants stated that a high-quality

261 coach-athlete relationship formed a solid foundation for a lasting and successful working

262 partnership. Essential to such sound relationships is communication. Accordingly, coaches

263 and athletes emphasized the need for open lines of communication to prevent conflict and

264   ensure a good interpersonal climate. Being approachable as a coach and sharing information

265   early on was deemed vital in this process:

266   Making the athlete aware of the fact that it is okay to go and talk to your coach

267   […] rather than people perhaps feeling a little bit sometimes like they couldn't

268   approach their coach or something. (A10)

269   While athletes expected their coaches to be democratic, the reality often seemed different in

270   that athletes repeatedly expressed to not being able to speak openly to their coaches leading to

271   conflict sooner or later. Hence, Athlete 7 suggested that "at the end of the day you can avoid a

272   lot of arguments by just asking someone before instead of setting a plan and saying 'you're

273   doing this'." Additionally, participants expected coaches to be adaptable to the individual

274   needs of athletes without losing sight of the bigger picture:

275   You can't treat people the way you wanna be treated, you have to treat people

276   the way they want to be treated, so it really is about having a fundamental

277   understanding of how athletes receive you and how athletes like to

278   communicate. So that if you can pick up on their cues or if you have an

279   understanding how somebody operates, ultimately you don't stop

280   communicating you just change how you communicate and sometimes it's how

281   you need to change this that makes all the difference. (C10)

282   However, adaptability was not a characteristic of the coaches only, athletes expected to be

283   adaptable by working well with different coaches. Strongly acknowledging the notion of

284   adaptability and flexibility, coaches in particular emphasized that athletes were expected to be

285   reliable, show constant effort and strong work ethic which were evaluated against mutually

286   accepted performance goals. Besides engaging in frequent conversation, shared decision-

287   making and caring for athletes' needs, coaches highlighted the importance of "giving credits"

288   (C4) to these athletes who were willing to discuss disagreements openly as it facilitated

289   quality relationships, better interactions, and honest communication. It was also perceived to

290   create an atmosphere in which athletes were prepared to accept the coach as a leader and the

291   decisions they made. This mutual understanding seemed important in the interaction with

292   external stakeholders including media. Athlete 1 underlined that "normally a coach and

293   [athlete] are singing of the same hymn sheet and they've got the same ideas and approach"

294   (A1). Lastly, participants emphasized the value of an *optimal performance environment* or

295   culture in which individuals respected one another, and while the collective formed a knit

296   group bound together by close ties and common goals, new members were always welcomed:

297   If anybody new comes into the environment it's a handshake culture. So, if he

298   met me and somebody walks in that's new, instead of making him feel

299   awkward, we stop the meeting and shake hands, everybody gets up and says

300   "Hello", that's pretty special about the culture in this particular place. (C5)

301   **Explicit conflict prevention.** In contrast to the previously described strategies that

302   prevented conflict in a more natural and unplanned manner, coaches and athletes also

303   explained how they employed specific strategies to deliberately prevent conflict in a pro-

304   active and strategical way. On an individual level, participants commonly reported the

305   importance of being in control over their emotions and actions (*self-regulation*), for example,

306   by being diplomatic rather than forceful or direct (e.g., coaches), trying to calm down or take

307   some time off before speaking up, and also being patient instead of demanding or even

308   expecting immediate change (e.g., coaches and athletes). These self-regulatory strategies were

309   also linked to taking perspective and responding empathically (*empathy*). Just as self-

310   regulation, coaches and athletes deemed it as important to consider the reasons of the other

311   person for reacting or behaving in the way they did. Thus, participants tended to acknowledge

312   the positive intentions behind somebody's actions or considering the potential impact conflict

313   may have in the long-run:

314   I do control myself to not have conflict. 'Cause I feel like during a session if

315   I were to have conflict, it would be bad. I would look bad. I don't want [the

316   coach] to feel bad. […] And it's just going to deteriorate the session. (A4)

317 Despite understanding that conflict can be resolved, managed or reduced by all participants,

318 athletes particularly often reported being compliant to their coaches due to a perceived power

319 differential within the relationship:

320   Even if I disagree with it. Quite often, he'll say something, I'll disagree with

321   it entirely. A hundred percent. I'll hundred percent disagree with it. But I'll

322   still do it. Because he's the boss and that's the way it has to be. (A4)

323 Only on rare occasions did athletes note how they would seek clarification about perceived

324 differences or actively articulate, discuss, and negotiate their point of view in order to find a

325 solution or compromise before differences in opinions turned into conflict. In that respect,

326 athletes stated that they would openly communicate potential conflict topics to their coaches

327 well in advance to prevent conflict later on. By anticipating conflict before it arose, they were

328 ready to manage rather than having to react to it when it presented. Similarly, coaches due to

329 their inherent position of power and assumed responsibility as a role model were viewed

330 instrumental in setting up rules, clarifying expectations, and identifying goals which helped to

331 minimize or prevent conflict (*communicating expectations & potential problems*); Coach 7

332 reported that "hopefully both having a clear picture and clear expectations of what is

333 expected, that in the first place, I would like to think would reduce the amount of conflict."

334   Additionally, the *timing of prevention strategies* was deemed important by

335 participants. While disagreements ideally should be discussed well in advance without

336 "letting them fester" (A6), sometimes athletes initially acted against their own but rather put

337 up with their coaches' opinions in order to avoid conflict in critical situations (e.g., in public,

338 competition) and only addressed the issue at a later point of time when it seemed more

339 appropriate (e.g., after practice/ competition, in a one-on-one meeting). For example, athletes

340   explained that coaches may benefit from feedback related to intra-team issues and coach-

341   player processes, but it would be more appropriate and effective if it was supplied privately,

342   "quietly in meetings" with the aim to "come up with a solution" (A4).

343   Overall, participants perceived coaches' *instruction and feedback style* as crucial.

344   Examples provided included finding balance between criticism and encouragement, accepting

345   challenges and questions from athletes, or giving positive feedback in a meaningful manner,

346   Coach 5 explained a structured process to negative feedback which aimed to reduce conflict:

347   Quick introduction: "Hi, you're right? Look, got bad news to tell you, if you

348   give me 30sec I would love to hear your response." You just give them the

349   news: "You're dropped" or "You're not involved this weekend" and then you

350   give them a clear objective reason for that, or your reason [...] then give really

351   clear, kinda XYZ and then that's it. But if you do that with an athlete in a

352   45sec period, really clear concise and you don't actually ask them how they

353   are feeling, you kinda turn the process to how to get back in. "Are you happy

354   with that?", rather than "I know you're not happy with the decision"

355   Coaches also acknowledged that the *team composition* needs to be considered as a whole in

356   the prevention of conflict. Accordingly, few coaches recalled adjusting their team selection in

357   a manner that would reduce possible conflict within the team, including staff members. Coach

358   4, for example, emphasized that they contemplated how athletes would fit into the specific

359   team environment and how contracting certain players might change these dynamics. Thus,

360   despite being able to sign "exceptional players", the number of foreign and national squad

361   players was reduced to avoid conflict by permitting frequent face-to-face communication,

362   connectedness, and influence. Another coach described how international athletes received

363   support from staff members to integrate well into the club. Moreover, athletes mentioned how

364   they used *athlete leaders* to transfer messages and feedback to the coach; Athlete 6 describes

365   "they did pass stuff through me to the coach, " whereas coaches liaised closely with these

366   players to gain understanding of intra-team processes and manage internal problems.

367   However, participants acknowledged that conflict was inevitable and some did not

368   even try to intentionally prevent it. They recognized that the creation of an environment, that

369   was not afraid of dealing with conflict or interpersonal difficulties but instead embraced them

370   as an acceptable situation that needed to be dealt with, would encourage athletes and coaches

371   to readily and actively seek solutions that prevented conflict escalation:

372   There is naturally gonna be conflict, I think it's understanding that and maybe

373   understanding how to deal with it [...] there needs to be a way of dealing with

374   it, I think that comes from understanding people's personalities, how different

375   people gonna respond [...] there should almost be in advance kind of a plan

376   for each player of how things gonna get resolved. (A6)

377   **Conflict Management**

378   The main category of *conflict management* included five sub-categories: 1) *Role*

379   *responsibilities*, 2) *intrapersonal strategies*, 3) *interpersonal strategies*, 4) *external support*,

380   and 5) *conflict management barriers* (Table 3).

381   **Role responsibilities.** This first higher-order theme covers processes and expectations

382   related to an instigation of the conflict management process. The majority of participants

383   agreed that conflict management was often initiated by coaches who approached athletes in

384   order to clarify the situation, whereas athletes rarely opened up conversations involving issues

385   of conflict such as difference in opinion or even clarifying a coaching decision or request.

386   However, coaches acknowledged that athletes in the presence of conflict tended to show

387   reconciliatory behaviours, such as putting more effort into practice, suggestive of willingness

388   to resolve the conflict. It was evident from the reports that athletes expected their coaches to

389   take charge from the start and guide them through conflict to its resolution. This was

390   confirmed by all coaches too who perceived themselves to be the more experienced, wiser,

391   the rational role model and "*conflict solver*" – "If the coach wants to get results he has to be

392   the one, he has to be the mediator and the person that is gonna try and solve those things"

393   (C9). Accordingly, coaches considered it their duty to create an awareness for conflict and

394   offer an opportunity for athletes to vent emotions without becoming overly involved. Finally,

395   it was emphasized that dealing with conflict consistently was paramount.

396   While coaches were perceived to be the leaders for problem-solving, athletes were

397   perceived to be the *leaders of performance*. As pointed out by Athlete 8 "athletes need to take

398   responsibility for anything that impacts on their performance" – athletes were responsible for

399   any issue - however controversial – that affected performance. This was especially important

400   to realize as it was repeatedly pointed out by both, athletes and coaches, that coaches did not

401   always know about ongoing problems or the severity of an ongoing conflict. They did not

402   know because athletes never shared these problems with them. Accordingly, coaches expected

403   their athletes to be willing to communicate problems that were associated with performance.

404   Further, coaches discussed the importance of athletes being self-reflective as well as open,

405   receptive and responsive to their coaches' point of view in order to come to a mutual and

406   acceptable solution in the face of problems and adversities. At the end, all interviewees agreed

407   that conflict management needs to be a give and take from both sides if it is to be effective.

408   **Intrapersonal strategies.** Interviewees reported how they engaged in individual

409   strategies in order to deal with the conflict at hand. Accordingly, coaches and athletes

410   explained how they noticed a need to down-regulate emotions before engaging with the

411   conflict partner. Especially coaches perceived themselves as more mature and experienced

412   and therefore expected to stay calm and collected as well as to be empathetic towards the

413   athlete, as described by Coach 4 who said "The only thing I thought is if he is emotional that's

414   fine but I can't be, I need to be empathetic". In contrast, some athletes reported to vent anger

415   or frustration by smacking or kicking equipment instead of targeting their coach which may

416   lead to the escalation of conflict. Some athletes also reported to become quiet and reserved or

417 withdraw from the situation as an initial reaction to conflict, using the gained time to regulate

418 emotions, reassess and reappraise or even reconstruct the situation (*self-regulation; reflection*

419 *and preparation*). Coaches and athletes further engaged in these self-reflection processes as it

420 helped to make sense of what had happened, to rationalize, and prioritize aspects of the

421 conflict. Both sides also emphasized the need to prepare for conflict management:

422   I think it is important to prepare what you want to say to the player and what

423   your reasons are, whether it's notes or make sure that you have it clear in your

424   head that you're not fumbling around, you have your rational ready. (C1)

425 This included rather simplistic things such as athletes bringing notebooks and listing potential

426 questions or concerns, but also coaches gathering information about the other's situation or

427 background, as well as monitoring and documenting athletes' behaviours during an ongoing

428 conflict. It was even suggested by coaches that reading up on related topics (e.g., anxiety,

429 developmental psychology) can provide the reassurance, confidence and necessary knowledge

430 to approach often awkward and uncomfortable conflict situations. In contrast to these rather

431 positive and helpful actions, athletes also described how they avoided engaging in conflict by

432 doing 'their own thing' when no open communication with coaches seemed possible or

433 forthcoming. Athlete 2 reported "I either just do a bit of it [training] or do what he gives me

434 but just do my interpretation" whereas another athlete organized their competition schedule

435 alone (*avoidance*). However, this was viewed as extreme behaviour and indicative of a

436 communication breakdown likely to be followed by the dissolution of the coach-athlete dyad.

437   **Interpersonal strategies.** Despite the need for intrapersonal strategies, conflict

438 management is an exchange between two conflict partners and thus cannot be achieved by

439 only one individual. Coaches and athletes mentioned multiple strategies that aimed to resolve

440 conflict in a mutual way. Firstly, the majority of coaches supported athletes' self-regulation

441 by offering space and time, or even acted as a sounding board so that athletes were able to

442   vent frustration (*co-regulation*). Coaches were comfortable with pauses or silent moments in

443   communication as they were means to reflect - "you let the players chew on it for a bit" (C6).

444   Further, coaches and athletes *acknowledged responsibilities* and apologized for

445   mistakes, either verbally or by showing corresponding behaviours; for example, Coach 6

446   reported how they "got send this huge bouquet of flowers from two 20-year old girls".

447   Coaches generally made concessions to athletes when these tried to seek out opportunities to

448   *collaborate or compromise*. This was especially the case in trivial or competition- and/ or

449   training-related conflicts as illustrated by Athlete 5 who said "We talked about […] the scores

450   that I need to get to qualify. He was like if you make that we are going to world student

451   games, when I heard that I was like okay, so he is going to make an effort." In contrast, most

452   coaches approached conflicts evolving around behaviour misconduct (e.g., lacking respect) or

453   repeated disagreements in a forceful manner, hence did not offer choice or negotiation but

454   were definitive and irrevocable (*forcing*). These direct, commanding and often controlling

455   behaviours were also utilized in front of other team members if coaches felt it was necessary,

456   for example, in times when "people need knocking down a pack or two" (C6), the team

457   needed to know that the coach had dealt with a particular issue or the conflict reflected an

458   issue that concerned multiple athletes within the training environment. Whilst some athletes

459   *obliged* to these decisions due to coaches' perceived authority, other athletes viewed these

460   behaviours inappropriate especially if their private life or career was in question. Sometimes,

461   when coaches and athletes had or wanted to work together despite unresolved dispute, they

462   ended up "agreeing to disagree" (C4) and tried to live with or move past the conflict.

463   Perceived as essential to all interpersonal conflict management approaches was

464   *communication*. While it was generally of interest how coaches and athletes communicated

465   with each other in order to achieve their personal aims and a resolution of conflict,

466   participants especially emphasized coaches' communication style towards the athlete. One

467   key element that was repeatedly highlighted by coaches related to communicating interest and

468   care. Accordingly, coaches encouraged and welcomed their athletes to express concerns or

469   opinions and actively asked questions to gain further information or feedback. Athletes

470   reported how coaches actively listened and acknowledged their opinions which facilitated an

471   openness to talk; Athlete 6 described "it was more of a conversation than [the coach] talking

472   at me or telling me what I should do." Overall, participants expected from their conflict

473   partners to be willing to share opinions, needs and expectations, as well as being able to give

474   reasons for their behaviours and decisions. Coaches used these conversations as an

475   opportunity to increase awareness or educate athletes on the implications of their behaviours,

476   they further helped them reflect on and understand their behavioural motives for the conflict:

477   We try to encourage the athlete to look at areas that they felt there was a

478   difference in the preparation or a difference in the mind set going into the

479   championship that they hadn't had in place before, just so that they were

480   trying to be self-assessed as opposed to being dictated to again. (C10)

481   Besides promoting self-reflection, coaches encouraged athletes to see conflict from diverse

482   perspectives and as such gain distance to it. Coach 6 asked, for example, "What do you think

483   about this situation? How do you think that would make someone feel? How do you think that

484   would make me feel?" Accordingly, coaches challenged their athletes by asking questions,

485   pointing out behaviours, or criticizing their work ethic in order to stimulate motivation and

486   challenge athletes' core beliefs. While coaches and athletes reported that they usually tried to

487   understand the other, they acknowledged that it was not always easy.

488   Based on these conflict management conversations, athletes and coaches reassessed

489   and set new goals and expectations in order to move on. Coaches described how they aimed at

490   leaving conflict management meetings on a positive remark and emphasized their willingness

491   to move forward together. Overall, coaches and athletes emphasized that all communication

492   should take place in a calm and controlled manner, in which opinions and needs could be

493   stated open and honestly and courteously; Coach 9 explained "I would never be strong again

494   […] it's much more calmer and nearly all of the time it would be a very positive meeting." At

495   times, coaches and athletes had to rely on indirect communication strategies, such as emails or

496   phone, which they regarded as more difficult compared to face-to-face meetings.

497   **External support.** In order to facilitate intra- and interpersonal strategies, participants

498   reported how they sought out help from third parties who were not involved in the conflict.

499   Thus, athletes mainly used their *friends and family* to "vent your frustration and then look for

500   advice perhaps afterwards" (A10). In team settings athletes reported further how individuals

501   turned to *team members*, which was sometimes perceived as counterproductive as alliances

502   against the coach were likely to form. However, athletes described how it was difficult to find

503   somebody neutral to mediate conflict as they believed that staff members were biased towards

504   the coach. Accordingly, it was suggested that the sport psychologist may equip athletes with

505   knowledge and skills to deal with conflict as well as to mediate meetings.

506   Coaches on the other hand, explained how they sought out information from their *staff*

507   *members* and sometimes other athletes. They deemed it important to gain comprehensive

508   insights into the problem and aimed at understanding the athlete before making premature

509   assumptions; thus, coaches took as much time as necessary and exhausted as many resources

510   as possible - as Coach 10 said: "It's about collecting as much information as you can and

511   gathering all the facts that you can know." Faced with severe conflict coaches reported

512   working with their performance director who they perceived to be especially experienced and

513   knowledgeable to try to find ways to resolute problems, issues or concerns. Lastly, few

514   coaches attended *mentoring programs* or utilized other professional development services in

515   order to improve their conflict management skills.

516   **Conflict management barriers.** Lastly, it was acknowledged that there were several

517   factors which may impair conflict management or resolution. Accordingly, when *relationship*

518   *quality* was poor or had deteriorated over time to a point where no open communication or

519   rational conversation could take place, conflict reached a point where a solution seemed

520 almost impossible. Additionally, coaches sometimes lacked *awareness* that there was conflict,

521 how serious it was and/or what it involved - and even if they were aware, coaches nor athletes

522 were always receptive to the other's opinion or willing to take their perspective:

523   To resolve conflict both parties need to recognize 1) there is conflict and 2)

524   they both want to resolve it. [...] in a conflict situation where only one party

525   wants to resolve you have to move on, [...] you can only control what you

526   can do and if you've done everything you can and there still seems to be no

527   way to resolve the conflict then, you know, you can't just keep beating your

528   head against the wall. Once you've done all your communication, you've

529   asked all the questions, you tried to get as deep as you can, if one of those two

530   parties is still convinced that there is no way to resolve… (C10)

531 In that, coach 10 mentions two more essential factors that can get in the way of conflict

532 management: time and energy restrictions. Coaches often emphasized that situational

533 circumstances or the amount of responsibilities simply required them to prioritize and

534 sometimes did not allow for the efforts needed to resolve conflict. Similarly, coaches needed

535 to consider the bigger picture by prioritizing team goals over individuals (*willingness &*

536 *priorities*). Finally, coaches and athletes explained that the behaviour of the other conflict

537 partner were not entirely in their control, especially if there was a *discrepancy between what*

538 *has been agreed on and how it was followed up*; Athlete 2 said "Saying the right things but

539 then not acting on them" would often get in the way of conflict resolution.

540 **Conflict Outcomes**

541   Depending on the conflict management barriers faced and strategies utilized, conflict

542 could lead to positive, neutral, and negative outcomes, as well as short- and long-term

543 outcomes. Within the main category of conflict outcomes, three sub-categories were

544 identified: *Intrapersonal*, *performance*, and *interpersonal outcomes*.

545   **Intrapersonal outcomes.** On an individual basis, immediate and long-term effects

546   were, for example, related to *wellbeing*, with participants overall reporting heightened stress

547   levels and rumination when conflict was not resolved constructively (e.g., conflict avoidance).

548   Especially athletes explained how they experienced sleep issues, anxiety or low/ depressive

549   mood. Even injuries seemed to be a result of conflict when no agreement about the training

550   load was reached and athletes adhered to the program; Athlete 2 stated that "I used to just go

551   and do it [training program]. But I just kept getting injured just because I cannot do it, I just

552   cannot do all that stuff." Related to wellbeing were also athletes' efficacy beliefs; whereas

553   coaches did not report a decrease in self-confidence, athletes mentioned frequent doubts

554   regarding sport-specific skills, but also their athletic and personal identity, especially when

555   coaches engaged in overly competitive conflict management strategies. In line with that,

556   Athlete 6 shared "I felt like he was kind of breaking down my personality […] I felt really

557   insecure, it was really strange, I felt really lost, I didn't know who I was anymore".

558   Contrary, coaches emphasized the positive impact on one's *sport development* that

559   conflict may have, not only in regards to athletes' skills, but also for the development of one's

560   coaching style and efficacy, Coach 10 summarized "it's about developing and growing as a

561   coach as much as an athlete." Thus, conflict was thought to foster resilience and teach athletes

562   to embrace challenge. Outside sports it was perceived to enhance athletes' *personal growth*,

563   including becoming more self-aware, developing communication skills and critical thinking,

564   being able to take perspective and become more open-minded. One athlete mentioned how

565   they were able to disclose personal information to the coach and felt finally understood. These

566   learning processes of athletes, however, required skilled conflict management from the coach.

567   **Performance outcomes.** *Positive performance* outcomes were mainly associated with

568   finding an effective solution for the original problem that both parties could agree upon.

569   Resolved conflicts seemed to improve athletes' commitment and work ethic in the long run,

570   sometimes forming a stepping stone for future performances, Coach 7 said:

571   [The athlete] won a bronze medal at the world champs this year, the senior

572   championships [...] [the athlete] came back to work with me again and from then

573   on [the athlete's] commitment, progress has been like this [up] and [the athlete]

574   told me that this was the best thing [conflict] I could ever have done.

575 Few coaches also described how ongoing conflict directly led to sporting success:

576   The end effect was that when he came to the competition he did the best

577   competition he has ever done, he won the medal, he won all the individual

578   apparatus medals and had the dream competition of his life. (C9)

579 These effects were attributed to a desire to prove the coach wrong or a generally improved

580 motivation/ work ethic. Accordingly, athletes seemed to be able to channel negative emotions

581 into their sport performance in the short-run, but also learnt from conflict long-term.

582   However, some participants described how they tried to separate between the conflict

583 with their coach/athlete and the task in order to avoid negative effects and perform

584 consistently. Nevertheless, not all *negative outcomes* of conflict could be avoided, so

585 discussed athletes how they worried about unresolved conflicts, felt distracted or physically

586 and mentally exhausted, which resulted in decreased results or performance stagnation.

587 Additionally, few athletes and coaches reported a lack of motivation immediately during or

588 after the conflict. Moreover, coaching efficacy may deteriorate as a consequence of conflict

589 both, short- and long-term, as athletes lose focus on the sport or even respect for and trust in

590 the coach. Lastly, severe conflict promoted athletes' thoughts about career termination if it

591 was perceived to a long-term impact on wellbeing, or no satisfying agreement was found:

592   It might mean that you give up playing [sport] cause you can't - with all of the

593   stuff [conflict] that takes away from the actual playing, so I guess it can challenge

594   you to think of other things. (A6)

595   **Interpersonal outcomes.** Continuing this line of thought, even if athletes did not

596 decide to terminate their sport career, they sometimes still parted ways with their coaches

597   because of the conflicts experienced (*termination*). Further, more athletes than coaches

598   described their relationships after difficult conflicts as strained, tense, lacking respect, trust,

599   confidence and openness, which were hard to build up again. However, taking a long-term

600   perspective, some conflicts did not negatively impact *relationship quality* if both sides were

601   able to move on. Indeed, most athletes and coaches perceived that conflict enhanced their

602   relationships over time. They explained that conflict parties gained a better understanding of

603   the other person because "in the heat of the moment, they say things that maybe give you a

604   clue, gives you a clue to something that is sitting deep there but they are not prepared to talk

605   about it, but in the heat of the moment they do" which then can be "picked up on when things

606   are quietened down" (C9). Overall, participants highlighted the advantages of functional

607   conflict, Coach 4 concluded "The beauty about conflict is that it can actually make stronger

608   relationships [...] actually a lot of my best relationships have come out of some conflict at

609   some point". Further, coach-athlete conflict may also be contagious and impact *other*

610   *relationships*. If managed well it may promote respect and trust in a coach and even increase

611   team cohesion; Coach 8 experienced conflict at the beginning of an international tournament

612   and said "It actually helped because I think the players respected me more after that. They

613   thought 'Right, we've got to pull together here' and it was forgotten." On the other hand,

614   conflict may lead to alliances between athletes against the coach or to criticism from staff or

615   other coaches. Taken together, it seems that conflict "makes or breaks a relationship" (A6).

Discussion

617   Utilizing the framework of interpersonal conflict in sport relationships (Wachsmuth et

618   al., 2017) as a scaffold, the current research focused on exploring practical strategies used by

619   coaches and athletes to prevent and manage conflict as well as assessing their effectiveness in

620   relation to perceived conflict outcomes. Specifically, the following research questions were

621   explored: 1) *What* practical strategies do coaches and athletes utilize to prevent and manage

622   interpersonal conflict and *how* do they implement these, and 2) what conflict outcomes do

623   coaches and athletes experience as a result of successful/unsuccessful conflict management?

624   Participants' reports revealed that coaches and athletes aimed to prevent conflict through

625   implicit and explicit strategies and further managed conflict after its onset by utilizing intra-

626   and interpersonal strategies as well as by seeking external support. In their attempts to

627   manage conflict, participants experienced a range of barriers which influenced immediate and

628   long-term conflict outcomes. In accordance with the study's analytical approach of directed

629   content analyses, which is generally used to "extent" existing theories (Hsieh & Shannon,

630   2005, p. 1281), the current findings support Wachsmuth et al.'s framework and further

631   expand it. Within this discussion, we aim to integrate the current findings into the existing

632   research in order to make sense of them in a holistic manner.

633   The generated findings highlight that conflict may represent a functional as well as a

634   dysfunctional process within the coach-athlete relationship. Accordingly, participants

635   described conflict as an unpleasant process that should be prevented as it may lead to

636   detrimental outcomes. On the other hand, participants reported that conflict may facilitate

637   interpersonal relationships, personal development and performance if managed appropriately.

638   Nonetheless, it was evident that participants departed from the simplistic differentiation of

639   constructive/ unconstructive conflict management by offering a more differentiated view

640   covering various intra- and interpersonal strategies as well as third party involvement. They

641   explained that some strategies seemed to be constructive in some situations, whereas others

642   were appropriate under different circumstances, and as such highlighted the importance of

643   further investigating environmental factors which influence coach-athlete conflict.

644   **Interpersonal conflict as a dysfunctional process**

645   Though results of this study are in line with the relevant literature (e.g., Jowett &

646   Shanmugam, 2016) and highlight the value of high quality coach-athlete relationships for

647   sport development, performance, satisfaction as well as wellbeing, they also illustrate the

648   importance of preventing potential negative consequences (e.g., performance stagnation, ill-

649   being) when coach-athlete interactions become dysfunctional (e.g., misunderstandings,

650   disagreements, conflict). While Dixon and Warner (2010) argued that strong coach-athlete

651   bonds may be a "desirable feature" (p. 159) for coaches within *lower level* American college

652   sports (NCAA Division III), the findings of the current study explicate that these strong bonds

653   are absolutely vital and require protection within *high performance environments*.

654   The results of this study highlighted several approaches to protect these strong bonds

655   by ensuring continuous lines of open communication which promote the formation of a

656   common ground of shared information and expectations. In accordance with the notions of

657   transformational leadership (Hoption, Phelan, & Barling, 2007) and autonomy supportive

658   coaching (Bartholomew et al., 2009), coaches were further expected to facilitate athletes'

659   motivation and performance by considering individuals' needs, encouraging athletes to think

660   critically while creating an environment in which athletes bought into coaches' visions. It was

661   evident through the participants' reports that the strategies employed created an optimal

662   training environment in which dysfunctional conflict was less likely to occur. However,

663   coaches and athletes highlighted how *implicit conflict prevention* through strong working

664   alliances was not sufficient, but instead needed to be purposefully supported by strategies that

665   prevented coach-athlete conflict (*explicit conflict prevention).* For example, coaches

666   attempted to reduce conflict potential by carefully considering both the selection of team

667   members and the leaders within the team based on interpersonal aspects (e.g., intra-team

668   relationships, personality, values). Similar to Jowett and Carpenter (2015), participants further

669   outlined the importance of setting clear expectations and rules. In addition, the current study

670   further details the manner in which expectations and rules were set and implemented through

671   the identification of common goals, negotiation of acceptable terms, continuous evaluation

672   and revision, coaches' role modelling, as well as athletes' timely communication of potential

673   concerns or their unconditional compliance to coaches' decisions.

674   While athlete compliance as an explicit form of conflict prevention was often caused

675   by controlling coaching behaviours and promoted destructive coach-athlete interactions in the

676   long-run (cf. Bartholomew et al., 2009; Felton & Jowett, 2013), coaches' use of forceful

677   strategies was deemed appropriate in some conflict situations. For example, forceful/dominant

678   conflict management strategies were considered constructive when quick decisions needed to

679   be made (e.g., during competition), when several individuals were involved (e.g., multiple

680   athletes), or athletes were perceived to lack respect for the coach or commitment to the sport.

681   In contrast to previous research in which the coach was usually portrait as the one holding

682   power over the athlete (e.g., Cranmer & Goodboy, 2015; Potrac et al., 2002), some athletes in

683   this study overcame these hierarchical norms and reported utilizing dominant/forceful

684   approaches to coach conflict when their personal health (e.g., injury) or private life choices

685   (e.g., education) were concerned. Nonetheless, even though these strategies could be positive

686   and effective in the short-term, if they were to be applied over time they could lead to ongoing

687   or frequently reoccurring interpersonal conflict. Under these circumstances, not only would

688   athletes and coaches perceive conflicts as dysfunctional, but they would also lead to negative

689   performance, intra- and interpersonal outcomes, such as decreased motivation and focus, low

690   mood, increased stress and anxiety levels, higher injury rates, and relationship termination. In

691   such circumstances athletes indicated low levels of self-esteem and undermined identity

692   beliefs as a result of interpersonal conflict. These findings are in line with Tamminen et al.'s

693   (2013) reports whereby athletes identified dysfunctional coach-athlete interactions as cause of

694   self-doubt, identity loss and even suicidal thoughts. Research is warranted in the area of

695   chronic conflict and its potential influence on wellbeing and performance. The current results

696   suggest that self-regulation and external support may provide some initial resources to cope

697   with conflict-induced stress; however, more research is required to substantiate this finding.

698   **Conflict management barriers**

699   While the current study did not specifically aim to investigate conflict management

700   barriers, multiple factors which inhibited constructive intra- and interpersonal strategies to

701   deal with coach-athlete dispute became apparent and included personal unawareness,

702   unwillingness or missing mutually acceptable solutions. Often these barriers were the result of

703   insufficient communication between the dyad members. It was evident from the participants'

704   reports that social norms and cultural expectations (Potrac & Jones, 2009), such as role

705   definitions within a traditionally hierarchical system in which coaches 'lead' and athletes

706   'follow', shaped a performance environment within which power differentials, as well as lack

707   of trust and openness existed.

708   In line with these cultural norms, some athletes perceived their coaches to possess high

709   levels of legitimate (formal hierarchy) and coercive power (capacity to punish) that they were

710   not prepared to challenge, and therefore obliged them to follow their coaches' decisions even

711   though they disagreed. These negative aspects of power seem to be consistent with previous

712   findings related to abusive behaviours or poor coaching practices within high-performance

713   sport environments (e.g., D'Arripe-Longueville, 1998; Gearity & Metzger, 2017; Gearity &

714   Murray, 2011). While athletes perceived these behaviours as inappropriate, ineffective and

715   negative, coaches viewed them as "the right way of coaching" and a way of gaining respect

716   (Potrac & Jones, 2009). This notion is supported by previous work on coaching effectiveness

717   and emotional abuse which nonetheless illustrates athletes' acceptance of these behaviours in

718   an effort to be seen as 'a good athlete' (e.g., D'Arripe-Longueville, 1998; Stirling & Kerr,

719   2009). Having said this, our research shows that some athletes did not tolerate such a

720   coaching style and openly challenged these behaviours or even terminated the relationship

721   with their coaches. Yet, Stirling and Kerr (2009) explained that athletes' choices in regards to

722   training venues and/or personal coaches may be limited in performance sport, therefore,

723   resistance to coaches' behaviours can potentially determine their future sporting career.

724   Athletes' resistance is more likely to emerge when coaches' behaviours are negative or

725   inappropriate, and thus, when coaches' behaviour is more positive then athletes may be more

726   willing to cooperate. Thus, behaviours linked to coaches' capacity to positively influence

727   athletes by displaying competence and expertise (i.e., prosocial power; French & Raven,

728   1959) can promote athletes' followership and compliance, and as such may reduce conflict

729   (Cranmer & Goodboy, 2015). Participants in the current study reported behaviours such as

730   forming common rules by openly discussing expectations and roles (cf. Jowett & Carpenter,

731   2015) as well as by showing competence through expert feedback, thorough preparation and

732   role modelling. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that coaches within high

733   performance environments also experience a multitude of organisational demands (e.g.,

734   Olusoga, Butt, Hays, & Maynard, 2009) and ultimately need to manage a range of

735   relationships in order to satisfy expectations of sport organisations. Hence, limited time and

736   resources may sway coaches' priorities towards matters perceived to be more urgent and

737   away from individual conflict situations, as mentioned within this study. In sum,

738   environmental and cultural factors are likely to influence conflict management within coach-

739   athlete relationships. Accordingly, future research should investigate social networks,

740   environmental circumstances and cultural aspects systematically in order to offer a holistic

741   understanding of conflict processes. As such conflict research may offer an opportunity to

742   unravel the complex, chaotic and "ambiguous social environments" of coaching (North, 2013,

743   p. 288) while it considers an interdisciplinary approach, including for example psychology,

744   sociology and pedagogy. Such an approach could generate knowledge and understanding that

745   is applied, comprehensive and multi-faceted and may be used by sport practitioners (e.g.,

746   athletes, coach-related staff, sport psychologists) to create challenging but healthy sporting

747   environments in which interpersonal conflict can be managed successfully.

748   **Interpersonal conflict as a constructive process**

749   In contrast to the above results which portray conflict as disruptive and dysfunctional

750   process, participants of the current study also considered conflict as a valuable and

751   constructive process. They reported seeking out opportunities following conflict to

752   collaborate and develop short- or long-term agreements which promoted performance,

753   personal growth and interpersonal relationships. Taking into account the previously described

754   power differentials and cultural norms, coaches (as knowledgeable and experienced leaders)

755   were thought to be best placed to prevent and manage conflict constructively. As such,

756   coaches were expected to take the first step towards resolution, and held responsible for

757   guiding athletes through conflict by being in control of their own emotions, co-regulating

758   athletes' emotions as well as responding empathically in a given situation (cf. Lopes et al.,

759   2011). This included being able to judge whether it was more appropriate to approach the

760   athlete in a caring manner or whether an opportunity presented to challenge athletes' core

761   values and beliefs. This finding aligns with the broader conflict literature which has shown

762   that opposing and collaborating communication strategies enhance long-term satisfaction

763   depending on contextual characteristics, such as attachment style, likelihood of evoking

764   change, and the importance of the conflict topic (Overall & McNulty, 2017). Future research

765   should aim to explore conflict and the specific communication strategies employed during the

766   life-course of the coach-athlete relationship.

767   In addition, participants in the current study viewed conflict as an opportunity for life

768   skill learning and personal development which has often been emphasized as an essential

769   element of sport (e.g., Gould, & Carson, 2008; Jones, & Lavallee, 2009). Accordingly,

770   coaches and athletes identified potential for personal growth through self-awareness,

771   empathy, as well as adversity and resilience, and skill development through communication

772   and self-regulation as a long-term response to conflict. Further, it was evident that an

773   increased flow of information also enhanced task clarity and problem-solving, and as such

774   aided performance directly. The findings of this study mirror previous research (e.g., Holt et

775 al., 2012) that reported beneficial aspects of conflict within sport teams. However, whereas

776 successful conflict management seemed to be essential for the positive development of the

777 individual and the relationship (cf. Cramer, 2002), the impact of conflict on performance may

778 be more complex to capture and understand. It is noteworthy that on one hand negative

779 emotions and increased arousal during conflict seemed to be linked to increased motivation

780 and stimulated performance for some athletes, but on the other hand, conflict was perceived to

781 be distractive and exhausting by others. As previously suggested, it will be of interest to

782 explore the associations between conflict and positive versus negative (performance)

783 outcomes by studying the context within which conflict evolves, including situational

784 circumstances (e.g., training/ competition), individual characteristics (e.g., personality, age,

785 gender), and environmental factors (e.g., sport culture/ system). In addition, factors worth

786 investigating also include sources of support (e.g., sport psychology, social network) coaches

787 and athletes can rely on in their efforts to manage conflict as indicated by current participants.

788 　　　　In conclusion, while it is coaches' experience and position within the dyad that make

789 them key problem solvers during difficult times, it is both coaches and athletes' willingness to

790 engage in constructive conflict management and their ability to communicate effectively that

791 can have important ramifications in minimizing negative and facilitating positive conflict.

792 Yet, it seems a challenge for athletes to find a way to open up, start a dialogue and address

793 issues with their coaches that really concern them. The results of this investigation into

794 coaches and athletes' experiences of conflict management and its consequences may resonate

795 with a wide range of sport participants regardless of their age, gender, sport level or type.

796 These results may in fact support sport participants to utilize some of the proposed strategies

797 to constructively approach conflict when it occurs. While the current findings come from

798 coaches and athletes who are involved in high performance sport, the presented challenges

799 and strategies may well be transferable to coaches and athletes who operate in participation

800 (recreation) sport. Moreover, while conflict is viewed within the coach-athlete relationship, it

801   is possible that similar processes occur in other types of relationships within the sport domain

802   (e.g., athlete-athlete, athlete-partner, parent-athlete) and outside it (e.g., business and romantic

803   or marital relationships; Rahim 2002; Overall & McNulty, 2017). This potential overlap in the

804   findings may suggest their theoretical generalizability reaching beyond the specific domain

805   within which this study was conducted (cf. Smith, 2018). Nevertheless, future research may

806   help to expand the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively manage coach-athlete

807   conflict and thus, help further improve sport participants' interpersonal interaction. Based on

808   the generated information training programs which facilitate conflict prevention and

809   management among sport participants may be developed and examined. Training programs

810   within the applied field of sport psychology can supply valuable knowledge and practical

811   skills that coaches and athletes can readily use to effectively address any interpersonal

812   concerns. Socially skilful athletes and coaches can, in turn, actively contribute to the

813   development and maintenance of functional and healthy relationships in which performance

814   can flourish and individuals grow.

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Appendices

Table 1. Participants demographics

	Coaches		Athletes	
	National	*International**	*National*	*International***
Individual	0	3	4	4
Team	3	5	1	2
$M_{age\ in\ years}$	45.80 ± 10.81		24.45 ± 3.31	
$M_{experience\ in\ years}$	22.91 ± 12.95		13.09 ± 6.19	
$M_{interview\ length}$	80.0 min		73.00 min	

*International coaches: 8 at World Cup level of which 5 coached Para-/Olympic level athletes;
** International athletes: 6 competed in international competitions (e.g., Nation Cups and Commonwealth Games) of which 3 participated at World Cup level

Table 2. Conflict prevention strategies

Sub-category	Theme	Strategies suggested for coaches and athletes
Implicit conflict prevention	Enhance relationship quality	**Coaches:** *be approachable & democratic, give credit to people who address concerns* **Athletes:** *be reliable, work hard, share needs* **Both:** *open and honest communication, adapt to individuals' preferences*
	Optimal performance environments	**Coaches:** *consider individual while keeping sight of the bigger picture* **Both:** *create group cohesion and welcoming atmosphere, set common goals*
Explicit conflict prevention	Self-regulation	**Coaches:** *be diplomatic not forceful* **Athletes:** *compliancy to coach* **Both:** *calm down, think before you speak, be patient*
	Empathy	**Both:** *take perspective, consider positive intentions behind actions, consider consequences of own behaviours*
	Communicating expectations & potential problems	**Coaches:** *be a role model, establish rules and expectations, identify goals* **Athletes:** *seek clarification, address concerns, negotiate* **Both:** *set common goals*
	Timing of strategies	**Both:** *communicate concerns and expectations in advance* **Athletes:** *use individual meetings*
	Instruction & feedback style	**Coaches:** *find balance between criticism/ encouragement, structured negative feedback with clear reason & outlook* **Athletes:** *intra-team processes, coach-athlete relationship*
	Team composition & athlete leadership	**Coaches:** *consider interpersonal relationships and contact time when planning team composition; help new athletes integrate into team and organisation* **Both:** *athlete leaders bridge between coach and team*

Table 3. Conflict management strategies and barriers

Sub-category	Theme	Strategies suggested for coaches and athletes
Role responsibilities	Conflict solver	**Coaches:** *create awareness for conflict, initiate and guide through conflict management, be calm and rational*
	Leaders of performance	**Athletes:** *recognize/ address problems that impact performance, be responsive to coaches' resolution efforts*
Intrapersonal strategies	Self-regulation, reflection and preparation	**Coaches:** *control emotions, gather information about conflict circumstances, read about potential issues, monitor and document athlete behaviours* **Athletes:** *vent emotions without targeting coach, withdraw from situation, take notes about concerns* **Both:** *self-reflect, reassess, rationalize, prioritize*
	Avoidance	**Both:** *use individual coping strategies, be proactive*
Interpersonal strategies	Co-regulation	**Coaches:** *be a sounding board to athletes, provide space and time for athletes to deal with own emotions*
	Acknowledge responsibilities	**Athletes:** *apologetic gestures* **Both:** *acknowledge mistakes and apologize*
	Collaborate & compromise	**Coaches:** *be open for negotiations* **Both:** *negotiate and make concessions, mainly related to competition- and training-related conflicts, set goals*
	Forcing	**Coaches:** *non-negotiables in regards to behavioural conduct and team issues, commanding communication,* **Athletes:** *non-negotiables in regards to health and career*
	Obliging	**Athletes:** *compliance to coaches' perceived power or actual acceptance of coaches' leadership*
	Communication	**Coaches:** *show interest and care, questions, active listening, paraphrasing, educate, encourage self-reflection, challenge* **Both:** *share opinions, needs and expectations, give reasons for their behaviours and decisions, set new goals*
External support	Friends & family	**Both:** *vent frustration and ask for advice*
	Team members	**Athletes:** *vent frustration*
	Staff members	**Coaches:** *ask for advice and help, gather information* **Athletes:** *improve skills, find mediator (sport psychologist)*
	Mentoring	**Coaches:** *improve skills and ask for advice*
Conflict management barriers	Low coach-athlete relationship quality (e.g., poor communication, power)	
	Lacking awareness (e.g., existence/ intensity of conflict)	
	Willingness and priorities (e.g., time/ energy restrictions)	
	Intention/action discrepancies (e.g., no follow up on agreement)	

Table 4. Conflict outcomes

Sub-category	Theme	Outcomes experienced by coaches and athletes
Intrapersonal outcomes	Wellbeing	**Athletes:** *low/ depressive mood, sleep problems, enhanced risk for injuries, low self-esteem* **Both:** *high stress, rumination*
	Sport development	**Coaches:** *enhanced/ decreased coaching efficacy* **Athletes:** *enhanced sport-related skills and resilience*
	Personal growth	**Athletes:** *self-awareness, communication skills, critical thinking, open-mindedness, empathy*
Performance outcomes	Positive outcomes	**Athletes:** *effective solution that increases performance potential, better work ethic and motivation, better performance during competition*
	Negative outcomes	**Athletes:** *performance stagnation or slumps due to lack of focus, motivation and energy*
Interpersonal outcomes	Termination	**Coaches:** *athlete suspension* **Athletes:** *change coach/ club, end career*
	Relationship quality	**Both:** *promoted or decreased confidence in the relationship, communication, trust and respect*
	Other relationships	**Coaches:** *increased/ decreased influence upon team* **Athletes:** *improved relationships with other coaches*